

2 Corinthians 10:1-18

I'm impressed by lots of different people.

I'm impressed by people who can run fast, or jump high, or lift heavy things. I'm impressed by people who can still do math, or cook a good meal, or play the piano. I'm impressed by people who can speak more than one language, or do more than one thing at one time.

Who are you impressed by?

Maybe you're impressed by some of the same people that I am. But there are people, aren't there, that most of us find impressive.

They're usually people who are smart, or articulate. People who have wealth, or power, or status. People who have done great things, or are spoken of well by others.

Who are you impressed by?

We've been working our way through 2 Corinthians. And central to the letter has been this conflict between the Apostle Paul and this group called the "super Apostles" (2 Cor. 11:5) or "false Apostles" (2 Cor. 11:13).

They've infiltrated the church at Corinth. And they've been challenging Paul's way of life and ministry. But Paul's been clear throughout this letter that his way of life, and his way of ministry, has been shaped by Jesus himself.

We saw that in chapters 1 to 7. There Paul defended his travel plans and pattern of ministry. He said that his ministry was one of service in weakness. It was like a death for Paul that brought life to the Corinthian church (2 Cor. 4:12). Just like Jesus.

And we saw the same thing in chapters 8 and 9. There Paul addressed the generosity of the Corinthian church. He said that they were to be generous just like Christ; who though rich, became poor for their sake (2 Cor. 8:9).

At every point, Jesus has been the pattern - the model - of Paul's life and ministry.

But these 'Super Apostles' aren't so keen. Up to this point, the 'Super Apostles' have been in the background of this letter. But in this final section of 2 Corinthians, chapters 10 to 13, Paul turns to address them directly.

And our passage really centers on that question: "Who are you impressed by?"

You see, the 'Super Apostles' had been making the claim that they were impressive.

And, in a sense, they are.

They were people who probably had training in public speaking - a highly valued skill in Paul's day. They were a bit like the TED Talk speakers of their time - sharp, engaging, and compelling.

They were impressive. But Paul isn't. At least, that's what they've been saying in Paul's absence. In fact, Paul quotes what they've been saying about him in verse 10. You can look at it with me. They say:

“His letters are weighty and powerful, but his physical presence is weak and his public speaking amounts to nothing.”

It's a rough review. The 'Super Apostles' are impressive. The Apostle Paul isn't. That's their claim.

And in our passage, Paul begins to defend himself. And he does that by making clear that he's someone who's approved and commended by God.

And as we look at this passage together, Paul wants us, like the Corinthians, to live and to minister in this way that's approved by God as well.

And to do that, Paul says that we need to depend on God's power, to achieve God's purpose, whilst boasting in God alone.

And we're going to unpack all of that together.

The first thing that Paul says, in verses 1 to 6, is that **The One Approved by God ... Depends on God's Power.**

In verse 2, Paul tells the Corinthians that he's going to visit soon. And he says that when he does, there are *“certain people”* that he plans to challenge. People accusing him, and his missionary team, of *“living according to the flesh”*.

Now, that sounds odd. It sounds like maybe they're accusing Paul of living in some kind of sinful way. But remember the context. The 'Super Apostles' are impressive. And Paul isn't.

And so, when they accuse Paul of living or conducting himself according to the flesh, they're saying that his way of doing things is so boring, and so ordinary, that it must be 'of the flesh' or 'of this world'. It can't possibly be spiritual or powerful.

I've got a friend who became a Christian in the church that Jemimah and I used to go to. And it was really encouraging. He grasped the gospel. He was baptised. And he was keen to come along to church and to learn more about God. And he did.

That is, until a friend of his invited him to the Pentecostal Church down the road. And for this friend of mine, this was a revelation. This new church had the bright lights, the big band, and the speaking in tongues. And our church didn't have any of those things.

And the conclusion that my friend drew was that this new church was much more impressive and much more powerful. And so, clearly, it was much more spiritual too. And that's what's going on in verse 2. These 'Super Apostles' are impressive. Their speaking is powerful and convincing. And so, they must be the spiritual ones.

But Paul is just so ordinary and plain: *“His public speaking amounts to nothing”*. His ministry must be done *“according to the flesh”* with no spiritual power behind it.

But in verses 3 to 6, Paul says that the exact opposite is true. His ministry, which seems so unimpressive in the eyes of the world, is actually profoundly spiritual and powerful.

He says in verse 3, that he lives *“in the flesh”*, but he doesn’t *“wage war according to the flesh”*. And this is true, Paul says in verse 4, because the *“weapons of [his] warfare are not of the flesh [that is, they’re not of this world] but are powerful through God”*.

As unimpressive as Paul’s preaching of the gospel seems, he says it’s both spiritual and powerful because God is at work through it.

And to prove his point, Paul uses the image of a military stronghold.

Now, in the ancient world, these strongholds were used to house armies. Some of them were permanent structures made of stone. Others were temporary structures made of wood. But all of them were impressive. These strongholds had thick walls, surrounded by trenches and spikes. And all of it was to keep their enemies out.

And Paul says that when he preaches the gospel, as unimpressive as it seems, he’s like a one-man army waging war against these strongholds.

And he can do this, in verse 4, because his weapons - his ordinary words - are *“powerful through God for the demolition of strongholds”*. As Paul preaches the gospel, God is powerfully at work.

And so, as Paul speaks to people about Jesus, he says that God is at work tearing down walls. Tearing down false thoughts and arguments and *“every proud thing raised up against the knowledge of God”*.

And once these walls have been torn down, and every false thought and argument set aside, Paul’s gospel preaching is powerful through God *“to take every thought captive to obey Christ”*.

Paul isn’t flashy like the ‘Super Apostles’. He doesn’t have their public speaking skills.

But what he does have is God’s power at work through him.

And that’s what matters. That’s what makes his ministry spiritual and powerful. As Paul tells people about the death and resurrection of Jesus for the forgiveness of their sins, God is at work changing hearts and minds.

And it’s this kind of ministry that’s approved by God.

And so, I want to ask, is this how you see things? Is this what you expect?

When you speak to people about Jesus, what do you expect? Do you expect it to be ordinary and awkward? Something that probably won’t achieve much? Or do expect your words to be profoundly powerful because God is at work through you?

Or when you open your Bible, by yourself or with others, what do you expect? Do you expect your heart and your mind to be changed? To have arguments and false thoughts torn down by the power of God? Do you expect to have your thoughts taken captive in obedience to Christ? Or are you expecting something more ordinary and unimpressive?

What Paul shows us here is that these things are powerful because God is at work through them. And that’s what matters.

And if this is how you do see things, then you'll be ready to speak about Jesus, even if you feel muddled and silly. And you'll be ready, not because of who you are, but because you know that God can powerfully work through you.

And friends, as our Meet Jesus Mission approaches, I hope that this passage will give you real confidence to speak to people, to invite people, and to trust that God can really save people.

Our efforts are so unimpressive and ordinary. But God works through them. It's his power that matters, not ours. And so, we depend on him.

Paul says that **The One Approved by God ... Depends on God's Power**. But he also says, in verses 7 to 11, that **The One Approved by God ... Achieves God's Purpose**.

And here, Paul addresses the other half of that complaint that we saw earlier.

In verse 10, the 'Super Apostles' accused Paul of being two-faced and inconsistent. It's the same accusation we saw with Paul's travel plans in chapter 2.

Here, they claim that:

"His letters are weighty and powerful, but his physical presence is weak..."

And Paul repeats their claim ironically in verse 1. He says:

"I who am humble among you in person but bold toward you when absent"

It's like they're accusing Paul of being a co-worker who sends strongly worded emails but never mentions them when you bump into him around the office.

Or it's like they're accusing Paul of being some kind of keyboard warrior, making all these bold claims online or through messages but never backing them up in person.

And the implication is that Paul isn't someone worth taking seriously. He's one person in his letters. Another when he's present. He flip-flops. He's a coward. So, don't listen to him.

And again, Paul shows the Corinthian church that this simply isn't true.

I mean, look at verse 1. Paul says that, in this letter, he's appealing *"to [them] by the meekness and gentleness of Christ"*. And in verse 2, he says that when he's present with them, he plans to be *"bold with the confidence by which I plan to challenge certain people"*.

The 'Super Apostles' say that Paul's tough in his letters and soft in person. But even here, in these verses, Paul shows that the opposite can be true. That he can be gentle in his letters but bold in person.

And, in verses 7 to 8, Paul says that there's a reason for all of this. A purpose behind how he acts.

He says, in verse 7, that *"If anyone is confident that he belongs to Christ, let him remind himself of this: Just as he belongs to Christ, so do we"*. Now the word "belong" isn't there in the Greek text, it's being supplied by the translators - which is fine. But I think

it's better translated as "sent by Christ" instead of "belongs to Christ". And so, Paul says *"If anyone is confident that he is sent by Christ, let him remind himself of this: Just as he was sent by Christ, so are we"*.

The 'Super Apostles' claim to be sent by Christ with Christ's authority. That's part of what it means to call yourself an Apostle. And of course, when they say this, it isn't true. But it's what they claim.

And Paul says to the Corinthians that, if these fake Apostles are sent by Christ, then surely, he is too!

And as an Apostle - a true Apostle - Paul has, in verse 8, an authority and purpose that are given by God. And this explains why Paul acts the way he does.

He says, in verse 8, that:

"...the Lord gave [this authority to Paul] for building you up and not for tearing you down".

That's Paul's purpose, given to him by God. And it explains what Paul's doing in person and in his letters. Whatever he does, whether face to face or in writing, he does it to build the Corinthians up.

And so, when he writes gentle letters to the Corinthians, trying to persuade them and convince them - like he does here - he does it to build them up.

And when he writes bold letters to the Corinthians, confronting them and rebuking them - like he's done in the past - he has this same purpose. All that he does, he does to build the Corinthians up.

And so, he can say in verse 11:

"Let such a person consider this: What we are in our letters, when we are absent, we will also be in our actions when we are present."

Paul is consistent. Not in his methods, but in his purpose: to build up the church.

And again, Paul does this because Jesus did this. Jesus is his pattern and example. We often think of Jesus as meek and gentle. And he was! That's how Paul describes him in verse 1.

But Jesus was meek and gentle for a purpose. He was meek and gentle with people who needed it. Who were weak. Who knew their own sin. And who knew that they needed help. And Jesus was meek and gentle with these people in order to build them up and not tear them down.

And that's what he says about himself in Matthew 12. He quotes what the Prophet Isaiah's written about him, saying:

“He will not break a bruised reed, and he will not put out a smoldering wick” (Matt. 12:20)

With people who need it, Jesus is meek and gentle in order to build them up. But Jesus wasn't only meek and gentle. He was also bold and confident. Especially when he spoke to people who were proud towards God, or leading God's people astray. With those people, Jesus would point out their hypocrisy. He would tell them that they're wrong. He would warn them of judgement to come. And again, he did that, not to condemn them, but to build them up.

That was Jesus's purpose. That was Paul's purpose. But is it your purpose? It can be so easy to come to church on a Sunday and just to think about yourself. It can be easy to think about what 'I' want to get out of the sermon. Or about who 'I' want to chat to after the service.

But Paul's purpose, and Jesus's purpose, was to build others up. And that should be our purpose too. In fact, the picture that Paul gives in Ephesians 4 is of the church - the body of Christ - *“building itself up in love by the proper working of each individual part”* (Eph. 4:16).

We're all meant to build each other up in love. And that takes time. It takes effort. And it takes thought. We need to know whether we should be gentle or bold with the person we're speaking to. It's hard work. But this needs to be our aim.

And so, are you ready to do this today? To gently encourage someone weighed down by sin or their circumstances? Or to be bold and speak up if someone's proud or leading others astray? Are you ready to build others up?

That was Paul's purpose. That was Jesus's purpose. And that should be our purpose too.

The One Approved by God ... Depends on God's Power to Achieve God's Purpose. But lastly, Paul says in verses 12-18, they ... **Boast in God.**

Now, if you scan through these verses, you'll see that they're all about *“commending”* or *“boasting”*. And that's been a theme already in 2 Corinthians 3 - you might remember Travis's glowing job reference given by Clint. And *“commending”* or *“boasting”* will be a big theme in the next two chapters as well.

But, maybe surprisingly, Paul says that what separates him from these 'Super Apostles' isn't that they boast and he doesn't. What separates them is actually what they boast in. In verse 12, Paul says that he doesn't *“dare classify or compare”* himself with others. Which is hard, because it's such an easy thing to do, isn't it? We do it all the time, even when we're not thinking about it.

We notice if people are taller than us or shorter than us. We notice if they're more or less attractive than us. We notice if they're smarter than us, or more wealthy than us. Comparing ourselves with others is an easy thing to do.

And it's what these 'Super Apostles' have been doing this whole passage! They've been comparing themselves and their ministry to Paul. And they've been boasting in themselves and their ministry at the expense of Paul.

But Paul says that when we compare ourselves to others, we're clueless. We *"lack understanding"* and are boasting in the wrong thing.

But there is, according to Paul, a right kind of boasting. And it's a boasting, not in ourselves, but in the Lord.

In verse 13, Paul says that he boasts in the job that God's given him to do. And this includes boasting in the Corinthians since Paul was the one who brought the gospel to them. And instead of boasting *"about other people's labors"*, Paul's great desire is *"to preach the gospel to the regions beyond"* the Corinthians in order to see others saved.

And all of this, of course, is God's work. It's his power, verse 4, that *"demolishes strongholds"*. That changes people's hearts and minds. So, as Paul boasts in the job God's given him, and the things that God's done through him, he boasts in the Lord and not himself.

And to drive this home, Paul quotes from Jeremiah 9:23-24 which we heard read earlier. But it's such a good passage, and it exposes so much of our own hearts, that I'm going to read it for us again.

Jeremiah says:

"This is what the Lord says: The wise person should not boast in his wisdom; the strong should not boast in his strength; the wealthy should not boast in his wealth. But the one who boasts should boast in this: that he understands and knows me" (Jer. 9:23-24)

We don't boast in ourselves. We don't boast in what we have. Instead, we boast in the fact that we know God, and have come to love him by his grace.

And so, when we're tempted to think: "Wow, I really helped that person!" or "Wow, that evangelistic conversation went so well!" or even "Wow, that person became a Christian". We should boast in what God has done through us, and not in ourselves.

We should give God the credit. And we should give God the praise. We should boast in the Lord.

Well, brothers and sisters, there are lots of things that are impressive in the eyes of this world. But the Christian life and ministry will never make that list. In the eyes of the world, they will always be ordinary and unimpressive.

But what Paul shows us here is that it's possible to live a life that will, at the last day, be approved by God himself. If we depend on God's power, and not our own. If we work to build others up. And if we boast in the Lord, and not ourselves. Then we will hear God say, by his grace: *"well done, good and faithful servant"* (Matt. 25:21).

How incredible is that? How freeing is that? What a great thing to live for.