

# By this everyone will know that you are my disciples...

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2 Corinthians 12:11-21

## 2 Critical Questions

I want to begin by letting you know about a couple of things that have happened in the life of our church over the last few weeks.

The first is a 4 week course that we have been running as an introduction to Christian leadership. It's been great! A bunch of young (and a couple of not so young) people have been meeting together to think about how the gospel shapes the church—and leadership in particular. Last week we thought about the question: *What makes a good Christian leader?*

The second thing that has happened recently was a dinner for what is now a growing group of young adults at St Mark's. (You might even look around and see some faces that weren't around 8 months ago!) We had some good quality pizza, and played some poor quality ping pong, and Simon led us in a discussion on the Marks of St Mark's. Basically, the question was, *What makes a good church?*

In each case we were dealing with 2 critical questions. They are questions that must be considered by every Christian generation. In fact, they are questions that must be returned to again and again in the life of a Christian community:

*What should you look for in a Christian leader? What should you look for in a Christian church?*

*What sort of leaders should I listen to? What sort of church should I attend?*

And these are the two questions which are asked and addressed in our passage for today from 2 Corinthians 12.

As the apostle says in verse 11, he has at the end of this letter, been acting like a fool. He has stooped to the level of the so-called “super-apostles”, speaking of himself, even as he has spoken of his sufferings and weakness.

And what we see at the end of this passage is that Paul’s foolishness flows out of his fear for the church in Corinth. Have a look at the first half of verse 20:

*For I am afraid that when I come I may not find you as I want you to be, and you may not find me as you want me to be.*

Paul’s *fear* is that he will be rejected by the Corinthians when he returns to visit them again. He is worried that they will be looking for something else in a leader, and won’t cut the mustard.

And on the flip-side, he is worried that he will find the church in Corinth to fall short of what he wants a church to be.

Do you see the questions there:

*What should the Corinthians **want** in a leader?*

*What does Paul **want** in a church?*

So that’s what we’re going to be considering today.

1. What is the measure of a Christian leader?
2. What is the measure of a Christian church?
3. And then finally we will consider the mystery that lies at the heart of the sort of Christian live that God is calling us to live.

## 1. The Measure of a Christian Leader

So first let's consider what makes a true Christian leader. And really this has been the main focus of these last chapters hasn't it. The question for the church in Corinth is who are they going to listen to? Are they going to listen to Paul and Titus, and the other brothers? Or will they continue to be led astray by the super-apostles?

And in this final appeal to the Corinthians, Paul returns to a metaphor that he has used before to illustrate the nature of his ministry

In his first letter to Corinth, Paul remembers the beginning of his relationship with them. He says in 1 Corinthians 4:14-15

*I am writing this not to shame you but to warn you as **my dear children**. Even if you had ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus **I became your father** through the gospel.*

Through the preaching of the gospel, Paul became a spiritual Father-figure to the Corinthian church. In a very real sense they owed their Christian life to him, as he was the one who led them to Christ.

We saw this a few weeks ago in this letter as well as Paul likened himself to the Father presenting his daughter to be married. He said in 2 Corinthians 11: "I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him."

And now here in this passage Paul says that his whole relationship with them, from the beginning until now has been characterised by this deep parental concern. And this parental leadership is characterised by two things: it is both sacrificial and strengthening.

So look again at verse 14:

*Now I am ready to visit you for the third time, and I will not be a burden to you, because what I want is not your possessions but you. After all, children should not have to save up for their parents, but parents for their children. So I will very gladly spend for you everything I have and expend myself as well.*

Verse 15 is beautiful isn't it. What does a parent do for their children? They spend what they have for the sake of their child, and they spend *themselves*, pouring out their energy and their efforts, sacrificing their own interests, for the good of their children.

And so what does a pastor do for their church? They spend what they have for the sake of those they serve. And they spend *themselves*, pouring out their energy and their efforts, sacrificing their own interests for the good of their flock.

True Christian leadership is sacrificial, for the purpose of *strengthening the church*. Verse 19:

*Have you been thinking all along that we have been defending ourselves to you? We have been speaking in the sight of God as those in Christ; and everything we do, dear friends, is for your strengthening.*

Paul's number 1 motivating concern in everything he is saying here, is the good and growth of this Christian church. It's tempting to think that this letter is an exercise in PR. Paul is being slammed in Corinth and now he's doing some reputation rescue. But that's not the case!

Paul has not been trying to *defend* himself. He has been trying to *strengthen* the Corinthians. Like a parent who sees their child has fallen in with the wrong crowd, he is do everything he can to guide them back to a way of life that is *good* for them.

All through this letter, Paul has expressed the full range of parental devotion. He has comforted and consoled, he has exhorted and encouraged. He has reminded them of the gospel in all its fullness and beauty, and he has warned them against the foolishness and boasting of those who would lead them away from the Lord Jesus.

In short, he has *loved* them. Not with a soppy sentimental niceness, but with a love that is both tender and fierce. Tender in his care for them, and fierce in his commitment to the truth.

Can you see what's so tragic about all this? In what can only be described as great folly, the Corinthians had rejected Paul who *loved them*, for the super-apostles who were merely out to *impress them*. They were ignoring this leader who sacrificed everything *for them*, and they were listening to leaders who were taking *from them*. They were spurning this man who did everything for their strengthening, for people who did everything only to strengthen their own platform. They were disappointed with Paul who led them to Christ, and were lifting up leaders whose only goal was their own self-promotion.

As Paul says, with palpable pain, *If I loved you more, do you love me less*. Or as he says in the next verse somewhat sarcastically: *Yet Crafty Fellow That I am, I caught you by trickery!* He is asking the Corinthians to recall how they became Christians in the first place? Was it because Paul sucked them in with some sneaky scheme? No, it was because he loved them.

This is the measure of the Christian leader: **Love**. A sacrificial, strengthening love. This is the sort of pastor I pray that God would make me. This is what we should be praying for all those who lead us. These are the leaders we should listen to, and follow, as they seek to love us, and teach us in Christ before the sight of God.

## 2. The Measure of a Christian Church

Because who we listen to *really* matters. Paul is so concerned about this church in Corinth, because he knows that there is an inextricable link between what (or who) we listen to, and the way that we live.

And Paul can see that by listening to the self-obsessed super-apostles, the Corinthians are in danger of becoming a church consumed by self-interest.

Listen again from verse 20:

*For I am afraid that when I come I may not find you as I want you to be, and you may not find me as you want me to be. I fear that there may be **discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder**. I am afraid that when I come again my God will humble me before you, and I will be grieved over many who have **sinned earlier and have not repented of the impurity, sexual sin and debauchery in which they have indulged**.*

As Calvin says in his commentary:

*He lists the vices, which chiefly prevailed among the Corinthians; almost all of which proceeded from the same source. For had not every one been devoted to self, they would never have contended with each other – they would never have envied one another – there would have been no slandering among them. Thus the sum and substance of this list is lack of love, because self-love, and ambition prevailed.*

And what is a failure to repent but a stubborn love of self prevailing over love of God? What is indulgence in sin but a love of ones own pleasure over a concern for pleasing the Lord?

And this is what Paul has been telling this church for years! The list here is almost the polar opposite of the famous list in 1 Corinthians 13:

*Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth.*

What does the apostle want to see in the Corinthians when he returns to visit them again? He wants to see *love*. Protecting, trusting, hoping, persevering love. A love which turns every member out from themselves and towards the interests of their brothers and sisters.

This passage reminds us that a church is not defined by its size, or the style of its gatherings. Not even by the quality of its preaching, or the orthodoxy of its ministry.

It is LOVE that truly defines a church.

And again, this is not a superficial niceness, but a deep and devoted love. The sort of love that prays, rebukes and speaks the truth. Love that forgives, comforts, and encourages. Love that mourns, rejoices and sings. Love that cries, confesses and carries burdens. As Ben said a few weeks ago, it is a love that *looks like Jesus, and feels like Jesus*.

And that's the *point* isn't it? The Lord Jesus told his disciples the night before he died: By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you *love* one another.

**The true measure of a Christian leader is love.**

**The true measure of a Christian church is love.**

### **3. The Mystery at the Heart of the Christian Faith**

Which raises the final question. In a world obsessed with power and prestige, what is it that will sustain Christian leaders in sacrificial strengthening love? In a world obsessed with self, what will sustain our church in selfless and self-giving love?

Well, just before Jesus tells his disciples that the measure of their discipleship is their love for one another. Jesus reveals to them the *mystery* at the heart of this life of love. In humble service he stoops down and washes his disciples feet, in a profound demonstration of the love he will show them in his death for them. And then he tells them, "As I have loved you, love one another."

The mystery at the heart of our faith is the love of Christ in the gospel. And the opening verses of this passage I think point us to two transforming truths that flow out of the love of Jesus for us: Gospel reality, and Gospel riches.

- ***Gospel Reality***

So consider verses 11 and 12:

*I have made a fool of myself, but you drove me to it. I ought to have been commended by you, for I am not in the least inferior to the "super-apostles," even though I am nothing. I persevered in demonstrating among you the marks of a true apostle, including signs, wonders and miracles.*

Now, in some ways, I reckon verse 12 is the most difficult verse in this whole book. For Paul has been highlighting his weakness and inadequacy, asking the Corinthians to turn away from the *outwardly impressive* and focus instead on matters of the heart. But now he refers

to *signs, wonders and miracles*...aren't these things the epitome of the outwardly impressive?! How does this all fit together.

Well, I think that instinctive response betrays a very common misunderstanding about the nature of miracles in the Bible.

Last week I was doing Bible Time at the pre-school and we were reading a storybook about one of the miracles of Jesus, and the big idea was that the miracle showed that Jesus was the powerful son of God.

And after we prayed, one of the girls put up her hand and said "Could Jesus Fly?" And then aaaalll the kids really wanted to know then whether Jesus could fly.

And here's the thing. If miracles were ONLY about showing how powerful Jesus was, then there probably would be some flying in the Bible. Jesus could have turned himself into a human skywriter and plastered "I AM THE POWERFUL SON OF GOD" across the mediterranean skies.

But miracles are not just about power. They are about love. Consider the direction of Jesus' power all throughout the gospels. Power flows out from him for the healing of the sick, the feeding of the hungry, the raising of the dead. Jesus' power is always directed towards the service and strengthening of others. And there is no greater expression of this than when he pours himself out on the cross for the saving of sinners like you and me. As I heard someone say recently, Jesus' coming into the world was not a power trip, it was a service trip, from beginning to end!

And the same is true here of Paul's ministry. These signs and wonders and miracles are not about him at all. Paul says again what he has been saying all along: he is nothing. The power of Paul's ministry comes *from Jesus*. And *like Jesus*, the power of Paul's ministry is entirely directed towards the good of those he serves. And so I think the Corinthians themselves are the great miracle of his ministry! Think of what Paul has said in this letter is true of them through the preaching of the gospel:

The light of the knowledge of the glory of God has shone in their hearts. From the inside out they were being transformed from one degree of glory to another. Through the preaching of the gospel they were new creations!

Paul has come to know that the very heart of reality is the sacrificial, strengthening, selfless and self-giving love of Christ. He has tethered his whole life to the the world-creating, life-giving Word of the Gospel and now he is pleading with the Corinthians to do the same. Paul is urging the Corinthians to get *real*.

In many ways, this whole letter is one long appeal for the Corinthians to look beyond the way things appear on the surface to see that the truest depiction of reality is a cross. That it is not the strong and the successful and the self-possessed who have it all, but the poor in spirit, the meek, and those who mourn. Sacrificial love might be counter-cultural in this world, but here we are reminded that it's going with the flow of what is true and ultimate.

- ***Gospel Riches***

And finally the gospel reminds us not only of what is truly *real*, but it also shows us who is truly *rich*.

Twice at the end of 2 Corinthians Paul says that he is not the least inferior to the "super-apostles" but then in verse 13 he asks the Corinthians, "And how were *you* inferior to the other churches, except that I was not a burden to you?"

Here I think we see the second great problem for the Corinthian church. On the one hand they were consumed by the appearance of things. But on the other hand they were blind to all that they had in the gospel.

I think the Corinthians thought that maybe they were *lacking* something. Sure, they had heard the gospel, sure they knew Christ, but maybe there's MORE out there. More to know, more to do, more power. And so they were taken in by these leaders who offered them *more* - and of course they offered it at a price.

But Paul wants to remind this church that in the Lord Jesus they lack *nothing*. They had received the fulfilment of every promise of God. They had received the Spirit of God. They were children of God and heirs of a heavenly kingdom. They were reconciled with God and completely righteous in his sight. BY THE GRACE OF GOD THEY WERE ABUNDANTLY RICH.

But they weren't able to see all that they had. They thought they were poor. They were looking for that latest and greatest thing that they really needed. And the super-apostles stepped in and were happy to oblige. And so instead of looking out for the needs of their brothers and sisters, it was every man for them self.

But when a church sees the riches that belong to them in Christ, they are freed from self-concern and turned out towards the needs of others. Paul's all-in love of the Corinthians was only possible because he knew he possessed the all-sufficient grace of God in the gospel.

Brothers and sisters, we are entering a new season of life as a church today. And there are lots of things we have needed to sort out. How to set up chairs. How to work the sound system. How to stream from the hall. How to be COVID-safe. How to do music when we can't sing. How to run our Christmas services. These are all important and necessary questions. But Jesus gives to us, as he gave to his disciples, one command: *As I have loved you, love one another. Whatever else we do as leaders, whatever else we do as a church. It must all be driven and directed by our love for each other.*

*And the only way we will be able to follow Jesus' command is if we allow his "As I have loved you" to shape our view of the world. As we remember that the fundamental reality of life is the cruciform love of Jesus, we will love. As we remember that we too possess God's all-sufficient grace, we can go all-in on love.*

We have been filled to over-flowing with the the powerful love of Christ in the gospel. So let us overflow with Christ-like love to each other and to the world.

And by this, *everyone* will know that we are Jesus' disciples: that we love one another.