

I Approve This Message – Moses Camacho

January 24, 2022, The Lord's Day

First Presbyterian Church of Corpus Christi

We find ourselves today in a moment in which it seems Paul's tone has taken dramatic turn. He's beginning to close the letter to the Corinthian church by giving a large and final address to the repentant and unrepentant people and the church, and particularly beginning to address his opponents.

To be very honest with you, there is so much in this passage that I didn't really know where and how to begin. So I have a question, have you ever had a work project, or had a task where you needed to work with someone else, and when the job was done, they took credit? Or have you ever done something, under someone else's leadership, or even did something for the Lord, and when you finished the job, you felt unrecognized or unacknowledged and then felt unfulfilled and empty?... See, I have. Many times...

But, back in 2011, I went on my very first Mission Trips with an organization called Global Expeditions to Tijuana, Baja, Mexico. We and hundreds of other teens were tasked with building houses for impoverished families.

Phillip was one of our group leaders, a group of about 20 young 17-20 year olds, who over the course of the trip became a friend and a spiritual coach.

Being about ten years ago, my memory is still pretty clear. Phillip was the guy to be Giving hugs to strangers, approaching them with a smile and warmth, putting kids on his shoulders and making them laugh, bringing food and gifts for the youth living in that town and the families we were working with. MIND YOU, I was his translator! Phillip didn't speak a lick of Spanish, yet he loved like no one

else. He was the guy that I walked with to a house, on top of a hill, and he made me start a conversation with this family that lived in a literal hole in a wall that also they used to sell candy from. There they had a son who was sick and they obviously couldn't afford a hospital. Phillip was the guy who made me pray for him first, then Phillip prayed and I translated. And we left that day. The next day was our final day, we went back with some leftover pieces of roof shingles to patch holes in their roof (another story for another time), and the boy that we prayed over was standing there with his parents to greet us. Well, and looking okay. Phillip was so excited, and I was too when it hit me.

The thing through all this is that he never took credit for pushing me. He always thanked God. He never took pride in himself, and remained humble before the family who thanked him and us for building them a home... when there was a moment that I felt I was failing or not doing enough, Phil reassured me that we do what we can, and trust God to take of the rest.

I share this short story about Mr. Zabukovec to express how a good leader in my life, showing humility in leadership, impressed upon me a heart for people, to serve and to love, and his simple action of encouraging a teenager would affect me for the rest of my life. I am sure that many of us in this room right now can testify of a good leader that blessed you in your life at some point or other. Yet, I bet we could also testify of some bad leaders, some bad folk who shouldn't have been in positions of authority to begin with. Many of us in this room or maybe we know of others, who have been hurt by leaders or people under those leaders, people who have been spiritually abused, who have been so deeply wounded that they just left their faith altogether... causing even some churches to die.

“Paul’s Presence versus Absence”

Paul's love for the Corinthians has grown from seeing their hearts changed and seeing a potential for the church to grow and expand in many ways to the glory of God... it's why the tone here is more stern, more serious, more profound, because it's not just himself that he's defending, but it's the Gospel itself. Paul is trying to bring back into the fold the people, the false apostles, to find their approval in the Lord. So let's get into chapter 10 today, looking at verse 1, we can see how the tone changes...

Paul's plea while absent (v. 1-2)

It's usually a predictable pattern to see Paul sign his name at the beginning and or end of the letter, with a farewell-goodbye and or a benediction. Weirdly, and dramatically, we're seeing it here. This is important for us to understand what Paul is doing. These words mark the most important transition in the letter. He is restating and reminding the church, his opponents and the unrepentant people, of who is the one writing and speaking to them. The first nine chapters of 2 Corinthians can be read as sincere and hopeful. But here, the language becomes stark and stern, almost threatening, because Paul is on the defensive as he addresses the charges against him made by the false apostles.

He says, (v.1a) "I, Paul, myself entreat you, by the meekness and gentleness of Christ..." It may be hard to see, but Paul eloquently uses irony in his appeal to the repentant people in Corinth, by saying something about Christ! Remember the issue at hand: These false apostles were boasting/bragging of having apostolic authority in the church and taking credit for the ministry that Paul started in the first place! They were pointing to themselves and bragging of their swagger (so to speak) in the ways that they spoke and gave speeches. They boasted of their spiritual power and mystical experiences, of their various strengths and talents.

They were doing all this, leading people away from the message of the gospel, while tearing down Paul, attacking his character, his *honor* (which was a very big deal in the Greco-Roman world), accusing him of not being a valid apostle and in essence, they were attacking the gospel itself.

So what does Paul do? He says he's coming to them *in gentleness and meekness*, another way of saying lowliness, humility. Scholars love this because it's the only time in the NT Paul opens an appeal like this. It immediately makes the listener and reader remember the words of Jesus, where, only recorded in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus himself describes his own heart.

It's in Matthew 11:29, *"Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls."*

By using the same wording that Jesus used, we see that Paul is prompting the church to remember Jesus and that from the get-go these opponents are behaving in a worldly fashion, far from the heart and character of Jesus. Working to get the approval of man and neglecting the approval of God in serving others through humility.

So why were Paul's opponents attacking Paul like this? Pastor Chip has mentioned Paul's speaking ability and appearance before, and I think it's important to reiterate it: Here in Chapter 10 especially, we see their reasoning for saying that Paul isn't as cool or strong as he wants them to think. Jump ahead to verse 10 and Paul is quoting them: "His bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account." It's hard to know what this really meant or what he looked like since the NT does not give a specific description of his appearance. The only surviving description of Paul's appearance is from a second-century apocryphal/fictional

writing called *The Acts of Paul*. In it, there is line that describes good ole' Paul as "short, bald, bow-legged, healthy-looking, single-browed, a bit long-nosed."⁷⁸

Assuming we can trust the description to be true, even though it came around more than 50 years after Paul's death, we can see that from a shallow human standpoint, he was as some wrote: "a thoroughly unimpressive specimen of humanity." And of course, Paul also has admitted that his speech is nothing fancy, he said as much back in 1 Corinthians (2:1-5).¹ We need to visualize and know that Paul was a regular joe, nothing special about him to the eye or to the ear; rather, he looked weak and unimportant. This is crucial when we talk about how God approves of and uses seemingly powerless things to show off his great power and grace and glory.

It's why Paul, who is operating in the power of the Holy Spirit, continues by again using military, warfare and battle language to talk about the true Christian life.

Paul's True Warfare while Absent (3-6)

Consider verses 3-6,...There are many a time and occasion where this section has often been misused or misapplied in the modern day body of believers. It's usually used to describe a struggle within our own "thought life," "negative thinking," or using it as an encouraging coffee cup/fridge magnet to stand up against the negativity of others in one's life.

As important as it is to have a healthy thinking-process, and to be bold to not succumb to the negativity of others, as we need to discipline our minds to

⁷⁸ Richard I. Pervo, *The Acts of Paul: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014), 89.

¹ Dane Ortlund, "[2 Corinthians](#)," in *Romans–Galatians*, ed. Iain M. Duguid, James M. Hamilton Jr., and Jay Sklar, vol. X, *ESV Expository Commentary* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 526.

think in ways that honor Christ, that's not what Paul is talking about here. Paul is not trying to control his worry, anxiety, lust or arrogance or temptations of any kind in his mind. I know some more traditional charismatic people may want to disagree, but the context is clear, it's not about fighting against demonic forces or evil spiritual forces that attack believers in Christ. It's not why Paul is saying it.

In Greek, verses 3-6 are one long sentence. That means that this whole section is to be taken as one thought. It's tough to show that in English, but it's not meant to be divided or cherry-picked. Paul's concern in the entirety of Chapter 10 is over the public clash of the freeing, loving, forgiving, kind, gentle nature of the Gospel and the true nature of God's approval to those who preach it, teach it, follow it and lead others in doing the same thing.

The use of words like waging war, weapons, warfare, destroy, strongholds, it's entirely a response to those who are denying the Gospel of Christ through their behaviors, actions, their teachings and lifestyle. As one commentator put it: *"To take captive every thought to Christ is to evaluate every teaching concerning who Jesus is and what it means to follow him in order to ensure that whatever is said and thought conforms to the character and purposes of Christ himself."*²

See, these false apostles were living in a way that was self-approval way. That was an ego-feeding way. They were boasting within themselves of their ability to be better, stronger, smarter, not realizing that is not what the Gospel was, that's not the heart or character of Jesus.

The weapons of Paul's warfare are prayer, the Word of God, faith, the power of the Holy Spirit... His way of fighting, destroying every high thing and

² Scott J. Hafemann, [2 Corinthians](#), The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 2000), 414.

stronghold, is by seeking the heart of God first, and then calling out the false teaching and people who are not hearing the voice of God, are not leading their people to the Lord, and are only working for their own good and pride. The Gospel is at stake in the hands of the false teachers. The paradox is that these things are destroyed simply by pointing out the foolishness of their message in light of the message of Christ.

Our job as preachers, teachers and leaders in the church is not to be severe with you. It's not about preaching hellfire and brimstone to scare you into becoming Christians or giving more money to the church. Pastor Chip talked last week that it's not about how much you give, he doesn't even know and that's true! But it's about your heart and relationship with God. Are you winning the approval of God by trusting him and living a life of generosity and love and service to others? Too many pastors have said that they do, and all they did was remove the kind, loving nature and atmosphere of Gospel-living and destroyed their churches.

These days I'm listening to a podcast-radio show called "the Rise and Fall of Mars Hill." Years ago, it was Mars Hill was a large mega-church based out of Seattle, Washington, that grew to have 15 campuses across 4 states, seeing a weekly attendance of 12,300 people.... But over time the church died. The pastor of that church was not following through on the heart of the Gospel. Ministry became about him, self-promotion, abuse of power and bullying his leaders and the congregation. Their story teaches us the importance of guarding the integrity of the Gospel, keeping leaders, elders, pastors accountable. We do that by asking, "are we living out the Gospel?" "How do we address or respond to conflict?" "Are we in prayer and in constant study of the Word?" We need to be, for our sake, for

your sake. These are questions are also for you as a church, as a people, need to ask and observe in yourselves and also in us as leaders, staff and elders.

On a daily basis though, outside of a church context, what would this look like? What is Paul getting at? I think what he and I are getting at can be seen in Luke 14:7-11. It's a Sabbath day, and just before this moment, Jesus had been invited to eat at a Pharisee's house, and then healed a man and sent him home.

⁷ Now he told a parable to those who were invited, when he noticed how they chose the places of honor, saying to them, ⁸ "When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not sit down in a place of honor, lest someone more distinguished than you be invited by him, ⁹ and he who invited you both will come and say to you, 'Give your place to this person,' and then you will begin with shame to take the lowest place. ¹⁰ But when you are invited, go and sit in the lowest place, so that when your host comes he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher.' Then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at table with you. ¹¹ For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

Paul's message, throughout the letter and this chapter, is that the approval of the Lord doesn't come from being a person of high-respect or prestige, it doesn't come from being surrounded by people who think you're great, in fact, it kinda seems like the opposite. The approval of God comes from being a person who chooses humility, and seeks to live a life that honors God and honors others first before yourself.

"Commended by the Lord, not Others"

That from verse 7. Look at what is before your eyes! Another way of translating that is look at the obvious! Paul subtly reminds the Corinthians that

even though he was unimpressive outwardly, Paul's ministry was evidenced to be supported with the power of God, a power that obliterates strongholds hostile to Christ. The false teachers, while outwardly impressive, are spiritually weak and powerless.

Here's why! *Verse 12(b): "...Not that we dare to classify or compare ourselves with some of those who are commending themselves. But when they measure themselves by one another and compare themselves with one another, they are without understanding."*

Think about Hollywood! Think about all the award shows they have where it's the actors and actresses giving actors and actresses the awards. The need for approval, the need and desire for reward and recognition, it's everywhere. It's not that hard to find in our everyday world because it is what the flesh loves to do. Some writers describe it this way: *"It is the nicotine of the soul for someone functioning out of gospel deficit. When our hearts are not alive to the full and free approval of God, we naturally vacuum up approval anywhere else we can find it."*³

That's the problem. Honestly, that's my problem; maybe if we're honest, that's also our problem. Without the Gospel, without knowing and understanding the sacrifice of Christ for us, without knowing of the new life we have under God's new covenant through the blood and life of Jesus, we are lost. We are left to our own devices seeking to satisfy all our cravings, to be fed, to be clothed, and to be acknowledged and recognized and when we don't, we puff ourselves up and find others who will puff us up and in turn puff each other up. It's a problem of the flesh, of the fallen human condition.

³ Dane Ortlund, ["2 Corinthians,"](#) in *Romans–Galatians*, ed. Iain M. Duguid, James M. Hamilton Jr., and Jay Sklar, vol. X, ESV Expository Commentary (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 527.

Take Proverbs 26:12 for instance, *“Do you see a man who is wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him.”*

Let’s look at Jeremiah 9! A prophet looking at his own people and saying: *“but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the LORD.”* But let’s not forget that in the list of nations that Lord was going to punish... Judah and Israel were listed there among the rest. The responsibility to look to the Lord and live according to his Law under his kingdom rule was not only for the other nations, but also for the people of God too. And when they exalted themselves over the Lord, they too became worse than the nations they lived among.

Paul’s message and challenge for Corinth, for the church across time, and for us today, is to learn how to boast in the Lord. To find our approval in him. The reasonable question to then ask is “how?” What does that mean?... Well, we understand the Lord by looking and seeing that he is a God of steadfast love, (forgiving, patient, long-suffering), justice (standing up for others, showing grace but defending the innocent and doing what is right over what looks better in the eyes of others), and righteousness, (not taking advantage of others, going the extra mile to do the right thing, being honest, showing mercy, being loyal).

We boast in the Lord by boasting about how God has changed our lives to be holy, to be pure, to do good, to live good lives, to love others, to love God, to live as Christ lived. We boast in what God is doing in the church, what he has done for the church and for his people, we boast about a good and loving God, who sent his son Jesus to die on a cross so that we, his creation, may be redeemed and

repent and turn back to God so that we may be freed from the curse and stain of sin and no longer walk in the ways of the flesh, but become a New Creation.

Conclusion

Paul here begins an appeal for the church to see his confidence that God is the Lord of the church and to we need to also retain that confidence considering how crucial this is for evaluating ministries in our day and age. I cannot overstate how important it is for us to share Paul's conviction that God does his sovereign work *through his people*. We as the body of Christ need to have people, in every church in every place who preach the gospel out of lives shaped by its truth and who are commended by God's power. "God does not approve those who commend themselves by their own achievements, but only those whom he himself commends through the active display of his own power."

The one the Lord commends is the one who is approved. He commends the one who does his will. His will is to love God with all our hearts soul mind and strength, and then to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. Those false apostles loved themselves and despised Paul? Paul could only be disappointed and warn them of the coming judgement against them if they continued to be unrepentant and hurt the church because of it. They could approve their message all they wanted, but it is more than evident that they did not have the Lord's approval. Let us live into the Gospel of Christ by following Paul's example to choose humility over pride, to exalt Christ over ourselves, and to always remember that the Lord commends the one who boasts in the Lord.