



2 Corinthians 10:7-18

What is the Purpose of Spiritual Leadership?

Summary: God commissions spiritual leaders and is the final authority in their evaluation.

We start this morning by jumping straight into the deep end of the pool, asking: what is the center of your identity? What is the thing you're most proud of, or perhaps most frustrated about? The thing that you keep coming back to, to judge how you're doing.

For some younger people, it could be your social standing – do you have enough friends? Are they the right friends? Are you doing the right things according to your friends? Is everything going socially?

For some in your 30s and 40s it could be your professional career – are you making a name for yourself? Are you advancing the way you hope to be? Are you proud to introduce yourself to people by your job title or profession? Is your spouse proud to tell people what you do? Is everything going well professionally?

For those of you in your 50s and 60s it could be your portfolio – how are your investments doing? Are you cheerful and optimistic about the future or checking your balances daily to see how much you've lost? Is everything going well financially?

What is the thing, the marker, that you look to, to judge your success or struggle in life?

And why, for most of us, is our first answer not how we're doing spiritually? Because, it's not. Once it comes up I may say 'well, yeah, of course that's important!' But here's the blunt reality: most of us do not *automatically* see life as *primarily* spiritual in nature, nor does the spiritual condition of our lives shape the way we see ourselves and our schedules in the way it should. We tend to focus first, and most, on things we can touch, see, sense, and feel.

And yet, as we saw last week, and will continue to see today – there is a very real spiritual aspect to life and it is the foundation upon which everything else is built. It is what will remain long after everything else begins to fade away.

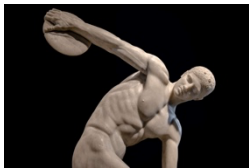
As we jump back into the Scripture this morning, we find the Apostle Paul responding to people who are judging him based entirely on externalities – how does he look, how does he talk, does he seem impressive? And in the process, we learn people have always made judgments about the way others look, what they can do, and what they have. In other words, we learn people have always overlooked the spiritual when evaluating themselves and others and we learn some valuable lessons about spiritual leadership, which can help change that situation, along the way. Read with me:

2 Corinthians 10:7 Do you look at things according to the outward appearance? If anyone is convinced in himself that he is Christ's, let him again consider this in himself, that just as he *is* Christ's, even so we *are* Christ's. 8 For even if I should boast somewhat more about our authority, which the Lord gave us for edification and not for your destruction, I shall not be ashamed— 9 lest I seem to terrify you by letters. 10 "For *his* letters," they say, "*are* weighty and powerful, but *his* bodily presence *is* weak, and *his* speech contemptible." 11 Let such a person consider this, that what we are in word by letters when we are absent, such *we will* also *be* in deed when we are present.

Those ten words that we open with in verse 7 are worth coming back to again and again. I believe it's an important question for us to ask ourselves. It's one each of us should sit with. And, we should remember this question is found in the Bible, in a letter addressed to a church. In other words, it's a question directed at Christians. Originally it was asked of men and women living in a particular town in ancient Greece, but it's still relevant today for each of us today. **Do you, do we, look at things according to the outward appearance?**

May God forgive us for how often the answer is yes. We make judgments about people and situations all the time based on external, observable features.

The problem back in Corinth is that Paul was not impressive physically. And you have to remember this is in days of the Roman Empire in the region of ancient Greece. This is the culture that gave us the Olympics and the word gymnasium. This is the civilization that is remembered, in part, for its artwork which so often focused on the human form.



This is also the culture that gave us philosophers like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. They had no TV or radio but they built theatres where actors would entertain and people learned the skills of rhetoric giving impressive, polished, moving speeches. They lived 2000 years ago, on another continent, spoke a different language, and didn't have an iPhone, but the people in the Corinthian church were just like us. They were used to *looking* at people, *listening* to people, and making judgments about them.



They looked at things **according to the outward appearance**. Just like us. And when they looked at, or listened to Paul, some of them were not impressed.

What I want you to see is that Paul doesn't try to change their mind by becoming more impressive, by competing according to their terms. He doesn't think well, I've to got take a class on public speaking. He doesn't say I should probably talk to my dentist about getting my teeth whitened and see about buying some new shirts, maybe look into a gym membership and this whole keto diet.

No. He completely flips the focus of the evaluation and judgment and points out: the most important thing in life is who we are at the core – the invisible part of us that is really us. The part that either reflects or distorts Christ.

Paul says, I am who I am because it's who Christ has made me. And church, I want you to be able to say the same thing. But it's not easy when we live in an Instagram world.

And yet, God wants you to know, understand, and believe, that the way you look, the way you sound, what you can do, how much you have achieved, *these are not the truly important things in life*. In fact, they're meaningless, like tattered, dirty, filthy rags, to quote from another place in Scripture. What really matters most is who you are at the foundation of your soul. The most important question is: are you in Christ?

If so, He is the anchor and source of your worth. It's not your physical appearance – the size and shape of your curves, how you look in the mirror. It's not how witty or smart you sound in conversation. It's not whether you get the promotion or recognition or not. It's not the value of your portfolio or retirement. It has nothing to do with the outward appearance. Who you are, and what you are, is shaped by the hand of God on your life – making you and molding you into what He wants you to be.

Your identity is meant to be rooted in Christ. Your calling and purpose are anchored in Him. Your value and worth are anchored in Him. And if that is true, thousands upon thousands of waves can crash upon you and never shake you, never move you.

Notice, Paul is confident in his identity. He is the same man whether writing a letter or coming in person. He is fulfilling the role he's been given by God, communicating the same message, whether you find it impressive in one form or not.

And speaking of fulfilling his God-given role, let's take a minute and talk about that.

The first thing I want to point out, is that just knowing and fulfilling, walking in, your God-given role and identity *will not solve all your problems...* though it will solve your *deepest* ones. Paul is obviously confident in his identity. He's not struggling with anything here. He's not doubting his self-worth or wondering if he's on the right path. He has those questions answered. And I want you to know, you can too.

But even still, others question him, doubt him, criticize him, talk about him when he's gone. Knowing your identity in Christ will put a solid foundation under your life, but don't expect everyone else to notice, appreciate, or agree. Listen to me: there's no way they can *if they're still looking, primarily, at outward appearances*. They're going to misjudge you all day long. But you can still be secure in your soul, like Paul. It is possible.

Second, let's notice what was Paul's God-given calling? He says he has been given *authority*. Now that's a dangerous word in our culture today. It's something all kinds of people are questioning. There are questions floating around right now about the legitimacy of the British monarchy, and of the United States Supreme Court, and of government agencies like the Department of Justice and the FBI – foundational institutions of society. There are ideas floating around, questions being asked – what is a legitimate basis for authority and how should it be used?

We have become suspicious of power and authority because we have seen them misused and politicized for personal gain and tribal benefit. To the cynic it seems that any time power is allowed to accrue to one person or party others will suffer.

Is that true? Are power and authority inherently corrupt or unjust? The answer must be no, though they are certainly loaded with the potential for corruption and injustice. Lord Acton was correct in writing almost 150 years ago, “power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”

Consider: who has the most power and authority of all? God, of course. And how does He use it? To benefit us. First, through Creation, He gave us all things to enjoy. And then, when we rebel against Him, He uses His power to rescue, redeem, and restore us. God uses His absolute power for our absolute good.

And then, he delegates some of that power and authority to us establishing positions of leadership and authority. From the Ten Commandments to the New Testament children are told to obey their parents. Scripture speaks to employee – employer relationships and establishes the authority of the state, including its authority for capital punishment. In the home, in the community, and in the church, God establishes authority putting one person in a formal, hierarchical position over another.

Now, the temptation is always to use that position for personal gain, but it is a temptation we must fight against. Authority, when properly used, always benefits others.

That is what Paul says here – God has given him a position of authority over the Corinthians, he didn’t earn it with statue-worthy physique. He didn’t win the position in a speech competition. It was given to him by God, but why? Look at the answer with me in vs 8 where he speaks of [our authority, which the Lord gave us for edification and not for your destruction](#).

Edification is a word we don’t use a lot today, but it simply means to build up, to enhance, to boost or fortify, to develop and expand – it is the exact opposite of destruction. You see, Paul’s letters are not meant to bully people, and when he shows up it’s not going to be to order people around, his authoritative guidance is meant to call people closer to Christ, to help them grow, to benefit them spiritually. And that’s exactly the model each of us should be embracing today. When we have a position of power, status, authority, we must ask: how does God want me to use this for the good of others, for their [edification](#) and not their [destruction](#). How does God want me to use this to imitate Christ?

This is as relevant for the twelve-year old assistant dance instructor assigned to work with younger girls as it for the fifty-four-year-old Deputy Undersecretary of Important Stuff. Your position of authority in the home, the workplace, the lab, the community, or the church is a gifted opportunity from God and one day you will stand before Him to answer the question: how well did you use it? Did you use it for yourself or did you take it seriously as an opportunity to help others.

Listen to what Scripture has to say about the importance of edifying others, building them up, and how exactly we go about doing it:

Romans 14:19 Therefore let us pursue the things *which make* for peace and the things by which one may edify another.

Church, we are told to pursue things that build other people up. And, you should expect, this will happen when you're part of a local church – you will build up and encourage other people, and they will build up and encourage you. It's normal, expected Christian behavior, but it's not automatic, it must be pursued – by each of us, by all of us.

Look at this:

Romans 15:1 We then who are strong ought to bear with the scruples of the weak, and not to please ourselves. 2 Let each of us please *his* neighbor for *his* good, leading to edification.

What is this saying? Value the people around you. Seek to build them up. Encourage them. And if necessary, where possible, cater to them. Prefer them over yourself. Bear with them as they grow. When you have authority or power, it's really easy to grow impatient with people – whether they're your subordinates or your kids. You want them to hurry up. You want them to get it. You want things to happen faster. But God, who has all authority, is patient with us and we who are strong ought to bear with those who are weak and not please ourselves.

The temptation is there, and it is real. Avoid it. Vent your frustration to God. Ask God to grant patience. Invite Him into your situation. But seek the good of others and patiently help them grow.

There are other verses we could look at, but for the sake of time, I'll only bring up one more, it's going to hurt though.

Ephesians 4:29 Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers.

Oh church, what else can we do about this but repent? To say, God, forgive me for the way that I have used my mouth or my keyboard to tear others down instead building them up. Forgive me for the times I should have kept my mouth shut but I spoke out instead. Forgive me for the times I have texted, typed, or posted and I should have just deleted or moved on.

These two little letters are so powerful when you put them next to each other. N – O. No. Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification. Church, the primary purpose of your mouth is to glorify God. But that's because the mouth is just an escape hatch for the things happening in the heart and mind. Jesus said out of the

overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. What comes out of you is only a reflection of what's already in you.

And God wants the things that come out of us to build others up, to encourage them, to help them. Even if that means confronting them. Listen, sometimes the most loving thing you can do is tell someone they're wrong, they need to stop, they need to change.

You want to help them grow, but you want all that growth channeled in a particular direction. You want it to bend toward God. That's what truly *edifies*, that's what truly builds up. Simply encouraging someone to follow what's in their heart could be the most destructive thing you could wish upon them if what is in their heart leads away from God and His grace.

Paul used his words to *edify* the Corinthians, but it meant offending some of them in process. And that's why, in part, a certain group was unhappy with him.

But, Paul says, I'm not trying to please them anyway. I'm looking forward to having my performance reviewed by Jesus. Read with me:

12 For we dare not class ourselves or compare ourselves with those who commend themselves. But they, measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise.

These guys feel good about themselves because they compare themselves to their peers – it's a mutual appreciation society. This is not wise. We'll see why in just a moment.

13 We, however, will not boast beyond measure, but within the limits of the sphere which God appointed us—a sphere which especially includes you. 14 For we are not overextending ourselves (as though *our authority* did not extend to you), for it was to you that we came with the gospel of Christ; 15 not boasting of things beyond measure, *that is*, in other men's labors, but having hope, *that* as your faith is increased, we shall be greatly enlarged by you in our sphere, 16 to preach the gospel in the *regions* beyond you, *and* not to boast in another man's sphere of accomplishment.

Paul says God sent us to Corinth to share the gospel, to tell you the good news. So, everything happening there now, kind of has its roots in us. Your changed lives are proof of what God is doing through us as we serve Him. And as soon as all of this is settled, we hope to press on beyond you and continue preaching the gospel in new areas. But, we take no credit for any of this ourselves, we're just willing participants in what God wants to do. Which is why he ends this way:

17 But "*he who glories, let him glory in the LORD.*" 18 For not he who commends himself is approved, but whom the Lord commends.

Let me summarize it all this way. The group in Corinth was looking at Paul and making their own judgments. He's not that big of deal they said. He writes some impressive letters, but he's not very impressive in person others said. They were comparing Paul to their own standards of physical appearance and style of speech and he didn't seem to measure up to the celebrities of their day.

And I want to remind you, this was happening with people *at church*. They knew who was who and what was what in their world. They knew who was trendy, what was popular, and when you compared Paul to that, he didn't seem to measure up. So, they questioned him and some wanted to write him off.

But I'll ask again the question I asked last week. Is that what they should have been looking for? Should they have been comparing Paul to the impressive people in Corinth? Should they have expected leaders in the church to be just like and perhaps better than, leaders and celebrities in the culture? And the answer, of course, is no.

The people of this world, the people outside the church, value different things than God, they're impressed by things that actually grieve and offend God. Or, they elevate to supreme importance something that's not important to God. When you look to, or follow those people, they actually exercise authority over you. They tell you how to get ahead. They tell you how to be accepted, how to fit in. They tell you what's important or trendy or on point and what's old, out of style, or on the wrong side of history.

And then they look at you and evaluate: do you get it? Do you have it? Can you do it? Are you worth anything, or not? They measure themselves and compare themselves among themselves and they do the same thing to you. *You* do the same thing to you. *I* do the same thing to me. And God says, that's not wise. It's not helpful. It's actually quite harmful.

It's either harmful because you *are* pretty enough, strong enough, smart enough, or savvy enough to fit in and get ahead, but you're going the wrong way. Or, you realize I'm *not* good enough, I'm too old or too young, too fat or too skinny, I'm too stupid, I don't know the right people, and you pound and you pummel yourself, grinding yourself down or despising other people, because you couldn't earn a spot among the crowd.

17 But "he who glories, let him glory in the LORD." 18 For not he who commends himself is approved, but whom the Lord commends.

When they turned on Paul and judged him, what did he do? He said, I'm not trying to please you anyway. I'm trying to follow Christ. I care more about His evaluation than yours. I may not be impressive physically, I may not be dynamic, persuasive, or witty in conversation, but I'm walking in integrity and I'm seeing results, things that only God could do.

Friends, I don't know all of you. I don't know your names. I don't know what each of you are good at or gifted at. But I know this. You're living to please someone. Who is that? Who is telling you what you need to be? What you need to wear? What you need to do next or

where you need to go? Who and what are shaping your life? Someone is in authority over you, who is it?

Are they, like Paul, using their authority, position, and influence to encourage you, build you up in your relationship with God, help you become more of who He wants you to be? Or, are they measuring you by their own standards and commending or condemning you accordingly?

And then, who are you doing that to?

How are you using the position, authority, and power you have? What is your goal for the people around and under you? Are they there to build you up, affirm you, make something better or easier out of your life? Or are you there to make a difference for God? To show them grace and press toward justice, beauty, excellence, and things that will glorify God whether they know Him or not?

What is the center of your identity and how are you using it or how could you use it in a manner that God would commend?

Here's the gospel truth – God is judging us too. He is evaluating us, critiquing us. And He's not impressed. By any of us. Not in the slightest.

But He's merciful. He sees that we'll never make it on our own. He knows all the places we're broken, on the inside and the out. And He offers to cover all of that. Cleanse all of that through His Son and the Holy Spirit when we ask Jesus to forgive us and cleanse us and we ask the Holy Spirit to give us strength.

All the good stuff happens as we keep coming back to God saying, I recognize my weakness here, I need Your forgiveness and strength. I can't do this well enough on my own, I need You. I know what other people think of me, help me not to care anywhere near as much about them as I do about You. Help me to [glory](#) in You.

If you can hear me, listen – God loves you, He is reaching out to you. He has a plan and a purpose for your life, an identity and agenda. It's probably not going to be impressive; it might not even be what you would call significant, at least in the eyes of those who are not looking to Him. But it's real. It's solid. It's stable. It's a worthy way to live and it will touch other people's lives – you will [edify](#) and encourage them and see them grow as you patiently and daily follow Christ.

It's a good life to live, and it's offered to you when you look to God instead of [outward appearances](#) using your influence and authority to build people up, not tear others down.

Let's pray.



Sermon Application and Discussion Questions

2 Corinthians 10:7-18

What is the Purpose of Spiritual Leadership?

Summary: God commissions spiritual leaders and is the final authority in their evaluation.

- What are your primary sources of identity?
 - Have they changed over time?
 - What do you think is the answer for others living here in our area?
 - Is the answer different in other areas?
- Obviously, people have always judged others on the basis of outward appearance but what affect has the internet had on this tendency?
 - What are the consequences of spending so much of our lives seeing filtered, staged, and selected pictures of other people and things?
- What do you think you need to improve about your life to make it better?
 - Paul didn't refute the fact that he was neither impressive physically or rhetorically (in his speaking). How can you live with, and thrive in spite of, your 'inadequacies'?
 - How would you give a pep talk to a friend struggling with their lack of impressiveness?
 - How would you counsel a friend who was contemplating something drastic (e.g. surgery or a large expense) in order to fit in or find acceptance?
- What is valued and esteemed in our church? Do those things edify people? Do they please God?
 - Do you ever find it hard to fit in here? Why?
- How and where do you (or can you) apply John 7:24?
- Who is placed under and who is placed in authority according to the following:
 - Ephesians 6:1
 - 1 Timothy 6:1
 - 1 Peter 2:13-17
 - Hebrews 13:17
 - Which is hardest for you to accept or fulfill?
- What does Jesus tell us about the proper exercise of authority in Mark 10:42-45 (for even greater context, look at 35-45)?