



2 Corinthians 11:5-15 The True Apostle

Summary: Confidence in God's calling enables you to show love and humility, even when challenged.

On Wednesday night, I attended a seminar on teenagers and mental health. It was a great opportunity to hear from Christian counselors and educators. They showed, from anecdotal observations and academic research, that there's a lot of anxiety and depression in the US right now and it's hitting both teens and adults. According to one report by the surgeon general from 2019, 70% of teens saw anxiety as a major problem among their peers, and that was before the pandemic.

But, the presenters all had a hopeful tone. Because, they pointed out, whatever other forms of support people may need, anxiety and depression are an open door for the gospel because, the God of all comfort wants people to know: you are not alone or incompetent as you face the challenges of life and the circumstances of the world. God is reaching out to you, calling you into deeper relationship with Himself and into Christian community where you find, and offer, connection and support.

God wants us to know: there is a point and a purpose to our lives. Fulfilling it won't always be easy, you will face disappointment and resistance in this fallen world, but you can know, beyond all shadow of doubt, that you have a purpose on this planet. And when you know that, and you know God has given you that purpose, equipped you for it, and supports and strengthens you as you fulfill it, you discover that you can endure things that knock others down and out.

As we jump back into 2 Corinthians this morning, I want you to see that Paul the apostle *knew* his identity and calling and that made a difference in his life. Some in the church questioned the man and his ministry because he didn't seem as impressive as other people in town, they questioned his value and worth because he was little too rustic for their taste. But listen as he defends himself and his approach:

2 Corinthians 11:5 For I consider that I am not at all inferior to the most eminent apostles. 6 Even though *I am* untrained in speech, yet *I am* not in knowledge. But we have been thoroughly manifested among you in all things.

7 Did I commit sin in humbling myself that you might be exalted, because I preached the gospel of God to you free of charge? 8 I robbed other churches, taking wages *from them* to minister to you. 9 And when I was present with you, and in need, I was a burden to no one, for what I lacked the brethren who came from Macedonia supplied. And in everything I kept myself from being burdensome to you, and so I will keep *myself*. 10 As the truth of Christ is in me, no one shall stop me from

this boasting in the regions of Achaia. 11 Why? Because I do not love you? God knows!

12 But what I do, I will also continue to do, that I may cut off the opportunity from those who desire an opportunity to be regarded just as we are in the things of which they boast. 13 For such *are* false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ. 14 And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. 15 Therefore *it is* no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works.

So, here's what I hope to convey to you during our time together: confidence in your God-given calling enables you to show love and humility, even when challenged.

Notice Paul's positive, resilient view of himself *while he's being criticized*. He says in verse 5 **For I consider that I am *not at all* inferior to the most eminent apostles**. Now, an apostle is a leader in the church, technically it means someone who is sent with a message, a delegate, and someone who holds authority as a result. We often think of Jesus' twelve disciples as the twelve apostles, but Scripture lists others as well.

Paul *knows* he is an apostle. He introduces himself as: **Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus** in over half of his writings - not because he needed to flex on people and get a little attention, but so people would know he wasn't speaking on his own authority. He wasn't doing this for Paul, he was doing it for Jesus.

Paul also knew there were other apostles. He was friends with some of them, but he didn't see himself as more or less important than any of them.

Now, that wasn't true of everyone. And you have to know that. You have to know that this is 2 Corinthians, and that means there's a 1 Corinthians. And in 1 Corinthians, Paul dealt with the fact that people were choosing sides and forming fan clubs for their favorite apostles, racking and stacking religious leaders, arguing over who was better than whom. And Paul had to tell them, 'Knock it off!'

He said, 'I wasn't crucified for any of you. No one is baptized in my name - fill your eyes, your heart, and your mind, with Jesus because Jesus is supremely better than any apostle. He's in an entirely different class. He's the reason for our apostleship. Without Him we wouldn't have a purpose.'

And listen ya'll - it's important that we be able to say the same thing.

Friends, you might be an accountant, a counselor, a program manager or a pediatrician, but you're not God. I hope you're called to be what you're doing. I hope you have found or are discovering your purpose, calling, giftedness, the things you're naturally a little better at than others, and you enjoy the sense of fulfillment that comes from that, *but you're still not God*.

That's good for you to know about yourself and it's good for other people to know about you. You can work hard, be creative, compassionate and helpful. You can fulfill your purpose and say, *I don't consider myself in anyway inferior to others, but you're still not God.*

How much of our internal dialogue centers on wishing we could do more, or had done that better, or could fix this situation or that problem, or we could go back and get a do over? Hey, calm down. It's OK. You're not God, and He's not asking you to be. He asks you to do and be something else: someone who knows God and reflects Him in your daily life.

So, that's one part, you know God and you have a sense of your purpose and identity, that's good. But remember, not only did Paul know his purpose, he also avoided the trap of comparison with his peers. You have to get this, not just in your head, but in your heart – Paul knew there were people who thought other apostles were more *eminent* than he was. People made a big deal about other apostles. There were apostles whose names elicited excitement or awe. And for some people, his name was not one of those names. *Paul knew this.*

And yet, it didn't mess with him. It didn't eat at him. It didn't gnaw at him or cause him to question himself.

How would you like to be that comfortable with your identity?

Paul says: *I consider that I am not at all inferior to the most eminent apostles.* And let me get a little nerdy here for a minute – behind our English word *consider* is the Greek *logizomai* it's from the root word *logos* where we get our English word *logic*. In other words, Paul isn't just casually aware of things, he's acutely aware. He's hasn't ignored the situation, he has considered it, chewed on it, and come to his conclusion.

What I want to know is, do you see the power of his position? Can you imagine having this kind of self-awareness, self-confidence, and not because you pumped yourself up with a bunch of positive self-talk and affirmation, not because you trash talked or belittled other people, but because you really, truly, understood and believed that you are *not at all inferior to* people who seem impressive.

What kind of freedom would that give you? What kind of difference would it make in your life if this was true of you? Where would you sense the change from your current struggles?

Well, now take a look at this: *6 Even though I am untrained in speech, yet I am not in knowledge. But we have been thoroughly manifested among you in all things.*

This is truly mind blowing to me. Not only is Paul comfortable in his own skin, confident in his own calling, secure in his identity, all of that is true *while* he recognizes and publicly admits his own weaknesses. He doesn't try to hide it or hide from it. He says, 'Yep, you're right, I'm not the most impressive public speaker you're ever going to hear.'

Now, we've been talking lately about the fact that these people, Christians in the church in Corinth, knew a thing or two about speech. This was the culture that gave us philosophers that you still study today and politicians that gave great speeches in the ancient Senate our modern senate is modeled after. You remember that this culture gave us the Olympic games, the most famous of four competitions known as the Pan Hellenic Games. The Olympics occurred every four years in Olympia, near the western coast of Greece. But every two years the Isthmian Games were held in Corinth drawing competitors in chariot racing, boxing, wrestling, and... rhetoric, or public speaking.

And Paul admits, yeah, you know what? I'm not as good as those guys. I'm not as skilled, might not be as moving and impressive. That's not who or what God made me. Paul's OK saying that, admitting it publicly.

He wasn't a bumbling idiot, but he wasn't going to be competing at the elite level of dramatic, compelling speech - if that's what you were looking for. I think we can appreciate that kind of honest self-assessment, right?

But think with me about this. If you're an apostle, if you're called, *by God*, to go out, meet people and share the gospel, to proclaim the message of the Son of God come to save the world from sin, to announce that God is calling people to repent of their sins and come to Him through faith in the cross of Christ, doesn't it seem like maybe, *just maybe*, it would be helpful to be a really gifted orator? Doesn't it seem like being an impressive speaker would help with a calling like that? Doesn't it seem like, of all the things God could empower you to do, preaching really well would be important?

We can see all the reasons to say yes. But God didn't. Paul may have just been average, perhaps slightly better than average, but he wasn't elite. And yet, he's the one God called.

Church, my heart aches for you to know: you don't have to be the best to be called and used by God. That's true in your professional life as well as your ministry to friends, family, and others. God does not require you to be impressive - to be the best, the most educated or well-trained. God might actually take little ol' average you, slightly above average you, and use you to do *great things* as you lean on Him and look to Him daily for strength, wisdom, rest, and guidance.

Our city is full of impressive people. Really impressive, well-trained people. And, I want to argue, it should be that way. This is the center of the American democracy - from public institutions like government and military, to the economic giants like Amazon, financial giants like Capital One, and information giants like Google, things happen here that ripple out around the globe. Let's have good people working on these issues and problems, let's have gifted, talented, trained, people.

But, let's remember, on the basis of Paul's example, even if you know you're not the best, you still might be the one God has chosen and sent anyway. So, like Paul, look to make up for it where it really matters.

2 Corinthians 11:6 Even though *I am* untrained in speech, yet *I am* not in knowledge. But we have been thoroughly manifested among you in all things.

Paul says, I might not be the most impressive when it comes to delivery, but I know what I'm saying and you've see the evidence in my life.

If I could take you back in time to Jerusalem in the first century, here is what you would see – a town built around an enormous, beautiful temple filled with activity, drawing people to worship from all around the Mediterranean, Southern Europe and North Africa. And in the Temple complex and around town, you would see people who were obviously religious, from the way they dressed to the things they did. You would see their strange customs. You would see people standing on the street corners praying. It all looked very spiritual.

And Jesus said it was worthless. It was empty. It had no meaning.

Why? Because what looked good on the outside held nothing substantial within. You would be impressed from a distance, but God was disappointed up close.

How many times have you had a similar experience? Ever booked a hotel or AirBnB that looked great online and disappointing when you walked in? Ever ordered something that looked great on the menu or in the display case and lacked any real flavor when you took a bite?

What would you rather have, something that seemed impressive externally or something substantial and true?

Well, again, Paul says, maybe I didn't make the travel team when it comes to speech, but I know what I'm talking about and you can see the evidence in my life.

Church, that should be our aspiration. That should be what we're aiming for. You might not be the smartest, the most attractive, the strongest or fastest, or best, but do you know God, and there is evidence in your life? That's what really matters, that's how we should judge ourselves and others, and ultimately, that is how God will judge us.

I said earlier, my hope this morning is to convey to you that confidence in your God-given calling can enable you to show love and humility, even when challenged. We've seen Paul's confidence, now let's see how it enables him to show love and humility.

First, love. If you read 1 and 2 Corinthians you learn pretty quickly, this church - the people, and their city – were a mess. A hot mess. And yet, Paul patiently and persistently loved them – the same way God loves us. Paul actively and aggressively sought to think less of himself and more about the needs of others. Remember, there are people in this church debating his importance, disappointed by his lack of impressiveness, and openly questioning his authority, and yet Paul says, look at this with me, vs 7 – I am **humbling myself that you might be exalted**. Verse 8 – I've taken money I received from other

churches and used it [to minister to you](#). Verse 9 – I tried not to be [burden to any of you](#). Verse 11 – [God knows, I love you](#).

Parents, I think there's something here to chew on, especially for your teenagers and young adults. You're pouring yourself out for them. That's good. They don't respond so well, that's OK. Look at Paul's example. And, remember Paul is just doing his best to try to reflect the love He received from Christ. God patiently and persistently, sacrificially, loves us. He initiates the relationship. And as we grow in our own understanding of what that means, we are enabled, slowly but surely, to begin showing it to others.

Jesus Christ humbled Himself, setting aside His divine rights and prerogatives and came down to earth, involving Himself in the mess we make of our own lives, through our own choices, and the mess others create for us with their choices. He didn't need to. He could have just torched the whole planet and started from scratch. He could be distant and disinterested – 'You got yourselves into that mess, figure it out on your own. I've got other things going on.' But He didn't. He got involved. He shows us love, even when the cost was suffering, agony, and pain – experiences that were otherwise completely foreign to the Son of God. He humbled Himself for our salvation.

And now, Paul who has benefit from his Savior's humility seeks to imitate Him. He allows himself to be misunderstood, questioned. He preaches the gospel free of charge refusing to take payment, which would make his life easier. Why? For their sake, not his own.

You remember that impressive public speakers were a thing in Corinth? You remember they had nationwide speech competitions at the Isthmian Games. So, it shouldn't surprise you to learn that you could make a living by speaking. In fact, Emperor Augustus paid a man named Verrius Flaccus 100,000 sesterians a year for his abilities as a speaker and teacher – calculating modern values is always a little tricky, but that's roughly \$1M a year in today's value for knowing stuff and speaking well.

So, there was a market for speaking. And people expected to pay for the knowledge and entertainment good speakers brought. But, just like today, that meant you had people who responded to what the market demanded. If you could make money by talking about Jesus, some people would learn whatever they could about Him and start speaking – it was just another story to them but it was super convenient that you had this ready market of Christians who would pay.

These are the people Paul is trying to save the church from. Yes, they sound spectacular when they speak, but they're not doing it because they love the church, they're not even doing it because they really know Jesus, they're doing it because Christians were willing to pay.

Luke captures something vaguely similar in the book of Acts where there's a family of Jewish exorcists – they're not Christians, but they've heard of Jesus through the preaching of Paul. And one day they come upon someone with a demon and they try to cast the demon out – they do their whole thing, and then just for some special effect, they say I cast

you out by the name of Jesus whom Paul preaches. And the demon-possessed man looks over at them and says (Acts 19:15) ... “Jesus I know, and Paul I know; but who are you?”

Acts 19:16 Then the man in whom the evil spirit was leaped on them, overpowered them, and prevailed against them, so that they fled out of that house naked and wounded. 17 This became known both to all Jews and Greeks dwelling in Ephesus; and fear fell on them all, and the name of the Lord Jesus was magnified.

So, the people presenting themselves as apostles back in Corinth seem to be similarly opportunistic. They're not like Paul, motivated by love. They're frauds, cunning, deceitful, disguising themselves, making money off of the Christian church in a city accustomed to paying for good speakers **and they will face their judgement**. But they sure look and sound good while they're doing it.

So, what do we make of all this, living thousands of years later in Northern Virginia instead of southern Greece? Well, nobody pulled up in a chariot this morning. You've got a super-computer in your pocket or purse, and you've got more clothes in your closet than a king would have back then, but I bet you dollars to denarius, you still judge people based on how they sound, how they look, how they carry themselves, how impressive they are. And you judge yourself the same way. Whether you're pretty confident about yourself or absolutely depressed and disgusted, there's no one you think about more than you.

I want you to know that having confidence in your God-given calling, purpose, role, and identity enables you to show love and humility to others, even when it's hard and you're challenged, and questioned, and compared to others.

And I want you to know that's all possible, because it's exactly what Christ did for us. He knew who He was. And He knew us and our condition. So, out of love, He humbled Himself and did what we could never do for ourselves. He suffered and died for the penalty of our sins, and offers us a fresh start and new beginning. He did it before we asked for it so that when we realized how much we needed it, He would be there waiting for us. He did it even though it wasn't easy. Even though He was questioned and challenged. Even though people still resist Him today.

Paul experienced this love of Jesus, personally and profoundly. It changed his life and he sought to show it to others. Today, many of you have experienced it, the question is, what difference does it make? How does knowing who you are *in Christ* affect the amount of frustration, anger, depression, and anxiety you feel? How does it affect the way you see yourself and the way you see others? How does knowing that you are seen and loved by Christ affect you? Because, confidence in God's calling can enable you to show love and humility, even when life's hard.

Let's pray.



Sermon Application and Discussion Questions

2 Corinthians 11:5-15 The True Apostle

Summary: Confidence in God's calling enables you to show love and humility, even when challenged.

- Do you experience comparison more internally (self-based) or from others? Was there a time in your life (school/growing up?) that you dealt more with comparisons than you do now?
 - Who do you feel compared to? Is it a fair comparison?
 - What good comes out of comparisons? How/why is comparison bad?
- What difference has knowing your identity and role in Christ made for you when it comes to comparison?
 - What is something you can admit you're not great at?
 - What is something you feel comes more naturally to you than others?
 - Is there an area of your life where you feel the only explanation for your success, achievement, or ability is God?
- When have you experienced attractive external appearances with a disappointing interior?
 - When is it appropriate for us to 'fake it' on the outside until our inside catches up? Is it hypocrisy to do something you don't feel like doing, simply because it's right and not because you really, really, want to?
- Paul received support from the churches in Macedonia (specifically, Philippi) in order to support his work in Corinth. How does this differ from the instructions found in Matthew 10:5-10 and 1 Timothy 5:17-18?
 - Review Philippians 4:10-19 – what do you learn about the Philippian's giving? What do you learn about Paul's attitude toward their support?
- How would you explain the difference between humility and humiliation?
 - How does humbling's source/origin affect the way it is experienced?
- In his commentary on this passage, Paul Barnett stated: "Suffering for others motivated by love for them lies at the heart of God's work of reconciliation." Christ's suffering is unique, but how do His people vicariously extend it today?
- Where you have you noticed people who were not Christians targeting people who are Christians as a source of revenue, attention, or engagement?