



Measuring Success 2 Corinthians 11:16-33

I have been through those many instances in life where I've applied for jobs and I've had to prepare a CV or Resume as Americans would say. It was an opportunity as many people put it to me at the time "to sell myself" by indicating my successes.

I've also been on the other side of the table as a member of an interviewing panel. It's as an interviewer I saw the differences in the way people sell themselves. Some are very conservative in what they say, others boast to the point of bending the truth or beyond about how superb they are. It's part of the job of the interviewer to draw out those that are underselling themselves and make sense of those who boast about themselves.

We have seen from past dips into 2 Corinthians that Paul was facing down some false teachers who had got their claws into the fellowship at Corinth. They were Jews who claimed to be Christian, even apostles and they boasted of their spirituality – their pure Israelite credentials, their obedience to the law and how blessed they were with the proceeds of their preaching activities. In fact, they measured the success in their ministry by the support they were receiving – and by that I mean financial support. Surely this meant that they were blessed of God? Paul, as far as they were concerned, was less than them because he wasn't slick, well-spoken and rich as they were. He just attracted trouble.

But as we found out last time, just because a preacher is slick, well-spoken and rich doesn't mean that they are spiritual, blessed of God or having God-given knowledge and insight as Paul did. They were charlatans who preached "another Jesus" and as we'll find out in a moment used fear and pressure to gain followers.

Paul goes to great lengths in this letter to expose them. In the early chapters he's very reserved in what he says, but here he's more open. We'll see in a moment that he even when he uses their method of boasting and the Corinthians' tendency to be gullible to expose the super-apostles for what they were. Why did he go to all this trouble?

In a number of places in this letter, he projects his love and concern for the Corinthians, the most recent being in verse 1 of this chapter: *11:1 I wish you would tolerate me, even when I am a bit foolish. Please do! 2 I am jealous for you, just as God is; you are like a pure virgin whom I have promised in marriage to one man only, Christ himself. 3 I am afraid that your minds will be corrupted and that you will abandon your full and pure devotion to Christ--in the same way that Eve was deceived by the snake's clever lies.* It was a case of deep concern for the Corinthian believers being tricked and his anger at how they were being tricked that has prompted such a response.

How were these people being tricked? You'll remember that last time we found that many of the Corinthians were tolerant of the false teachers and were impressed by their boasting. Here we find that they ended up bullied into following them. *19 You yourselves are so wise, and so you gladly tolerate fools! 20 You tolerate anyone who orders you around or takes advantage of you or traps you or looks down on you or slaps you in the face.* They had been impressed and manipulated. How often down the ages have God's people been fooled by false teachers who have done the same and still do the same. Manipulating people in that way is just not of God. Look out for it – there's plenty around. It's an easy mindset to get into. It's called spiritual abuse – where someone gains power over others in an illegitimate and abusive way. How? It's usually by fear – fear of hell if they don't do as the leader says, that prayer will only be answered by following the cult, or they won't be blessed unless they do certain things, like give the cult money, or even use pressure to make people make commitments without thinking things through properly, or by trapping them by providing a service after which people feel obliged – or trapped – into following them. These are all common ways in which the cults entrap people.

Unfortunately Christians have also done the same from time to time down the years and we so often need reminding that we do things according to God's will, way and power, not using the techniques of the world to manipulate people into following Jesus. It still happens and I've seen it in churches and it's not often easy to

spot – remember that satan masquerades as an angel of light. A clue is often in what kind of Jesus they preach – it's usually “another Jesus” - a Jesus of law, not of grace.

Thankfully, this isn't what Paul was about. He says sarcastically in verse 21 *I am ashamed to admit that we were too timid to do those things!* In those days sarcasm was often used to express something strongly. He just didn't do that. He didn't need to take advantage of people, trap them or threaten them – all he was called to do was to bring the Good News to people in a faithful and relevant way and let the Holy Spirit do the rest. It's still the same today.

So Paul has heard the boasts of the super apostles, so what has he got to boast about? This is how he puts it: *16 I repeat: no one should think that I am a fool. But if you do, at least accept me as a fool, just so I will have a little to boast of. 17 Of course what I am saying now is not what the Lord would have me say; in this matter of boasting I am really talking like a fool. 18 But since there are so many who boast for merely human reasons, I will do the same.* Paul's ministry and method was not to boast about how great he was: his calling was clear – to bring the Good News to people. In fact he had already said as much in chapter 3: *5 For it is not ourselves that we preach; we preach Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake.* Just think of all the other places in his writings that Paul says that.

So boasting wasn't how the Lord called him to preach. But the Corinthians' stupidity had been so great that he was going to use a bit of sarcasm to expose their foolishness and the falseness of the super-apostles. That's why in verse 18 he says *18 But since there are so many who boast for merely human reasons, I will do the same.* And also in verse 9 *You yourselves are so wise, and so you gladly tolerate fools!* So he says *at least accept me as a fool, just so I will have a little to boast of.* In other words, he says, if you really must take so much interest in the boasting of fools, treat me as a fool and listen to what I've got to boast about! *But if anyone dares to boast about something--I am talking like a fool--I will be just as daring.* Even by the human argument of boasting Paul would show how different his God-given ministry was.

Let's remind ourselves of the boast of the super-apostles. They claimed that they were the faithful followers of Jesus because they were strictly Jewish, obeyed the law, preached salvation through law and demanded money to that end. They measured their success by how many paying converts they had and by how slick their ministry was. The main problem for Paul is that they went part of the way with the Christian faith, but the rest was a heap of lies. Tennyson:

*"A lie that is all of a lie can be met with and fought outright;
But a lie that is partly the truth is a harder matter to fight."*

So what was Paul's boast? Firstly he goes right to the core of who they were: Jews. And he was one of them. As he often said who faced with Judaisers – he was an arch Jew. The description is shorter here.

22 Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Abraham's descendants? So am I.

So far so good, but when it comes to Jesus this is where he diverges. *23 Are they Christ's servants? I sound like a madman--but I am a better servant than they are!*

So how did Paul measure his success? Of what did he boast as important?

And how does this relate to us? Yes, how does this relate to us?

We've already compared the super-apostles to a cult – and they have many characteristics. But we've also seen how it's easy to move in the flesh rather than the Spirit and deal with people in a worldly way rather than a spiritual one.

So how do we measure success as a church? Is it measured by the number of people in membership, the number of things that we do, how much we are growing or not, how friendly we are to one another or outsiders, how large our ministry to the younger generation is, how vibrant our worship seems, how well-funded our ministry is? All are things people look at as characteristics of a thriving church. Or is it all a case of outward trappings?

This is where the biggest irony is in 2 Corinthians is. Paul boasted in what his rivals considered his failure and weakness. I'll put them into a number of categories which sum up Paul's measure of success:

- measured in terms of risk and sacrifice – is our faith important enough to lose our lives for?
- measured in terms of effort and commitment
- measured in terms of weakness

- measured in terms of living experience of God – next time.

Now, we'll find as we go down them that what looked to the super-apostles as a disastrous ministry, we see that Paul's ministry was something that was amazingly blessed of God.

Coffman: When the hay and stubble of their false claims were viewed alongside the pure gold of God's work in the life of Paul, only a fool could have failed to see the difference.

Which is of course, what Paul fully intended. How did Paul measure his success? Let's go down the list

- **measured in terms of risk and sacrifice**

I have worked much harder, I have been in prison more times, I have been whipped much more, and I have been near death more often. 24 Five times I was given the thirty-nine lashes by the Jews; 25 three times I was whipped by the Romans; and once I was stoned. I have been in three shipwrecks, and once I spent twenty-four hours in the water. 26 In my many travels I have been in danger from floods and from robbers, in danger from my own people and from Gentiles; there have been dangers in the cities, dangers in the wilds, dangers on the high seas, and dangers from false friends.

One of the things Jews of the diaspora were good at was blending in with the local community. Everyone knew they were Jews, but unlike Judeans, they tended to stay out of trouble. But here was Paul, not only preaching something that caused consternation to Jews, but got him into trouble with the Greeks and Romans too. Five times he was flogged by the Jews (the law allowed for 40 lashes but Jews tended to stipulate 39 so that they wouldn't break the law and go over 40 if they), three times by the Romans (illegal as he was a Roman citizen), stoned at Lystra, and he got shipwrecked. To sum up, he flirted with danger. For him being a Christian was dangerous!

Why did he go through all this pain, literally. To bring the Good News to people. The persecution he suffered wasn't because he was cursed, but because he was bringing the truth to men and women. My experience of being a Christian is that when we really want to make a difference to people's lives by bringing Jesus to them, trouble comes our way. It always does. Satan just doesn't like us getting anywhere with our faith and whether it be personal or as a church, whenever we point in the right direction we get discouraged. One of his biggest discouragements is when people say "so and so is successful, why aren't you?" Well, are they? And who said we should compare what God calls to do with us to anyone else?

The challenge that comes to me through this passage is how far are we prepared to go for our faith? I remember years ago preachers used to challenge us "are you prepared to die for your faith?" We all said yes because there wasn't then and there isn't now, and chance we are likely to become martyrs soon. But think again. There are plenty of other ways we can lose our lives. Paul lost a successful life as a Pharisee when he trusted Christ. He lost a comfortable existence in Tarsus when Barnabas invited him to Antioch. He lost a very safe and successful ministry when he started to make missionary journeys. He didn't die on any of those occasions. But there was the loss of other opportunities, many dangers and lots of aggravation.

But the end justified the means when God's people obey his call and leading. All of the decisions Paul made were watershed decisions in the history of the church. History tells us that. Paul knew that from the volume of people that trusted Christ. All the people who followed Christ through his ministry knew that. As a result of his risks, his sacrifice, God brought vast blessing! More blessing than any of the Jewish preachers who came behind him, trying to undo his "damage" and make a few pence in the process!

And the lesson for us? When we understand our mission, then we need also to understand that to bring people to Christ brings problems, opposition, risk, sacrifice – but also a massive harvest if like Paul we stick in there. If our lives are smooth and untroubled and the ministry of our church uncontroversial and un-offending, then we're doing something wrong! But I say that only in the context of the gospel and doing God's will, because it's possible to be controversial and offending due to arrogance, personalities, ignorance, unforgiveness and just plain nastiness.

- **measured in terms of effort and commitment**

27 There has been work and toil; often I have gone without sleep; I have been hungry and thirsty; I have often been without enough food, shelter, or clothing. 28 And not to mention other things, every

day I am under the pressure of my concern for all the churches.

Paul's success was measured in the amount of effort and commitment he was prepared to put into his call. His opponents as I've said just hung on his coat-tails. They exploited his work in a detrimental way. If we want to see the work of God moved forward, then it isn't just about the preparedness to lose our lives, but what we are prepared to put into it. Now again, it's possible to work in the flesh and not the Spirit which is why we see here that Paul was under the pressure of his concern for the churches. It was the people God had called him to serve that was the burden that drove him to make that amount of effort even to the point of deprivation. Do we want to see a successful ministry here at MRBC, then we must be prepared to work, not for ourselves, or for the church as an organisation, but to see Jesus exalted in people's lives and it's that concern that should be driving us as it did Paul.

– ***measured in terms of weakness***

29 When someone is weak, then I feel weak too; when someone is led into sin, I am filled with distress. 30 If I must boast, I will boast about things that show how weak I am. 32 When I was in Damascus, the governor under King Aretas placed guards at the city gates to arrest me. 33 But I was let down in a basket through an opening in the wall and escaped from him.

For this evening we look finally at the final measure of success, a real understanding by ourselves and everyone that looks at us that we are weak. When it comes to the things of God we may take risks and we may work hard, but real success only comes because God achieves to by His Spirit through us. And that comes as we realise that it must be all of Him and none of us. It's a hard lesson to learn, but when we identify and accept how weak we are in human terms, we discover more of the strength and power of God.

Sometimes weakness also means that we take a strategic retreat rather than being the bold believer facing up to opposition and hard situations. Paul gives us the story of his escape from Damascus. It's related to us in the Acts. To some it would have seemed like an act of cowardice: to escape from Damascus in the dead of night rather than face his critics and probable death or wait for some kind of miraculous act for God. That night his weakness meant retreat, but that gave him the opportunity to spend time with God in Arabia, and discover Him in his life in Tarsus before being called to Antioch and to his world-changing ministry. Weakness meant doing things in God's time.

That's also a lesson for us. We sometimes need to recognise in our weakness that we can't do something never mind how much we want to do it or feel called to do it. Weakness means we must learn to accept God's time, and wait for His call and the power of the Spirit. But so often we try to do things we think ought to happen anyway. Disaster and lost opportunities often follow. Weakness is an acceptance of God's way and time which often means waiting for Him, taking risks, putting in effort, before we see the power and blessing of God poured out. As we look through all of Paul's life and ministry, we find periods of intense activity are punctuated by times of not doing much – in deserts, shipwrecked, imprisoned, recovering from beatings. The times of weakness were as much growing times as the times of blessing and they will always be with us.

Finally and probably most importantly we have the notion that success is

- ***measured in terms of living experience of God.*** This is the last one and we'll look at that next time when we explore chapter 12.

TEV

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27 There has been work and toil; often I have gone without sleep; I have been hungry and thirsty; I have often been without enough food, shelter, or clothing. 28 And not to mention other things, every day I am under the pressure of my concern for all the churches. 29 When someone is weak, then I feel weak too; when someone is led into sin, I am filled with distress.

30 If I must boast, I will boast about things that show how weak I am. 31 The God and Father of the Lord Jesus--blessed be his name forever!--knows that I am not lying. 32 When I was in Damascus, the governor under King Aretas placed guards at the city gates to arrest me. 33 But I was let down in a basket through an opening in the wall and escaped from him.