

Outward Appearances

2 Cor 10:7-9

So last week we looked at the first few verses of 1 Corinthians 10. I'll continue it more fully in a later week but tonight I just want to focus on a couple of verses, 7 and 8. 2 Cor 10:7 *You are looking at the outward appearance of things. Are there some there who reckon themselves to belong to Christ? Well, let them think again about themselves, because we belong to Christ just as much as they do.* 8 *For I am not ashamed, even if I have boasted somewhat too much about the authority that the Lord has given us--authority to build you up, not to tear you down.*

Paul was being criticised by Jewish believers who were saying that he didn't speak truth because he wasn't as impressive as them, either in his religiosity or in the way they weaved their words. They sounded impressive, convincing but yet their words weren't truth. And there were people who had been brought to Christ and nurtured by Paul who were being led astray by these teachers.

It must have been very sad and difficult for Paul, who knew what the truth was to be confronted by those in the fellowship who had been led astray by how convincing they sounded, particularly as he wasn't in a position to be there to deal with it, and they even disrespected his letters.

I'm sure we've all been in that position, where we know we're telling the truth, we know what the truth is, but yet for one reason or another we are not able to get the truth across. It's frustrating. It can be very distressing when we see people being led astray and because of someone else's lies, they're not believing us. Here were people claiming to speak truth in order to get the people's allegiance and presumably their money by claiming that Paul and his ministry were not of God. You can see by looking at chapter 10 in the round, that Paul is intensely frustrated. Paul flags up their motives:

7 You are looking at the outward appearance of things. Are there some there who reckon themselves to belong to Christ? Well, let them think again about themselves, because we belong to Christ just as much as they do.

You are looking at the outward experience. What they said seemed convincing, impressive, effective. Paul was just a scruffy itinerant preacher who made tents. Who was right? Paul is quite kind to his opponents as he says: *we belong to Christ just as much as they do.* But in truth he knew that they were damaging to the Church and people really should not have been listening to them – and their belonging to Christ was questionable.

Rather than condemn them outright which a frustrated and annoyed person usually does, he deals with this constructively in two ways. Firstly he refers to scripture:

7 You are looking at the outward appearance of things. Now you're all wanting to tell me what that refers to.

It's: 2 Sam 16:1 *The LORD said to Samuel, "How long will you go on grieving over Saul? I have rejected him as king of Israel. But now get some olive oil and go to Bethlehem, to a man named Jesse, because I have chosen one of his sons to be king."* 2 *"How can I do that?" Samuel asked. "If Saul hears about it, he will kill me!" The LORD answered, "Take a calf with you and say that you are there to offer a sacrifice to the LORD.* 3 *Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will tell you what to do. You will anoint as king the man I tell you to."* 4 *Samuel did what the LORD told him to do and went to Bethlehem, where the city leaders came trembling to meet him and asked, "Is this a peaceful visit, seer?"* 5 *"Yes," he answered. "I have come to offer a sacrifice to the LORD. Purify yourselves and come with me." He also told Jesse and his sons to purify themselves, and he invited them to the sacrifice.* 6 *When they arrived, Samuel saw Jesse's son Eliab and said to himself, "This man standing here in the LORD's presence is surely the one he has chosen."* 7 *But the LORD said to him, "Pay no attention to how tall and handsome he is. I have rejected him, because I do not judge as people judge. They look at the outward appearance, but I look at the heart."*

When faced with the impressive Eliab, he's told to ignore that for God looks at the heart. It's the heart that makes the difference and whatever we may look like and sound like. It's the motive, the emotions, the attitude that drives us. Now we can't fool God. He knows just where we are coming from. It's a common idea in the Bible and here are a few more verses

Luke 16:15 Jesus said to them, "You are the ones who make yourselves look right in other people's sight, but God knows your hearts. For the things that are considered of great value by people are worth nothing in God's sight."

John 7:2 Moses ordered you to circumcise your sons (although it was not Moses but your ancestors who started it), and so you circumcise a boy on the Sabbath. 23 If a boy is circumcised on the Sabbath so that Moses' Law is not broken, why are you angry with me because I made a man completely well on the Sabbath? 24 Stop judging by external standards, and judge by true standard

Romans 2:28 After all, who is a real Jew, truly circumcised? It is not the man who is a Jew on the outside, whose circumcision is a physical thing. 29 Rather, the real Jew is the person who is a Jew on the inside, that is, whose heart has been circumcised, and this is the work of God's Spirit, not of the written Law. Such a person receives praise from God, not from human beings.

So we're being told to not get carried away with appearances and show, making snap judgements, following our own prejudices – but look at people's hearts, see them as God sees them. Now God knows the heart so nothing can be concealed from Him,. That's true but pray that He will give each of us the discernment to see through people; to know their heart. The better we know someone, the better we discern their heart.

It's important to know the difference between good reasons people give for their words and actions, and the real reason. That said, for the man or woman of God, the good reason for their actions will be the real reason.

But to come back to verse 7: *You are looking at the outward appearance of things. Are there some there who reckon themselves to belong to Christ? Well, let them think again about themselves, because we belong to Christ just as much as they do.*

When we endeavour to look at the heart, we soon identify those that are of Christ and we embrace them even if outwardly they are different from us. It annoys me when God's people make snap judgements on others because they do worship differently, or because they are not “reverend” enough, or because they don't achieve a certain mark in the estimation of others, they don't fit the right stereotype we have, or because they don't meet someone's approval. It's even sadder when people separate themselves for others because other people just don't suit.

We are God's people and we serve as part of the body of Christ and it's God who has decided who we serve with. We should forget the outward appearances because God looks at the heart and we should endeavour to know people's hearts and love and encourage one another on that basis. If we did that more often, it would make a massive difference.

There is a second reason that Paul gives that does not condemn these people outright however annoyed he was. It's found in verse 8: *For I am not ashamed, even if I have boasted somewhat too much about the authority that the Lord has given us--authority to build you up, not to tear you down.* Unlike his critics, Paul had genuine apostolic authority and used it with much power. But rather than use it to lord it over others, his desire was to use the authority he had constructively - authority to build you up, not to tear you down.

Look back to verse 6 and Paul was fully intending to test the loyalty of the church to him. It sounds ominous but he had the apostolic authority to do so. But the letter was there to avoid him having to take drastic action with them. He wanted to build people up not destroy them. That's why he sent the letter with harsh words and warnings – so he could bring the kind ones when he arrived. As he says in verse 9: *for I do not wish to seem as if I would terrify you by my letters.*

The priority that Paul had was to build them up and he was going to break it as kindly as possible to them – to give them that opportunity to see what God was doing and fall in to line. But he was still an apostle and he wasn't going to let them get away with what he saw as false, ungodly behaviour as we shall find out as we go along further in later weeks.

I found this passage strangely topical. How do those in leadership respond to those who those who seek to undermine their authority and try to influence the church against them? That was exactly the issue that faced Paul and we get some good pointers from it:

Firstly expose the truth in the light of the word of God. It's real important in this kind of situation to go back to scripture because in the vast majority of situations it helps us see where truth lies and often that isn't in the clamour of voices, but understanding what God sees as he looks at the hearts of those involved. Look carefully, look at the heart.

Secondly, don't use authority in a destructive way – the end product was that he should build the church up.

Very good but we'll see as we go on that the bottom line is that Paul was God's appointed apostle and in disrespecting and opposing him, they were opposing his leadership. In the end, once faced with the word of God and the authority of who brought it, if they still disagreed, they had to go. And I think he did make sure they went too.

It's also a warning to leaders not to hide behind authority, but use it properly and not abuse it or people. The same tests that leaders can use against those that confront them, are the same tests that the leaders can apply to themselves to ensure that they don't abuse the authority God has given them. What is in my heart? Is my action scriptural? Does my action build up the church?

Thomas Babington, Lord Macaulay, once observed that *"the highest proof of virtue is to possess boundless power without abusing it."*

Challenge to confession and then communion

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