



I've called this message Christian Leadership and the Anemic Christian. When I talk about the anemic Christian I'm mean the kind of Christian none of us wants to be; a Christian who lacks energy and life. There is a lack of motivation for spiritual things; a kind of spiritual boredom or malaise. The anemic Christian lacks evidence of the power of God in his life but he doesn't really care because he's become comfortable with this state of affairs. He may go to church and read the Bible every so often, but he's going through the motions. He's pushed the cruise control button; he's just coasting.

You might wonder what this has to do with Christian leadership. Two weeks ago we looked at 1 Corinthians 3 where Paul gave us some powerful images of what it means to be a Christian leader. Remember he was practically forced to do this because there were many in the church at Corinth who questioned his leadership. Even though Paul had led them to Christ and planted their church they'd "moved on" from him like kindergartners moving up to first grade. Other teachers, the most prominent of which was Apollos, had come along and captured their attention. Part of the reason they were so taken by these men is they fitted the mold of the itinerant wisdom teachers that were such a big part of their culture. These men would travel from town to town and show off their rhetorical skills and so-called knowledge like a talk show host looking for the highest ratings. As a result the church at Corinth was dividing up according to which leader was most impressive. Even worse they were on the verge of abandoning the Gospel in favor of what they called a "higher" form of wisdom. This was just one of the many strange things happening in this church. This is why we've called this series: Crazychurch. If you think this is bad, hold on because in chapter 5 he confronts them about a man in their church who was sleeping with his father's wife!

But in chapter 4 Paul is still dealing with this problem of how they view Christian leadership and he gets very personal. He shows the difference between his view of himself as a leader and their view of what a leader ought to be is really the difference between a vital, life-filled, exciting, adventurous Christian life and an anemic, boring, complacent substitute.

He starts out by telling them how they ought to think of Christian leaders. *"Let a man regard us in this manner, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God"* (v. 1). Two things: they're servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.

"Servant" literally means "under rower" like slaves deep in the galleys of a ship, rowing according to the orders of the captain above them. Paul says, "This is how to think of us. Not as big shots; not as men who throw our weight around, but under-rowers, taking our every command from our Master, Jesus.

Then he says they're "stewards of the mysteries of God." He uses an image from a typical Roman household. A steward was a household slave who had been entrusted with some aspect in the household. In this case Paul says they've been entrusted with the mysteries of God. He's not saying he's been entrusted with something mysterious but what he's been given was hidden in past ages but now has been revealed through the coming of Christ, and this is what he's to make known. The gospel itself is the mystery: Jesus Christ and him crucified.

With this in mind we can see what the primary job of leader within the church is: to make known the mysteries of God so that people can understand it. Leaders aren't corporate CEOs who manage the church and its staff in a typical "what I say goes" way. Nor are we elected officials who do everything we can to keep our constituents happy so we can stay popular and get re-elected. Our fundamental charge is to make God's truth known.

That's what it means to be "found trustworthy." That's the goal of a steward. But who decides that and when is that determination made? Look at verses 2-5. *"In this case, moreover, it is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy. But to me it is a very small thing that I may be examined by you, or by any human court; in fact, I do not even examine myself. For I am conscious of nothing against myself, yet I am not by this acquitted; but the one who examines me is the Lord. Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him from God."*

There are two things to notice here, one that's for leaders and the other for those who are led. For leaders it means ultimately God is the One who determines our faithfulness. Paul believes this so much he won't let anyone else's judgment influence him. He uses the word "examine" five times because the Corinthians were examining him like a jury getting ready to deliver a verdict. He says, "I don't care about your examination of me. Your approval doesn't really matter." That doesn't mean he wasn't ever open to any feedback, but just that he didn't give it ultimate

weight. There is only one opinion that ultimately matters: "The One who examines me is the Lord" he says.

Then he takes it one step further: "I don't even examine myself. Even my own estimate of my ministry doesn't matter." Paul knew how easy it is to be deluded about ourselves. We can think more highly of our work than God does. I might think since we have a big church with a big staff I'm a success. I can preach a sermon and get a few compliments and go home feeling like I'm the next Chuck Swindoll. But God may have a completely different estimation of my work. Or there may be times when I feel like a flop. I can find churches much bigger than ours and preachers who can make me look like a freshman taking public speaking. I can beat myself up over that. Maybe I'm a loser. Paul says don't go there either. God may think far more of your work than you do. Again, this doesn't mean we never examine ourselves, but we don't give it ultimate significance.

We have many leaders in our church. We have elders, pastors, directors, small group facilitators, Sunday School teachers and youth group leaders. If you're just a parent you're a leader. If you're going to be a leader of people in any capacity, you can't be a people pleaser. You're a servant of Christ. He's your Master. He's your judge. You answer to him. Every leader has to make decisions that are unpopular. I've been a pastor in this church almost half my life. I love the people of this church. I've been blessed by you. And so, I want you to like me. But if my main concern is to be popular and well liked I've failed as a leader. So we have to take stands that sometimes are very unpopular. Some people choose to leave. Then there are some things we won't take a stand on because we don't think Scripture calls for it. Some folks leave over that. Do I like that? No. I want everyone to like us and stay. But as Bob Smith from PBC once told me "You're not running for mayor."

The second implication of this is for those who are being led: stop judging before the time. This isn't saying we can never pass judgment. Right in chapter 5 he tells them there is a place for judging those within the church and for what we call church discipline. Jesus said, "Do not judge or you too will be judged" but he also said, "When your brother sins go and rebuke him in private." We find the balance in that we're not to judge when our judgment is self-righteous, legalistic and mean-spirited. But judgment and discipline is needed when it's meant to protect God's truth and God's people from sin. It's always to be done in a spirit of humility, gentleness and a recognition we don't know it all. A time is coming when God will reveal things no human can see. That's what Paul says in v.5. God sees into the motives of our heart. He sees what we can't see. I think the reason he calls them "arrogant" down in v.6 is because they thought they knew it all. They were taking pride in one leader over another as if they knew everything. Instead of taking pride in their leaders they ought to be humble and thank God for them. As he says in

v. 7, *"Who regards you as superior? And what do you have that you did not receive?. And if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not..."*

So Paul puts his finger on one of the reasons our Christian lives are often so anemic: our pride and arrogance. We judge before the time of judgment as if we know it all: "We have the right leader and he has a corner on the truth and the rest of you are off. We've examined you and your leader and your way of thinking and we've got it right and you've got it wrong." When we become so proud and so narrow in our thinking we can't learn from, respect and appreciate anyone but our leader and our church and our little niche within Christendom, then our spiritual life will become small, narrow and anemic. Part of being vibrant and alive in the Christian life is staying open to all the different sources from which God can teach you.

One of my favorite writers was a Catholic priest named Henri Nouwen. He taught me things about prayer and leadership I couldn't find anywhere else. I don't agree with everything he said or did, but I still learned a lot from him. And when he died and appeared before his Master I trust what happened was just as Paul said at the end of v. 5, *"each man's praise will come from God."* I would have expected him to say "each man's rebuke will come from God." But, no, Paul's focused on the reward that not just he but other leaders will receive.

The second thing Paul says about the difference between vital Christianity and anemic Christianity is one embraces the way of the cross while the other comfortable complacency. Look at v. 8. *"You are already filled, you have already become rich, you have become kings without us; and indeed, I wish that you had become kings so that we also might reign with you."* Paul's language is steeped in irony. The Corinthians have become smug, self-satisfied and comfortable. They're "filled" and don't hunger for righteousness. They're "rich" and don't seek spiritual wealth. They've already started to "reign" as if they were kings so they don't look forward to the return of Christ when believers will reign with him. Paul says with tongue in cheek he wishes it were true because then he could reign with them. It's like Paul is saying, "You guys are acting like you've already gone to heaven!" Theologians like to say the kingdom of God is "already but not yet." The Corinthians had the "already" part down but forgot about the "not yet."

So Paul punctures their massive pretensions by describing his status as a true leader in v. 9. *"For, I think, God has exhibited us apostles last of all, as men condemned to death; because we have become a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men."* He uses an image that comes from the triumphal processions of returning Roman legions. The senior military men would come first, then the more junior ones, and behind them the prisoners would be dragged along. Among the defeated enemies, the slaves

would bring up the rear, eating everyone's dust, knowing they were destined to die in the arena at the hands of the gladiators or thrown to wild beasts as a spectacle. They were for all practical purposes dead men. They would be men who had abandoned all earthly hopes and ambitions. Paul says, "That's like us."

Then he draws out the contrast in v. 10. ***"We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are prudent in Christ; we are weak, but you are strong; you are distinguished, but we are without honor."*** Paul and his friends are "fools" because they embrace the "foolishness of the cross" while the Corinthians take pride in the wisdom of the world. Paul and his friends are "weak" in that they renounce human strength while the Corinthians boast in it. The Corinthians are "distinguished" in the world's eyes because they adopt the world's values while Paul and his friends are dishonored.

Then he gives them a glimpse of what true Christian leadership looks like. ***"To this present hour we are both hungry and thirsty, and are poorly clothed, and are roughly treated, and are homeless; and we toil, working with our own hands; when we are reviled, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure; when we are slandered, we try to conciliate; we have become as the scum of the world, the dregs of all things, even until now"*** (verses 11–13).

What a list! It makes me think of the title of a best-selling Christian book you can buy over at Costco: *Your Best Life Now*. Can you imagine Paul putting that title over this description? The one thing on the list that might seem out of place is he works with his hands. But in that culture manual labor was seen to be beneath true teachers of wisdom. Paul was criticized for this. How could he be a true leader, a true man of wisdom if he dirtied his hands by making tents? Notice also the way he responds to the jibes and taunts and skepticism of the world: When reviled, they bless; when persecuted, they endure; when slandered, they answer kindly. They do exactly what Jesus did in those hours leading up to his death on the cross and exactly what he taught us to do. The last thing Paul says is meant to shock us: "We've become as the scum of the world, the dregs of all things." The "scum of the world" was the yukki, smelly stuff that got stuck in your sandals when you walked outdoors. Do I need to be more graphic? The "dregs of all things" was the stuff you scraped off plates and into the garbage. Paul says that's what we are in the world's eyes.

When we think of this, it's hard not to think of the cross. If Paul had a model for choosing this way of life, it was Jesus and the cross. Isaiah wrote of him, ***"He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised and we esteemed him not"*** (Is 53:2b-3). Paul told the Philippians he not only wanted to experience the power of Christ's resurrection but also the fellowship of his sufferings (Phil 3:10). Paul was imitating Jesus.

What does this mean for us? It certainly challenges our comfortable lifestyle; our assumptions about what we should expect in

this world and from the people of this world. If we're honest I think we'd admit few of us live this way. Few of us live like men marching to their deaths, having abandoned all earthly hopes and ambitions. We look a lot more like the comfortable Corinthians. This is another reason our Christian lives are often so anemic. Instead of embracing the way of the cross we've embraced comfortable complacency. Not only do we think we **know** it all, we think we **have** it all. And from the world's standpoint we sometimes do. So how do we respond to this?

Let me apply this by saying two things. First of all, be careful of imbalance. There are some Christians who tell us, "It's wrong to own a house or cars or to have any kind of affluence." Or "It's wrong to occupy positions of respect in the world." They tell us Christians ought to give away their riches or quit their jobs and live a radical existence for Christ. We **do** need to rethink these issues as followers of Christ, but I'm not sure it's right to go to the other extreme. C.S. Lewis said that the devil always sends error into the world in pairs which are opposite extremes. His strategy is to get us so guilty over our comfort and affluence that we'll go to the opposite extreme to a kind of an enforced suffering and poverty which is just as dangerous. Paul lived this balance. He once said he could ***"get along with humble means or he could live in prosperity"*** (Phil 4:12). He told Timothy ***"God gives us richly all things to enjoy"*** (1 Tim 6:17). So we need to keep the balance.

But having said that, here is a second thing: Not just leaders but all believers are called to embrace the cross as a way of life. Jesus put it this way, ***"If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake shall find it."*** (Mt 16:24-25). What does that look like for you? This means we surrender or bury all our earthly hopes and dreams to him. We don't get to plan the agenda for our lives. It means we invest all we are and have for him and his purposes. We say to him, "Here's my life. Here's my plans. Here's my education. Here's my home. Here's my family. Here's my checkbook. Here's my talents. It's all yours. I no longer have the right to self-lordship. You're my Master." So any possessions or comforts you have you hold them loosely. Since they're not yours in the first place you can lose them without any sense of complaint or deep loss. This also means we give up our right to be thought of in a certain way. We're willing to be laughed at, ignored, marginalized, written off as ignorant, even mistreated if that's what confessing Christ brings us. Our desire for the approval of the world can't outstrip our desire to hear him say "Well done!" Only people who see themselves as dead to this life will be able to bless and be gracious when they're cursed and slandered and mistreated.

I received an e-mail this week from Jackie Perez, one of our mission's partners in the DR. She and her husband have twin babies.

She wrote, "We recently were so thrilled to find a new home that would allow us to be living in closer proximity and allow us to truly do life with those we work with and minister to. We moved all of our things in and began to raise our family in the new home. It proved all to soon to be far from that. Our home was invaded while I was taking my sister-in-law home at 3 in the afternoon... They watched me and waited for us to leave and when the time was right they pried the rebar up in the girls' room, climbed through Stella's crib, left mud on her sheets, tore her mosquito net and began rummaging through our house looking for items to sell. We believe I interrupted them when I came home just 30 minutes later. They took our laptops and several other electronic items. They tried to steal our joy, hope, and sense of security and replace it with doubt and fear. Thank you Jesus for protecting us in a place where we live daily with targets on our backs." She went on to ask for prayer not only that they would continue to fearlessly serve Christ but that God would use their response to this as a witness to the community. This is a great example of what we're all called to, whether we're missionaries or not.

The third thing Paul says about the difference between vital Christianity and anemic Christianity has to do with the difference between genuine power and mere talk. *"I do not write these things to shame you, but to admonish you as my beloved children. For if you were to have countless tutors in Christ, yet you would not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel. Therefore I exhort you, be imitators of me. For this reason I have sent to you Timothy, who is my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, and he will remind you of my ways which are in Christ, just as I teach everywhere in every church. Now some have become arrogant, as though I were not coming to you. But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I shall find out, not the words of those who are arrogant but their power. For the kingdom of God does not consist in words but in power. What do you desire? Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love and a spirit of gentleness?"* (verses 14–21).

Once again, Paul says "imitate me" because he imitated Jesus. He sends his young son in the faith, Timothy, to model for them what that looked like. Then for the second time he calls them "arrogant" because they talked big, but they didn't have the power to back it up. We all know the difference between talk and power. We witness it all the time in the pregame talk that takes place in the world of sports. Some athletes boast of how they will destroy their opponent. But often those same athletes are silenced by the power of their opponents on game day. On the other hand, there are those who say very little but show their power when it comes time to play the game. Paul's opponents in

Corinth talk big but Paul says when he comes he'll show them the difference between true power and mere talk. He says God's kingdom doesn't consist in talk but power. He's talking about the power of the gospel to change lives. When the good news that Jesus died for your sins and rose to give you the hope of eternal life gets a hold of a person that changes their lives. People who were rebellious and addicted to sin are conscience stricken and eager to find the forgiveness and new life Jesus offers.

Genuine, life-filled Christianity isn't about mere talk, it's about the power to change selfish, greedy, loveless people into men and women who show the fruit of the Spirit in their lives—love, joy, peace. There are some believers who are nothing more than religious windbags. I've seen leaders rise up who are brilliant and talented. They have an almost hypnotic influence on others and they quickly gain a reputation as an impressive person. But as time goes on I've seen these same guys fizzle out. Maybe their teaching goes off on a tangent or some moral flaw that lies hidden in their character comes to the surface. Talk is cheap, but change requires power. Paul says, "When I come, I'll not listen to all the talk. I want to know, where's the fruit? Where's the transformation?"

What really makes this compelling is he reminds them he's their father in the faith. Through the gospel he's begotten them. They're his beloved children. They may have "countless tutors" but only one father. In that day the tutor was almost like a nanny. He's referring to all the other teachers in Corinth. They could go through countless nannies but only one father. And the father is coming back soon and then everything will be sorted out. Do you want him to come back with a big stick or with open arms and a big smile?

When I was a kid, I started to play the drums. I dreamed of having a five-piece drum set that I could pound away on like Ringo Starr. So as a twelve-year-old who just started drum lessons I was so excited to get a drum set for Christmas. But when the big day came and presents were passed out I discovered instead of a five-piece drum set I got a single practice pad. It hardly made any noise at all. It was like a toy for a toddler. I choked out a thank you to my parents and went into my room and cried. I think many believers have expected to receive something in the Christian life like a five-piece drum set and ended up with a boring practice pad.

Why is our faith often so anemic? Paul tells us a few of the reasons: We think we know it all. Instead of humble stewardship we opt for arrogant judgment. We think we have it all. Instead of the way of the cross, we opt for comfortable complacency. And we think we can do it all. Instead of the power of the gospel we opt for mere talk.

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