

The Secret to Ministry Success

2 Corinthians 12:1-10

Before we jump back into our series through the book of Exodus next week, I want to take the opportunity at the start of a new year to review and reflect on our vision as a church—what God has called us to as a congregation. As we’ve framed it: *to be a gospel-centered community living each day on mission for Christ across the Metrowest.*

We adopted that vision just over five years ago, as the culmination of a significant period of re-visioning and renewal, really finding our way back to the heart of what God has called his church to be and to do. There are several key words in it, which can feel like buzzwords or a little clichéd, but in their intent are anything but.

By “gospel” we mean the good news of what God has done to establish his kingdom and deal with our sin through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. It is the heart of the Christian faith and the central message of Scripture.

By “gospel-centered,” we mean keeping the gospel of Jesus the main thing. The church is always being tempted to put something other than the gospel at the center of its life and ministry. Often good things—family, small groups, music, preaching, missions, youth, children’s ministries, outreach, justice, community service. But none of these are able to give shape, direction, and significance to *everything* we do as a church. None of them are able to *empower* everything we do. And therefore none of them should be at the center. Rather, we want everything we are and do to flow *out of* the gospel and point *back to* the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The gospel is not just a message for non-Christians; it’s not just how we begin a relationship with God, as if once we become a Christian by grace through faith, we then grow and serve God by works and human effort. Rather, the same grace of God that saves us also transforms and equips and strengthens the whole of Christian life and mission (cf. Tit. 2:11-14). We never outgrow our need for the gospel of Jesus.

And so we want to be centered on the gospel. But while the good news of Christ comes to us just as we are, it doesn’t leave us the way it finds us. It changes us, and bears fruit among us in *community* and through us in *mission*. By community we mean *relationship*—with God and with each other (Eph. 4:1-17). And by mission we mean *purpose*—we have been rescued for a reason, to serve God by bearing witness to the gospel of Christ in both word and deed, making disciples of all nations (Matt. 28:18-20).

And mission and community mutually reinforce each other. On the one hand, becoming part of a community, a family, is a *fruit* of the gospel’s mission, as God draws people to himself, unites us in Christ, brings us into his family, and refashions us into the image of his Son (Col. 1:3-14). At the same time, mission takes place in the *context* of community, as we labor side-by-side for the advance of the gospel, bearing witness to God’s grace through our message and love (Phil. 1:27-30).

This has been our vision as a church—a gospel-centered community living each day on mission for Christ. And by God’s grace it’s become increasingly true of us over the last few years. You never arrive at something like that (not this side of heaven), and we still have a long ways to go, especially in the mission and outreach part.

But there’s also a strong sense among our elder board that the time has come to take a fresh look at our vision as a church. Not to replace any of these values, or move on from them, but to ask God how he wants us to put them into practice in *more specific ways* in the months and years ahead. New England is still a mission field. The Barna Group released a poll this year ranking American cities in terms of “Bible-mindedness,” meaning those “who report reading the Bible in a typical week *and* who strongly assert the Bible is accurate.”¹ Boston ranks 99 out of 100.

We have a mission. And our mission is unchanging—to make disciples for Christ. But what does that look like for *this particular people, in this particular place, at this particular time*? We want to begin seeking God for more clarity and focus in how we advance the gospel as a church in the Metrowest in 2017 and beyond.

So that’s a conversation we’ll be having in the weeks and months ahead. It’s something we want to explore together as a church; the elders don’t have answers to that.

But whenever you begin to strategize about ministry, or dream about what might become; whenever you start to think about change or growth or what we would do differently, or how to move forward, there is a temptation on the one hand to approach ministry in order to *make much of ourselves*, or on the other, to avoid ministry because *it’s too much for us* (it costs too much, we’re not good enough).

And this is especially true when you consider the prevailing values and impulses of evangelical culture today. So much of what dominates the conversation is the drive to go bigger and better. To come up with the best programs, the best facility, the best social media presence, in order to attract a bigger audience. Which sounds noble—we want to expose more and more people to the gospel of Christ. But has effectively turned gospel ministry into a competition, making Christians and seekers consumers, and treating church leaders like celebrities. Success is measured in market share and book deals, rather than faithfulness or spiritual maturity.²

Which excites some churches and leaders, who are up for the challenge and eager to make a name for themselves, for their brand. And causes others to shrink back, because they can’t compete. They become insecure, envious, or apathetic. It’s a Walmart syndrome—you either hate the big box store, or want to be the big box store, and sometimes both.

Now of course that’s a generalization. Not every small church is insecure, and not every big church is greedy. I’ve served in both big and small churches and seen gospel ministry thrive in both contexts. It *is* a serious issue in evangelical culture, but the issue is not size, or even

¹ “2016 Bible-Minded Cities,” *Barna*, Jan. 20, 2016. Available at: <https://www.barna.com/research/2016-bible-minded-cities/>.

² For a helpful engagement and healthy critique of the attractional church movement, see Jared C. Wilson, *Prodigal Church* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015).

strategy, but the heart. The temptation to approach ministry in order to make much of ourselves, or to avoid ministry because it's too much for us.

So as we begin a new season of thinking freshly about the future and what God is calling us to as a congregation, how do we chart a course forward amid these prevailing currents of consumerism and competition, and the unpredictable undercurrent of expressive individualism? How will we measure "success"?

This is the question I want to explore this morning. And to help us find our bearings and chart our course, we're looking at Paul's second letter to the Corinthians.

Competition in Corinth

Though we don't necessarily think of it in these terms, the book of 2 Corinthians is all about what successful ministry *really* looks like—the kind of ministry God approves of and works through. And Paul addresses this question in large part because his own ministry is being challenged.

The church in ancient Corinth had no shortage of issues, but one of their consistent challenges was rallying around certain leaders at the expense of unity. Paul addressed this in his first letter, when the factions formed around various church leaders ("I follow Paul," "I follow Apollos," 1 Cor. 1:12; cf. 1:10-17; 3:4-6, 21-23; 4:6).

But the situation has become far more dangerous by 2 Corinthians. It's no longer followers bickering about whose leader is better. There is now a group of leaders who have shown up or risen up, claiming a superiority for themselves. Paul caricatures them as "super-apostles"; we might call them "celebrity pastors" today. They have turned ministry into a competition (2 Cor. 10:12), measured not by faithfulness to the gospel, but rhetorical flourish, showmanship, power, strength, and popularity (2:17; 3:1; 4:2; 11:7, 19-20). And who therefore challenge Paul's authority as an apostle because of his weak persona, poor speaking abilities, and frequent suffering (10:1-2, 10; 11:6). Paul's a loser. Always ending up in prison. They don't like losers. They like people who don't get caught.

But they're not even preaching the true gospel, which is what ultimately troubles Paul. It's one thing for people to edge in on his territory; he couldn't care less about that (cf. Phil. 1:15-18). It's an entirely different thing when their criticism of Paul is coupled with a false gospel, and that's the situation in Corinth. As Paul explains in ch. 11,

I feel a divine jealousy for you, for I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ. But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. For if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or if you accept a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it readily enough. (11:2-4).

And so Paul spends much of his letter making a defense for his apostolic authority, that he really has been sent by Christ as a messenger of the gospel—not because ministry is a competition, but because in this case, rejecting his apostolic authority also meant rejecting the apostolic message—the gospel that Christ entrusted to his apostles, which the Corinthians received, in

which they stand, and by which they are being saved, if they hold fast to the world preached to them (1 Cor. 15:1-4). And it's this same gospel that actually qualifies Paul for ministry, and that displays Christ's glory not through a powerful persona, but often through weakness and suffering (2 Cor. 3:4-6; 4:7-12).

One of the ways Paul makes this point is by indulging his detractors by playing the super-apostles' game. The celebrity pastors foolishly boast in their own ministries; I can be foolish too. Let me boast a little bit about mine (cf. 11:1, 16-21). So that's what he does in chs. 11-12, only he turns their game on its head. He boasts not in his own strength or accomplishments or success, but in his weaknesses. In chapter 11, he "boasts" about his ministry experience, specifically all that he has suffered in the service of Christ (11:21-33). When we come to chapter 12, our passage, he turns to a new subject: "visions and revelations of the Lord" (12:1).

But notice what he does here. In vv. 1-6, he describes the kind of spiritual experience he won't boast about—the kind of experience that would exalt him. Then in vv. 7-10, he talks about the kind of experience he will boast in—one that demonstrates his own weakness, through which Christ displays his own power. The funny thing is that he's talking about the same spiritual experience, a vision he received 14 years earlier. But the way he talks about it shows us what real ministry success depends on, and helps us face the temptations we described earlier—to approach ministry to make much of ourselves, or avoid it because it's too much, we're not good enough. The secret to ministry success, according to Paul, is the *sufficient grace of Christ*. Because the grace of Christ is sufficient for us, we can be both confident in our ministry *and* content in our weaknesses. It's Christ's power that makes the difference and is ultimately on display.

Look at vv. 1-6 with me, what Paul refuses to boast in. The lesson for us here is to pursue ministry that exalts Christ, not self.

What Paul Refuses to Boast in (12:1-6)

In playing the boasting game, Paul relates one of his spiritual experiences in rather vague and evasive terms. In fact, he talks about it at first in the third person—"I know a guy." It's like when you have a question about something, but you don't want people to know you have that question. "I'm asking for a friend." That's basically what Paul's doing here. We know that because in v. 7, he talks about receiving the revelation in first person ("to keep *me* from becoming conceited about the surpassing greatness of the revelations").

So what is he talking about, and why is he talking about it this way?

In contrast to the super-apostles, who apparently boasted in their private spiritual experiences, Paul is very vague about the experience itself. He received a vision from God some fourteen years earlier, in which he was caught up into God's very presence, what he describes as "the third heaven" or "paradise." The Bible refers to the sky as heaven, and the stars as the heavens, and to the dwelling place of God as heaven, which is probably what Paul means by "third" heaven.³ Probably not unlike Isaiah's vision in Isaiah 6. And in God's presence he heard things that he's not permitted to talk about. He's not even sure whether this happened bodily or not.

³ See Scott Hafemann, *2 Corinthians* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 459.

What he is sure about is that he will not boast about such an experience. He will only boast in his weaknesses; he refuses to boast in anything that would make much of himself.

He could boast in this experience. He wouldn't be lying or untruthful. "Though if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I would be speaking the truth" (v. 6). So why does he refuse? Because, as he says in v. 1, it does no good. "There is nothing to be gained by it." He doesn't deny that spiritual experience like this can happen, but he will not glory in them or base his apostolic ministry on them, because "they are useless when it comes to edifying others or establishing his apostolic authority."⁴

Paul doesn't want his ministry, his apostolic authority, to rest on some private spiritual experience that everyone will have to take his word for, and most likely praise him or even idolize him for. He wants his apostolic authority to rest only on what others can see and hear in them for themselves—namely, his suffering on their behalf (what they see) and his proclamation of the gospel (what they hear). That's what he means in the second part of v. 6: "But I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me."⁵

Paul refuses to boast in anything that would make much of himself instead of Christ. Even things that actually happened to him, even gifts and skills that he actually possesses. Which reminds us that as we think freshly about the future and what God is calling us to as a congregation, we must pursue ministry that exalts Christ, and not us.

There is a gravitational pull within fallen humanity to make everything revolve around us. To put the self at the center. And neither individual Christians nor churches are immune from that. Even Paul is tempted to exalt in the greatness of his experience, as we'll see in vv. 7-10. It's so easy to make church man-centered instead of God-centered. To make worship all about our experience; to run programs driven by our needs or aspirations or personal goals; to turn outreach into getting our name out. And to think that we're serving God in doing all these things, when in many ways we've functionally replaced him with ourselves.

Again, none of this is about size or strategy, experience or skill; it's about the heart. It's about our ambition, our aspiration, our drive. What are we pursuing in the name of ministry? Is it God's glory, or is it ours? *May it never be ours!*

As Scott Hafemann summarizes, "Paul's example [here] reminds us that our public ministry, pulpit presence, programs, and personal lives should all communicate our utter dependence on and satisfaction in God, rather than calling attention to our own strength, experiences, and, if we are in the ministry, 'professionalism.'"⁶ In the words of John the Baptist, "He must increase; I must decrease" (John 3:30). Whatever we think God is calling us to moving forward, make sure it is his glory driving us. His glory that waits at the end. Otherwise, there's no point even walking down that path.

There's a temptation to pursue ministry in order to make much of ourselves. But there's also a temptation to avoid it because it's too much for us. To think that we have nothing to offer. That

⁴ Hafemann, 460.

⁵ See Hafemann, 460-461.

⁶ Hafemann, 477.

we're not qualified, or skilled enough, or that the price is just too high. Paul addresses this second temptation in vv. 7-10, in what he will gladly boast in—namely his weaknesses. And the lesson for us moving forward is to practice ministry with confidence in Christ and contentment in our weaknesses.

What Paul Gladly Boasts in (12:7-10)

Paul continues to talk about the same experience, but he changes his tune slightly when this elative spiritual experience produces suffering in his life. He refuses to boast in the glory, but he will gladly boast in the weakness that resulted from the vision.

Even so, he remains pretty vague in how he talks about it. Verse 7: “So to keep me from being conceited by the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from being conceited.” He never really tells us what exactly this “thorn” is. People have speculated—is it persecution, is it a physical ailment? We know it was caused by this vision. We know that it was sent from Satan, the accuser, to afflict him. And we know the purpose was to humble Paul, to keep him from giving into the temptation to make much of himself because of his incredible spiritual experience.

We also know that whatever it was, it was incredibly painful. So much that he plead with God three times to take it away (v. 8). But God demonstrated his power in Paul's life and ministry not by taking away his weakness, but by working through it. The kind of weakness that the super-apostles would make fun of, or point to in order to disqualify Paul from ministry, the kind of weakness that Paul found personally unbearable—this is how God answered his request to take it away: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (v. 9).

If we listen to the spirit of our age, or even the whispers in our own hearts, it's tempting to think that to be useful to God, we have to have it all together. To be a spiritual powerhouse. And that our weaknesses compromise our usefulness to God, or flat out disqualify us from service. I don't know enough. I'm not holy enough. My sin is too much. There are better people than me. I've got too much on my plate already. I can pray, maybe I can give some money, but otherwise, you've got the wrong guy. I'm not good enough. We focus on our weaknesses and we avoid ministry because it's too much.

But what Christ tells Paul, and through him tells us, is not to focus on our weaknesses, but to focus on his grace. “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”

It is the grace of God that not only saves us; it is the grace of God that sanctifies and strengthens us, and makes us useful to Christ. What do we mean by grace?

Grace is when God gives us something wonderful even though we actually deserve something terrible. We deserve his judgment and wrath for our sin. But “or our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (5:21). That's grace. Because Jesus is our faithful representative and willing substitute in his life and death, God gives us the credit for his life, while Jesus takes our penalty in his death. The relationship that a Christian has with God is not something we deserve or earn, it is only by grace through faith in Jesus Christ (cf. Eph. 2:8-9).

When we pursue ministry to make much of ourselves, or avoid it because it's too much for us, we reveal the fact that we are not depending on grace. To exalt ourselves in ministry, or to avoid it because we feel unfit, is to live as though our sufficiency before God is based on our own life and effort. But as Paul protests in ch. 2:16, if that's the case, "Who is sufficient for these things?" His answer in ch. 3:4: "[This] is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit" (3:4-6).

It is grace that saves us. It is grace that sanctifies us and strengthens us for ministry. The secret to ministry success is not anything that we bring to the table; it is the grace that displays Christ's power through our weakness. "We have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us" (4:7) "Therefore," Paul says in ch. 12:9, "I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me" (v. 9).

That doesn't mean we brag about how sinful we are, or how sloppy our ministry might be. This doesn't mean that God is more honored in worship when our music is bad, or when they are typos in the worship folder. Or that he gets more glory if I'm obnoxious and abrasive to my non-believing neighbors. Suffering and weakness are a means to the glory of God, not a necessary condition we're supposed to seek out. 'Let's do worse today so God gets more glory.'

We should work hard at serving God. We should care about the health of our ministries, the quality of our music, the effectiveness of our programs—not because God can't use us without it, but because he is worthy of our best.

But he doesn't need us to be the best in order to use us. We don't have to prove ourselves to God. We don't have to prove ourselves to the world. We don't have to prove ourselves to each other. Our sufficiency is Christ, who by his grace, on the basis of his own life, death, and resurrection for us, has made us ministers of a new covenant (3:4). And so we need not be insecure or afraid. We don't have to hide our weaknesses, pretend they're not there, compensate for them. It is through the imperfection of Westgate Church that the perfection of Christ will be easiest to spot.

"Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (12:9-10). Not in myself, but in Christ.

I'm excited to follow God together as a congregation, to make his name known across the Metrowest. I'm excited to seek him together to see what that might look like in the months and years ahead. But whatever we sense God calling us to, it must exalt Christ, not us, and it must be fueled by his grace. We must continue to strive for a gospel-centrality in everything. Which means that we can practice ministry with confidence that God will show up, because it is Christ and his grace that does the heavy lifting by his Spirit—and contentment in our weaknesses, because when we are weak, then we are strong, with the power of Christ on display.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Opening Question

1. When you think about the evangelical church in North America, what are some of the common ways people measure success?

Questions for Study and Understanding

2. What is going on in Corinth that helps us understand what Paul is writing about in this letter (and more specifically, in our passage)? (hint: see 11:2-6, 12-15)
3. Look at 11:16-33. How does that help us understand why Paul is “boasting” in chs. 11 and 12?
4. What topic has Paul decided to talk about in ch. 12, and what is he saying about it in vv. 1-6? Why do you think he’s talking about it this way?
5. What changes in the way Paul talks about his experience in vv. 7-10? Why do you think he now speaks about it differently?
6. What is the key to Paul’s success in ministry, according to v. 9? How does this “key” work?
7. How would you summarize what Paul teaches us about the *goal* of ministry, and the *means* for accomplishing it? How is this different from how the “super-apostles” approach ministry?

Questions for Reflection and Application

8. How do Paul’s words here either challenge or encourage you as you think about serving the Lord (whether personally or together as a church)?
9. In what ways are you sometimes tempted to exalt yourself (or your church) in ministry? What do you think drives that ambition?
10. In what ways are you sometimes tempted to avoid ministry? Why?
11. How does Paul’s emphasis on the grace of God address both of those temptations?
12. Is there anything you sense God calling you to do this year that makes taking his grace seriously all the more urgent and important?