

Downward and Outward
II Corinthians on Walking in the Way of Jesus
Part Six: 6.3-8: Leading in the name of Jesus

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In our fall sermon series on II Corinthians we've been zeroing in on Paul's life and ministry, and what he teaches and models about how a follower of Jesus is called to live in a way that is distinctive from the values of the surrounding world.

Right, but . . . what exactly does that mean on a Thursday afternoon when I am sitting in my math class next to someone who has been unkind to me, or I'm in a faculty meeting across the table from someone who has just discredited my work, or I'm reading the morning headlines and feel like the world is going off the rails because of *those* people?

Up to this point Paul has used a number of different metaphors to describe kingdom values: he is like a defeated captive being led in a triumphal procession. He is like an everyday clay container who carries around in him a treasure. He is like an ambassador from a far country, representing another king and another kingdom.

Those images are powerful and compelling . . . but it's still all a bit vague.

In the passage we look at today Paul gets really specific. He pulls out a list of specific qualities that he believes should characterize every true servant of Christ, making them distinctive and setting them apart from the surrounding world.

Before we walk through it, let's do a quick review of where Paul has brought us so far in this letter that he wrote to the Corinthian church.

You might remember that the thing that sparked the letter was that the Corinthian church has weighed Paul's ministry and found it seriously wanting.

Why is your life so full of trouble, Paul? We want to envy you, not pity you. If God doesn't give you what you want, the problem isn't with God. Obviously God is not blessing your ministry because God is displeased with you.

Why are you so weak, Paul? Why are you so unwilling to speak with strength and power, and to rip apart your opponents? We want to be impressed and overwhelmed by you. A successful ministry should be based on strength and power.

Where is the charisma, the flash, the self-promotion, Paul? We want to be wowed. The lack of those things proves that God's hand is not on your ministry.

The core issue, as we've seen, is that the Corinthians have uncritically adopted the values and perspective of the world around them. They've imported into the church the up-and-to-the-right, ambition-and-accomplishment model of leadership that surrounds them from the Emperor on down.

So Paul seeks to address this upside-down way of thinking about the evidence of a faithful Christian life and of a God-honoring witness in the world.

In chapter two, Paul challenges the paradigm the Corinthians use to make sense of the Christian life. In the surrounding culture, with shrines and altars and temples to the gods at every street corner and in every home, the way you deal with the gods is simple. You give the gods what they want, and they give you what you want.

Paul says that is a flawed way of understanding what it means to follow Jesus. God is not serving us. We are serving him. He is the King, like the Triumphator in a triumphal procession. And he has conquered us, ending our self-rule, and inviting us to live our lives under his loving dominion.

In chapter three Paul spells out what it means for us to open our lives up to the loving rule of Jesus. By his Spirit, who he breathes into us, we begin to undergo an inner transformation. But we aren't transformed into the likeness of Moses, the powerful wonderworking hero of the ancient world. We are transformed into the likeness of Jesus, who was gentle and humble in heart, and whose life ended in costly sacrifice.

In chapter four Paul tells us why his life is about pointing past himself to Jesus. Incredibly, Jesus is God making God known. And that Jesus who reveals God now lives within us by his Spirit, within each of us who know and love and serve him. So I have a choice. I can either live my life in a way that calls attention to me, or I can live in such a way that my life points past me to him. My choice? Paul says. I'm just an everyday container, but I carry around in this world the incredible treasure of Jesus. I'm not the point. He is. So I'm stepping back, getting out of the way, so the eyes of the world are not on me, but on him.

In chapter five, Paul says, everywhere I go I seek to persuade others that Jesus is worth following. His faithful forgiving love, which has touched me and fulfilled me and transformed me, compels me to go to the world and make him known, so he can touch your life and fill you and transform you as well. God made you for relationship with himself. Jesus makes that relationship possible. I'm just here to introduce you two, and then step back into the wings.

My whole way of seeing has changed, Paul says. I used to categorize people on the basis of external appearances. Not anymore. We no longer regard anyone from a worldly point of view. So when God brings someone into our life, we just ask one question: does this person know Jesus or not? And then we respond accordingly.

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I love this picture by Chong Wan Yong. It's the picture of a man sitting in a boat with his diving gear on. It looks like he could be a commercial fisherman, getting ready to go spear fishing or pearl diving, or maybe a photographer, ready to go snap some pictures of the sea floor for *National Geographic*. He sits confidently at the center of the picture, and seems to have no other thought than of himself and his enterprise.

But just beneath him is an upside down world, a world far wider and deeper than his small self-at-the-center world, a world teeming with life and joy and beauty and beings and purposes beyond his imagining. Kind of like the Kingdom of God, which is invisible but surrounds us and is more real than this physical world.

He is just like the Corinthians. They claim to have stepped into a relationship with Jesus, they claim to have entered into the kingdom of God, but nothing about the way they see has changed. They are blind to the kingdom of which they are now part. It's invisible to them.

They continue to look at things through the lens of power and pride and success and strength, instead of seeing things the way Jesus sees them.

In the previous chapter, in II Corinthians 5.12, Paul said,

Are we commending ourselves to you? No, we are giving you a reason to be proud of us, so you can answer those who brag about having a spectacular ministry rather than having a sincere heart.

They've got it all wrong!

Paul's letter is like cataract surgery. The way the Corinthians see things is cloudy and obscured and needs correcting. They are seeing him, and the Christian life, and the church, through the power and success values of the world. They are blind to the realities of the kingdom.

Through this letter Paul is seeking to take out the old lenses and replace them with new ones, ones that bring Jesus and his kingdom more clearly into view.

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So as Paul pivots from chapter five into chapter six of II Corinthians, he gets specific. Really specific.

If a man or a woman is seeking to live life and do ministry in a way that is faithful to Jesus and mirrors him, what exactly will that look like? Paul tells us.

II Corinthians 6.3-4 NLT

We live in such a way that no one will stumble because of us, and no one will find fault with our ministry. In everything we do, we show that we are true ministers of God.

A couple of things on these verses.

First, about “living in such a way that no one will stumble because of us.”

Stumbling is what happens when something gets in our way. It trips us up and prevents us from continuing down a path we’re on. It takes our eyes off the thing we’re moving towards and puts them on something else.

I like the way this verse is translated in an earlier version of the New Living translation, which says:

We try to live in such a way that no one will be hindered from finding the Lord by the way we act.

The Greek is emphatic. “*Nothing* before *no one* setting an obstacle!” I’m utterly unwilling to live in a way that causes offense and gets in the way.

God is calling people to himself through Jesus. Paul is saying he refuses to live or relate in a way that causes the least distraction or offense as people make their way toward Jesus. I just want to get out of the way, and make sure that the only thing people hit their head on is Jesus himself.

Here’s one other thing to point out. Paul speaks of those who are “true ministers of God.” The word here is *diakonos*, servants. It doesn’t just refer to pastors. It includes all of us. It means “one who carries out the commands of another.” It usually referred to the king’s servants. That’s us. Servants of the king.

In everything we do, no matter what our circumstances, we demonstrate that we are true servants of God. That we are faithfully doing his bidding. We refuse to give anyone any grounds to discredit him.

For Paul and his fellow workers in the kingdom, life has not exactly been easy. Others have certainly made things difficult for them.

II Corinthians 6.4-5 NLT

We patiently endure troubles and hardships and calamities of every kind. We have been beaten, been put in prison, faced angry mobs, worked to exhaustion, endured sleepless nights, and gone without food.

But Paul refuses to let how he has been treated determine how he will treat others.

It is so tempting for us to blame how we relate to others on our circumstances. Well, I would have been patient if I hadn't been so hangry. Or I would have listened better if he hadn't kept interrupting. Or I would have made the right choice if they hadn't been pressuring me. I would have responded with kindness if she hadn't been so mean to me.

No, says Paul. The world bases how they will relate with others on how others relate to them. But not us, not followers of Jesus. The way we relate is based not on what is going on outside, but on who rules over us on the inside.

Now we get to the specifics. Here, says Paul, is how we show that we are true servants of God:

II Corinthians 6.6 NLT

We prove ourselves by our purity, our understanding, our patience, our kindness, by the Holy Spirit within us, and by our sincere love.

Paul spells out nine Kingdom virtues that will shape the way he relates to others as a true servant of the King.

Others will see we are true servants of the king by:

Our purity: This is a rare word that could also be translated *integrity*. It means my whole life is defined by one reality. My whole interior is going the same direction. All of my motives and desires and values and intentions and behavior are one.

It isn't the case that part of me is chasing after what pleases and serves me, while another part of me is trying to please my king. All of me is going the same direction. The presence of Christ in my life explains every part of it.

Others will see we are true servants of the king by:

Our understanding: The kingdom of God is the frame of reference that connects everything for me. Jesus is king. We are his subjects.

My biblical understanding of God's intentions, his designs, his redemptive purposes, is all so deeply integrated in me that what James calls "the wisdom that comes from above" informs the way I think about everything: my time, my money, my relationships, my vocation, my neighbor, everything.

Next Paul mentions two qualities that have to do specifically with how he responds when he comes under attack. As it happens, these are also the first two words that show up in Paul's description of what love looks like in I Corinthians 13, and they also both show up on the list of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5.

Others will see that we are true servants of the king by:

Our patience: In the verse just before this one, in II Corinthians 6.4, Paul says

We patiently endure troubles and hardships and calamities of every kind.

In English we have the word "short-tempered," but we don't have the word "long-tempered." That's too bad, because that's exactly what this word means. Another way to translate it is "slow to anger," which as you may remember is one of the key qualities of God in Exodus 34.

The King James called this "long-suffering." It refers to a love that perseveres, holding out for a long time before giving way to irritation or impatience or anger. I think the JB Phillips translation captures this best: "slow to lose patience."

Patience was the spiritual virtue that was preached on and advocated more than any other in the early church. Historian Alan Kreider, in his wonderful book, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church*, argues that this is *the* characteristic of early believers that more than any other made their faith attractive and resulted in the incredible growth of the early church in the first three centuries: the church's patient response in suffering and under persecution.

Others will see we are true servants of the king by:

Our kindness: In I Corinthians 4.13 Paul says, "When we are slandered, we answer kindly."

This word means something so much more robust than our anemic English word "kind," which sort of falls in the same lame category as "nice." It feels like something you'd say to compliment someone when you can't think of anything else to say.

But kindness is actually one of the most important graces in the Christian life. The ancient theologian Origen defined this as a sweetness that is poured out on all. The opposite of harshness or roughness, it is the word used to describe wine that has mellowed with age and lost its acidic bite.

This word refers to good heartedness, warmth of character, not just being good but being eager to do good for others. It's a generosity of soul, making generous allowance for others, assuming the best in a person, extending a warm and generous welcome to others despite their shortcomings.

It's fascinating that in its early history Christians were called by this word, and so was Jesus, by the world around them. That's because the Greek speaking world mistook *Christus*, Christ, for *chrestus*, this word. So all the Greco-Roman world thought that Jesus was called the Sweet One, the Good One, and they called Christians *Chrestians*, the little Good-hearted ones, the little Sweet Ones. And that made sense to them based on what they saw in the Christians around them. Would that we could earn that title again today . . .

Now Paul comes to the middle term on his list of virtues, and it really is the one that explains the presence of all the others. He says:

Others will see we are true servants of the king by:

The Holy Spirit within us: When it comes to living a distinctive life that honors and reflects our king, this is the absolutely crucial ingredient. Left to our own strength or inclination, we are able to bring about no lasting change in ourselves. None. We can't do it. I've never been able to bring about even the least little change in myself.

But at the very center of our understanding of the Christian life is the belief that the Father chose us, the Son reconciled us, and the Spirit, sent by the Father and the Son, takes up residence in us and begins to live his life in us and through us, transforming us by his presence and his touch, empowering real and lasting life change.

So all four of these qualities that Paul has just described and all four of the qualities that he is about to describe are the work of the Spirit in us. Do you remember the last word in the list of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5.22?

It says "self-control." Except it doesn't. The word "self" isn't there in the Greek. What it says is, "inner mastery." Well, whose inner mastery? Not ours. The fruit *of the Spirit* is love, joy, peace, *patience*, *kindness*, and so on . . . and all of these fruit, all of these qualities, are the result of *his* inner mastery, *his* rule over our interiors.

As we saw a few chapters back, Paul says in II Corinthians 3.18:

All of us are being transformed from glory to glory into the likeness of Christ, which comes from the Lord, *who is the Spirit*.

Others will see we are true servants of the king by:

Our sincere love: This word literally means with love that is not like an actor in a play.

The only time we pretend to love someone is when we are thinking about ourselves instead of them. You are a means to my ends. That is the essence of a life that is out from under the mastery of Jesus. That's the issue Paul will confront in chapter 11 when he speaks of the false apostles, the deceitful workers, playacting as servants of Jesus (11.13). They pretend to serve others, but they really serve themselves.

But when Jesus masters us by his Spirit, our lives flip inside out. Rather than using you for my ends, to meet my needs, I seek God's best for you even when it costs me. That's what it means to love someone sincerely. My regard for you is not self-serving or feigned. It is sincere. I genuinely want God's best for you.

II Corinthians 6.7 NLT

We faithfully preach the truth. God's power is working in us. We use the weapons of righteousness in the right hand for attack and the left hand for defense.

Others will see we are true servants of the king by:

Our faithfully preaching the truth: This is much more than simply not lying. Paul says, our teaching corresponds with spiritual reality, with seeing things in a way that has God at the center, which means we preach that God created humanity for relationship with himself, but we are alienated from God because of our rebellion against God, and God has sent his son to bring us home to God, and that his project is to bring us into relationship with himself, and fold us into a new family, and transform us into the likeness of his son – all of which requires our assent, our placing ourselves under his loving rule. We preach the truth. We preach a life centered on God and his loving rule.

Others will see we are true servants of the king by:

God's power working in us: Wherever God moves, God confirms his work by giving glimpses of his presence and power.

Faithful followers of Christ have an interesting relationship to power. On the one hand, unlike the driven and success oriented Corinthians who make it a point to put their power on display, Paul says he is not powerful. You remember in chapter 1 Paul says he came to the end of himself and his own strength. His life is marked by weakness, not strength.

But at the same time, in chapter 1 Paul says God brought him to the end of himself so he would learn to rely on the power of God instead of his own limited power. And in

chapter 12 Paul says that, when it comes to his ministry, God's power works best in his weakness (12.9). So I have power. It just isn't mine.

God puts his power on display in and through those who faithfully serve him, and the weaker and more humble and vulnerable they are, the more his power shines through. Peter in Acts chapter 2 says that "Jesus was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs which God did among you through him." (2.22)

Paul will say something almost identical in 12.12 about his own ministry when he says:

I proved I was a true disciple when I patiently did many signs, wonders, and miracles among you.

Those who are faithful servants of Christ will put the presence and power of God on display right in the midst of their weakness and vulnerability and shortcomings. They won't be able to help it. Others will see God at work in and through them.

And finally, others will see we are true servants of the king by:

Our weapons of righteousness: This phrase can be understood in several different ways but I'm convinced that the New Living Translation gets it exactly right.

Because of our Reformation heritage as Protestants, we understand that often in the New Testament the word "righteousness" is used to refer to our right standing with God which Jesus brought about for us through his death on the cross.

But not here. That's not what Paul is talking about. Here it refers to being the right kind of people and doing the right kind of thing. Another way to express it is "treating people right." So when we feel called to go on the attack, to defend truth or the cause of justice, the only weapon we have is treating people right. And when others attack us and we want to defend ourselves, the only weapon we'll defend ourselves with is treating people right.

Some of you were here two weeks ago when Nathan, our ministry partner in Egypt, said "love is our only weapon." That's exactly what Paul is saying.

II Corinthians 6.8 NLT

We serve God whether people honor us or despise us, whether they slander us or praise us.

When the elders studied this passage earlier this week, one of them made the really interesting observation that at the beginning of this passage Paul seems to be really concerned about how others will view him, but by the time we get to the end he doesn't seem to care at all.

But a closer look takes away the mystery. Paul *doesn't* care about how people view him, not at the beginning or the end. What he *does* care about is how people view the God he serves. So he will do everything he can to minister in a way that puts *God* in a positive light.

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So . . . integrity, understanding, patience, kindness, love, God's truth, God's power, treating people right – all evidence of the mastery of the Spirit in our lives, all proof that we are true servants of God, all ways of relating that put God in the best possible light.

Paul not only sees things in a new way, through the lens of his conversion and his having been made a new creation. He advocates living in a new way, in an upside down way, or more accurately, in a right side up way.



He dismisses what the world prizes, and he prizes what the world dismisses. The kingdom of God is the world turned back the right way, the way it's supposed to be.

These qualities, these virtues, says Paul, are the marks of a true servant of Jesus. This is what will characterize us when God has put things right in our lives. All radically different from the spirit of the times, which advocates power and flash and ambition and strength and building up yourself and tearing down your opponent.

It doesn't take a lot of reflection to realize that the culture surrounding us today is very similar to the culture surrounding the church in Corinth.

It also doesn't take a lot of reflection to see how easily the values of the world can seep in and take over the values of the church. The temptation is real. They work. They get us what we want.

A couple of months ago Lance Morrow wrote an article in the *Wall Street Journal* about the temptation to set aside Christian values, those advocated by Jesus and lived by Paul, in exchange for the leadership values advocated by Niccolo Machiavelli in his book *The Prince*.

Morrow writes:

In “The Prince,” he makes a distinction between the Christian virtues and what he calls *virtu*, the virtues of classical antiquity: manliness, force, strength, courage, bravery, glory, and, when necessary, ruthlessness. The primary goal is winning. Machiavelli suggests that Christian virtues are all very well, but if the prince wishes to survive and succeed, he should be guided by the ideas of the ancient *virtu*. [Lance Morrow, *Wall Street Journal*, Friday, July 26, 2024, A15.]

There is a choice before us each day we step out into this world. Will I pattern my life after Jesus, demonstrating humility and a loving disregard of self and lively regard for others, which the world mocks and finds inadequate? Or will I pattern my life after the driven, self and success-oriented, prestige and power-based way of the world around me?

Look again at these two lists.

The upside down *virtus* of the world, with the self at the center, and built on power and control and flash and fame.

The *Virtus* of the World according to The Prince.

Manliness	Bravery
Force	Glory
Strength	Ruthlessness
Courage	

And then the right-side-up virtues of the Kingdom, with Christ at the center, marked by grace and humility and kindness and love and self-sacrifice.

The Virtues of the Kingdom according to the Apostle

Purity	Sincere love
Understanding	The truth
Patience	God's power
Kindness	Righteousness
The Holy Spirit	

Now think of the way you relate to others. How you respond to needs. How you get things done. How you voice disagreement. How you respond to hurt. How you express your opinions on social media. How you confront wrong. How you try to bring about change. How you respond to criticism.

Which set of virtues is true of you most often?

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As the worship team comes up, use this moment to invite the Spirit of God to do in us what we are incapable of doing in ourselves.

Let's turn this passage into a prayer:

God, by your Spirit, help us to live in such a way that no one will stumble because of us, and no one will find fault with our ministry. In everything we do, help us to demonstrate to the world that we are true servants of yours.

God, make it so. Do in us what we can't do in ourselves, to the praise of your glory.