

## **“SUBSTANCE OVER STYLE” (2 Corinthians 10:7-18)**

This morning I want to talk to you about substance over style. How many times have you been to a fast-food restaurant, and you're deciding what to order and you see a well-placed poster on the wall of a gigantic hamburger with a freshly baked bun with a thick, juicy hamburger hanging out the side, with cheese dripping down. You say, "I'll take one of those." When you get your hamburger and unwrap it, you find that the bun is squished, the hamburger patty – instead of hanging out the sides – is hidden somewhere inside the bun, and the cheese is not melted and not dripping down the side. What you get is not what you saw on the poster.

It's a good example of style over substance – we're easily attracted to things that appear good and pleasing and exciting on the outside, but upon closer inspection has nothing of lasting value or significance. As they say in Texas, it's all hat and no cattle – there's a lot of bragging, but nothing to back it up. Style over substance can find its way into churches where the focus becomes attracting people with impressive buildings – entertaining, charismatic speakers – and huge stage productions – all of which are not wrong as long as it is backed by substance and God's Word is taught, including the difficult parts – people are cared for and disciplined – and people are challenged to grow and serve the Lord.

Style over substance is not new to our day – it was a problem in the church of Corinth that the Apostle Paul founded and was in the process of writing a letter to. The Corinthians were being duped into following a small, but influential group that had made their way into the church after Paul left. The members of this group were attractive in many ways – they were smart, they were charismatic, they were excellent speakers, they knew important people, and they had a way of swaying people to their way of thinking. But they lacked substance – they did not preach the gospel, and they did care about the spiritual wellbeing of the people – they were driven by fame and power and money.

When Paul hears about these false teachers, he's heartbroken. He started the church and poured his heart and soul into the people, only to see them overtaken by boastful, arrogant men who were leading the congregation away from the truth of the gospel and using them for their own selfish ends. In order to gain control of the church they set about to discredit Paul in the eyes of the people and strip him of his apostolic authority over them.

In chapters 10-13 of 2 Corinthians Paul defends himself in order to regain his apostolic authority. Paul didn't like to talk about himself, but to answer the charges made against him he knows he has to say things about himself that might appear like he's boasting – a word he uses a lot in chapters 10-13. He makes it clear that he's not bragging about himself, but boasting about what the Lord has done through Him.

In verses 7-18 Paul answers some of the charges made against him, and compares his character and ministry to his opponents. In these verses we will see six marks of substance over style that we can put in the form of a question. These marks can apply to churches or individual believers – they are marks of maturity that every Christian should possess.

The first question is: **Am I spiritually humble?** In verse 7 Paul writes... “You are judging by appearances. If anyone is confident that they belong to Christ, they should consider again that we belong to Christ just as much as they do.” It appears as if these interlopers were claiming a special, elite relationship with Christ that Paul or anyone else did not have...

“I belong to Jesus in a way that you don’t... I have a special pipeline to God that you don’t... God works through me in a way He doesn’t work through other people,” and feel like this puts them a position of authority and power over others.

Have you met people like this? I used to have a guy who’d stop by church about every six months and give me a word from the Lord. I asked him if he was part of a church and he kind of brushed it aside like that wasn’t important because he had his own self-styled ministry. He didn’t stay long – he shared his latest revelations from the Lord and headed on to the next church.

I once worked with a staff member at a church that was one of the most spiritual arrogant people I’ve met. He was quiet and soft-spoken, but he had this air about him that he was spiritual elite, and he would often use the phrase, “God told me.” As it turned out, he didn’t stay long at that church, and went on to another church where he lasted only six months. I ran into the pastor of that church sometime later, and he told me that he had to confront this individual about something and the guy pulled out his spiritual trump card and said, “I did what I did because God told me.” The pastor’s response was, “What God tells you is not binding on me,” and he was dismissed from his job.

Paul was very humble as an apostle. Before his conversion to Christ he was anything but humble – he bragged about his heritage, his status, his accomplishments, and his righteousness. But God humbled him on the road to Damascus, and later Paul referred to himself as chief of sinners and the least of the apostles. He saw himself as an ordinary, run-of-the-mill jar of clay. He said, “There’s nothing special about me – I’m just a broken vessel chosen by God to display His glory.” Beware of anyone who claims any kind of spiritual superiority, or has special knowledge and insight that others don’t have. We all have different gifts and abilities, but we’re all equal in God’s eyes.

The second question regarding substance over style is: **Do I use power to build others up or tear them down?** Verse 8 says... “So even if I boast somewhat freely about the authority the Lord gave us for building you up rather than tearing you down, I will not be ashamed of it.” One of the things Paul boasts about, or defends, is his authority as an apostle. In every arena of life – in marriage, in homes, in government, in the workplace, and in churches – God establishes authority – and in order for any areas to work there needs to be someone in charge and submission to those in charge – otherwise there is anarchy.

When Paul was saved on the road to Damascus, God appointed him to be an apostle to the Gentiles. “Apostle” means “one who is sent,” and God sent Paul to proclaim the gospel to Gentile people who had not heard the gospel. Paul recognized that his authority was from God – he didn’t appoint himself, God did. When he came to Corinth, he led people to Christ and started a church, and served as the leader of the church. He could have used his position as leader to dominate and control people, but he says in verse 2, “I did not tear you down, but I built you up.”

In contrast, the false teachers wanted to tear down everything Paul had started for their own selfish purposes – but everything Paul did – including telling the church some hard things – was for their spiritual wellbeing. He wants them to remember his time with them, how he loved them and cared for them as a spiritual father... “Don’t let these intruders tell you otherwise – I led you as a servant and didn’t lord it over you.”

The third question that helps define substance over style is: **Am I faithful despite my limitations?** We see this in verses 9-11... “I do not want to seem to be trying to frighten you with my letters. For some say, ‘His letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing.’ Such people should realize that what we are in our letters when we are absent, we will be in our actions when we are present.”

One of the ways Paul’s enemies tried to smear him was to imply he can’t be trusted... “He writes you all these bold, harsh letters trying to frighten you – but when he shows up, he’s timid and weak.” They were trying to paint Paul as someone not worthy to be called an apostle – he’s too weak to get his way and win you over.

And to throw salt on the wound, they add, “He’s an unimpressive person to look at, and he’s not a very good speaker.” A second century writing described Paul’s physical appearance as being “small in size, bald-headed, bow-legged, eyebrows that met in the middle, with a big-crooked nose.” If this is true, Paul was not much to look at, and his enemies used this as another way to put him down and say, “What kind of a leader looks like this?” The world dupes us into thinking that beautiful people are more worthy of admiration and honor, but God delights in choosing the lowly and despised of the world through whom He can radiate His glory and rebuke the pride of the world.

They also picked at Paul for his so-called lack of speaking skills. Greek culture was known for its abundance of eloquent and persuasive orators, and they said, “Compared to these skilled orators, Paul is not very polished or persuasive.” There’s something in our human DNA that likes impressive people – and that includes impressive preachers – and in the internet age we have access to the best speakers in the world. Most pastors, however, are pretty average. I thought I was pretty good until we started live-streaming our services during Covid and watched myself preach. Ouch. I’m not the only pastor who felt this way. Everyone should have to watch themselves speak in front of a camera.

God would say, “If you’re blessed with a pastor who speaks eloquently, who has charisma and persuasion, then count your blessings – but I’m most interested in substance and someone who cares about his flock.” And for that matter, God says, “I can speak through anybody – I spoke to Balaam through a donkey – so don’t get too obsessed with style, it’s the substance of the message that matters.”

Paul’s opponents said, “He’s impressive when writing letters – all bold and brash – but in person turns weak and timid.” In verse 11 Paul says, “Such people should realize that what we are in our letters when we are absent, we will be in our actions when we are present.” His point is: “I’m the same guy in my letters as I am in person. The only reason I’m bold and direct in my letters is so that I don’t have to be bold and direct when I come visit you. I will if I have to, but I would prefer you purge these false teachers from the church before I get there so I won’t have to.”

Despite his limitations, Paul is faithful to his calling as an apostle. He doesn’t like being mocked and belittled, but he’s not going to let it deter him – he’s going to do what God called him to do and take action if necessary. He may not be much to look at or listen to – but he’s a man of substance – and someone the church can count on to do the right thing.

The fourth question we can ask in determining if we are putting substance over style is: **Do I seek God’s approval or man’s?** Verse 12 says... “We do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some who commend themselves. When they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise.”

Paul knows that in order to win the Corinthians back he's going to have to talk about himself, which he hates to do. As he does talk about himself, he's very aware that any achievements or accomplishments he has are directly related to God's grace in his life. Therefore, he says, "I'm not going to get into a comparison game with my opponents, and try to tell you how much better I am than them. I'm not going to measure myself according to their standards, but God's standards."

Paul's opponents were very impressed with themselves, and did everything possible to let people know it. They had their own little elite club that prided themselves in their privileged heritage, their education and knowledge, their oratorical skills, and their superior spirituality. But Paul points out that they live in a bubble, and measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves.

The modern-day equivalent of this would be the so-called "beltway" in Washington D.C, where the political movers and shakers live who make decisions for the rest of the country they know nothing about. Hollywood is another overt example of living in a bubble, where nearly everyone thinks and votes the same way, has their own value system, and praises themselves with one award ceremony after another.

In the same way these false teachers had their own mutual admiration society and patted each other on the back. The problem was that they measured themselves by worldly values, not God's values. Their entire goal was to impress others with their looks, their talents and abilities, and their money – which Paul says is foolish because it's the wrong measuring stick.

We still deal with this problem today where we measure our success or value by comparing ourselves to others. It's foolish to compare, because you run into one of two problems – you either find someone who has more than you – more skills, more money, more friends, more recognition – or you find somebody who has less. When you find somebody who has less than you, you get full of pride. When you find somebody that has more than you, you get full of resentment. Whenever you compare, you're either feel superior or you feel inferior, and both are deadly.

The only measurement that matters is God's, and we free ourselves from a lot of baggage when we live for an audience of one and look only to God's approval and validation. Galatians 6:4 says, "Each one should test their own actions. Then they can take pride in themselves alone, without comparing themselves to someone else." When you get to heaven God is not going to say, "Why weren't you more like him or her?" He's going to say, "Why did you waste so much time and energy trying to be someone else? I made you completely unique – one of a kind – to fulfill a unique purpose nobody else can. Seek my approval, not man's."

This leads a fifth question: **Am I staying in the lane God assigned to me?** In verses 13-16 Paul explains the unique assignment God gave him... "We, however, will not boast beyond proper limits, but will confine our boasting to the sphere of service God himself has assigned to us, a sphere that also includes you. We are not going too far in our boasting, as would be the case if we had not come to you, for we did get as far as you with the gospel of Christ. Neither do we go beyond our limits by boasting of work done by others. Our hope is that, as your faith continues to grow, our sphere of activity among you will greatly expand, so that we can preach the gospel in the regions beyond you. For we do not want to boast about work already done in someone else's territory."

Paul saw the intruders at Corinth as invading his mission field and then taking credit for what he had done. They were like those who claim to have been in the military and won awards and decorations without ever serving, and steal the valor of those who did. These false teachers were claiming credit for a church they had nothing to do in building.

In response, Paul explains his assignment from God. Before Jesus ascended back to heaven, He commissioned His disciples to be His witnesses – starting at the home church in Jerusalem, then fanning out to Judea, Samaria, and to the farthest reaches of the earth. The apostles were careful not to go to the same areas and set up rival ministries and churches – there were far too many places to reach and they each went to different regions. Phillip went to Samaria, and according to tradition Matthew went to Ethiopia, and Thomas went to India, and the rest scattered out throughout the Middle East.

Paul's unique calling was to share the good news of Christ in the Gentile regions to the west where there was no church. He made three missionary journeys in a span of about 12 years and planted about a dozen Christian churches in major cities. Paul's strategy was to plant a church in a key city, and then raise up church leaders to continue the ministry. Once he laid the foundation for the church, he would move on to share the gospel in places that had not yet been reached – that was his calling.

Five years earlier came to Corinth – the first Christian missionary to do so – and planted a church. He worked with the people for 18 months before he moved on to share the gospel in other areas. Because he founded the church, he was their spiritual leader and authority. His hope was that the church would become spiritually stable by this point so that he would be free to venture further west as a missionary. He planned on going to Rome, and then on to Spain – the farthest region to the west in the Roman Empire.

But he didn't feel free to go until the church at Corinth was spiritually stable – and proved their stability by removing the false teachers from the church. The fact that he would not move on until that happened showed the depth of his love and concern for the Corinthians – he didn't want to see the church he started fall into enemy hands.

One of the things I've learned in ministry is to stay in the lane God assigned to me, and not look over to someone else's lane. 28 years ago God called me to Gold Beach, and this is the mission field I share with you. Unlike Corinth, that only had one church, we have other churches in town that preach the gospel, and there's no need for us to compete. Each church is unique and is able to reach different people.

But in our fallen nature there always lurks a little spirit of competition. In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians he chastised the church for competing over allegiance to different leaders – some said, "We like Apollos," and others said, "We like Paul." Paul said, "We're both on the same team – we have different gifts and abilities, and different spheres of influence – but it's God's church."

I'll admit that I was more competitive when I was younger and just starting out... "How do I compare to others? Who's coming to our church and who's going to other churches?" But hopefully, as you grow older and mature, these things become less and less important. God has a lane assigned to each one of us, and we're supposed to look straight ahead and not worry someone else's lane. Paul, I'm sure, is thinking, "There are thousands and thousands of people in the world who don't know Christ. Why don't you go try to reach them instead of stealing my sheep?" Churches should always be focused on taking the gospel to those who have never been reached.

The sixth question that helps us sort out substance over style is: **Do I boast about me or about the Lord?** Verses 17-18 says... “But, ‘Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.’ For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends.” Paul realizes that in defending himself he might come across as boasting, and he doesn’t want to do that. He once had been a world-class braggart, but God humbled him and he now says, “If anyone is going to boast, let him boast in the Lord.”

He quotes from the book of Jeremiah where it says, “Let not the wise boast of their wisdom or the strong boast of their strength or the rich boast of their riches, but let the one who boasts boast about this: that they have the understanding to know me” (Jeremiah 9:23-24). We sometimes look at smart people and are wowed by their intelligence, but any intelligence they have comes directly from their creator. We look at celebrities with their power and influence, and God says, “Where do you think gave them their gifts and talents?” People who have been blessed with wealth and nice things might be tempted to say, “Look at all I have. I did this!” But God is the one who gave them skills, good health, and the ability to make money.

Augustine, the great theologian of the early church, was asked what the three most important virtues in life were. He thought for a moment, then said, “Humility, humility, and humility.” Real substance is thinking less of yourself and more about God and others. Paul says, “If you’re going to boast (and he was getting ready to do that in chapter 11), boast about the Lord – boast about who He is and what He’s done in your life. If you sing well, give God the credit; if you have done well in your business, give God the credit; if you’re kids have turned out well, give Him the credit. In this way pride is weeded out and God receives the glory.

Paul wraps up the chapter by saying, “What you say about yourself mean’s nothing – it’s what God says about you that makes the difference.” Paul had learned, as we all should learn, that God’s approval is all that matters – we play for an audience of one and we seek to please Him alone.

The theme that runs throughout these verses is: God values substance over style. Substance is revealed by staying spiritual humble, and using power to build up instead of tear down. Substance doesn’t get caught up in comparison, but stays in the lane God has assigned you. And substance boasts in the Lord and seeks His approval.

Substance over style will not always be recognized or rewarded in a world that values outward appearance – but that’s okay, because the values of this world are passing away, and only that of real value and substance will endure.