

Authentic Leadership

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 10 April 2022

Preacher: Rev. Jeff Simpson

[0 : 0 0] We have been in a series this spring in the book of 2 Corinthians that we've been calling Power in Weakness.

And we have seen so far how the invitation to follow Jesus is really an invitation to a life of paradox. And that's because God's greatest display of power, his greatest display of victory, his greatest display of glory came in something that looked like suffering and loss and weakness through somebody who was mocked and rejected and betrayed and crucified like a common criminal.

And so what that shows us is that true spiritual power is often going to look like weakness in the eyes of the world. And so we've seen how this paradox of power and weakness applies to a number of things.

We've seen how it applies to suffering. We've seen how it applies to how we think about glory. We've seen how it applies to how we grow in the Christian life, the nature of the new covenant, the nature of ministry in the church.

And this morning, we're going to look at how this paradox of power and weakness applies to leadership. It applies to leadership. Here in 2 Corinthians 6, Paul shows us what being an authentic leader looks like.

[1 : 3 3] What being an authentic leader looks like, especially in the face of criticism. Over the past year and a half, before I was ordained, I went through a process called the ordination discernment process.

And it's a long process for good reason. And you kind of went through several rounds of interviews with different groups of people. And in one of those first interviews, I was asked this question.

So Jeff, how do you respond to criticism? It was a pretty direct question. And I responded by saying, well, do you want me to say how I should respond or how I actually respond?

And the person said, no, we want to know how you actually respond. And so I said, I was pretty honest. And I was like, well, you know, honestly, I can tend to get pretty defensive. I can tend to think about all the reasons why this person's wrong.

And maybe I don't do that outwardly. Maybe I don't say any of that. But I think it in my heart. I actually sometimes will have these like imaginary debates between myself and this person where I clearly and convincingly show them why they're wrong.

[2 : 4 5] Hopefully I'm not the only one. But I was beginning to explain how I responded to criticism and just being honest about that. How about you? When you are criticized in the workplace or at home or among your friend group, how do you respond?

How do you respond to criticism? As we look at how Paul responded here in 2 Corinthians 6, I think it's helpful to just reveal a little bit of the background of this letter.

He had planted the church in Acts chapter 18 in Corinth. And while he was away continuing his ministry elsewhere, some people started to call his ministry and his leadership into question.

They started to critique the validity and the legitimacy of his leadership. They critiqued him for not being the impressive, successful leader that they thought he would be or that they wanted him to be.

He was not the great public speaker that they hoped he would be. He wasn't the successful minister. He suffered a lot.

[3 : 51] He was imprisoned multiple times. He was beaten. He had a lot of things in his life that looked like weakness. And so as a result, a lot of people started to criticize Paul and even follow other false apostles.

And so a couple of the reasons why Paul writes 2 Corinthians are, one, he's trying to defend his authenticity as an apostle.

But not just that. He wants to restore his relationship with them. His goal isn't just to correct them or persuade them or lay down the law. It's to win them.

He wants to win them. He wants to restore his relationship with them. And in doing so, throughout the letter, but particularly in this passage, he shows us what being an authentic leader looks like.

And he shows us that authentic leadership is this unique combination of authority and vulnerability. Authority and vulnerability.

[4 : 52] And so we're going to look first at how Paul views his authority. And then we're going to look at how Paul expresses vulnerability. But before we do that, let's pray. Father in heaven, this is your word.

We believe it's absolutely true. And Lord, I pray that you would illumine our minds and hearts. God, would you teach us to know you as you want us to know you, to obey you as you want us to obey you, and to worship you as you want us to worship you.

We pray this in Christ's name. Amen. So first of all, we're going to look at what authentic leadership looks like by looking at how Paul views his own authority.

So last week in 2 Corinthians chapter 5, Pastor Tommy talked about how vertical reconciliation with God leads to horizontal reconciliation in the world.

That as God reconciles us to himself by giving us his righteousness, he then sends us out to be agents of reconciliation in the world. And at the end of chapter 5 and the beginning of chapter 6, he transitions by turning this theological reality of reconciliation into a personal invitation between him and the Corinthians.

[6 : 09] In this section, he makes a personal and a direct appeal to them. And this is the only time in the whole letter where he directly refers to them as Corinthians. He says, you Corinthians.

It's a personal appeal. It's a direct appeal. And part of what he's doing is he's saying, look, because God has resolved the conflict of sin between us and him, that gives us the power to resolve the unresolved conflict that's between us.

The vertical reconciliation that we've received gives us the resources to reconcile between one another. And there's some things that we've got to talk about. And so here he confronts his critics head on.

And so how does he do it? How does he do it? Chapter 6, verse 3, he says, You know, one way to respond to criticism is to flex on people with your authority.

It's to flex on people with your title, your position. You know, I've got more degrees in this person. And so what they're saying, there's no way that they could possibly be right.

[7 : 26] I'm a C-level executive. This person is just a mid-level employee. And so they must be clearly wrong. They don't know what they're talking about. And maybe you've never said something like this out loud.

But if you're like me, I can guarantee you've maybe thought something like this in your heart. And this view of authority says that my leadership or my authority is ultimately based on my position.

It's based on my title. It's based on my credentials. And so when you're faced with criticism, what that means is you will validate your leadership by saying, I'm in charge. I'm the leader.

Sit down and listen to me. I'm in charge. And it's important to remember that as an apostle, Paul has every right to do this. I mean, he's an apostle. He has received direct revelation and direct authority from Jesus Christ himself.

And so he could have said to the Corinthians, look, as someone who's received direct authority from Jesus Christ, as an apostle, listen, sit down, shut up, listen to me. I've got something to say. He could have flexed on his position, but that's not what he does.

[8 : 33] Instead, he says, we commend ourselves as what? As servants. As servants of God. This word here, diakonos, means servant.

It means minister. It's also where we get the word deacon from. And a servant is someone who puts the priorities of others before their own.

A servant is someone who sacrifices their personal agenda to seek the glory of God and the good of others. And if you're a Christian, if you belong to Jesus, this is your primary job description.

It's as a servant. We're servants. It doesn't matter if you're a freshman in high school or a CEO of a Fortune 500 company. Our job is to be a servant.

We're to put the glory of God and the good of others before our own priorities. And this is true regardless of if you're in a place of formal leadership or not.

[9 : 33] You may say, well, I'm not in a place of formal leadership. I don't have a title or a position. But we may not have a formal leadership title, but all of us are in places of influence.

We're all in places of influence, and that is what leadership is. It's just a place of influence. And so we might be in a place of influence as a sibling or as a parent or as a neighbor or a co-worker.

We all influence other people with our words and our actions. And so as we are in places of influence, we have the opportunity to lead even if we don't have a former leadership title.

And what Paul is saying is that true authority doesn't come from your position. It comes from how you serve. It comes from how you serve. Those of us who maybe have been around in the church for a while may have heard this phrase servant leadership before.

And we might say, oh, yeah, I'm a big believer in servant leadership. Leaders are servants, and servants are leaders. I've read several books on servant leadership, and I've been to conferences about servant leadership.

[10 : 39] But the way that you really find out what you believe about leadership, the way that you really find out what you believe about what it means to be a leader, is what you do when you're criticized.

That's when you really find out. I remember when I was doing campus ministry, I led a mission trip in the summer of 2018 to Melbourne, Australia with a team of 10 college students.

We were there for a month to do outreach on various college campuses in the city. And I was co-leading the trip with somebody else. And it was a great trip.

And about midway through the summer, one of the girls on the trip was kind of frustrated with me about something. And she had been frustrated about it for a few days.

I didn't know about this. But her kind of frustration kind of came to a crescendo one night as our team was walking out of a restaurant. And she basically, in the midst of everybody, our whole team out in the parking lot of this restaurant, she voiced her frustration with me and criticized me in front of this whole group.

[11 : 50] And I can't remember exactly what she said. But as you can imagine, I was pretty shocked. I was pretty taken aback. I was pretty humiliated. It's hard to be publicly criticized in front of a group of people that you lead.

And so the question for me in that moment was, how do I exercise my authority or my leadership in this moment? Do I exercise it by flexing my title or my position?

Or do I serve? Do I act like a servant? Do I exercise my authority or my leadership in this moment? And these are, if you've ever been in a situation like that, those are not easy questions to answer. These are hard situations to navigate as a leader.

And that's why what Paul is saying here is so countercultural. He has this opportunity to flex his authority and his position, but he doesn't. But he doesn't.

And so this is why what Paul is saying is so countercultural. And this is why Jesus is so amazing.

[12 : 52] This is why Jesus is so incredible in terms of how he thought about his own authority. Because no one has ever had more authority than Jesus. No one has ever had more authority than Jesus.

He has all authority in heaven and on earth. Colossians 1 says that all things were made by him and for him. And in him all things hold together. He's the king of kings.

And he's the Lord of lords. No one's ever had more authority than Jesus. And yet, no one has ever acted more like a servant than Jesus.

No one has ever acted more like a servant than Jesus. In Matthew chapter 20, he's talking to his disciples. And he says to his disciples, he says, You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them.

And their high officials exercise authority over them. He says the way that the world exercises leadership is by flexing their title and their position and their authority.

[13 : 54] But he says to his disciples, he says, Not so with you. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant. And whoever wants to be first must be your slave.

Just as the son of man did not come to be served, but to serve. And to give his life as a ransom for many. The one who has authority over all became the servant of all.

The one who is glorious beyond all comparison became a ransom payment to exchange his life for ours. And so when you see that, when you see that the one who has authority over all became a servant of all, that will change how you view authority.

And it will change how you view criticism as a leader. On one hand, it has to make us open up to the possibility that our critics might be right.

Right? If nothing less than the son of God becoming a ransom payment for us had to reconcile us to God, then we should never think, no matter what leadership position we're in, we should never think that we're too good to be critiqued.

[15 : 05] We should never think that we're too good to receive criticism. We should be humble enough to admit, you know, maybe they're right. Maybe they're right. On the other hand, even if our critics are wrong, even if they're 100% wrong, we should still receive their criticism with humility.

You know, one pastor that I really respect says, he says, you know, even when I've received criticism from people who are 95% wrong, even if they're 95% wrong, I still try to look for that 5% of truth.

I still try to look for that kernel of truth, something I can learn from, something I can grow from, something that might be true, that I need to learn in order to grow into maturity in Christ.

And on the flip side, if we're someone who gives criticism to someone else, if we're giving feedback to someone, being a servant should also shape how we do that as well.

If we're giving constructive criticism, we should remember that even though we're not in a position of authority, that the way that we respond to that person should be as a servant, as well.

[16 : 12] This is all because servants, servants see criticism as an opportunity to enter a J-curve. You know, we've been talking about this idea of a J-curve that author Paul Miller talks about, and it's this pattern of discipleship, of entering in Christ's death and resurrection over and over and over again, that we die with Christ and rise with Christ, and that's what grows us and matures us.

And we can avoid the J-curve, we can avoid growth and maturity by getting defensive when we're criticized, by flexing our authority and our position, or we can remember that we're servants.

We can let the criticism, whether it's right or wrong, we can let it put to death the pride that's in us, and we can allow that to make us more humble, to make us more humble like Christ, to grow and mature.

And when we do that, we experience a mini-resurrection. We grow more and more into the likeness of Jesus. We die with him, we rise with him. Servants see criticism as an opportunity to grow and be more like Christ.

And you know, Paul's critics were totally wrong. They were totally wrong about him, and yet, he faced their criticism as a servant. As a servant. And that leads to our next point.

[17 : 32] That's how Paul thinks about his own authority, but this is how, next we're gonna look at how he expresses vulnerability. How he expresses vulnerability. You know, Andy Crouch, Christian author, wrote a book called Strong and Weak.

And in that book, he talks about how every person in every society needs both authority and vulnerability to flourish. Authority and vulnerability need to be combined in order for people to grow and flourish.

And he says the best leaders are people who use their power for the benefit of others while being willing to embrace the risk and the suffering that that involves.

And so he says, look, if you have, you need both, you need both authority and vulnerability. If you have authority, but not vulnerability, that'll lead to exploitation.

That's power for power's sake. You know, this is what Vladimir Putin wants. This is what perpetuates every system of injustice.

[18 : 39] Power for power's sake. If you have vulnerability without authority, this is what all of us fear the most.

This is being exposed to all of the risks and all the dangers in the world without having any agency, without having any ability to do anything about it.

If you have neither authority or neither vulnerability, that's a life of withdrawal. It's a life of living your life in a safe bubble and having no meaningful engagement with the world at all.

You might be safe, but you'll never have a meaningful life. But if you combine authority and vulnerability, you get flourishing.

You get flourishing for people in societies when people use their power to benefit others while embracing that risk for themselves, opening themselves up to risk and loss, that's when people and organizations and societies and cultures flourish.

[19 : 47] And that's when you get love. And so in verses four through 10, Paul is, what he's doing is he's bringing together his authority and vulnerability. And he does this by giving us a resume of his ministry.

But it's not the sort of resume that you and I would think of. It's a resume of weakness. It's a resume of vulnerability. And he starts by listing a number of external difficulties that he faced.

In verse four, he says, we commend ourselves in every way by great endurance, afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots.

These are external difficulties that he faced. You know, we know that in places like Acts chapter 14 that he was beaten and stoned. We know that he was sent to prison multiple times. We know that in Acts chapter 19, while he's preaching the gospel in Ephesus, a riot erupts because the craftsmen who sell idols can no longer have a profitable business because no one's worshiping idols anymore.

And so they riot in the streets. The idol makers riot in the streets because Paul has disrupted their business through the preaching of the gospel. He continues in verse five with difficulties that he faced, sufferings that he faced because of how he personally chose to minister.

[21 : 11] Labors, sleepless nights, and hunger. This is most likely referring to how at a certain time, Paul didn't want to be a financial burden to any of his churches, to anybody.

And so he would often do manual labor as a tent maker to support himself financially so others wouldn't have to. And sometimes this meant staying up late at night and working and having sleepless nights and sometimes not always having enough money to buy food.

He says in 1 Thessalonians 2 verse 9, for you remember our labor and toil. We worked night and day that we might not be a burden to any of you while we proclaim the gospel of God.

And he continues in verse six by listing examples of how he conducted himself with personal integrity, with moral integrity.

And so he says, he continues his list by saying, I commend myself in purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God with weapons of righteousness for the right hand and the left.

[22 : 20] And so he's saying the legitimacy of my ministry isn't based on my external results or external success. The legitimacy of my ministry is based on the purity of my heart.

It's based on my integrity. It's based on my moral conduct, my way of life. It continues in verse eight and nine and in this list of things, he is comparing his reputation among his critics and what was actually true about him.

His reputation among his critics and what was actually true about him. Verses eight and nine, he says, through honor and dishonor, slander and praise, we are treated as imposters and yet are true, as unknown and yet known.

His critics said he was a fraud. They said he was an imposter, but he knew that God knew who he was. He knew that God saw the truth of who he was and he was fully known by him.

And then finally, in verses nine and 10, he concludes his resume of weakness, his resume of vulnerability, and perhaps what is the most poetic section, and really in a section that describes the overall paradox of his ministry and really what is the overall paradox of the Christian life.

[23 : 38] He says, as dying and yet behold we live, as punished and yet not killed, as sorrowful yet always rejoicing, as poor and yet making many rich, as having nothing and yet possessing everything.

Paul says, spiritual power was present in my weakness. Resurrection life was present in my mortal body. Spirit-filled joy was present amidst all my sufferings and sorrows and true spiritual riches were present in my earthly poverty.

And so Paul says, you want my defense to my critics? You want my resume? Here it is. Here's my resume. I have suffered for you.

I have endured difficulty for you. I have worked hard for you. I've lost sleep for you. I have acted with integrity for you.

I have been slandered. I have been called an imposter and all of that has made my life look like a living contradiction. That's my resume. It's a resume of vulnerability.

[24 : 53] And so why does Paul do this? Why does Paul give us a resume of vulnerability and weakness and not a resume of strength? I mean, I think a legitimate question here for us is are we to conclude that our abilities, our strengths, our expertise isn't valuable in the kingdom of God?

And the answer is no. Of course our strengths and our abilities matter. God has given everyone strengths and abilities as people made in his image and as Christians we're called to use our skills and expertise to the glory of God in our work, our jobs, and our vocations.

But skills and expertise alone do not make you an authentic leader. Credentials and talent and expertise alone do not make you an authentic leader.

What makes you an authentic leader is how you use your abilities and your skills to love. To love. And love is the whole point and love is the whole reason why Paul is defending his ministry this way.

Love is the whole reason why he's making himself vulnerable. We said earlier his goal isn't just to correct them or lay down the law. His goal is to win them. How do we know?

[26 : 12] We know because of what he says in verses 11 through 13. In verse 11 he says we have spoken freely to you Corinthians and opened wide our hearts to you.

We are not withholding our affection from you but you are withholding your affection from us. I speak as to my children open wide your hearts also.

In the face of criticism Paul's main goal wasn't to be right. It wasn't to clear his record. It wasn't to vindicate himself. His main goal was love.

It was to be loved and to love the Corinthians to restore his relationship of love with them.

Authentic leadership is about combining authority and vulnerability for the sake of love. It's about combining authority and vulnerability for the sake of love.

[27 : 14] Paul says I'm not trying to flex on you. my heart is wide open to you. My affections are open to you. Look how much I've suffered for you. Look how much I've worked hard for you because I love you.

I'm opening my heart to you Corinthians. Will you open your heart to me? Will you open your heart to me? And this is an incredible vulnerable place to be because as he opens himself up and makes himself vulnerable he's opening himself up to further criticism.

He's opening himself up to further rejection. He responds to criticism paradoxically. He responds to criticism by opening himself up to more criticism.

But he does it for love. And this is a model for us of what authentic leadership looks like. And so as we think about your homes and your neighborhoods and your workplaces this is a model for us for what leadership looks like but it's also a beautiful picture of the gospel.

It's also a beautiful picture of the gospel. The events of Holy Week this week remind us that the gospel is that in Jesus Christ God's power was expressed through vulnerability for the sake of love.

[28 : 34] That that's the gospel that in Jesus Christ God came to a world that had totally and utterly rejected him. And God responds to that rejection he responds to our sin by putting himself in a place that opens himself up to more rejection by becoming totally vulnerable.

Palm Sunday this morning this day Palm Sunday we celebrate that the king of kings doesn't come riding into Jerusalem like a conquering king on a war horse like a Roman military official.

He comes riding in on what? A colt. a young donkey a humble animal that represents humble people for farmers and blue collar people authority and vulnerability.

On Monday Thursday we consider how the one who has authority over all things in heaven and on earth kneels down before his disciples and takes a towel and does something that only a servant does and he washes their feet.

He takes a place of vulnerability. And then a good Friday we see how the judge of all the world the one who's going to judge the world is given an unfair trial and he's betrayed and arrested and beaten and mocked and crucified like a common criminal and dies.

[30 : 06] One of the most painful deaths imaginable. In Jesus Christ God has expressed the greatness of his power and authority and glory through the vulnerability of love.

In Jesus Christ God says to us my heart is open to you. My affections are open to you. My love is open to you. I have made myself utterly vulnerable to you.

I have opened myself to more rejection. I have laid aside my power and my authority and my glory to show you how much I love you.

I have opened my heart to you. Will you open your heart to me? And friends that's the invitation of Palm Sunday. It's the invitation of Holy Week. It's the invitation of the gospel that God has opened his heart.

He is unrestrained in his affections for us. And the invitation for us is will we open our hearts to him? Will we be vulnerable with him? Will we open wide our affections to him?

[31 : 07] And that's the path to authentic leadership and it's the path to being authentically human. Let's pray. Our God and Father we worship you and adore you.

We thank you that you laid aside your glory to become a servant. Lord I pray that that would change us to be people and leaders who use our power and authority for others.

Serving them. Becoming vulnerable for them. Lord create a culture of love in us where power and authority come together in a way that glorifies you and reflects the gospel we pray.

Amen. Amen.