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## POWER IN WEAKNESS | PLAYING THE FOOL

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In William Shakespeare's play "Henry IV Part 1," the young Prince Hal, the heir apparent, the future Henry V, appears to be a reckless young man. He wastes time with lowlifes and thieves like his friend Sir John Falstaff. Falstaff is a complete and utter fool — although a witty and lovable one — and together they drink all night and sleep all day, and then do it all over again the next day. Hal gives every appearance to everyone, especially his father, that he is irresponsible and unfit to rule, but then he reveals that his behavior is all just an act. He is merely playing the fool so that when he actually reforms his life, the transformation will be that much more dramatic.

But not only that, Hal plays the fool for a specific strategic purpose. By concealing his real character, he is given the opportunity to rub shoulders with common, ordinary folks — his future subjects. And this gives him the ability to learn how to connect with people — all kinds of people — which makes him a great king. And so at just the right moment, he will redeem the time by revealing his true identity. At one point he explains:

My reformation, glittering o'er my fault,  
Shall show more goodly and attract more eyes,  
Than that which hath no foil to set it off.  
I'll so offend, to make offence a skill,  
Redeeming time when men think least I will.

In a similar way, the Apostle Paul plays the fool in 2 Corinthians 11. What you need to remember is that the Greco-Roman world of the first century in which Paul lived was a society in which people shamelessly boasted in their accomplishments and achievements and saw absolutely nothing wrong with it. We might consider that to be a little brash or a little pretentious, but they were not concerned. Remember that in the Roman world, humility was not a virtue. In fact, the Romans didn't even have a word for humility until Jesus arrived on the scene.

Now, the reason why Paul writes this letter is because the Christians in Corinth were in danger of being carried away by these teachers who slipped into Corinth after Paul had left, and these teachers felt no compunction about showing off. They claimed to be everything that Paul was not. If Paul claimed to be an apostle, they called themselves super apostles. They prided themselves on their eloquence, their rhetoric, and their strong speaking ability as well as their commanding physical presence. They boasted in their extraordinary spiritual gifts and their supernatural spiritual experiences. They prided themselves on their impressive pedigree and their human connections that they considered to be deeply influential.

So what was it that they were offering the Corinthians? Well, they basically told these Corinthian Christians that they could become somebody important. They could

become somebody prominent. They could become somebody famous by associating themselves with these leaders. But Paul is wise enough to know that this is all a sham. And so with a bit of a twinkle in his eye, he delivers this fool's speech in order to expose these false teachers for who they really are. In effect, he says, "Well, if you're really into boasting, boasting you shall have. If you're really into rhetoric, well, here's some rhetoric for you."

Paul proceeds, through this fool's speech, to skewer his opponents, but this fool's speech is dripping with holy irony. Paul explains that he's not being serious. He's saying, "I'm not speaking as the Lord would." He's deliberately playing the fool for a strategic purpose, to expose his opponents as false shepherds. That's what makes 2 Corinthians the letter for our times.

As we've been discussing over the last several weeks, many people no longer trust the church or its leaders for a number of understandable reasons, for all kinds of abuse and misconduct. But here in 2 Corinthians, Paul provides us with the timeless corrective that we need, and I believe that this is important for all of us. As our church has grown (and it has grown quite dramatically in recent years), the leaders of the church — the elders of the church, myself included — have been thinking through what it means for us to take our call even more seriously to be shepherds of the flock that God has entrusted to us. How do we know, feed, lead, guard, and equip the people that God has entrusted to our care?

And so as we consider Paul's fool's speech today, there are a number of things that he teaches us. So let's look at each of them under three headings. Let's consider: 1) *the false shepherd*, 2) *the true shepherd*, and 3) *the great shepherd*.

<sup>16</sup>I repeat, let no one think me foolish. But even if you do, accept me as a fool, so that I too may boast a little. <sup>17</sup>What I am saying with this boastful confidence, I say not as the Lord would but as a fool. <sup>18</sup>Since many boast according to the flesh, I too will boast. <sup>19</sup>For you gladly bear with fools, being wise yourselves! <sup>20</sup>For you bear it if someone makes slaves of you, or devours you, or takes advantage of you, or puts on airs, or strikes you in the face. <sup>21</sup>To my shame, I must say, we were too weak for that!

But whatever anyone else dares to boast of—I am speaking as a fool—I also dare to boast of that. <sup>22</sup>Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they offspring of Abraham? So am I. <sup>23</sup>Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. <sup>24</sup>Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. <sup>25</sup>Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; <sup>26</sup>on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; <sup>27</sup>in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. <sup>28</sup>And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. <sup>29</sup>Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?

<sup>30</sup>If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. <sup>31</sup>The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, he who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying. <sup>32</sup>At Damascus, the governor under King Aretas was guarding the city of Damascus in order to seize me, <sup>33</sup>but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall and escaped his hands.

*2 Corinthians 11:16-33*

## **The False Shepherd**

Let's begin by considering what Paul has to say about the false shepherd of God's flock. Paul reveals that the false shepherds in Corinth boasted in themselves in order to be admired and to gain a following, and they promised that the same could also happen to the Corinthians if they just associated themselves with these leaders.

Now, one of the curious features of our modern world is that it seems that more so than in the past, many people increasingly say that what they want most in life is to become famous, to be known, to be recognized, to become influential. Why might that be? Why are more people today interested in being famous? Well, I have a theory about that which I'll share with you. It seems to me that when people give up belief in God, when they give up any belief in some kind of transcendent order that is greater than the self alone, it creates a bit of a vacuum. When we give up belief in God, we lose the ability to tap into something that provides us with a deeper, more enduring sense of meaning and purpose in our lives. And so we try to fill this vacuum by seeking external validation from others. We need to be noticed, we need to be seen, because that external validation helps us truly believe that we are significant. That we are valuable.

So I'll give you a somewhat humorous example of this desire for fame to fill the vacuum. This example comes from a Disney movie. In the 2022 live action version of Disney's Pinocchio, there's a scene where the fox (who's also a con artist cleverly known as Honest John) tries to lure Pinocchio away, not because he's seeking Pinocchio's best interest but so that he can sell him off to Stromboli, the puppet master, in order to make money for himself. And so when Honest John spies Pinocchio, he asks, "Where are you going?" And Pinocchio says, "I'm going to school so I can learn a bunch of stuff to be a real boy and make my father proud." The scene unfolds.

Honest John: A real boy? Why on earth would you want to be real when you can be famous?

Pinocchio: Famous?

Honest John: Yes, famous. I'm speaking of the theater. Bright lights. Music. Applause. Fame!

Pinocchio: Fame? But I want to be real.

Honest John: Yes, yes, my boy, but did you know, many people say that you're not actually real until everyone knows about you. Why, to be famous is to be real. Until then, you're just a nobody. Do you want to be a nobody? No! Nobody wants to be a nobody. Everybody who's anybody wants to be a somebody.

Pinocchio: But my father said I should go to school.

Honest John: Of course he did. All parents say that. But he doesn't recognize your genius. Who needs an education when one has such a personality, such a profile, such a physique? Why, he is a natural born actor. Right, Gideon? And not just an actor. An entrepreneur. Nay, an influencer. And won't your father be proud?

Pinocchio: Really?

Honest John: Oh, of course he will. Why, he will see your name in lights. Lights six feet high.

Now the scene, of course, is intended to be funny, and yet it seems to strike a chord, does it not? Because in many ways this is expressing how a lot of people in our culture feel. We believe that we're not really real, we don't become our true selves until everyone knows who we are — until we're known, noticed, recognized, and validated.

But what Paul shows us here is that this desire for external validation will never be satisfied. No matter how much applause, no matter how much validation we receive, it'll never be enough to tell us who we really are and to assure us that we truly are significant and valuable. And like Honest John, who's not looking out for Pinocchio but is only in it for himself, these false teachers in Corinth likewise were only seeking to gain a greater following for themselves in order to increase their influence and perhaps make a little more money.

But Paul calls them out on it. At the beginning of this passage, he is not only ironic but sarcastic. In verse 17, he explains that he's not speaking as the Lord would; Jesus probably wouldn't be this sarcastic. He's not speaking as the Lord would, but as a fool. And then he pokes fun at the Corinthians. He praises the Corinthians for their supposed wisdom. He says, you're so wise by tolerating these leaders who are taking advantage of you. He begins in verse 19, "For you gladly bear with fools, being wise yourselves! For you bear it if someone makes slaves of you, or devours you."

Now almost all the commentators will say that when Paul uses that word "devours," he is alluding to Ezekiel 34. And Ezekiel 34 is one of the most famous places in the whole Bible where God calls out the false spiritual leaders in ancient Israel. He calls them false shepherds. Rather than knowing, feeding, leading, protecting, and equipping his sheep, these false shepherds devour them. Rather than feeding the sheep, they feed *on* the sheep, and they expose them to danger and allow God's sheep to become lost and scattered. And God therefore eviscerates these false leaders through the prophet Ezekiel. He tells Ezekiel,

<sup>2</sup>Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy, and say to them, even to the shepherds, Thus says the Lord GOD: Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? <sup>3</sup>You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. <sup>4</sup>The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them. <sup>5</sup>So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts. My sheep were scattered; <sup>6</sup>they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill. My sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with none to search or seek for them.

Without a doubt, this has to be one of the most severe indictments against spiritual leaders in the whole Bible. But what's worse is that Paul is suggesting that these Corinthians are allowing these false leaders to take advantage of them. He says, "you bear it" if someone makes slaves of you, devours you, takes advantage of you, or puts on airs, or strikes you in the face. And on top of all that, not only were they allowing themselves to be taken advantage of, but they accused the Apostle Paul of being weak. They said that he was a weak leader in contrast to these strong ones. And again, in a bit of irony in verse 21, Paul says, you know what? You're right. You're right. I am weak. I was far too weak to ever even think of taking advantage of you.

## **The True Shepherd**

So in contrast to the false shepherds in Corinth, Paul models for us what a true shepherd looks like, but he does it in dramatic style. If you want rhetoric, rhetoric is what you're going to get. So he takes this common cultural practice of boasting in one's accomplishments and achievements and he inverts it. He boasts in all the wrong things, with one exception: He will take seriously his own background and pedigree. See, they were trying to one-up Paul by saying that they had these great human connections. And Paul says, so what? So do I. I'm just as much of a Hebrew, just as much of an Israelite, just as much of a child of Abraham as any of you.

But other than that, Paul boasts in what anyone else in the Greco-Roman world would've been too ashamed to even mention. See if they prided themselves on their accomplishments and achievements, well then he's going to take pride in his disappointments and setbacks. If they relied on their rhetoric, their slick presentation skills, well then he refuses to manipulate people with his words. If they boast of possessing extraordinary spiritual gifts and expect to get paid to use them, Paul rejects any kind of financial compensation from the Corinthians. He doesn't want to give anybody the wrong idea. He is going to support himself with his own hands. He doesn't want to be a burden to anybody financially. And if they go on and on and on about their dramatic, supernatural spiritual experiences, Paul says that he decided to know nothing among the Corinthians except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

In other words, Paul says, if you want to know what makes me qualified to be a leader of God's Church, I'm not going to tell you about all of my successes. No, I'm going to tell you about all of my suffering. So he mentions the things that no one else in the Greco-Roman world would have ever brought up in public. He mentions all the things



that they would have been too ashamed to ever say. He lists the number of times that he was imprisoned, beaten, flogged, stoned, shipwrecked, and left adrift at sea. He emphasizes all the danger that he's faced by rivers and robbers, by Jews and Gentiles, in the city and in the wilderness, and all the times that he experienced sleepless nights, hunger, thirst, cold, exposure, and anxiety.

And what was it that made Paul so anxious? He wasn't anxious for himself; he was anxious for others. He says that he was plagued by anxiety because of the daily pressure of all the churches. His concern was not for himself but for all the Christians and all the churches in all the cities where he had founded a church.

You see, these are the kinds of shepherd leaders we need. These are the kinds of shepherd leaders we need to become. Not those who boast in our victories, but those who boast in our defeat. And that is what Paul is doing at the end of this passage, which at first seems rather curious and strange. So let me explain what's going on here, and let me explain it by analogy.

In the United States, the highest award of valor is the Medal of Honor, which is usually presented by the president. But in the first century, the highest award of valor for someone serving in the military was called the Corona Muralis — the crown of the wall — and it was literally a golden crown in the shape of a wall, or a battlement of a city, or a fortress. And this is how one might win it.

In the first century, people often waged war by laying a siege against a city. And once the city had depleted its resources and its strength, then the attacking army would invade. They might use a battering ram to try to break down the gate, or they might put up ladders in order to climb over the wall. The only problem with using ladders is that only one soldier could go up the ladder at a time, and you were in an incredibly vulnerable position because the defending army could shoot arrows at you or pour hot boiling oil on top of your head.

This was obviously a very dangerous job, and it was incredibly risky. It took an enormous amount of courage. So the first person over the wall was awarded the "crown of the wall," because if one person got over the wall, victory was almost in sight since that person could help clear the way for the other men coming up the ladder to also make it. The only problem, of course, is that if you were the first one over the wall, it wasn't necessarily likely that you would survive the battle. And that's why, if you claimed that you were the first one over the wall and that you deserved the crown of the wall, you had to swear by the gods that this really happened to you.

That's what Paul's talking about. He's taking this medal of honor in the first century and turning it upside down. He's inverting everybody's expectations, because he doesn't boast in his victory; he boasts in his defeat. He basically says, I never was the first one over the wall, but you know, there was a time when I was hemmed in in the city of Damascus and someone let me down in a basket through a window outside the wall. I wasn't the first one over the wall; I was let down from the wall in order to escape being caught.

So Paul takes this medal of honor and flips it upside down. He boasts not in his success, but in his suffering; not in his triumph, but in his trials; and not in his victory, but in his defeat. If we want to be true shepherds, then like the Apostle Paul, we need to learn to discern the difference between show and substance, between charisma and character, and between self-promotion and self-giving.

See, the gospel inverts our values and transforms the way that we relate to one another. So I want to give you an analogy to help you think about how we should be relating to one another as Christians. How should we relate to one another within this church? How should we relate to one another within our Community Groups? Here are the two images.

Picture two waiting rooms. The first is a waiting room where you're sitting in preparation for a job interview. How do you conduct yourself in the waiting room before a job interview? Well, you dress your best. You dress for success. You're going to try to put your best foot forward. You want to make a good impression. You're anxious that you won't actually get the job, so you want to make sure you come across as impressive. And you've prepared your resume where you have listed all of your accomplishments and achievements, your gifts and skills and experience, and why you're qualified for the job. And you know that if you are asked to share any of your weaknesses, you'll try to turn your weaknesses into strengths. "Well, sometimes people say that my greatest weakness is that I work too hard or I pay too much attention to detail." Right? So in the waiting room before a job interview, you are seeking to impress, and you're probably sizing up the competition. Who else is in this room, and do I have a leg up over them?

But now imagine a different waiting room: the waiting room before going in for a doctor's visit. In that waiting room, you really don't care how you look, especially if it's an emergency. You might have just rolled out of bed and went over there. And you're not sizing up everyone else in the room. You're not comparing yourself to other people, and you're not afraid of showing your weaknesses. In fact, you might very freely share your symptoms. "Oh, why are you here today? Your knee. Ah, yeah. For me, it's the hip." Right? In the doctor's office, we don't have to pretend. We come as we are, and we not only share our weaknesses, we share some of our greatest struggles. We come not in pretense, but we come with authenticity.

And so my question is, how can we become a church like that, where we don't act as if we're in the waiting room before a job interview, but we act like we're in the waiting room before a visit to the doctor? Perhaps in your Community Groups this week, you could ask yourself that question. Which kind of waiting room are we, and how do we become the kind of waiting room that Paul is advocating for here?

Years ago, when I had just started out as the pastor of this church — it was close to 15 years ago — I was at a conference, and I met a wise old minister there. He began to explain to me that he wasn't sure how much longer he would continue at the church where he was serving, and he wasn't sure if he would take another church after that or simply retire. But the way he put it stuck with me, because he didn't just say, "Well, I'm old, and I'm tired, and I'm not sure how much gas I have left in the tank." That's not what he said. He said, "I've taken so many bullets over the years, and I just don't know if I have enough room on my chest for another wound."

As it turns out, I would say that that's how we tell the difference between the true shepherd and the false shepherd: You will know them by their scars. You see, this minister was the real deal, because not only did he continue in that church and lead them through another difficult leadership crisis, but then he even took on another church after that before retiring. You will know them by their scars.

## **The Great Shepherd**

So the question is, how do we become that kind of Christian leader — the kind that God calls us to be? The answer is that we're called to reflect the Great Shepherd who has made himself known in the person of Jesus. When God challenged those false shepherds through the prophet Ezekiel back in Ezekiel 34, he accused them of devouring, scattering, and exposing the sheep rather than feeding them, leading them, and protecting them. But despite their failure, which caused them to be scattered and lost, God says that one day he himself will come and be the shepherd of his sheep. He will find those who are lost, he will bring back those who've been scattered, he will bind up those who have been injured, and he will strengthen the weak. "I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep."

And that is why Jesus' words would not have been lost on anyone in John 10 when Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd." I'm here. I'm the one who will know my sheep. He says, I know my sheep and my sheep know me. He says, I will feed my sheep. They will go in and go out from me and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal, kill, and destroy. I have come that they might have life and have it to the fullest. He promises that he will lead his sheep. He says, the good shepherd goes before his sheep, and they follow him because they know his voice, and he promises to protect his sheep.

He says that the good shepherd is nothing like the hired servant. The hired servant cares nothing for the sheep. The hired hand runs at the first sign of danger, but not the good shepherd. No, the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep, and therefore no one and no thing can ever snatch you out of his hand. He's the one who knows us, leads us, feeds us, and protects us.

And how does Jesus accomplish all this for us? Not through success, but through suffering. Not through triumph, but through trials. And not through victory, but through an apparent defeat. Because Jesus too decided to play the fool. After all, what could be more foolish, what could be more stupid, what could be more ridiculous, what could be more humiliating than God hanging on a cross? What kind of a leader is that? And yet the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. And so through the cross, our great shepherd finds those who are lost, brings back those who have strayed, binds up those who are injured, and strengthens those who are weak.

Even the risen Jesus who voluntarily laid down his life for us continues to bear his scars. Jesus continues to bear the wounds of where the nails pierced his hands and his legs. He continues to bear the scar of where the spear pierced his side. Jesus is not ashamed of his scars, and he's not ashamed of us. In fact, he willingly shows his scars to us, because that's how you know the true shepherd from the false. You will know them by their scars. His wounds are the proof of his love and the mark of authenticity. And



now Jesus calls us to follow in his footsteps, to become under-shepherds of our Great Shepherd.

And that means that if we're going to follow in the way of Jesus, it's going to be the way of suffering, not success. It's going to be the way of trials, not triumph. And it's going to be the way of defeat rather than victory — but only an apparent defeat, because we know that in the end we will receive the victory. Jesus received not the crown of the wall but the crown of thorns. And so if we follow Jesus, we too will become shepherds who know how to feed, lead, guard, and protect others — not for self-promotion, but out of self-giving. The world around us may call us fools for following Jesus, but if so, let's gladly play the fool, because there's no wiser way to live than in the shadow of the cross. And if we're going to boast in anything, let's boast in the Lord.

*Let me pray for us.*

*Father, we thank you that we have a good shepherd who, rather than feeding himself on the sheep, rather than devouring the sheep, laid down his life for the sheep. Father, may we never get over the fact that you voluntarily gave up your life for us so that you might bring us home, no matter how lost or scattered or broken we feel. So we do pray that you would strengthen us in our weakness as we look not to ourselves but to you. We thank you for what you have accomplished for us through your life, your death, and your resurrection. We thank you that we can know you by your scars. It's in Jesus' name that we pray. Amen.*