

Good morning everyone, my name is Mark Peters and I am one of the pastors here at North Shore Alliance Church; it's great to have you with us this morning. I love to hear the story of God at work among us, and that's exactly what happens whenever we begin to pray.

I never cease to be amazed when I think that God, the Unlimited One, the Majestic One, the One the Bible describes as an all-consuming fire, that this God loves to meet with me, and with you. God is the central act in the entire universe, and He has given us a backstage pass. Through Jesus we have access into his throne room, into his presence, where we can listen to His heart and pour out ours. Prayer is not a duty, it's a privilege. Thanks Marcus and Beth for your willingness to share a part of your prayer journey with us.

As we launch our 40 days of prayer in a few weeks time, I trust you will take the plunge and take up the challenge to dedicate yourself for 40 days to spending time with the Father in prayer. Prayer is not a monologue, it's a dialogue, and I trust that as we dialogue with God about neighbors, friends, and nations, that God will speak and act in response to our prayers. We will say more about the 40 days of prayer in the coming weeks.

I want to begin my message this morning, by letting you in on the way my mind works. I am a person with an active imagination, so much so, that I have to be careful what I listen to. For instance, when my wife gets home from working at the hospital, I do my best to listen but some times I've got to call it quits. Whenever Naomi tells me about medical procedures, or the insides of people's bodies, my mind is painting visual pictures. Now, I haven't fainted while listening to one of Naomi's reports, but I've come close.

Because of my active imagination, I have a hard time enjoying a movie if I have read the book in advance. When I read a book, my mind produces mental images at a rapid pace. As I follow the twists and turns of the plot, my imagination fills in all the details, including vivid images of the main characters. And these pictures are so ingrained in my mind, that when I see the movie, the characters never look or sound quite right...I often end up disappointed.

The same is true when I read the Scriptures. In fact, when I finally went to Israel a few years ago, I discover that many of the mental images I'd created as I read the Scriptures were way off.

Illustration: Do you know what comes to my mind when I read Paul's letter to the Corinthians? I can't help but imagine a child, standing on the elementary school playground, waiting to get picked for a sporting team. I have been a sports enthusiast my entire life, and nothing comes close to those days of standing on the schoolyard, picking teams, hoping I wouldn't be picked last.

You know the drill, 2 captains are elected, one chooses first, the other chooses second...back and forth it goes until every player has been taken. As they voice their picks, there is a line of players waiting desperately to hear their name be called. And inevitably, there is that one person who will be chosen last. And sometimes that player isn't so much chosen, as they are grudgingly allowed to join a team. As I read Paul's letter to the church at Corinth, sometimes I wonder if Paul doesn't feel like he's being picked last?

God has used Paul to bring this church in Corinth to life...over an 18 month period, the Holy Spirit brought this church into being through Paul's blood, sweat, and prayers. Paul brought them the message of

Jesus dying on a cross, to redeem and restore people to God. It was through Paul that the Corinthians heard about God's love, His grace, His forgiveness...and they believed...they were saved.

But now, as some of the Corinthians look at Paul, they look with a mixture of gratitude, and revulsion. They are having a hard time accepting Paul as their spiritual father, their having a hard time being proud of Paul, because he is nothing like the impressive people they see in their society. To return to the sports analogy...the Corinthians want an upgrade at Paul's position...they were looking to "trade" Paul in for a 6th or 7th round draft pick...they'd have been willing to trade Paul for a bag of hockey pucks.

Can you imagine how Paul felt? Most of us don't have to imagine...we've experienced the pain of rejection. But God gave Paul eyes to see the bigger picture, beyond his own pain, to what was at the root of things.

One biblical scholar refers to Corinth as being, all at once, "the New York, Los Angeles, and Las Vegas of the ancient world."¹ As God invited Corinthians to join His new family, there was much needing change...God had saved them out of Corinth but now He intended to take Corinth out of them. And one of the first bits that needed transformation was the way they measured what mattered.

Probably all of us, if we took a few moments, could name the things that are most important to us. It's important to know what "matters"

because what we value drives our lives. So the question is, where are your values driving you? When it comes to measuring what matters, does what we measure matter to God?

As we've been discovering over the past few weeks, the Corinthians were really big on "wisdom"...they prized wisdom over almost everything else. But from God's perspective, the "wisdom" the Corinthians were enamoured with was lacking any true depth or power.

This morning I want to invite you to turn your attention to 1 Cor. 2:1-5, as we look to God's Word for another taste of true wisdom. If you are using the Blue Bibles located directly in front of you, you can find our text on page 1773.

"1 When I came to you, [brothers and sisters], I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. 2 For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. 3 I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling. 4 My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, 5 so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power.

The world in which Paul lived was both incredibly different, and incredibly similar to our own day. In Corinth, image was everything...*does that sound familiar?* When a public speaker came

¹ Gordon D. Fee, *The New International Commentary of the New Testament: 1 Corinthians*, 3.

to town, the first impression they made was crucial for any long term success.

One scholar writes, “Workers would compete for applause and offer entertainment...in between courses at the best banquets. Competitive showmanship was the order of the day”.² If you want to get ahead you’d better look good, sound good, know how to please the crowd, and know how to sell yourself.

The best speakers were treated like rock stars...they wined and dined women, they amassed wealth, and power. It was into this image-focussed city that Paul arrived. He came with an unimpressive message (about a crucified God), he spoke to an unimpressive selection of Corinthian people, and apparently he wasn’t all that impressive himself.

The Scriptures don’t tell us what the apostle Paul looked like, but in one ancient source he is described as being short, bald, bandy-legged, with a hooked nose, and a mono-brow.³ Likely Paul wasn’t on Corinth’s “50 Most Beautiful” list.

In 2 Cor. 10:10, we get a sense of what the church really thought of Paul. He quotes them saying, “*For some say, ‘His letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing.’*”

So how does one respond to this kind of criticism? How does Paul address a church that is enamoured with image, and rhetoric? How does he refocus this church so that they begin to measure (to value) what matters to God?

Well...Paul does what we have come to expect from him, he goes back to the message of Jesus’ death and resurrection. From Paul’s perspective, living in the light of the cross ensures that people will see things clearly.

In vs. 1-2, Paul speaks about the content of his message. While he was among them he didn’t bring a dazzling display of eloquence or poetic bluster; he kept his message simple, focused. He writes, “*For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.*”

We know from the Book of Acts that Paul lived in Corinth for 18 months. It’s hard to imagine that in those 18 months, Paul didn’t have anything to say except when it came to Jesus’ death and resurrection. This is Paul’s way of saying that everything pales in comparison to the wisdom of the cross, and more, that everything in life can be seen through the lens of the cross.

For Paul, the cross, the death and resurrection of Jesus, has turned the wisdom and values of the world on their head. The philosophers, the scholars, the brilliant debaters, in their great “wisdom,” completely

² Roy E. Ciampa, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary, The 1st letter to the Corinthians*, 112.

³ These descriptions re taken from an apocryphal work known as *The Acts of Paul and Theclas*.

missed what God was doing to save the world. Their best thinking precluded the possibility of God's solution: the cross.

God's wisdom was shocking in that He presented the world with a crucified Messiah as the key to triumph over sin, death, and the devil. Through the weakness and suffering of God the Son, Jesus, humanity has been presented with a way to be restored to God the Father. Wealth, wisdom, and power--the glittery things that people chase after--none of these usher us into relationship with God; only Jesus can do that.

I think Paul would be very comfortable with the saying, "All that glitters, is not gold." Not everything that people chase after is valuable, in fact, much of what people chase after is insubstantial, insignificant, and fleeting. "If we can't take it with us," why do we hold on to "stuff" with a kung fu grip?

The cross reveals the power of God. The cross reveals full measure of God's love and holiness. The cross reveals the lengths to which God went to purchase your life...He held nothing back.

When we stand in the light of the cross, we see things clearly, we begin to measure what matters, and let go of what doesn't.

In vs. 3-4, Paul shifts the focus from the content of his message to the form of the preacher and his preaching.⁴ Paul writes, "3 I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling. 4 My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power".

⁴ Fee, 89-90.

Now, it's impossible to know the exact nature of Paul's weakness or the cause of his fear while he was among them. He could have had a physical ailment, maybe he felt inadequate, maybe at times he wished he cut a more impressive figure, or spoke with more rhetorical brilliance.

What we do know is that Paul was convinced that his own weakness put him in a place where he actually became usable before God. Because of Paul's weakness, failings, and inability, anything God did through him only magnified God's glory. So don't think for a moment that your weakness or inability disqualifies you...God delights to work through our weakness, because in our weakness His strength is unmistakable.

Paul undercuts the very thing the Corinthians are pining after. They want someone who sounds impressive, but Paul was content to live with his rhetorical limitations if it meant that Jesus was front and centre. Sometimes, the "pursuit of excellence" is little more than a thinly guised pursuit of self-exaltation...we want to be "excellent" for the sake of our name. But if Paul is any indication, God can receive glory whether we are "excellent" or not.

And as Paul points out, though his preaching came through weakness, his message was anything but weak. Paul says, *My message may not have been eloquent or persuasive, but it came with a demonstration of the Spirit's power.*

The question is what does Paul mean by "a demonstration of the Spirit's power"? What is he referring to? There are differing opinions

on this...some suggest that Paul is referring to signs, wonders, and miracles...supernatural activity is evidence of God at work in their midst. Now, signs, wonders, and miracles are evidence of God's presence and power, but I don't believe that is what Paul is referring to here...he'll get to that later in his letter.

The Corinthian's faith, their ongoing transformation, was proof that Paul's message came with power. When they received this message of the cross, these Corinthians had been transferred from darkness to light; Jesus redeemed them and restored them to God. There is no greater miracle than the miracle of forgiveness and grace. In Romans 1:16, Paul writes, *"I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes"*.

In an image-is-everything-world, Paul didn't stack up. The Corinthians compared him to the Socrates', the Platos', and the Aristotles' of the Greek speaking world; clearly it was like comparing apples to oranges.

The Corinthians wanted to listen to someone who would move them to laughter, or tears, or applause. But Paul wasn't trying to entertain, he wasn't trying to gain more followers on Twitter, or to make a quick buck. He had set his heart on seeing God's power at work in people's lives. I suspect if we could ask Paul today, he'd tell us that he chose what is better by far; Paul measured what mattered.

And so, in the end, the Corinthians didn't get what they wanted but they received something much greater...they received the living Christ, who by the power of the Spirit, was beginning to change and transform them.

illus: As I listen to the Corinthian complaint, I can't help but think that all of us can relate. They wanted Paul to be more impressive, to measure up to the rhetoricians of the day. This complaint, that Paul was simply not enough, is not a burden that only pastors carry.

Many of us have people in our lives (spouses, parents, kids, friends, bosses, etc.) that have disappointed us for one reason or another, perhaps legitimately. We want them to be more, we're convinced **they** need to be more so that **we** can be more. Like I said, this is not a burden that only pastors carry, but this complaint does come with the title of "pastor".

Pastors and spiritual leaders, are not immune to the expectations of people around them. It is amazing to me at times to hear what people think must go on in my mind and heart; like everyone else, I wrestle with insecurity and self-doubt. I know what it is to carry around questions in my mind like: *"Do I care enough?"*, *"Am I a strong enough, or wise enough leader?"*, or *"Is my preaching deep enough, relevant enough, or, entertaining enough to keep people engaged?"*

And inevitably people come along who say 'no'. *"You didn't care enough for me when I was in difficulty."* *"You're not a strong enough leader, your vision isn't clear and compelling, your strategies aren't brilliant...I can't follow someone like you."* Or, *"You're preaching isn't deep enough... I need someone who can challenge me, teach me something I don't already know...I'm just not being fed by you."*

I want to be careful here...I'm not out for sympathy, nor am I attempting to induce guilt. If anything, I have been wonderfully cared for here at NSA...so many of you have been so kind to me, to our

staff, to our elders, and to other leaders in the church. So please, I'm not looking for a flood of encouraging e-mails this week.

But I wanted to address the disappointment and criticism Paul was facing, because we all face it. And like Paul, in the face of criticism and disappointment, we need to go back to the cross where we can see things clearly, where we can see what matters, and remember exactly what God thinks of us...we were worth dying for.

I also want to foreshadow what's coming later in Paul's letter. In chapter 12, Paul introduces the concept of the people of God being like the human body. Just like the human body, the church is filled with all kinds of parts and together they make up the whole. It takes more than a pretty face to make for a healthy body. It takes more than a set of ears, or a pair of hands, or some ribs to make the body complete; the same is true when it comes to the church.

I've said this before, and I'll say it again: if you know me for long enough, I will disappoint you as a pastor. There is no one pastor who will ever be all things to all people...nor does God intend for them to be. I came across a quote this past week that I'd like to read for you; it was written by Larry Crabb and taken from a book entitled '*Connecting*'.

He writes, "Where are the spiritual leaders, the shepherds of the flock, the elders of God's people? Why are one or two official Christian leaders assigned the role of pastor and expected to carry a

burden that belongs on many shoulders? Where are the people who can listen well and guide us through our problems to the father's heart and who regard it as their calling to do so? Whatever became of the idea that all believers are priests?"⁵

It takes the whole body of Christ, every single one of us, working together, using our gifts, to ensure that people are loved, taught, built up, and transformed. This was true in Corinth, and it is equally true on the North Shore.

In the face of the Corinthian complaints, Paul does the unthinkable...he agrees with them. In essence, Paul says, "*You're right...I didn't come to you with wise and persuasive words. But there is a reason for it if you're willing to listen.*" The Corinthians are busy complaining that Paul isn't impressive enough, and Paul agrees, pointing excitedly to the most impressive person he knows...the Lord Jesus Christ.

In vs. 5 we see that Paul came, relying on God's power instead of persuasive words, so that, their faith would not rest on his eloquence, but on God's power.

Paul is not rejecting "good" preaching. Instead, he is exposing and rejecting the danger we all face in life: self-reliance and self-exaltation. We no longer live in a world where the brilliant public speaker is adored by the crowd, but we still live in a world where image matters more than substance; we are obsessed with self-

⁵ Larry Crabb, *Connecting*, 98.

presentation.⁶ Any time we find ourselves infatuated with impressive displays of charisma or skill, Paul's teaching becomes applicable.

Here in verse 5, Paul wraps up a train of thought he began in chapter 1:18, and we see that he is quite content to point away from himself to Jesus. The goal of his preaching, and of all biblical preaching is to point to Jesus, and invite people to put their confidence in Him.

That's what I want to do this morning...to invite you once again to put your confidence in Him. When it comes to God, we have so much to be confident in; He is a rock-like foundation for our lives.

Think about what God has done for us. Already, in just the first chapter of Corinthians we've discovered that we've been: called, set apart, and invited into God's love, forgiveness, and peace. We've been filled with the Spirit's presence, power, and gifts. And we've been promised a glorious future. Even now, we are being kept and sustained by Jesus for the life that is still coming. God, who has made us these promises is faithful; He will do this.

Friends, think of what you were when God invited you to join His family. We weren't invited because of our image, not because we are impressive in wisdom, power, or nobility...we weren't invited because of what we bring to God, but simply because He is a God who loves.

Through the cross, God has turned the wisdom of the world on it's head...and He has reversed our fortunes...we've been chosen friends, chosen to be a part of God's family.

⁶ Hayes, 37.

When we put our confidence in Jesus, it is never misplaced. Friends, put your confidence in what He's done, in what He is doing, in what He will do. If we can't trust the One who died to save us, who can we trust? Choose to live your life in the light of the cross, choose to view all of life through this lens, so that you can clearly see what matters, and what doesn't.

Pray