

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

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Sermon manuscript

### **Sermon Series: AUTHENTIC**

(studies in the book of 2 Corinthians)

#### **A Vision for Authenticity (part 2)**

(2 Corinthians 2:17--3:6)

Study #4

#### **Introduction: The “normal” Christian life...**

It’s not necessarily good news when your doctor tells you that your blood pressure is “average,” or that your general level of fitness is average.

However, if he says, “*Your blood pressure is ‘normal’*” - well, that’s something to celebrate. If your fitness level is normal for a person of your age, congratulations.

As you well know, average and normal are not at all the same things.

“Average” is purely descriptive. It tells us what is the behavior typical of a given group.

“Normal” is prescriptive. It sets up a certain level of behavior as “normative” and dares you to shoot for that “norm.”

This distinction between *average* and *normal* is important and can be applied to people’s work habits, study habits, and athletic abilities.

We could even turn the question to spiritual matters.

The AVERAGE CHRISTIAN LIFE would be whatever most Christians experience.

The NORMAL CHRISTIAN LIFE is the life of the Christian as *prescribed* by God in the New Testament.

And sadly, the difference between the AVERAGE Christian experience and the New Testament NORMAL can be as different as night and day.

This morning, if you would characterize your own experience as a believer as more “average” than “normal” you’re not alone.

But if you come to the conclusion that you (and we) are not quite experiencing the “normal” that God would have for us, you’re probably also hungering and thirsting for something MORE.

Today we get a second glimpse of NORMAL as the Apostle Paul has come to know it.

Last Sunday we noted the following marks of spiritual authenticity:

- Gratitude;
- Seeing the triumph of Jesus as our triumph;
- Leaving behind a fragrance of Jesus everywhere we go.

In our passage for this morning Paul lists two more marks of authentic Christianity. And if last week’s list whetted your appetite for experiencing the real deal, you can be sure that this morning’s time in God’s Word is just as mouth watering.

We start off by finishing off 2 Corinthians 2:16. Paul asks a loaded question.

#### **Unimpeachable Integrity (vv. 16b-17)**

#### **I Am Inadequate (v. 16b)**

*[16b] And who is adequate for these things?*

This is the question asked by someone who is in over his/her head - and knows it!

With all of the energy leading up to the mid-term elections, all of the candidates were completely focused on winning. A whole bunch of these candidates - many of them newbies to the political process - won.

Do you wonder, as I do, if any of them woke up on Wednesday morning and wondered, “*What in the world have I gotten myself into?*”

The chasing dog finally catches the car. Now what does he do?

It’s like that great scene from the classic movie, Rocky, where Sylvester Stallone realizes that he can’t beat Apollo Creed in the ring. He’s just going to try to go the distance. He’s not adequate.

I suspect that you have, from time to time, been involved in something and realized, once you jumped in feet first, that you are in over your head.

Maybe it was an assignment at work that you honestly couldn’t handle. Or it was a task that required more intellectual tools than you possess. Perhaps it was a physical challenge that was beyond you.

When the light bulb went on and you saw that you were in over your head, did you ask yourself some version of the question Paul asks here, “*Who is adequate for these things?*”

Most of us, when we are reflective and thoughtful will ask ourselves that question from time to time?

Paul is asking the question he poses as a Christian. And it is a well-placed question.

Stop and think for a minute about what is really at stake when you talk with a friend about Jesus.

The issues in play when we share the Gospel of Jesus are God’s judgment, salvation, forgiveness of sins, and eternity. These issues are WAY too big for us.

When all of that weightiness crashes in on us we ask the question Paul is asking. We don’t ask it theoretically or hypothetically or rhetorically. It is with great sincerity that we wonder, “*Who in the world is adequate for these things?*”

*“Who am I kidding? Here I am dispensing a message that I know will be lethal to some and therapeutic to others, but never knowing which it will be for whom. I am not up to this! The issues are too big for me.”<sup>1</sup>*

Now, my natural response when I realize that I’m in over my head is to swim for shallow water or get out of the pool.

As Christians, if we realize that the message we are bringing to the people we love is simply too HUGE, borders too much on the edge of enormity, our temptation will be to ratchet back the radical nature of that message. Make it more palatable.

Paul refuses to go there. He doesn’t allow his understandable sense of inadequacy to prompt him to either change the message or to use shady, manipulative methods to get the message across.

### **The Indispensable Equipment for Ministry: Integrity (v. 17)**

*Watering down the message (v. 17a)*

**[17a] For we are not like many, peddling the word of God...**

The word that we translate here - *peddling* - is a fascinating word. It is the Greek word from which we get our English word “cheap.”

In the wine industry, the word described the process of watering down, or diluting pure wine with water. When a salesman watered down his wine he stood to increase his profits, but he did so at the cost of downgrading quality.

Paul has observed lots of people doing this with the Christian message, Gospel hucksters attracting a crowd by pitching a message that has lost its bite.

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<sup>1</sup> It has been suggested that his question is at least partly polemical. Paul’s opponents may have very well claimed to have been adequate for the task of ministry. Paul knew he wasn’t, in and of himself, and advertised that fact.

It was possible then and it is possible today to gain a following by only emphasizing the attractive truths of the message, or by appealing only to what people want to hear. In another place, Paul called people who do this, “*ear-ticklers.*” (2 Timothy 4:3)

In our own day it can be tempting to water down the message of Jesus. We dilute, we cheapen the Gospel when we downplay:

- THE OUTRAGEOUSNESS OF GRACE.

Tell a hard-working, responsible woman that there is absolutely nothing she can do to earn her salvation - and she just might take offense. Most of us would like to think that we can have a hand in obtaining eternal life, but the Bible is clear that we are saved by grace through faith, not by our works. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

- THE UGLINESS OF SIN.

Find a guy who has spent his whole life thinking that he’s done well enough to commend himself to God and then tell him that his sins have separated him from a just and holy God and he may be offended as well. But again, the Bible says that every one of us has sinned and has fallen short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23).

- THE ENORMITY OF JESUS’ SACRIFICE.

Most of us enjoy envisioning ourselves as the hero coming to rescue the person in need. We are the strong, “together” types who save the day. Tell your friend that the reality is that he is the weak one. He is the helpless. He is the hopeless in need of rescue. Being spiritually authentic means that we tell our friends that Jesus did what they could never do for themselves. He gave Himself as a sacrifice on the cross to pay the penalty for their sin. (Romans 5:8)

The message of Jesus is the only message that will save, but it flies in the face of self-reliance and pride. Dilute it and it will be more popular and better received. But it won’t save.

Give the message in all of its outrageousness and it brings soul-saving, life-changing power along with the potential for persecution and rejection.

So how can we avoid the temptation to dilute the message of Jesus when it is such a draw to do so? Here’s how Paul stayed authentic.

*Speaking/Living in the presence of Christ (v. 17b)*

***[17b]...but as from sincerity, but as from God, we speak in Christ in the sight of God.***<sup>2</sup>

Paul was protected from watering down tendencies by remembering that his every action was taken in God’s sight. God heard every word that he uttered.

There is a purifying that occurs when we remember that we live under the watchful eye of a holy, loving Savior. When we remember this the result is unimpeachable integrity.

The essential mark of integrity will show up across the board in the life of a spiritually authentic Christian.

Find a man with integrity and you can trust his golf score. The word of a woman with integrity is her bond. You can trust the spiritually authentic young couple to remain sexually pure on a date.

There is an increasing congruency between what they say and what they do. They will speak truly. There are fewer and fewer hidden areas of life.

The Christian who is growing in authenticity is becoming less and less interested in putting up a good front, and more and more interested in becoming a person of integrity.

And when it comes to the Gospel, there is no watering down of the message. They tell it lovingly, often, and straight.

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<sup>2</sup> Message: This is a terrific responsibility. Is anyone competent to take it on? No - but at least we don’t take God’s Word, water it down, and then take it to the streets to sell it cheap. We stand in Christ’s presence when we speak; God looks us in the face. We get what we say straight from God and say it as honestly as we can.

Here are the marks of spiritual authenticity Paul has listed to this point. The “real deal” experiences:

- unfailing gratitude (because God’s blessings are always weightier than our trials);
  - unvarying success (because we always get to participate in the triumphs of Christ);
  - unforgettable impact for Christ (not that everybody responds positively to the message, but all respond, one way or another);
- and, as we’ve just seen
- unimpeachable integrity (because we remember that we live in the sight of God).

Now Paul wrote autobiographically. These marks all characterized his life. And that would have been good for the Corinthian believers to hear because they were getting a very different message about Paul from certain people in Corinth.

The general opinion of Paul was spiraling down - FAST! And the two rhetorical questions at the beginning of chapter three tell us that some of the folks at the church were questioning Paul’s apostleship.

### **Undeniable Reality (vv. 1-6)**

#### **Two Kinds of Letters (vv. 1-3)**

*Letters on paper (v. 1)*

***[1] Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some, letters of commendation to you or from you?<sup>3</sup>***

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<sup>3</sup> Paul evidently thought that letters of recommendation were not altogether bad ideas, as they could promote goodwill between churches, and protect churches from being taken advantage of by charlatans. In 1 Corinthians he spoke strongly on behalf of Timothy. In this letter, he commended Titus. In Romans, he commended Phoebe to the Christians there. In Colossians he reminded them to welcome Barnabas when he arrived. Modern churches have taken Paul’s practice to the practical step of asking for letters of transfer of membership, a healthy practice, I believe.

Evidently, there were those in the church who stood against Paul. They were advising the church to ask Paul for some letters of commendation the next time he visited, to validate his ministry.

Get this. After having been the one who had established the church in the first place, they were saying,

*“Oh, and by the way, Paul, next time you come our way, it might be a good idea if you brought a reference letter from Peter or John - you know, from one of the REAL apostles.”*

This is nuts. Doubting the Apostle Paul’s credentials makes no sense at all. If anyone was ever an apostle, clearly it was Paul!

But, then, maybe we shouldn’t be so hard on the Corinthians. After all, Paul didn’t exactly fit the mold of what a successful leader looks like.

In an insightful couple of paragraphs, Ray Stedman wrote these words a generation ago,

*“I have often wondered how the apostle Paul would rate in modern ecclesiastical circles, whether he would be considered a success or not if he were carrying on his ministry today.*

*“It is hard to believe that a man who spent most of his time in jail, who never made enough salary to buy a home of his own, who never built a church building, never spoke on television, or even had a radio broadcast, who ran around so much that he had no permanent residence of his own, who frequently had to get another job to support himself, [who never had - as far as we know - a family], who admitted that he was a poor speaker and had a very unimpressive appearance, could ever be a successful pastor.*

*“Small wonder that they had a hard time believing in Corinth that he was actually an apostle!”<sup>4</sup>*

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<sup>4</sup> From Stedman’s commentary on 2 Corinthians “*Power Out of Weakness*” p. 36., Word Publishing.

He didn't fit the picture of a together kind of guy. GQ wouldn't have placed him on their cover and Christianity Today's Leadership Journal wouldn't have interviewed him.

Despite all that, Paul was not about to give in to the Corinthian's request. No letters were needed and none would be sent!

But, then he goes on to say that the reason he won't be bringing a letter of reference from someone else is that he already has a letter that validates his apostleship.

*Letters on human hearts (vv. 2-3)*

An apostle's epistles

***[2] You are our letter, written in our hearts, known and read by all men; [3a] being manifested that you are a letter of Christ, cared for by us...***

It is not that the existence of the Corinthian church made Paul an apostle. He would have been an apostle had this church never been founded.

But the way the church was founded by him, the way he cared for them and led them and nurtured and equipped and disciplined them served as a Stamp of Apostolic Approval.<sup>5</sup>

So, Paul had made impact on the lives of the Corinthians and that marked him as God's apostle. No, that's not enough!

Lots of people have a life-changing impact on other people - and that impact may or may not have much to do with Jesus.

Drill sergeants in the Army have life-changing effect on new recruits. Supervisors use wise management techniques to effect change in their employees. Moms and dads obviously deeply and powerfully impact their kids. But this impact may have nothing to do with Jesus.

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<sup>5</sup> Earlier, he had written ***[1 Corinthians 9:2] you are my seal of apostleship in the Lord***"

Yet there was something special about the changes that occurred in the Corinthians through Paul's influence. It was something deeply spiritual and God-centered. And it was the kind of effect he had that marked Paul out as the real deal.

Engraved by the Savior

***[3b]...written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.***<sup>6</sup>

As a result of his engagement with them, they encountered the living God.

They didn't just learn manners or discipline or morality or doctrine. Their lives were impacted by the living God. They have the message of God written on their hearts.

And THIS is the ultimate ringing endorsement of Paul's ministry:

**That the changes that had occurred in the Corinthians had occurred because Christ had changed them, and Christ's life-changing power had been unleashed through Paul.**

Now isn't this the kind of impact every one of us longs to be making in the lives of those around us?

Dream with me for just a moment.

Wouldn't you love to have the sense that it was YOU God was pleased to use to bring spiritually authentic change to another person? That it was you leaving behind the fragrance of Christ, your spirit of gratitude, your unimpeachable integrity that prompted a Christ-centered change?

I can't think of much better than to know, *"That person over there - that young person, that child, that adult - is a changed individual. Jesus has worked powerfully in his life/her life. They have God's message imprinted all over them. They really 'buy' into the Gospel now - and I had a part in that change!"*

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<sup>6</sup> Note Ex. 31:18 - *"two tablets written by the finger of God"* on Mt. Sinai.

That is the kind of impact I believe we all want to be making. And, in the remainder of chapter 3 this morning, Paul begins to outline the approach to life that results in just that kind of impact.

He says explicitly what he vaguely hinted at earlier; that when it comes to making Kingdom-of-God sized impact, he is NOT adequate.

### **We Have Been Made Adequate for Heart-Based Ministry! (vv. 4-6)**

*Back to inadequacy (vv. 4-5a)*

***[4] Such confidence we have through Christ toward God. [5s] Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves...***

Of course there was a time when Paul did consider himself adequate - in and of himself - before God. And, of all people, Paul did have a very impressive spiritual resume!

Possessed of a keen mind and a powerful personality, he was extremely zealous for God. He had energy for God. He had an impeccable Jewish pedigree (see Philippians 3). He was orthodox. He was moral.

All of things were going for him. He even thought that they were what would make him right before God. BUT, when he came to Christ, he saw that this approach to being “adequate” before God didn’t cut it.<sup>7</sup>

He came to understand that “*in and of himself*” he had NOTHING (zip, zero, nada) to commend himself to God. He possessed no power to work change in the hearts of others, no adequacy for spiritual ministry.

And yet here he is, making powerful impact for Jesus, being the tool God used to bring authentic change to the Corinthians. So what gives?

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<sup>7</sup> He called that whole collection of self-commending works nothing but “barnyard dung” (that is the word he used in Philippians 3) in comparison with the glory of knowing Christ.

Well, a watching world might have said that Paul was a successful apostle because he did his best to leverage his resources and abilities to serve God with all his heart. But Paul would never have said that.

Paul knew that he was adequate only because he had learned to present himself to God in such a way that God’s power flowed through him. He had learned to live on the basis of something he refers to here as a “*new covenant*.”

*Welcome to adequacy (vv. 5b-6)*

***[5b]...but our adequacy is from God, [6] who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.***

Before Christ came, God’s people served Him under the covenant inaugurated by Moses. Jesus replaced that “old covenant” with a new one, a covenant that the prophet Jeremiah predicted hundreds of years earlier.<sup>8</sup> The two covenants could not be more different.

The **Old Covenant** (the one God made with Israel at the time of Moses, and which lasted until the time of Christ) said, “*Here is a standard. Now, do your very best to live up to it.*”

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<sup>8</sup> [Jeremiah 31:31] “Behold, days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, [32] not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them,” declares the LORD. [33] “But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” declares the LORD, “I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. [34] “They will not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them,” declares the LORD, “for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.”

The **New Covenant** (the first fruits of which Jesus previewed at the Last Supper when He said, ***“This cup is the New Covenant in My blood.”*** Matthew 26:28; Mark 14:24; especially Luke 22:20; also 1 Cor. 11:25) says, *“Present yourself as an available instrument for God to use. He will work through you. What God requires, He will provide. Admit your inadequacy. Your resources are not the critical thing in making life-changing impact on others or on your world - God’s resources are crucial.”*

Under the Old Covenant, Paul did his very best for God; under the New Covenant God did His very best through Paul.

If we would be adequate for New Covenant ministry, we must reckon with our inadequacy. New Covenant ministry works on the basis of *“Everything coming from God; nothing coming from me.”*

If we would be used by God as Paul was used - to be a God-centered change agent in others’ lives, to bring a taste of spiritual liberty and freedom to hungry, hurting people - we must learn what Paul learned.

That is that all our equipment for life-changing service to God - our impact and power - comes not from ourselves, but from God!

### **Conclusion:**

In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul wrote, ***[1 Corinthians 4:20] For the kingdom of God does not consist in words but in power.***

Spiritual authenticity is not just about morality and it is not just about doctrine. It is about LIFE - and specifically about a powerful life.

That power does not come from us, but from God. And we become powerful people for God when we live on the basis of the New Covenant.