Glory, Story, Approval, Confidence
2 Corinthians 2:12-3:6

We're looking at Paul's second or, as Matt correctly said last week, what would be better called his third letter to the church at Corinth. And certain leaders have entered the church there and they're trying to turn the people against Paul. So Paul has to defend himself. But if you've ever had to do that, it's not easy, is it? Because it can rapidly sound like you think you're immune to criticism, or that you're proud.

But is that a problem? I mean, given Pride marches and social media, to be proud, or to promote yourself, are virtues, aren't they?

In the 1830s, after visiting America, the French Philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville wrote, 'Each citizen is habitually engaged in contemplation of a very puny object, namely himself.' But if that was true of 1830s America, it is most definitely true of virtually the entire West today. Studies show that since the 1950s the incidence of narcissistic personality traits has increased in each subsequent generation, and a 2009 study showed it had more than doubled in the previous ten years.[1] And you know, from looking around, or even just looking inside, that we live in an increasingly self-absorbed culture.

Which is what makes today's passage so relevant, because it deals with exactly these issues of: how do you feel good about yourself, and whose attention are you living for. Of self-confidence and self-promotion.

Whose glory?
Look at v12-13: 'When I came to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ, even though a door was opened for me in the Lord, *my spirit was not at rest* because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I took leave of them and went on to Macedonia.'

So, from Ephesus, Paul wrote a letter to the church at Corinth, that's now been lost. And Titus was the postman. And it seems like they'd agreed to meet up afterwards at Troas, so Titus could fill Paul in on how the letter had gone down. But Titus never showed, and that bothered Paul. 'My spirit was not at rest'. Why's he disquieted? Is he worried Titus might have got lost en route? No. He's concerned about the church. Was Titus delayed because, after reading the letter, the church was now in melt-down?

And so, despite things going well in Troas, Paul's unsettledness moves him on, and he heads to Macedonia, probably because that's what he and Titus had agreed if Titus couldn't sail from Corinth before winter set in.

But it's not Paul's travels that are interesting per se, it's his emotional state, and how transparent he is about it. Because whether it was politics, or business, or sport, Corinth was this entrepreneurial, highly competitive culture of pushing yourself forward to get ahead. And to be a leader meant to be dynamic, self-sufficient, superhuman, with a 'can do' mentality. And in such a culture, Paul's honesty about his emotions would not have scored highly on the Corinth Successful Leader Personality Index, because they're a display of weakness. And leaders aren't weak, they're strong.

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[1] DeGroot 7

Diane Langberg, a Christian psychologist, says of the narcissist, "He has many gifts except the gift of humility."[2] And in Corinth, to be humble enough to admit that you might experience emotional turmoil because you care for people, would do you no favours in the eyes of the world.

So why does Paul do it? Well, because he's deliberately undermining Corinthian kind of thinking.

But it's not just Corinth. Think about today. Because in leadership, and in life in general, narcissistic or self-promoting traits can be considered strengths, can't they? Because sometimes they are! Strong self-confidence, clear vision, able to cut through opposition, thick skin, doesn't allow emotions to enter into decision making. But here, Paul is saying, Christian leadership, in fact, the Christian life, is not about projecting an image of strength, it's about a humility that realises you are not self-sufficient.

Look at v14, 'But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession.' Now, how would the new leaders in Corinth have presented themselves? In all likelihood, they'd have been busy promoting themselves: 'Let me tell you about these other churches that have been so blessed by our ministry. And you know Mr X? Of course you do, he's famous, and a friend of mine, and here's a letter from him saying how much he's been helped by my ministry. And church, you too can live a life of victory, if you just join my parade.'

But Paul is saying, 'Christ always leads us in triumphal procession.' And he's using the image of a Roman triumph, when a victorious Roman general, fresh from defeating some enemy, would parade through Rome leading in procession all the defeated prisoners he's captured. And the whole point of the triumph was to display the power and the glory of the man who's won the battle.

And these other leaders were saying, I'm the successful leader, look how great and glorious I am, because that was the culture. And Paul is saying, 'no, my life is all about, look how great and glorious Jesus is.' He's the victor. In fact, I was his enemy, and he's captured me!

I saw an article on the BBC this week entitled: 'The Met Gala - 13 of the most eye-catching looks.' And it showed the pictures of various celebrities and the dresses they'd worn. But it was that word 'eye-catching' that caught my eye. Because that was why they had dressed as they had: to have people look at them.

And so whether it was Corinth, or today, culture can encourage a 'look at me. I want to be the centre of attention' mentality. And Paul is saying, Christianity, and Christian leadership, is very different it's 'look at Christ - he's the only one who deserves the glory. He's the one who's won the battle, he's the one who's triumphed over our enemies of sin and death, and in doing so, he's triumphed over me.'

Now, you are not a narcissist, but at least some of the time we want people's eyes on us, don't we? I mean, just sometimes, just a bit. I remember a pastor once saying that he had to repent of wanting God to have *almost* all the glory. We want just a slice of it. The problem is, if it gets a hold, that desire for attention can seriously put things out of whack and damage our relationships can't it?

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[2] DeGroat 15

And so we need someone other than ourselves to be the object of our glory. If it's you, narcissistic traits will only grow. But if it's someone else, you'll end up idolising them in an unhealthy way. So Paul says, it's got to be Christ, because he's the one who conquers our self-absorbed hearts.

But life and leadership are not just about who's getting the glory, it's about the stories we tell.

Whose story?
Look at v14 again. 'But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere.' And in a Roman triumph, as the victorious general paraded through the streets, incense would be burned and scattered along the way, and the air would be full of it.

And we're always going to be filling the air with something, aren't we? Whether at home, or on campus, or at work, or at church, in this procession of life, in our influencing of others, we're always going to be telling one story or another.

And for a leader, it could be the story of how he came from nothing and nowhere to greatness - the story of success. It could be the stories our lifestyles tell of what really matters in life. It could be the story we project on social media, which is not entirely false but neither is it entirely true.

But what is true is that in a culture that's high on self-absorption and self-promotion, 1st Century Corinth or 21st Century West, that story will be about 'me'. And if you're a leader, that can create a false sense of intimacy among those around you, because they think they know you. But the message Paul's filling the air with is not about him at all. It's that 'through us [God] spreads the fragrance *of the knowledge <u>of him</u>* everywhere.' That far from the false intimacy a self-absorbed leader might offer you, the message Paul's spreading is that *God* can be known, that you can enter into a relationship with him where you *know* you know him.

But in a self-absorbed culture, the idea that there *is* a God and it's not you, and that the story of life is about him and not you, that's going to have a mixed reception, isn't it?

Verses 15-16, 'For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life.'

Now, smells can have strange effects, can't they? Last week in home group, Nigel cooked us Japanese golden curry. And Su grew up in Japan, and when she smelt it she went, 'wow, this is just what it was like' and the memories came flooding back. Or, Su has one bottle of perfume which she wears maximum once a year at some special occasion. And I love the smell of it and it's got all these happy memories. Which is great, until we were out to dinner with a couple of friends in the UK in the summer and I went to hug the woman and she was wearing Su's perfume and it was all I could do not to say, umm you smell like my wife!

But if perfumes are powerful, so are the stories we tell. And nowhere is that more true than the Gospel, because it divides people. Or, more accurately, the way people respond to it highlights the division that already exists, between those who are being saved, and those who are perishing.

And to some, the message of the Gospel, that through Christ you can know God, is like the stench of death, Paul says. Now, have you ever come across a dead animal that's rotting? Remember that smell? It can make you gag, can't it. And for some, Christianity make them sick. Because it says, we're not God, but we *are* accountable to him for how we live. And that's the stench of death to death, Paul says. Because if you're self-absorbed, it's about a dead man, Jesus, stopping me living the way I want. Which is death.

But for others, the same message is 'a fragrance from life to life.' Because it's about Jesus risen from the dead, giving me life in place of death. Saving me from the self-absorbed contemplation of something puny, and instead giving me something great - the knowledge of God.

Ok, but if in a self-absorbed, self-glorying culture being a Christian is going to be objectionable to people, how can you do it? Verse 16, 'Who is sufficient for these things?' How do you not compromise on the one hand, and just make the gospel sentimental goo; or become a hard and judgemental culture warrior on the other?

Whose Approval?
I was chatting recently to a friend who works in HR about some of the motivational letters we've received from various people applying for various jobs. When I was a doctor there were the ones that made claims along the lines of, 'I have personally performed 15 brain transplants.' Or when we've advertised for a youth pastor here and you get a motivational letter that leaves you thinking that this must be the apostle Peter reincarnated, so gifted is he, rather than the 22 year old straight out of seminary that he is.

Or have have you ever had to write a reference for someone and wondered how good can you legitimately make them look?

And in Corinth, these new leaders were coming with just such letters of recommendation: 'these guys are great, they have our stamp of approval, you should follow them.' And they were saying about themselves, 'hey, we are up to this task of leadership, we can do this'.

But who does Paul have to commend him? Who says of Paul, 'this guy's the real deal, follow him'? And where does Paul get his sense of 'can do' from? The sense that he can live the Christian life and spread the Christian message without becoming sentimental or aggressive.

And where do you get it from? Whose word of approval do you look for that tells you you're ok, that you can do this life thing?

You see, the temptation of our current culture is that you look to that from yourself, that you're to tell yourself, 'I can do this, I can be anything I want to be, I just have to believe in me.' But what the Bible says is that that self-affirmation apart from God, that thinking you can do life on your own, without reference to God, is as old and as flawed as humanity. Because the serpent came and whispered in the Garden, you can do this! You can live life without God. And Adam and Eve believed it. And we've been believing it ever since. It's the desire to escape the fact that we're not self-sufficient, but that we're creatures, created by a creator, and we hunger for his loving word of approval.

Verse 16 again, ‘Who is sufficient for these things?’ And Paul responds, v17, ‘For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God’s word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ.’

And that word ‘peddler’ was used for a person who watered down wine and then sold it as if it was the real thing. And Paul says, we don’t do that with the message of the gospel. We don’t adulterate it. We’re men of integrity and ‘*in the sight of God* we speak in Christ.’ Paul knew that whatever he said or did, how he led and lived, was in the sight of God.

You know, if you’re always living in the sight of others, and looking for their commendation, it can be exhausting, can’t it. And if you’re living out of self-approval only, the day will come when you realise you can’t do everything, no matter what you tell yourself, and that can destroy you. But when you live knowing you are seen by God, and that you are in Christ, you can relax, because you know you are already approved of. Because he sees you in him.

But is that just another form of self-affirmation? I mean, prove you have God’s approval, Paul. Chapter 3:1-2, ‘Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you, or from you? *You yourselves are our letter of recommendation.*’

In other words, Paul is saying, 'you’re the living proof of God’s approval. The proof, written not on parchment but on people. Before I came to Corinth there was no church, and now there is.’ And that letter of commendation, v2, is ‘written on our hearts, to be known and read by all.’ So Paul’s not some Great Leader, holding them at emotional arm’s length. They matter to him. They’re written on his heart. And their changed lives were open for all to see.

In 1 Corinthians Paul wrote to them and said, ‘Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. *And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.’* (1 Cor 6:9–11). In other words, in this church there were people who used to be sexually immoral, or worship idols, or were homosexual, or stole, or were greedy, or got drunk, or fiddled their taxes, but through the transforming power of the gospel, they’d been cleansed, and were now living chaste, sober and honest lives as followers of Christ. That’s the evidence of God’s approval.

And it’s knowing you already have God’s approval in Christ, that can give you what you need to do what he calls you to do.

Whose Confidence?
If these leaders were breathing the cultural air of Corinth, it’s no wonder their leadership looked like Corinth, is it? Confident, self-sufficient, self-promoting. And there are archaeological examples of civil leaders who built buildings or roads and stuck plaques on them that read, ‘erected by so and so, *at his own expense*.’ In other words, this is how good and generous, and wealthy I am.

So just like today, this was a culture where you got recognised for your accomplishments. You got your self-worth from what you owned, earned, or achieved. That’s what gave you inner confidence. The problem is, it also leaves you fragile, doesn’t it. Fragile to failure and fragile to pride. Plus,

fragile in your own self - because there's this growing divide between the image you present and the reality beneath.

But yet again, Paul roots his confidence elsewhere. Verse 4, 'Such is the confidence we have *through Christ toward God*.' His confidence to live for God's glory and to tell His story, doesn't lie in himself at all. Verse 5, 'Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God.'

You see, you can think that God approves of you, because of you, because you're so good at what you do, because you're a good friend, or dad, or worker, or Christian. And Paul says, My confidence is not based on my performance. On my own, apart from Jesus, I'm nothing. My sufficiency, my capability, my being good enough, only comes from him. And it *does* come from him: verses 5-6, 'But our sufficiency is from God, who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant.' It's the confidence that comes from the gospel.

You see, Paul contrasts the Old and the New Covenants. One is of the letter, the other is of the Spirit. One is written on tablets of stone, the other is written on the heart, he says. Think your approval in the eyes of God or others, and your inner confidence depends on you being good enough, on your moral effort, and you keeping God's laws - the Old Covenant - it's like a living death: Verse 6, 'The letter kills.' But when you understand the New Covenant, the gospel, that Christ has lived the perfect life for you, and that your approval before God depends on his moral record, that's counted to you, not yours; and that at the cross he has taken away every failure to live up to God's standards, and every sin on your part, then you know that through Christ you stand approved of by God. And that's life, because v6, 'The Spirit gives life.' Because the Spirit takes God's law and writes it on our hearts, and now, because of Jesus we want to obey it, and by the Spirit we're given the power to obey it.

And so we find ourselves wanting to live for his glory, because we realise Christ really is the greatest. And we want to tell his story and spread that message, because it really is good news. And we know we have God's approval, not because of us, but because of Jesus. And that gives us the confidence to lead and to live. It's the confidence we all need.