

How to choose a Bible teacher

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning, everyone. So how do you choose who to listen to when it comes to the Bible and people who teach the Bible?

Because there are a lot of choices today, aren't there? Especially with the Internet and TV, the amount of choices you have when it comes to Bible teachers is more than any person in history before you ever had.

And so how do you choose what preachers you're going to listen to and what preachers you're going to ignore? And that is a question that I think is more relevant today than it ever was because of the choice we have of Bible teachers and people claiming to speak for God.

And it's no small issue either. This is not like choosing your shampoo from checkers because the preachers you listen to can affect where you end up in eternity.

I'm not joking. That is how important this question is. Who you choose to listen to, who you choose to follow, whose words you choose to have an influence on the way you live can affect your eternal destiny.

[1 : 1 4] And so what criteria do you use, if any, to make that choice? Well, that's exactly what Paul is talking about here in chapter 10 of 2 Corinthians.

That's what he wants the Corinthians to think about because in Corinth there were also a lot of impressive Bible teachers floating around in the first century, but not all of them were preaching the truth.

In fact, many of them, you could probably say a majority of them, were preaching messages that were in opposition to the message that Paul had come to share with the Corinthians years before.

And these Corinthians were being caught up in those teachings, and they were turning against Paul. That's why he writes to Corinthians, because of the situation with these false teachers arising and turning the church against him and his message.

But the thing was, they were wolves in sheep's clothing, and the sheep's clothing was that they were preaching about Jesus. And their preaching, their teaching, it wasn't anti-Christian, according to the hearers.

[2 : 1 8] It sounded biblical. In fact, the very next chapter we're going to look at next week, Paul talks about them preaching another Jesus. So they weren't not preaching Jesus. They were talking about Jesus.

It sounded Christian. And so that immediately tells us that we mustn't think everyone who preaches Jesus today is worth listening to.

Just because the word Jesus comes from their lips, just because they've got an open Bible in front of them when they're preaching, doesn't mean they are serving Jesus. Many of them are serving the enemy, and the enemy knows that's the best way to get under the radar and destroy God's church from the inside, is when you dress these wolves up in sheep's clothing and get them to sound Christian.

But listening to them will lead you to destruction. And so that's why this issue is so important, and that's why Paul spends the last three chapters of this letter to Corinthians focusing now, really centrally focusing on these false teachers and helping the Corinthians to understand why they need to choose carefully who they listen to.

That's what this chapter is about. And he also, in this chapter as you read it, as he's explaining to the Corinthians why they must carefully choose and how to choose carefully who they listen to, he stresses that it's their responsibility, not his, who they listen to.

[3 : 41] He says things like in verse 1, I appeal to you. Verse 7, consider this. Verse 11, realize this. You see, he's telling the Corinthians that it's up to them to realize the criteria of who they should be listening to.

And he's talking to all of them. He's not just talking to the leaders, the church council. He's talking to the ordinary Christians in the pews. And he's saying it's their responsibility to select who they listen to because he, Paul, can't police that.

I, as your pastor, can't police who you listen to and what books you read. At the end of the day, it's your responsibility who you choose to listen to, not mine.

But that's why these chapters are here in 2 Corinthians because they are here to help you choose wisely. And as we read chapter 10, we see there are really two main points that Paul wants to make here when it comes to how to choose who you're going to listen to in your life.

So let's look at each of those two main points. The first is that we mustn't make that choice based on outward appearances. Don't judge by outward appearances.

[4 : 50] So in other words, that old adage, don't judge a book by its cover. You know that one? It's often used. Well, that applies just as much to churches and teachers as anything else.

And that's Paul's point in most of this passage. Don't judge a book by its cover. And the reason he says that was because Paul's opponents, and even some of the Corinthians within the church themselves, were judging Paul by outward appearances.

They were judging his ministry and trying to decide whether to listen to this guy or not based on what they saw on the outside. So we see this. Have a look in verse 10. Paul is saying about his opponents, for some say, his letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive, and his preaching amounts to nothing.

So they read his letters, right? They read Paul's letters, and they say, oh, this is good stuff. This is solid. This guy knows what he's talking about. But then in person, they look at him, and he's really not what they expected. They expected this impressive speaker with a thriving ministry.

You know, the kind that, like if he was here today, would have thousands of followers on Twitter, and he would have his own website, and he would have posters on telephone poles of him dressed in a fancy suit with a ministry called something like Eternal Fire Deliverance Ministry with Prophet Bishop Paul of Tarsus.

[6 : 16] You know the kind I'm talking about. You see them all over. You know, these big impressive preachers. Well, Corinth was full of preachers like that.

Those were the kinds of people, the teachers that the people wanted to follow. Those were the ones who everyone was talking about. The exciting speakers with their engaging sermons who looked as impressive as they sounded.

But Paul wasn't like that. He wasn't outwardly impressive. You know what Paul looked like? We don't have any photographs of him. But, in a second century document, there is actually a description of him.

Someone who, at least spoke to someone who saw him, described him like this. This is from this document. He was a man of middling size, and his hair was scanty, and his legs were a little crooked, and his knees were far apart.

He had large eyes, and his eyebrows met, and his nose was somewhat long. So, we don't know how accurate this description of Paul is, but it's the earliest description of him we've got, and it certainly doesn't contradict what we read in this passage, in verse 10, in person, he was unimpressive.

[7 : 33] He was a short, balding guy with a monobrow, basically. Not the kind of preacher you would put on a poster to advertise your ministry. And so, because of that unimpressive exterior, the Corinthians didn't put much stock in what he said, because that is just a human tendency.

If something doesn't look impressive on the outside, we're not going to spend much time listening to that, or investing our time and our thought life in that.

You know what I mean? If we don't see something impressive on the outside, we're generally not attracted to it, and that was what was going on here. That the Corinthians didn't see Paul as impressive on the outside, so they didn't spend much time or put much stock in what he was saying, and that was their big mistake for two reasons that Paul mentions here.

So, firstly, the reason that was a big mistake was that Jesus himself wasn't outwardly impressive either. That's what he's implying when he starts by comparing himself to how Jesus was.

So, look at verse 1. He says, by the humility and gentleness of Christ, not by the power and authority of Christ. By the humility and gentleness, and in the ancient Near Eastern culture, those were traits that were not appraised.

[8 : 53] Humility and gentleness was seen as weakness. But he says, by the humility and gentleness of Christ, I appeal to you, I, Paul, who am timid when face to face with you.

So, I think what he's saying here is, you Corinthians accuse me of being timid and weak and not powerful. But that's actually because I'm trying to represent Jesus to you.

You see, I could be powerful and authoritative if I wanted, but that's not going to help you. And Jesus wasn't outwardly impressive either.

Now, I don't think you would have been able to pick Jesus out from a crowd if you saw him. He certainly wouldn't have been like the good-looking white Jesus that you see in movies, you know, with the blue eyes and the straight blonde hair.

In fact, we do, do you know, we have a description of Jesus in the Bible. We have a physical description of Jesus, or as close to one as you can get. Isaiah 53, the prophet, he says this, he had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.

[10 : 07] He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering and familiar with pain, like one from whom people hide their faces, he was despised and we held him in low esteem.

That's describing Jesus when he was on earth. And that's the first reason that we shouldn't judge by outward appearances, which is what we're so prone to do.

Because even Jesus wasn't outwardly impressive. That's the first reason. The second reason we shouldn't judge by outward appearances is that God, we read in this passage, actually approves and uses things that are specifically not impressive to exercise his power and build his church.

So, Paul said as much in the last letter, 1 Corinthians, I'll quote from that, God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise.

God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things, the things that are not, to nullify the things that are so that no one may boast before him.

[11 : 16] So, God deliberately chooses the unimpressive things in the world and the unimpressive people in the world to display his power so that it's always about him and not about us.

That's why he chooses the unimpressive things so that his power and his glory are magnified and we don't distract people from that. It's not about our impressiveness and our ability to speak well or our ability to gather a crowd.

And that's what he emphasized in 1 Corinthians and it's what he goes on to emphasize here too from verse 12 to 17. Have a look in your Bibles. So, he concludes this chapter by quoting from Jeremiah who was saying essentially the same thing.

God was saying, was teaching the same principle through Jeremiah. Verse 12, he says, when they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise.

Then down to verse 17, but let the one who boasts boast in the Lord for it is not the one who commends himself who is approved but the one whom the Lord commends.

[12 : 29] And so, Paul's picking up on what Jeremiah was saying in his prophecy that outward strength, that's by the way the passage Michiel read for us earlier. And if you were listening, you would have picked up the idea that outward strength or impressiveness means nothing to God.

Because God chooses to exercise his power and build his kingdom and do his work on earth through people who don't necessarily fit the world's measure of impressiveness.

More often than not, he will choose the unimpressive. Deliberately. He chooses the ones who don't have much to boast about in themselves. And that's the second reason that we must not be taken in by outward appearances.

Okay, and if that's the case, what must we be aware of today? Well, just like the Corinthians were making the mistake of following these outwardly impressive teachers who were experts in all the best methods of communication and they were, by the way, back in the day when they didn't have Netflix and YouTube, the entertainment was to come listen to these what were called rhetoricians, these guys who would come and use rhetoric and they would be schooled in the best methods of communication and they would be able to hold a crowd and they would be humorous and they would use good illustrations, they would be excellent expert communicators.

And those were the people that, those were the teachers that people were listening to and being attracted to. But I think we can just as easily fall into that trap when today we are attracted to and let ourselves get influenced more by the teachers who can use the best communication methods.

[14 : 13] We tend to be attracted to and have time for those who know how to communicate well. Those who are captivating, impressive and interesting.

Those who have thriving YouTube channels and big impressive churches with backlit stages and professional musicians. Those are the kind of churches that you want to go to because you think, well, that's where we'll really hear good stuff.

Those are the churches people tend to be attracted to, the outwardly impressive ones and that is the huge danger that Paul is warning against you. That is a mistake to be attracted to those churches for those reasons.

And so we mustn't fall into that trap, which I think today with our visual culture, we're even more prone to be attracted to the visually attractive people and ministries.

But we mustn't fall into that trap of judging by externals. And that's the first principle when it comes to choosing who to listen to. But the second is related to it and it's the reason for it.

[15 : 20] The second point that Paul makes in this passage is don't underestimate the power of ordinary Christian ministry. Don't underestimate the power of ordinary Christian ministry.

So look at what he says in verse 3 to 5. He says, For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world.

On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God. And we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.

Let's just pause there and consider what he's saying. So in verse 3, he says, Though we live in the world. Literally, the original says, Though we walk in the flesh.

Which is translated here, Though we live in the world. But I think, when he says that, Though we walk in the flesh, he's actually referring to his weakness, his fleshly weakness. That's how he's used this idea of flesh before in the letter.

[16 : 26] the unimpressiveness by worldly standards that he has. The knock knees and the monowheel and the long nose. But his suffering as well is what he's referring to.

The fact that if you looked at him, you wouldn't be that impressed. And though we do that, though we walk in the flesh, in weakness, he also says, We do not wage war according to the flesh.

We do not wage war as the world does. In other words, while we might not look impressive, we don't use or try to use the tools and techniques of the world to do our work.

Instead, we use heavenly weapons that God has given to us, which are able to do much more than worldly power could ever achieve. So he's saying that his normal, seemingly unimpressive ministry might look ordinary, but that is the ministry that God has approved.

And that is the ministry through which God has chosen to exercise his power. Because through that ordinary, unimpressive ministry, preaching the gospel faithfully, Paul says two things are happening.

[17 : 41] Verse 5, firstly, arguments that set themselves up against the knowledge of God are destroyed. So people's clever objections and well thought out arguments against God are reduced to nothing when they come to believe, despite all their clever arguments.

That's the first thing that God's power does through ordinary gospel ministry. People's clever arguments are just laid down and destroyed. Secondly, people's thoughts are taken captive to be obedient to Jesus Christ.

People's loyalty changes from serving themselves to serving King Jesus. That is what God's power does through ordinary, unimpressive looking Christian ministry.

Those two things. And notice Paul uses very war-like language here. Do you see that? Demolishing strongholds and taking captives. And that's the point, really. Paul's saying that his teaching, whether the Corinthians listened to his teaching or not, is a matter of life and death.

Because there is a spiritual war going on. And Paul's not just come to entertain them. He's come because of this war and their very eternal lives are at stake.

[18 : 58] That's what he's saying here. And God has given him, not these other teachers, not the impressive teachers, but him, Paul, the power and the weapons to engage in the spiritual war.

And to carry out powerful invasions into enemy territory through the power of the truth that he proclaims. That's where the power lies. And the same goes, now this is the point for us, the same principle applies for ordinary looking Christian ministry and ministers today.

Teachers who faithfully preach the truth of scripture week in and week out, those are the ones you should listen to. Even if they don't have much outward impressiveness.

Even if they don't entertain you. Even if they lose their place in their notes or don't wrap up their sermons neatly or go over time or a bit boring. The fact is, if they are faithfully expounding the doctrines of scripture and rightly handling the word of truth, then they are the ones that God has empowered to carry out his mission and capture people for Jesus and change you.

even if they don't look it. So don't make the mistake of the Corinthians and neglect them for the more impressive teachers. Because, I mean, think of your own, if you're a Christian, think of your own conversion experience.

[20 : 20] Think of how you, either through growing up in a Christian family or through coming to hear the gospel later in life, how, what broke down your arguments against the gospel.

What was it that captured you to make you obedient to Jesus? What was it? I'll tell you what it wasn't. It wasn't how entertaining the preacher was.

It wasn't how he finished on time that converted you. It wasn't that he held your attention because he was funny. No, it was because he preached the truth of the gospel.

The gospel is God's power for salvation. And when that gospel is proclaimed, the truth that Jesus died for sins and rose bodily and ascended to the place of power and is coming back to judge the living and the dead, when that truth is proclaimed faithfully, it's then that God does his work.

He doesn't need flashy lights and clever speakers to capture people and save them and change them. He doesn't need that to change you. If you know, you still are not captive to Christ.

[21 : 30] Christ, if you still have those arguments against Christ that keep you from being sold out and giving yourself to him, well then to change you, which needs to happen if you're ever going to be saved, to change you, God will use his word.

That's where the power is, the gospel, as you sit under the word. That's when God will exercise his power in your life. So don't neglect that. And that also means, coming back to the point of this passage, the real test of faithful Christian ministry.

Now you might be sitting here going, okay, so how do I determine which Christian ministers are legit or not? Because I see a whole lot on TV and some of them sound really impressive and they've got white suits and they're really, you know, I want to listen to them because I like, I'm entertained or I'm stimulated by their preaching.

How do we know what faithful, real Christian ministry looks like? Well, it's not how impressive the teacher looks, it's whether people are captured for Christ under their ministry or not.

That is the test. A church can be very big and impressive and have many people attending its services because it's a nice place to go. But the important question that we've got to ask, we've got to look through all that exterior and we've got to ask how many of those people going to that impressive church with its backlit stage and its professional musicians, how many of those people are captured for Christ and living in obedience to Him day to day?

[22 : 58] That's the real test of whether that is a ministry that is used by God or not. Proof of genuine Christian ministry. And so, those are the principles we read in this chapter.

Those are the principles we must, we have a responsibility, each and every one of us, to consider when deciding to who to listen to, what churches to attend. Number one, don't judge by outward appearances.

Don't just be attracted to impressive ministries which may not have any real transforming power. And number two, don't underestimate the power of ordinary, day-to-day, Christian ministry.

Those small, bland, pokey churches with their pokey preachers who are faithfully preaching the gospel, week in and week out, because those are the ones, more often than not, that God sees fit to use powerfully to carry out his work in the world, believe it or not.

Now, that summarizes this chapter and the teaching of this chapter. But, before I finish, I want to apply these truths to another tendency that I've noticed in churches today.

[24 : 06] When we look around churches and when we evaluate what churches to go to, what people to listen to, I've actually noticed, and it's not just me, that many churches fall into one of two groups.

And you'll probably be able to think of examples of churches in either of these groups. The first group is that group of big, impressive, attractive churches with great, slick websites and an excellent worship team and impressive ministers who know how to communicate well.

Now, don't misunderstand me. There's nothing wrong in and of themselves with big churches, with a lot of resources which are impressive and which, you know, have a good social media presence and a great website.

There's nothing wrong with them by themselves. God often sees fit to use them in a mighty way. The problem is, and it happens more often than you think, the problem is when those churches start to rely too much on worldly methods to attract people to the gospel and to change people.

When they start to rely on their facilities and their resources and their clever growth models and techniques and the excitement of their services and their special events and their impressive speakers, when their outward appearances become what they rely on for their growth rather than the power of ordinary gospel preaching, well then, you know what happens?

[25 : 37] Eventually the gospel itself gets sidelined. Not right away. The first generation very much still agrees that the gospel is central to everything we do, but if they're not actually relying on that gospel first and foremost for their growth and their attractiveness and their effectiveness of their ministry, but rather relying on human means, then the next generation they'll have grown up seeing that the gospel isn't really that important, but other things are.

And that's when the gospel will get sidelined in favor of the more impressive things that will pull more people in. And so that's the first danger we need to avoid in our churches. The second danger is the opposite of that.

The second group of churches. And in this group are churches that are small and faithful in their teaching and careful in their doctrine. Where the gospel is front and center.

center. But what's happened in those churches often is that they've become holy huddles. You know what I mean? Christians who keep to themselves. They're very well fed on scripture and they experience God's power through the means of grace within the church as they gather.

But the problem is they make little or no effort to use their power outside the walls of the church. You don't see them out there in the world. You only see them when you come to their church on Sunday.

[27 : 00] They don't get involved in their community and they don't make any efforts in evangelism. What they need to be reminded of is the fact that the way God saves people is through them, his people, wielding the power that he's given them out in the world and engaging in spiritual warfare, not hiding in the trenches.

That's why Paul uses this warlike language here. And that's also why we must take note of what he says in verse 15. Have a look in your Bibles. He says, neither do we go beyond our limits by boasting of work done by others.

Our hope is that as your faith continues to grow, our sphere of activity among you will greatly expand so that we can preach the gospel in the regions beyond you.

So what he's saying there is that as God's power is exercised in a local church like ours, faith, then as the saints are fed on God's word and grow and strengthen in faith, then that church must do what it can to take the gospel out into the world instead of staying in the trenches and keeping that power to themselves for their own benefit.

It's our responsibility as a church to take what we've got here outside of the four walls of this church. And then once we do that, we must trust that God will use the little pokey things we have to offer.

[28 : 27] Our ordinary day-to-day work as a church, we must trust that God will use that as we engage in our community in acts of service and then use the means of grace that God has given us, preaching prayer and the sacraments.

We must trust that as we do that work, God will be working through us to break down barriers, to capture people for Christ and to grow his kingdom in power. And that is the great privilege we have, being one of his churches.

Let's make sure that we don't neglect that. Let's pray. Yes, Lord, we thank you. We thank you for this warning against being caught up and swept away by outward impressiveness.

We pray that you would help us to be on our guard against false teachers, wolves in sheep's clothing that seem impressive and convincing on the outside. Help us, Lord, rather to seek out your power.

Thank you as well that your power is exercised through ordinary Christian ministry and that even us at St. Mark's, a small church like this, can have a huge impact for your kingdom in our community because you are doing the work, not us.

[29 : 36] And it's not up to our resources or our clever means, but it's up to your power. So, Lord, help us to carry out the work that you've given us faithfully. And as we do so, will you bless that and will you break down barriers, capture people from Christ and grow your kingdom in Jesus' name.

Amen.