

LOVING LEADERSHIP

Sometimes you meet people who seem to have everything – they have the background that's impressive, the education that shows how intelligent they are, the looks that are attractive and appealing, the confidence in the way they speak; perhaps they also have a perfect house and perfect family to go in it; they are always right, they never seem to have problems and they can make you conscious of your own; add to that the ability to make you feel as if you're always doing the wrong thing and you can begin to think they are not the most pleasant people to know. You can start off impressed and end up resenting them.

Then somewhere along the line you hear about a problem that dogs them. Maybe it's a physical ailment; maybe it's a family struggle; maybe you discover that they don't feel as if they match up to the outward impression; maybe there's a sin in their own life that they can't seem to overcome. How does your impression change then? Is it to gloat or do you feel just a little more sympathy and willingness to feel they may have something to say because of their own vulnerability?

Maybe that's what happened to Paul. He doesn't seem to have been attractive to look at but he had passion and zeal; he got fired up about things; he started churches. Before he was converted to Christ, he hunted down Christians to get rid of them. Now he wanted to get rid of sin with the same kind of zeal.

So he'd been pretty firm in telling people to get rid of anger and pride and to stop telling stories that weren't true; he'd been hard on sexual immorality; he hated splits in the church. You can read again and again things that show how he feels:

'get rid of bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice' (Eph.4) 'put to death ...sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed...rid yourselves of anger, rage, malice, slander, filthy language...' (Col 3)

It's not a popular, politically correct way of speaking.

So no, Paul, with his educated background, his passion, his apparent success as an evangelist, his ability to express himself clearly, his commitment, was not always a popular man. He told you when you were getting it wrong. He didn't do it the way the other so called apostles were doing it. They were attractive, appealing, charming, impressive. No wonder Paul began to offend people.

But there are two things that might just change opinion.

1. Paul has a thorn in the flesh. He's not a man who's untouched by human problems.

I got a tiny bramble thorn in my thumb a few days ago. I could hardly see it. But you all know how it hurts until it's out! I still remember the time when I was a teenager and fell whilst I was running and got a lot of gravel in my knee. ...with much tender prodding and poking, my mum eased out most of the lumps...hard to see the one that was left...flesh began to heal but painful...clearly a bit left in there- opening it up and delving into raw flesh was awful....but the relief when it was gone! Paul had something in his life that hurt like a thorn that can't be removed and becomes more painful as it sinks in and gets covered over. How he had asked God to take it away.

Physical ailment? Hurt from others? Sin that he struggled with? His own reactions? But here he's honest- it hurts. But if it was all sunshine maybe he'd forget about relying on God. Maybe he'd be conceited enough to think his successes and his own direction in life were all about him. Instead he's got nowhere else to go: *v.8-10*

We don't go shouting about our problems. That can put people off too – as if nobody else ever has a difficulty. But sometimes when people see that the great and mighty of our world have their own vulnerabilities, it can make us warm to them a little more.

2. But it's not just that Paul has a problem that makes him a little more human. Look why he's doing this.

3. He's not building churches to look successful; he's not trying to gain

wealth or popularity; he's not telling them to get rid of sin because he has no feeling for them.

v. 14 16– *what I want is not your possessions but you....* This man counts himself as a spiritual father to them. He wants their absolute best. He doesn't want to be humbled by realising that he hasn't cared enough to tell his spiritual children that they need to stop doing things that are harmful to their lives and each other.

1 Cor 13 – this letter was not written to a church that was a perfect example of loving fellowship but to one which was not!

Everything we do, dear friends, is for your strengthening (v.19)

So here is a man who I admire. I don't admire him because he is impressive as a speaker or successful as a church planter or precise as a teacher. I don't admire him because he's always right.

I admire him because he is human, with problems that give him pain but is still ready to spend himself for the people he longs to bring to good relationships with Christ. In that, he is willing to risk the taunts and have people shout that he's harsh and picks up on faults, not because he's got no feeling but because he cares so much he won't let it go.

So for us:

1. let us pray to become more honest in the right ways, so that we may share with one another our lives, not just the people we seem to be on the outside
2. let us pray for all leaders to have the love and courage to call people to a right kind of life, through their own human strengths *and* weaknesses and by relying more and more on God