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Title: Look Up #1 - "Look Up for Leadership"

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 1:12-2:4

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Well, good morning. We are in week two of a series we started last week that we're calling Look Up and we're working our way through the book of Second Corinthians. And last week we talked about looking up for comfort. And today we're going to talk about looking up for leadership. But I want to start with something else, and that is I want to bring you into a little debate that my wife and I had at home the other day.

And I'm going to ask you to participate by giving your opinion of who is right and who is wrong. I know this is a little dangerous, but I never used to drink coffee at all. And when I had COVID a couple of years ago, it was something I could taste. And so, I started to drink coffee. And then I realized that having coffee with my wife in the morning was actually a great moment where we could just sit and talk. And so, some mornings I'll get up and leave and we won't have the opportunity. But if I'm home, we'll usually sit down and have coffee together and sometimes we'll share significant things, what's going on in our lives, and what we're hoping for. Maybe we'll share something from our Bible reading together. We'll talk about it.

Sometimes my wife will go into the zone that I call the we me zone, which is we should do this. And what she means is I should do that, like we should do this, and it's her to-do list for me. And sometimes we'll just have some goofy conversations. And the other day we had one of these where on my newsfeed I was looking at the news and on came the ridiculous things people ask for before their first date. I started to share them with my wife. And the debate that we had was she thought some of these things were reasonable. I thought they were unreasonable. So, this is where you weigh in and you can help resolve this for us. Now, to be fair to my wife, I'm only reading the ones that I actually thought were unreasonable.

Here's the first one. The person who required a grand total of \$350 before agreeing to a date. So, these are people who are finding each other on social media. And this lady said, before you ask me on a date, I'll only agree to lunch and dinner depending on my schedule, and you'll have to provide the following. She wanted \$50 for gas, \$75-\$100 for a babysitter, \$100 for some kind of new clothing, and \$100 to do her toes. Reasonable or unreasonable? Okay. That's one for me if you're keeping track. Zero for my wife.

How about a person who is a bit controlling? Here's what he said. He said, hey, there, we matched. Also, I'm a very strong, confident, and assertive man. And I am a bit controlling, just being upfront. Is that a problem? We sure did. It could be. I like assertiveness and I appreciate direct, but I absolutely will not be controlled. Then he says, think of it as a father figure, protective, making you better, watching over you, checking in, asking permission to go out, and choosing your outfits. To which she responded, haha. Best of luck to you now. I think we can all agree she was reasonable. He was not. I won't even put that one to the vote.

How about this? The person who demanded a home-cooked meal. You get to come over and cook me dinner. How? Now why would I do that? Because you're a sweet girl. And you expect this sweet girl to come over and cook you dinner? It would be nice. Do you usually

have any success with this expectation? He says I'm one for three. And she says you can update it to one for four.

Now you have this next one. This is somebody who says, I won't ride in a car unless it costs \$100,000. She starts with her expectations. She says I need an intelligent, independent man, an invitation to a specific event or dinner or something more interesting. Then she says I will not even put my back end into a car that costs less than \$100,000. Again, unreasonable.

Now, here's the last one that I have for you. And this is a person who has a wish list. And she made this obvious when she put it out there. She had all her physical characteristics and all of her personality characteristics. But the one that caught my attention was the deal breaker. Must love bulldogs. The reason that I share this is, and there were other ones like I expect you not to drink, smoke, do things like this, and that's where my wife said, I like the expectations upfront. So, it really wasn't as acrimonious as I probably painted it. But here's why I say this. When you're about to go on a first date, you have expectations. Can you have expectations that are too high? Probably. But some of us can have expectations that are too low.

Now, we all live in situations where we are either in leadership or being led. It's a constant at work. You have somebody who leads you unless you're at the top of the org chart, in which case you lead. But even if you lead at work, there are times when you're at home that you follow. That you're being led. A good marriage will have times when the husband leads, times when the wife leads, and you will lead your children. There will be times when your children will lead you. And so, my question is, can you have expectations of leadership that are too high? Can you have expectations that are too low?

Well, Paul is writing to the Second Corinthians. And if you were here last week, you heard me basically say this. And that is there's a reason that we've not heard a lot of teaching on Second Corinthians. This is one of those passages because it's autobiographical. Paul basically is defending himself against critique, and it's hard to say what is the application to me or you today when we read this. But here's what Paul basically does. He takes the critique or the criticism that's directed toward him. And what he does is he defends himself. And I think we get some insight into leadership, whether we're leading or following that can be helpful.

So first, let me just work through this passage and show you what Paul is defending himself against and what he's asserting. And then we'll talk about some of the implications and what it means for you, what it means for me. Here's how this starts. Verse 12, "Now, this is our boast." And right away that word is probably a word that seems unchristian to us. We shouldn't boast in our minds. But probably what he means when he says this is our boast is not, I'm boasting, as we hear boasting, but probably something more along the lines of this is what we feel confident in and this is where we feel good about where we've been is probably more what that probably connotes.

And then he says, "Our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, with integrity and godly sincerity." So, he talks about conscience. Let me ask you just another question. Should you always trust your conscience? You know the part of you that says this is what's right, this is what's wrong. I would suggest that trusting your conscience can actually be dangerous in some ways because we are so

impacted by sin that we can convince ourselves that right is wrong and wrong is right and good is bad and bad is good. And so, we have to be very careful simply saying, my conscience is my highest sense of what is right and wrong.

But at the same time, I think there's a peril to not having a developed conscience, to not listening to it. Colin Cruz in his commentary on Second Corinthians says that this way, "To reject the voice of conscience is to court spiritual disaster." And Paul here says, listen, my conscience tells me that even though you have a critique of me, even though you have a criticism of me, that it is unfair. And then he goes on to assert at least eight different things about his leadership. Here's what he says. He says we have led, or I have led and conducted myself with integrity, verse 12. And if you look in your Bible, there's a little note here, a little letter next to it usually, and then at the bottom of the page, it says many manuscripts say holiness.

And let me just talk for a second about textual criticism. This is a rabbit trail from the leadership, but it's in this text and it's important. And that is sometimes people will say, well, you can't really trust the Bible because there are all these different manuscripts, and how do we know that we actually have the Bible like what was intended? And this is a really good example of that, and here's why. We have all these manuscripts, but probably not one perfectly intact manuscript. And those who study it, they have them dated and they can tell you where they came from and all these different facets of each manuscript.

And sometimes there's a discrepancy. The vast majority of discrepancies are exactly like this one, where it says that we conducted ourselves with integrity. Some translations say sincerity and the word at the bottom in our English is the word holiness. So probably what happened was somewhere a scribe was transporting it, and just as they were transporting the words, didn't capture it carefully and thought, oh, this word is probably that word and they wrote it down. And then it went forward in other manuscripts.

And what happens in textual criticism is people go back and they reconstruct it and say this word is probably more likely. But here's the point. This passage doesn't mean anything really different. If the word is integrity or the word is holiness here, they're different shades of the same word. One is basically integrity, saying maybe with more of a secular bent in not having any kind of spiritual agenda to it. What he's saying is, I did what I thought or what I said I was going to do. The word can mean sincerity or purity. The word holiness means I was right before God. So, on one hand, it's the word right before people, on the other, it's right before God or right before my conscience. And what he's doing is he's just saying, listen, you're accusing me of not being forthright with all of you, but I want you to know my conscience is clear. I have acted with integrity.

Have you ever had somebody do something that short-circuits you in terms of integrity? You know how painful that can be. I had an incident that wasn't super painful but was painful enough and happened recently. I had my car rear-ended last year and so I got a new vehicle for myself, and my wife was driving it the other day. She came home and somebody had backed into my car, left a dent in the bumper, and didn't leave a note. And so, I now have a bump in my bumper from this event. And I had those moments like, are you kidding me? How do you not leave a note? How do you not take responsibility? And what Paul's saying

here is there was nothing that I did where I did not keep the standard as best that I could. So, there's that.

And then we see in the same verse this idea of godly sincerity, which is basically Paul just saying, my sincerity has been basically the fact that the way that I've lived has been to God for God. He's talking here about his motives. So, he's saying, my actions, my motives, were right. Then he says this. He says, "We have done so, relying not on worldly wisdom but on God's grace." So now He moves to talking about his reliance, where he's saying, I didn't rely on the methods of people, but I have relied on God for what I've decided to do. And if you read through this passage, what you see is people were critiquing him because he said he was going to come visit and he didn't come visit. And so probably what was happening is the criticism was you don't do what you say your motives are all about. You're relying on worldly methods, not on the ways of God. And so, there's this criticism that he's taking, and he's basically warding it off.

Verses 13 and 14. He talks about his clarity. He says, "For we do not write you anything you cannot read or understand. And I hope that, as you have understood us in part, you will come to understand fully that you can boast of us just as we will boast of you in the day of the Lord Jesus." So, he says, listen, I didn't state things in ways that you couldn't understand. I didn't use my intellect to impress you, but I tried to be clear.

And then in verses 15 through 17, he talks about his flexibility. And this is about the whole visit, not the visit thing. He says, "Because I was confident of this, I wanted to visit you first so that you might benefit twice. I wanted to visit you on my way to Macedonia and to come back to you from Macedonia, and then to have you send me on my way to Judea. Was I fickle when I intended to do this? Or do I make my plans in a worldly manner so that in the same breath I say both 'Yes, yes' and 'No, no'?"

Again, they're likely critique or criticism here was you don't do what you say. And what he's doing is he's saying, I had an intention, but I changed my plans. I'm just being flexible. And then he asserts that he was faithful to the message. He uses this. Yes, yes, no, no kind of language to say as surely as God is faithful. Our message to you is not yes and no. This is verse 18 and following, "For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was preached among you by us—by me and Silas and Timothy—was not "Yes" and "No," but in him it has always been "Yes." So, he says yes, I have been flexible in the way that I've gone about things, but I have been completely faithful to the message.

And then he speaks about his demeanor or humility. I'm going to say I'm going to come back to verse 22, but we see this in verses 23 and 24. He says, "I call God as my witness—and I stake my life on it—that it was in order to spare you that I did not return to Corinth. Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, because it is by faith you stand firm." And so, he says listen, I didn't use my position to lord it over you, but I approached you with humility.

And then, finally, he talks about care. Chapter two, verses one through four, especially verse four, "For I wrote you out of great distress and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to grieve you but to let you know the depth of my love for you." And so, what he has done here is he's laid out his case. He basically said this is how I've led.

Now, you read that and what we could do is we could simply say, okay, so good leadership involves these eight qualities, now go and do. But that isn't really what this passage is about. And I don't think that that's ultimately the best way to think about this and understand this because you could easily talk about another 50 qualities of leadership. I think what's best to do here is to step back and say, Paul was responding to this criticism. What does this teach us about leadership, either where we're leading or where we're following?

Again, all of us are in places where we lead, where we follow. Here's what one author said about this. He said, "Character is nonessential to leadership. We all know leaders who've led large organizations and garnered the loyalty of many followers and yet lacked character. They demonstrated courage and competency. They were clear in their directives. They may have even sought the advice of others, but they were not men and women who were known for doing what is right. It's not uncommon to hear accomplished leaders attribute their success to business practices and personal conduct that most people would consider reprehensible. And yet they are king or queen of the mountain, at least for the moment." As we discussed earlier, he writes, "You can lead without character, but character is what makes you a leader worth following." You don't have to exhibit all of these things to lead something, but if you want to lead well and leave a wake behind you that's positive, then character will be a part of how you lead, that you embrace.

And so, as we come to this, what I'd like to do is just think about leadership on a couple of levels. I saw a book that Andy Crouch wrote a few years back called *Strength and Weakness*. In it, he talks about authority and vulnerability. And I saw somebody talk about it this way. And if we think of it this way as a two-by-two chart, high authority here, high vulnerability here. Low vulnerability here, low authority here. We can think about what it is to lead. We live in a time where a lot of people want to say that authority is bad, that all authority is bad, and that you should never have authority because it's inherently misused.

But if you think about the Bible, who had authority? Jesus. What did he say in the Great Commission? Matthew 28, He said, all authority, where? In heaven and on earth has been given to me. That sounds like a lot of authority to me and that's a whole lot of authority. So, Jesus had authority, but Jesus was also vulnerable. He was humble. Philippians two, He did not consider equality with God, something to be grasped so he emptied himself, making himself in the image of a man. So, what do you have with Jesus? You have somebody with high authority and high vulnerability. We could say that this is where leadership flourishes, this is Jesus. If we are to use that rubric for this.

Then what we have is we have some people who will be high authority but low vulnerability. In other words, the character, the sharing, won't be part of how they live. It's all about authority, all their way. And if we're thinking about this from the Bible, you could say that this is King Herod and this is the kind of person who is destructive in the way that they lead. This is the person who brings harm into the world, so to speak.

And then if we were to talk about high vulnerability and low authority, what we would talk about is somebody who is in some ways wounded and has a sense in which their way of thinking about things is to suffer through things. And this would be from a biblical standpoint, Elijah, and there's a sense here of suffering or hardship.

Then over here we get withdrawal, which is just simply saying, I don't need to be engaged. And this might be somebody like Jonah. I don't have authority and I don't engage in this whole thing.

Now, why do I take the time just to show you this? The reason that I draw this for you is that we can often in our day say leadership is either all authority, all skills, or all character, vulnerability if we use this. But it's important to say leadership is both. It's also important to understand that there is no perfect human leader. It doesn't matter who you follow, whoever you follow, there will be a continuum between perfection over here and bad over here. And no matter who you follow or who you are as a leader, there will be times when you will not care fully, when you will not be completely sincere in every motive. There will be times when your way of leadership feels like it harms some people.

And so, the question becomes, what do we do with that as a follower and what do we do with that as a person who sometimes is in the role of a leader? Well, the first thing I think is true for both, and that is to simply acknowledge that there is one perfect leader and that is God, it's Jesus, and there is one that we can look up to. And what that means is when we are in a place where we're following somebody and we start to say they've started kind of coming this way in their leadership, that we can make a decision. And I think a decision is real because there is a time to say either one of these things was so egregious that I can no longer follow this person or there are so many of these things happening over time that I no longer want to follow this person. And what that means is that that's a legitimate thing.

But the flip side is, if we are not careful, what we will start to do is we will start to look for these things and we'll start to nit-pick, criticize, and instead of looking to the one who is perfect as the ultimate leader, we will start to demand from our human leaders too much. Is it that our expectations are too high or too low? Now you see this all the time in different arenas. If you are a parent and you've had your kids in youth sports, you've seen this. And here's what I mean. There are usually one or two parents who volunteer to coach the team, volunteer keyword, and then there's a whole host of parents who sit in the stands, and the parents who are coaching the team are doing a horrible job because everything they do is wrong. Every way that they go about it is horrible.

Now, to be fair, just to use this rubric, is there a time to say, my kid's youth sports coach has led in such a way that I don't want my kid in that environment? Absolutely. If your coach slaps your child, you should absolutely take your child out of the environment. If time after time they belittle your kid, sooner or later you say you don't need to keep going to this. But what happens for some of us is we just get in this zone of saying, oh, I can't believe that they called that play. They didn't give my kid the ball enough. And then we go down this criticism road where instead of saying nobody's perfect as a leader, but there is one who's perfect, and let it remind me of the one who's perfect, we get into the criticism zone. What you see in this passage is that the Corinthians were criticizing Paul on things that Paul thought were fairly minor. And so, he defends himself.

One of the weakest things that we can do is choose to sit idly on the side and critique and criticize those who are engaged without stepping into the arena. Now, it's true that there will be some arenas that we can't step into. The arena of youth sports is one. Probably some of us

sat around and watched the Steelers last week and had some critiques. And I can't volunteer. I can't put my hand up and have somebody say, well, why don't you come give it a shot this week and see if you can do better? And the truth is, I wouldn't know enough about football. As many hours as I've spent studying and watching films, I would not know enough about football to make the same kinds of quality decisions that those coaches would make. And my point is just again, to say having some understanding that human leadership is flawed, there's only one that we should expect perfection from. And yet still being able to say we need a standard, we need to be able to say, what is it that we need to do?

Now, here's a second thing, and that is where you and I lead. What happens when you recognize that you've started to take some of these steps yourself? Now, my guess is some of us here will say, well, you know, there's pretty much Jesus and me up here. But you know what's a great teacher about how you're not that close to Jesus? It's parenting. If you've ever parented, you know that one of the things that happens on the regular is that you have a gap between the parent you want to be and the parent you are. You want to create sweet memories and instead, you shuffle your kids off to bed to get another 10 minutes watching Netflix by yourself. And I say that because I've been there. You want to be gentle and encouraging, and instead, you're quick with your words and a little harsh in a way that you didn't intend to be.

Well, what's happening is you're taking these steps away from what is perfection. So, what do you do with that when you find it to be you? And this is why we need to look up to the one who is the perfect leader. Because what the gospel message is, is you and I are not perfect. We sin, we let God down, we don't even keep our own standards, and Jesus paid for it on our behalf.

But there's more than that here. Here's what it says. I'll start at the end of verse 21. It says, "He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come." So, what does that mean? Well, it means that God has put His spirit in us, as a deposit, a financial term, meaning it's like a down payment. He's given us a seal which either meant something that was secret or something that was a sign of ownership. And this is this idea basically that as far as you and I fall, God says, I have given you my spirit as a deposit, and so the fact that you want to be better, want to be different, is an indication of my spirit living in you, working in you, and through you. And if that's something that you see in yourself, then you can say, I can look up. Because even though I haven't been the kind of dad, the kind of husband, the kind of leader, the kind of friend, the kind of person I've wanted to be in every instance, my conscience can be clear because of what God has done for me through Jesus Christ. And if that's what you can do, then you're able to turn the table on leadership a little bit.

Some people would say that there's a crisis in leadership in our country right now, maybe a crisis politically, a crisis in business, a crisis in the churches, in education. And I don't know that I would disagree. The stakes are high right now. And so, when we read a passage like this and we see Paul simply defending himself, my question to me, my question to you, whether you're a longtime person of faith or exploring faith, and that is, are you bringing about a better future for those you lead?

Part of the Christian message isn't just to help people get one day to a future heaven, but it's bringing about what the kingdom looks like here and now in the places you have the opportunity to lead. What that means is in your classroom, in your use sports team that you oversee, in your business, in your exam room, what does it look like to lead and say, even though I move away from perfection, there is one who is perfect and I have been sealed, I've been anointed, and I've been given the Spirit as a down payment so that I can exhibit the life of Christ.

You see, sometimes when we try to do things in the name of Jesus, it's almost worse than if we don't. And here's what I mean. C.S. Lewis said it once, and here's what he said. He said, "That of all bad men, religious bad men are the worst." Because there's something when people have heard you say that you are a follower of Jesus and then they see the places that you don't exhibit it, that it feels off.

The other thing, when our time comes of recognizing that we've stepped away, isn't just to assert that God has given us the Spirit as a down payment, that Jesus has made it okay, because that could lead us just to simply say, well, I'm just not perfect. There are no perfect leaders. I can't help it. What we actually need to do is every time we're aware of this line, step back from it and say it wasn't right to go across it. I want to come back. And the reason I say that is because without that, we can start to give in to just a spirit of saying, well, since there's only one who's perfect and it doesn't matter what I do.

Again, C.S. Lewis put it this way, he said, "People often think of Christian morality as a kind of bargain in which God says if you keep a lot of rules, I'll reward you. And if you don't, I'll do the other thing. I do not think that is the best way of looking at it. I would much rather say that every time you make a choice, you're turning the central part of you, the part of you that chooses into something a little different from what it was before. And taking your life as a whole with all your innumerable choices, all your life long, you are slowly turning the central thing either into a heavenly creature or a hellish creature. Either into a creature that is in harmony with God or with other creatures and with itself, or else into one that's at a state of war, and that it is not living at peace. See, it's either joy and peace and knowledge and power, or it's the other means, which is madness, horror, idiocy, rage, impotence, and eternal loneliness. Each of us is at each moment progressing to one state or the other."

See, there's more at stake than just how you lead in your sphere of leadership. It's what are you becoming in every moment. Every time we make a choice to say, it's okay just to let this go, or I'm turning back toward the one who does all things right, we are turning into one extreme or the other. And so, the challenge that Paul, in a sense, gives to the church, the very church that was criticizing him, is to say, I want you to look up and see the perfect leader. And yet at the same time, he didn't just walk away saying, I'm far from it. He tried to turn back and say, let me be who God called me to be.

I don't know where you have leadership, where you are a follower, but whether it's in your marriage, in your home, in your business, or in your recreations, you have the opportunity to help turn yourself and that area into something that's more godlike or less godlike with what you do and choose to do every day.

Let's pray. God, today I ask that you would help me to choose to turn toward you and to emulate you in every place. I pray that would be the desire for each of us here. God, I pray that we would be able to freely recognize where we come short and turn away from it, turn back towards you, while still receiving and relishing the grace that you lavish on us through Jesus Christ. God, give us wisdom to know when to take ourselves out of the situation and when to simply say there is no perfect human leader and to stop being on the criticism train. We pray all of this in Jesus' name. Amen. Thanks for being here. Have a great week.