



As you look at these two statements—"I am Nothing" and "I am Important"—which seems to fit you the best? Which phrase are you more comfortable saying about yourself?

Through their behavior you can see which phrase people believe about themselves. Take for example the 10-year-old boys on the Sea Wolves, the San Carlos Little League team I coach. Some boys fully believe "I am Nothing." You see it in their slumping posture when they get in the batter's box. You see it in their tentative swing of the bat. They fully believe that they will strike out and reveal a sense of brokenness and nothingness.

On the other extreme, some boys believe "I am Important." They walk confidently to the batter's box. They have some kind of pre-pitch ritual, which involves moving their hands, banging the bat, digging in their feet, etc. They fully believe they will hit a home run every time at bat and they reveal a sense of importance.

What about us? What do we believe about ourselves?

I Am Nothing.

For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles... (Ephesians 3:1).

Paul was a prisoner

In this opening verse, Paul is revealing, with stark honesty, his status as a prisoner. To fully understand how startling this is, let's consider the setting of 1st Century Roman culture. Being a prisoner in the Roman culture was highly disgraceful. Their culture was consumed with attaining and maintaining honor. Roman citizens maneuvered and networked in order to be close to people of power in their cities. To receive public recognition from someone of influence would boost his or her own influence. They were trained that being shamed was a fate worse than death.

In that context Paul is admitting here, "I am a prisoner." This was shameful. Yet Paul is admitting without excuse or justification, "I lay down my rights. I surrender my will. My future and fate are in the hands of someone else."

It would be like a soldier encountering his enemy, recognizing defeat, surrendering his weapon and placing his fate in his captor's hands. But notice that, although Paul is a prisoner of the Roman guards, he says he is a prisoner of Christ Jesus. Paul has surrendered all of his rights to Jesus. There is brokenness and humiliation here.

Although I am less than the least of all the Lord's people, this grace was given to me (3:8).

Paul was the least

This word "least" is a newly constructed word in the Greek. The Greek is *leaster*, meaning "less than the least." Since Paul had so violently opposed the church prior to his conversion, since his past was so bad, he considers his actions a direct act against God himself and his crime greater than anyone else's. There is deep brokenness and humiliation here.

The higher our awareness of our rebellion against God, the deeper our brokenness. For each Christian there is a life-long discovery of the depths of our rebellion against God. This is vital in our sanctification for God uses our increasing awareness and the subsequent forgiveness as the tool that will bring humility.

It's important to guard ourselves from only accepting ourselves as broken. We can get stuck in self-pity, shame, regret, self-hatred—a downward spiral. On the other end of the tension is Paul's understanding of that.

I Am Important.

Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you (3:2).

God gave Paul a job

Paul is contrastly filled with a high sense of dignity because God has given him a job. He is delivering the message of God's grace to the Gentiles. Paul did not apply for the job. Paul did not interview for the job. Paul did not receive the job because he networked, achieved a certain GPA, or proved himself effective in managing projects and people. God and God alone chose Paul for this job.

In this verse, notice that Paul maintains an attitude of humility by pointing out that God's grace was **given** to him. Paul did nothing to warrant it being given.

...that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly (3:3).

God showed Paul a mystery

Paul has a great mystery to reveal, a mystery that's been kept hidden for ages (Ephesians 3:5,9). A mystery of, shall we say, gargantuan proportion. A mystery he did not discover for himself but was given (Ephesians 3:2). A mystery that will bring peace and harmony between enemies (Ephesians 3:6). A mystery that

will change the world forever. It will stop civil wars. It will end human slavery. It will bring clean water to thirsty people. It will bring healthy food to the starving. It will bring medical care to the forgotten. It is the single most powerful transformational power that ever has or ever will be conceived.

And this power has been kept a mystery. People globally have searched for it but haven't found it. People have hoped for it, only to live in perpetual unfulfillment.

But God decided 2,000 years ago that it was time to fully reveal the mystery:

» **Is there a God?**

» Yes

» **What is God like?**

» Jesus in the flesh

» **How can I know him?**

» Through faith

God has stepped into human history in the form of Jesus Christ and done the unimaginable. He suffered and died. He shed his blood so that the mystery would forever be known. God revealed this mystery to Paul. Do you know what this mystery is?

This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus (3:6).

Although Paul fully recognizes that he did nothing to be shown this mystery, he experiences a high sense of dignity and honor because the mystery has been shown to him.

Look at this image from the *Magic Eyes* book. Some people can see these hidden images easily. Others have a very difficult time seeing the hidden image within. This idea that God showed Paul a mystery means that if we stared at this image forever, we'd never fully see the hidden image. We'd get parts of the image. We'd get overly excited about one piece and speculate and theorize what the rest looked like based upon the one piece. But we'd only be scratching the surface. Then the mystery was fully revealed, made clear. And it wasn't because someone was really gifted at seeing. It was **only** because the designer of the picture showed it to them. To be shown such a mystery reveals that God thinks you're important.

Remember what Mark said last week about the animosity between Israel and Gentiles? The Gentiles were not permitted to worship God inside of the temple. In fact, the inscription above the doors said, "Gentiles were responsible for their own death if they entered." A funeral would be held for a Jewish boy who married a Gentile. Jews would not help a woman in labor because they didn't want to assist another Gentile entering the world. Gentiles were fuel for the fires in hell.

I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power (3:7).

God worked powerfully on Paul

In Ephesians 1 Paul described God's power as great. So great it raised Jesus from the dead and then placed Jesus on a throne at God's right hand. It's a power that is far above all other supposed powers in the universe.

Paul is saying in verse 7 that he is been on the receiving end of **that** power. **That** power has completely transformed his motives, his desires, his actions, his words. **That** power, which has no limits, has worked deeply within Paul. God does not waste his power. If Paul is on the receiving end of it, there is inherent dignity and confidence and importance involved. Understand this: Paul sees himself as important because he has been the focus of God's loving power.

There's a danger at this extreme: pride, arrogance, damaging independence, resistance to listening to others and an over-importance of yourself. But that's not what Paul is describing about himself here. He has a Jesus-based importance.

In this passage we've read verses that would put Paul at both extremes: I am Nothing and I am Important. Which is right? Both. Paul was a man who lived right in the middle. Living in the middle does not mean he had a partial awareness of his brokenness or his importance. No, he was fully aware of both simultaneously. He lived in the full tension of the two.

The result is a man who is simultaneously broken and confident. He is not grueling in self-hatred and debilitating brokenness, shame or worthlessness. Nor is he puffed up with false dignity, arrogance or self-importance. He is living in the tension of the two, fully aware of both at the same time. This is the Biblical picture of humility. Move either way on the line and we filter the demonstration of God's power in the Gospel.

Tim Keller, pastor of Redeemer Church in Manhattan, New York and spiritual leader in America describes the tension of these like this: "So we can say that we are more wicked than we ever dared believe, but more loved and accepted in Christ than we ever dared hope — at the very same time. This creates a radical new dynamic for personal growth. It means that the more you see your own flaws and sins, the more precious, electrifying, and amazing God's grace appears to you. But on the other hand, the more aware you are of God's grace and acceptance in Christ, the more able you are to drop your denials and self-defenses and admit the true dimensions and character of your sin."

God's Power is Revealed with More Glory.

There are some powerful applications for each of our lives because of this. But before we talk about that, let's look at the implications of this for Paul's life and ministry. Because it's from

this place of tension that Paul's ministry flows. In fact, you could say, Paul's job of preaching springs from this place.

Although I am less than the least of all the Lord's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the boundless riches of Christ, (3:8–11).

To preach the boundless riches of Christ = no boundary, unlimited.

...and to make plain (v. 9).

Make plain = enlighten, bring to light. There are two steps here: In verse 8 Paul preaches; in verse 9 Paul is making the mystery clear—going beyond the Gospel message and explaining a Christian's New Identity and Spiritual Growth to everyone, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things.

Kept hidden = veiled. It wasn't seen clearly.

Who created all things? Just as God created the world by speaking, God is using Paul's spoken words to create the church. Paul spoke words, the Spirit used them to create converts and these new converts organized themselves to be the church. Never underestimate the power of words. It's because of the power of God's words that I always quote scripture when I'm teaching or preaching, like today, or if I'm giving counsel to someone, or if I'm explaining the Gospel to someone. The Word of God is powerful.

His intent (v. 10).

His intent—of Paul being a humble man; his intent of Paul's preaching the Gospel, making the mystery clear, which established the church—was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms.

Manifold = variegated, very many-sided. Referring to intricately embroidered pattern of a multi-colored cloak, or the manifold hues of a batch of flowers; in this case it means "the richly diversified nature of the divine nature of God."

It would be like this: these spiritual rulers and authorities would have known "The Lord is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and rich in love." Just like a child might think they know what their parents do in order to run the household, these spiritual rulers think they know what God is doing as he runs the universe. But they have no idea what is really going on. God's plans are multifaceted. But they never imagined that God would use the weak to display his power, never imagined that God would show power through people that are broken. The wisdom of God has angles and perspectives that are unlimited. The wisdom of God cannot be fully known by anyone other than God.

Remember that Paul often references the spiritual realm through Ephesians and he's doing it again.

...according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord (v. 11).

According to his eternal purposes. Again, this is God's plan and power that is being displayed.

In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence (v. 12).

A great reminder that children of God have nothing to fear from God. His boundless love is given to us. The riches of his grace have been lavished upon us. The result in our hearts should be freedom and confidence.

I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory (v. 13).

Paul ends this section of verses referencing the suffering he's enduring because of his imprisonment, which is the same topic he started on in verse 1. In both cases Paul communicates an attitude of contentment. With this attitude Paul is living what he's preaching. Here's how.

The Gospel message is—God's amazingly strong love is understood and experienced by a person with a broken heart. A person confesses their sin, repents of their attempts to live as their own god and accepts God's forgiveness and his authority in their life.

Paul is living that by accepting his state of suffering with contentment. He is not grasping for power as an escape. Nor is he graveling in his brokenness. He's living right in the middle. How could this apply to us?

Individually

Stop attempting to experience our sense of importance from any source other than Jesus

People we've known; places we've been; accomplishments we've achieved; we apply these truths to our lives when we confess to God the emptiness of all of this.

We can experience more of God's presence when we conscientiously confess to him our attempts to find significance and identity in these false places and ask him to be our everything.

Stop trying to act like we've got it all together

The first application related to how we proactively attempt to build our sense of importance with false sources. This second one deals with how we react when someone treats us like we don't have it all together.

A friend, boss, spouse, child, lawyer, doctor, neighbor points something out to you that is a mess. We were hoping that nobody noticed but we've been caught. We've been revealed. My simple advice involves one part—**agree**.

Any attempt to make excuses or provide explanations reveals that we are attempting to find our importance in a source other than Jesus. Why? Because admitting our failure means that that source is now drained. If the source we were getting importance from is drained then I am no longer important.

This is why the Apostle Paul is modeling and instructing us in our passage today to find our sense of importance in Jesus. He is a source that will never run dry. He is a source that will never disappoint. Come clean with Jesus about places you are looking to build your importance. Come clean with someone else.

Corporately

Stop looking to institutions, government, companies, policies or laws to bring Jesus-based change to our world. We are living in times with cultural changes moving further and further away from Biblical morals and principles. This breaks my heart because we have a rich history of standing on Biblically-based principles.

Jesus did not say, "I am coming into the world to save people through governments."

He did not say, "I am going to change the world through powerful companies."

He **did** say, "I am the way and the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father except me."

He **did** say, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

The best chance our world has is each one of us telling the Great News of Jesus.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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