

## **Not in Vain**

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Earlier this week I was listening to a podcast called “Unexplainable.” It is a science podcast that aims to explore scientific questions that seem to elude our understanding. From the truly mysterious, to the simply very challenging.

The episode I was listening to was about something that I had actually sort of assumed we knew. The height of Mount Everest.

The episode described in great detail the challenge of measuring the height of a mountain. Mount Everest is the highest mountain in the world by virtue of the fact that its peak is the highest point above sea level on planet earth. But even measuring that involves a tedious task of using surveying tools to measure just where sea level is at the base of this mountain that is about 400 miles from the nearest ocean.

But the line that really struck me was when the scientist being interviewed said that there are actually four mountains in the world that could claim to be the tallest mountain on earth.

It all depends on how you measure.

As we know, when measuring mountains by their height above sea level, Mount Everest is the tallest mountain in the world.

Mauna Kea, an inactive volcano in Hawaii, is the world's tallest mountain as measured from its base, deep in the Pacific Ocean, to its summit. In fact, measured this way, Mauna Kea is a full mile taller than Everest.

Dinali, in Alaska, is the tallest mountain if you are just measuring the height of the formation itself. The base of Everest is already quite high above sea level, but if you placed Mount Everest, and Dinali, on a flat surface, Dinali would be taller.

And fourth, is Chimborazo peak, Ecuador. Which, because the earth is not perfectly spherical, but bulges at the equator, is the point on earth closest to space. So if you are measuring down, instead of up, you might say Chimborazo is the highest point on Earth.

We all thought we knew, what is the tallest mountain in the world, but in truth, it all depends on how you are measuring.

In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul is imploring a church that has largely rejected him, to listen to him. He is listing off the credentials of his ministry, trying to convince them to receive him once more, as their leader and friend.

Here is the list he gives to prove that things are going well:

afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; all endured by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God.

To most people in the world, including some in the church in Corinth, these were signs that things were not going well. In a world that was at least as obsessed with wealth and status as our own, these people were on the bottom, they were weak and despised, and things were not looking up.

I can be so easy for us to forget this, because we live in a world now where Christians walk the halls of power, and there is a church in or near the center of almost every city and town on the planet, but in the beginning, the church did not seem powerful or influential.

If you were an ordinary Roman Citizen, you would likely see this small band of troublemakers who are routinely imprisoned and killed, and think that they were failures.

Paul's brilliance is that he can see this all for what it is. It's not in vain! He implores the Corinthians to see it.

To see that the measuring stick of status, power, and influence, is not the way to measure faithfulness in following Christ.

We are treated as impostors, and yet are true;  
We are treated as unknown, and yet are well known;  
We are treated as dying, and see—we are alive;  
We are treated as punished, and yet not killed;  
as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing;  
as poor, yet making many rich;  
as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

So how's it going? It depends how you measure.

Everyone thinks they know how to tell who is the greatest and most powerful.

But it depends how you measure.

So here is the question for us. How do we measure our lives?

As Christians, how do we measure our lives?

Well, I think that Paul teaches us two important things.

First, pay little attention to how the world around you would measure your life.

One of the things that Paul lifts up are that we are "treated as unknown, and yet we are well known."

Every church I have been a part of has a sort of honor roll of those we remember with gratitude. Those whose names are on the lips of folks in the church even a generation or two after they are gone.

For the most part, not powerful or influential people in any traditional sense, but rather those whose lives are remembered as a tapestry of thousands of acts and words of kindness and grace. They are well known because they could be counted on in crisis. Because their love for people was so unmistakably evident in their every act.

I am sure you know people like this in your own life, either in this church, or outside it.

No one would ever call them celebrities. But they are surely, very well known.

Measured by familiar metrics of who is “known,” instagram followers, or influence, or a contrast with the crush of paparazzi, these people would not register by the measure of our culture. But of course how well do we really know, those people we all know? Do not get caught up in how you are measured by the culture around you.

And second, don’t just measure what your convictions cost.

This is a hard one. When faced with a difficult choice between going along with something we know is wrong, or standing up for what is right, the benefits of doing the right thing can seem so abstract, but the costs are usually straightforward and very real.

To be sure there are many examples throughout history where people have been visited with the kinds of beatings and imprisonment Paul mentions for standing up for what they know to be right.

But, I want to take an example that is more relatable to most of us.

What we do when we hear someone make an insensitive or offensive remark, even if inadvertently.

We know that doing the right thing, and speaking up, saying “I am not comfortable speaking like that” or “that’s not funny” will—without a doubt make the moment uncomfortable. It may feel like it could even damage a relationship.

Or if it’s someone like our boss it could feel like it would cost us a promotion, or a raise.

The cost is obvious to us.

What’s the benefit of speaking up? We talk ourselves out of it again and again. But the aggregate of all those moments when we chose comfort over honesty is a culture that tolerates what it should not.

We have to work to be just as mindful of the benefit of doing the right thing as we are of the cost.

I doubt I am going to change anyone's mind about what the highest mountain in the world is.

But I have to say, I like the case of Mauna Kea. Which is a full mile taller than Everest. But almost all of it is underwater, and you'd never see it.

I think that might be the measure of a model Christian. By the measure of what the world values, we would be pretty small and not especially significant. Not showy or boastful. Not sounding a trumpet so everyone can see what a great thing we are doing.

But steadfast and persistent in doing what is right, out of sight and unnoticed.

It may look like it has next to nothing.

But it has everything.