

July 7, 2024,

Strength in Weakness

2 Corinthians 12:2-10

I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.

"My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect, not in strength, but in weakness... For when I am weak, then I am strong."

In various aspects of life, we are often encouraged to be strong and not show any sign of weakness. Whether it's in high school sports, legal proceedings, or personal disagreements, the message is clear: show no weakness, no vulnerability, and no acknowledgment of limitations. However, Paul's letters express a different perspective, advocating for the acknowledgment of weaknesses. In 2 Corinthians 12:9, Paul writes, "I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me."

This message from Paul reminds us that it's acceptable to recognize our limitations. By acknowledging our weaknesses, we can experience the true power of Christ. However, putting this concept into practice is not always easy. **It demands humility, a virtue that can both inspire and motivate us.** It involves giving our weaknesses to God and understanding that God loves us in our weaknesses, not in spite of them.

While the idea of opening our hearts and offering God our weaknesses seem simple, it's a different story when it comes to implementing it. Knowing what we need to do is one thing, but actually following through with it is a different challenge, as we recently learned in a sermon about physical health – many of us know that eating well and exercising is good for our bodies, yet we struggle to follow through with these habits. So, how can we create a space to openly address the obstacles and difficulties we encounter while striving to live as Jesus taught us?

Robert Fulghum gained attention years ago with his book titled "**All I Really Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten.**" It was a poem of sorts, a list of proverbs about life's simplest aspects. The list included things like "Share everything. Play fair. Don't hit people. Put things back where you found them. Clean up your own mess. Don't take things that aren't yours. Say you're sorry when you hurt somebody." The poem turned into a book and eventually became a series of books.

In today's text, Paul urges us to consider living with weakness and strength. It takes an amazing amount of humility to recognize that some of life's most important teachings are basic and simple—like faith. Is it a big leap? Sorry, but I don't think so. The truth is faith is really simple. It's not easy, unfortunately, but it is simple. Love God; love neighbor. Simple. Do as you would have others do to you. Simple. Let us give thanks, by which we offer God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe. Simple.

But not easy. And why is it not easy? Because we don't know how, or we think we know how and don't want to learn. Or we think we used to know and refuse to be taught again. Or we think we should be able to do it, to live the kind of life we long for without effort and discipline. And maybe we should be able to. But we aren't. We don't. We can't. We don't know enough. Or stuff gets in the way. Irritations distract us. Difficulties derail us. Suffering prevents us.

It is the human condition to suffer, to have things go wrong. How can we expect to live the kind of life Jesus lived when stumbling blocks rise in front of us regularly? How can we expect to bask in the glory of God when our wrestling wounds cause us to limp with every step? If only we could live a life free from conflict and pain, then we could be the kind of Christian we see in others, like Paul, for instance. Paul was pushed into a corner; his credentials were being questioned. "Who do you think you are?" That was the question bandied about. It was probably more like, "Who does he think he is?" Because it was done behind his back. His detractors showed up and tried to tell the new Christians that Paul wasn't worth listening to and that they were much better at this Christian life than he was. He had no special authority or special powers or insight into what it means to follow Jesus Christ.

Paul had to talk more about his experiences and knowledge to answer this. He needed to tell his story and emphasize his achievements for a while. Paul went through a lot for Christ, including suffering, shipwrecks, imprisonments, beatings, insults, hardships, persecutions, calamities, sicknesses, and weaknesses. He didn't want to brag, but he did for a chapter and a half. However, in verse seven of chapter twelve, he abruptly shifts to discuss a "thorn in the flesh," a weakness or pain. Humility was important to Paul, possibly because he struggled with it, he knew how crucial it was, or he understood that losing sight of who was in charge was a sure sign of getting off track. "To keep from being too elated, too puffed up, too full of himself, "a thorn was given me in the flesh."

We don't know what his "thorn" was, and commentators speculate on it to this day. Some assumed the Corinthians knew what it was, so he didn't need to mention it. Others say it doesn't matter. What is your thorn? Whatever you struggle with, whatever makes you fall short of your ideals. Paul's point is not to draw attention to himself; he is inviting us to see an opportunity for humility. When you are hurting or weak, that's when you might finally realize that you need help, that you need to learn, that you need something you can't supply for yourself.

This thorn in the flesh is a teaching tool to keep Paul focused on the source of goodness, wholeness, and joy in his life, which isn't himself or his accomplishments, but God who saves him. Just like Paul, let us rely upon God's power in our weaknesses. We are strong when we are weak and rely on God's strength. This means that if God asks you to do something, God won't take 'I can't do it' for an answer because God already knows you can't do it. If you try to do it on your own, you will fail. "I can do all things through [God] who strengthens me," as Paul writes in Philippians (4:13). It means we may not get what we want, or even the strength we want, but it's crucial to learn to lean on God, as it is **with God that we have strength in our weakness.**