

SERMON: “My Grace is Sufficient”

Text: 2 Corinthians 12:1-10

The focus for God’s Word to us today is our Epistle reading from 2 Corinthians 12. But before I turn to this, allow me to remind you about this word “Epistle.”

It is not a word we use much these days and if you didn’t already know, this word refers to a letter that has been composed for the purpose of communicating news. Perhaps today we might call it a “newsletter,” but even that word is falling out of use also.

Now in my Bible, the publishers have placed in red these words because they were words spoken directly to Paul from Jesus:

⁹ But he (the Lord Jesus) said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”

And then Paul goes on to write...

Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

How is it possible to be strong when you are weak? Many people might say that you cannot be both these things at the same time. Weak and strong are opposites. You’re either weak or you’re strong, not both.

This is what human reason would claim, but in Christ these apparent opposites find new meaning. And the truth of this new meaning is evidenced in Paul’s own life and is what Christ seeks to reveal in our life also.

In this letter to the Corinthians, Paul is addressing a situation in which his ministry was being attacked and undermined. There were false apostles going around, telling people that they shouldn’t listen to Paul.

They’re saying things like: “He’s not a real apostle because He wasn’t one of the twelve who went around with Jesus. And just look at him, he’s always getting into trouble, being run out of town. He doesn’t look like someone blessed by God. So, don’t listen to Paul. Listen to us instead.”

That’s what Paul is up against and in these closing chapters of 2 Corinthians. This is what Paul seeks to address.

Now notice Paul is not really interested in defending himself so much as defending his ministry, his gospel ministry, and the apostleship the Lord himself had entrusted him with. It's for the sake of the gospel of Christ that Paul is speaking to this situation.

And how does he do that? Well, he boasts, but not in the way we might think of boasting or in the way these other false apostles were boasting. This is what he writes...

I must go on boasting. Though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. ²I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. ³And I know that this man was caught up into paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows— ⁴and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter.

Paul here is indirectly talking about himself and these amazing experiences he's had which could compete with anything these false apostles had encountered and yet, he is willing to leave them behind.

I'm not sure what kind of "spiritual experiences" you've had, but for myself, I know that I've never had anything like Paul's experience, being caught up to a third heaven. In fact, I find myself sometimes intimidated by even those experiences of other Christians I meet – who sometime talk about "how Christ saved me from drugs, alcohol and the general ditch of life."

Maybe some of you can talk about such experiences or perhaps you find yourself saying things like, "I've been a faithful Christian all my life! I've been a regular church attender all these years! I've been on PPC or helped build this church! I'm probably one of the top givers, too!"

Now it's hard for me to imagine quiet, humble, modest Lutherans saying such things out loud. Maybe you haven't been caught up into paradise but how many times have you had thoughts like these?

Well, Paul didn't keep his pedigree quiet. In Philippians (3), he writes:

⁵circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee...and so on

But then he writes,

⁷But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ...

That's really what Paul is saying here in this letter to the Corinthians. For Paul, if there is anything to boast of it is what Christ has done for him in his weakness. To be weak is better because Christ and his life-giving message is heard more clearly.

Paul then gives an example from his life of how the Lord kept him weak. He writes...

7 So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.

Now just think, if there's someone who deserved to be blessed and helped by God, I would think it would be Paul. But what does the Lord do to him instead? He gives him a thorn in the flesh! He lets Satan afflict him in some way. Perhaps this was a physical illness, we're not exactly sure. But in any case, it kept Paul humble, which was a good thing from Paul's perspective. The Lord used this affliction to keep Paul from getting puffed up and to keep him trusting the Lord for his strength.

Now did Paul like his weak circumstances. Of course not! Paul prayed to the Lord that he might take this thorn in the flesh from him, but you know what, that didn't happen. Instead, the Lord gave him a better answer. He said to him:

"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

How many of us want to hear that answer to our weaknesses or to the weaknesses and difficulties being encountered by those we love? And yet, what an incredible answer this is.

"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

Dear Christian friends, this is an answer for you in your weakness! The Lord's grace is sufficient for you! The Lord's power is made perfect in your weakness!

We may not like that answer and yet this eternal truth is the one we need to learn to grasp onto and cling to as we face all those weaknesses in our lives.

For if you have the Lord's grace, that will be enough, more than enough to deal with your circumstances.

"My grace," Jesus says, "My grace is sufficient for you" because it includes all the gifts Christ freely gives. Grace is God's undeserved favor, everything he gives you that Christ Jesus earned for you.

Someone once offered this acronym for "grace:" G-R-A-C-E, God's Riches At Christ's Expense (repeat).

Just think of everything Christ has graciously done for you.

He has earned your place before God by what he did for you.

He fulfilled God's Law on your behalf. Jesus kept all the commandments you have broken; that you have failed to keep.

And yet, though innocent, he bore your sins in his body on the cross. Jesus suffered the punishment you and I deserve. He accepted the death penalty that was ours.

Was this easy? No! Three times Jesus prayed that his suffering might be taken from him. "Nevertheless, Jesus prayed, not as I will, but thy will be done."

And so Jesus willingly went to the cross to bear the sin of the world, your sin and mine. He literally was given a thorn in the flesh, a whole crown full of thorns, pressed on his head. He took the nails in his hands and feet. He suffered the utter abandonment by God that we sinners deserve.

Christ's power was made perfect in his weakness which is another paradox. For in his being weak, in his suffering a completely humiliating death for us sinners, Jesus paradoxically displayed his power, crushing the serpent's head and delivering us from judgment and death.

And then finally, His resurrection shows that the victory is real. Jesus is your righteousness, your forgiveness, and your life!

So dear friends, this gospel – this good news – this archaic newsletter - doesn't appear very impressive or powerful. The message of the cross may sound like foolishness to the world; unimportant; a fairy-tale; a myth. It sounds like weakness, not power.

But for us who are being saved, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Therefore, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

This is why Paul could boast in his weaknesses. And so can you.

For we are secure in Christ. We know our salvation rests secure in him. This is why we can be weak and accept times of weakness. This is why we can even boast in our weaknesses because it actually causes us to rely on Jesus all the more!

And so Paul writes:

"Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

"When I am weak, then I am strong."

So, how are things for you? Do you feel your weaknesses or are you fighting against it – maybe even complaining to God about it?

Or maybe you know someone who suffers from one of the many forms of weakness out there, like loneliness or depression. Maybe you know somebody who has a thorn in the flesh, who has all kinds of physical ailments, and they're not getting better.

Well, dear friends, the Lord has a word for us today:

“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”

A message like that may not be the first thing you need to say to someone else struggling with one of life's weaknesses, but it is the message by which God makes strong those who are weak.

So, in your weaknesses, may God help you to hold onto, not your strength, but the promise of Christ: *“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”*

Take Christ's promise with you as you leave today:

“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”

Amen.