

“Content with Weaknesses for the Sake of Christ”
2 Corinthians 12:1-10
July 8, 2018
Faith Presbyterian Church – Evening Service
Pr. Nicoletti

We come this evening to the climax of Paul’s “Fool’s Speech” in his second letter to the Corinthians.

Paul has been responding to a group of false teachers in the church in Corinth that has questioned his apostolic authority, and declared their own superiority to him. Among their criticisms of him, they have been saying that Paul is weak, while they, the false teachers, are strong, and accomplished. Their spiritual credentials are impressive, while Paul’s ministry seems to be beset with humiliating persecutions and sufferings.

Last week we looked at a portion of Paul’s response in which we said he did two things: he confronted the Corinthians for caring too much for the esteem of their culture around them, and he began to present to them a theology of weakness and suffering. We focused on the first element of that last Lord’s Day. In our text tonight, Paul focuses even more on the theme of weakness, and so will we.

And so with that in mind, please listen carefully to our text this evening – 2 Corinthians 12, starting in verse one.

The Apostle Paul writes:

^{12:1} 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. ⁵On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses— ⁶though if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I would be speaking the truth; but I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me. ⁷So 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. ⁸Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. ⁹But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. ¹⁰For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

This is God’s Word.

Paul here describes two things and then draws some conclusions about them: he speaks about the vision he received, and he speaks about the thorn he received. As we try to understand this text and grasp its meaning for us, it would be good for us to start with those.

Let's start with the vision. What should strike us most about the vision is how little Paul tells us about it. His telling of it is, in fact, thoroughly unimpressive.

And to understand the significance of that, we need to realize that Paul's opponents in Corinth, the false apostles, whom Paul ironically calls "super-apostles" in chapter 11, these false teachers have been boasting of the visions and revelations they say they have received. That's part of why Paul says he has to go on to discuss visions and revelations in verse one of our text – he's ironically and mockingly mirroring the boasting of the false teachers. *They* boast of visions and revelations, and so now *he* must boast of visions and revelations. On the surface Paul is mirroring their boasting ... but when we look closer we see that he is also turning it on its head. He's inverting what they boast about, and by doing that he means to rebuke and correct them. [Barnett, 556]

So they have boasted in their visions and revelations. And now Paul will boast in his. And the irony begins again. [Wright, 131]

First, there is the timing of the revelation he speaks of. Now, generally speaking we would imagine that boasting of your most recent vision would be best – it would show off your current spiritual superiority. Which is why it should strike us as funny that Paul chooses a vision he received 14 years ago. Not exactly the freshest example of spiritual superiority. We know from Galatians 2:2 and Acts 13:1-3 that Paul had had more recent revelations than the one he's chosen to write about here, and verse seven of our text gives us the same impression. So off the bat, where Paul's opponents would boast of the latest and greatest revelation they claimed to have received, Paul chooses an old dusty one from 14 years ago. [Barnett, 561-562]

Second, there's the way the vision is tied to the speaker. We would imagine that those boasting of their visions would want to make it clear that the vision reflected positively on them personally. It said something about *them*, and so *they* would feature prominently in the telling. Paul, on the other hand, speaks of himself in the third person. He keeps himself at arm's length. We can figure out from the text that he *is* speaking about himself ... but he speaks as if he isn't. Paul detaches the vision from his own person – again inverting the typical boast. [Barnett, 562]

Third, he describes what it was like ... but not really. In fact, he tells us almost nothing about what it was like. Where Paul's opponents might be giving intriguing details about their experience, Paul gives us none. He says he's not even sure what was going on. He repeats his ignorance about the nature of how he received the vision twice, and his parenthetical comments seem to tediously interrupt any awe that might build in the telling of the vision. [Wright, 131-132]

And finally, there's the content of the vision – the great spiritual mysteries revealed. And here, Paul says he can't tell us. This is the final way Paul intentionally makes the telling of his vision fall flat. We would at least expect that he would share with us some revelation he received in the

third heaven, the highest heaven ... but he says he can't tell us. As a consequence, since he doesn't share the content of the vision, the content of the vision can't be used to authenticate his apostolic calling, as the false teachers try to use their claims to visions and revelations to authenticate *their* ministry. Paul brings nothing back from his vision to "wow" us. [Barnett, 556, 562]

So Paul's telling of his vision is an intentional dud. His spiritual accomplishment is skimmed over.

But then we learn that there *is* one aspect of his vision that he can share with us ... though it's not something we might expect. What he apparently *can* tell us about is the thorn in his flesh.

In the context of his vision, Paul says: "a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me."

So what is the thorn in Paul's flesh? What real-life thing is that meant to represent?

Some have suggested that Paul's thorn in the flesh is the persecution he had been given in his ministry. Others have argued that it was some form of sexual temptation. Some have argued that it was the Judiazers. Others have argued that it was a physical affliction of some kind. Some have argued that it was those who opposed his ministry, like the false teachers in Corinth. Others have argued that it was a medical problem, like epilepsy. And still others have argued that it was a psychological problem, possibly something that included bouts with depression. [Barnett, 569-570; Schmidt, 819-821].

The reality is that we just don't know what the thorn in Paul's flesh refers to. And we probably never will in this life. Barnett wonders if even the Corinthians knew what Paul was referring to. [Barnett, 568; Schmidt, 821]

And maybe that's for the best, because it forces us to think in categories rather than in specifics. [Barnett, 570]

What we *can* say about Paul's thorn in the flesh was that it was some kind of weakness, and therefore some kind of limitation. He tells us as much in verse nine. And that is the point Paul is making – what he directs our attention to. What he speaks of in such a way that he intrigues us, is not any vision he received, but the weakness and limitations that the Lord gave him. *That* is what he draws our attention to.

Paul makes it clear that he could have boasted in his visions, and it wouldn't have even been foolish, because he's actually had visions – and his are real. That's the point he's making in verse six. Paul isn't refraining from speaking of them because he doesn't have them, he's refraining from speaking of them because he wants the Corinthians to see that they don't really matter – they're not what's important. And so he refers to his old vision with non-descript language, while drawing our attention to the weakness the Lord gave him. In fact, the one piece of revelation, the one word from the Lord that Paul is able, or is willing, to share with us, is the

word about the thorn. The single line: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.”

Paul skims over his visions, he skims over his spiritual accomplishments, while emphasizing his weaknesses and limitations. Why does he do this?

Well, he does it because his opponents in Corinth *hated* weaknesses and limitations. And they hated weaknesses and limitations because what they most valued were accomplishments – And many of the Christians in Corinth felt the same way.

And of course so do many Christians today.

And I don’t think that you and I are so different.

I think that, like the Corinthians, you and I hate weaknesses and limitations, because what *we* most value are accomplishments.

Do you think that’s true?

Maybe before you answer, you should stop and identify what your weaknesses and limitations are. What is it that has been placed in your life that makes you weaker than you’d be without it – that places limits on you? And let’s make it, as it was in Paul’s case, something that you didn’t necessarily choose. What unchosen weaknesses and limitations are a part of your life?

It could be a physical limitation – some bodily or medical struggle. Something that makes it so that you cannot do certain things that you wish you could do. A medical condition that you did not choose, that hinders you.

It could be a mental or emotional limitation. Maybe an ongoing struggle with anxiety, or depression, or something else. It doesn’t need to be something that is completely debilitating ... but something that limits you in some ways – where there are things you wish you could do, accomplishments you wish you could achieve, but those mental or emotional struggles limit your capacity, limit your resilience, limit you.

It could be a spiritual limitation. A persistent struggle with temptation to sin. A struggle with temptation to doubt. A struggle with temptation to unnecessarily question your assurance. Some spiritual struggle that limits your spiritual accomplishments, that makes you feel spiritually weak.

Or it could be a relational limitation. Now, on the one hand, it could be someone like Paul’s opponents, who is a thorn in the flesh because they sin against you. But it doesn’t need to be that. It could be someone who, simply by some need that they have, puts limitations on you. Paul says that his thorn was a messenger of Satan, meaning Satan used it to weaken him. But the thorn itself need not be sinful. Satan can use brokenness as well as sin to weaken and limit us. And so your weakness or limitation could be a person who is especially reliant on you right now, maybe through no fault of their own.

Maybe it's a friend or loved one with a medical need – a child, a parent, a spouse. Maybe it's someone who struggles with mental or emotional health. Or someone struggling spiritually. But someone, who by the nature of their need from you, limits you. Limits what you might otherwise be able to accomplish. Or, again, maybe it *is* someone who has sinned against you and limited you that way.

Or if not a personal or a relational condition, maybe it's some other situation you face – struggles and limitations outside your control when it comes to your job, or your finances, or your living situation, or something else.

It could be medical, it could be mental or emotional, it could be spiritual, it could be relational, it could be situational. What might it be for you? What is that limitation – that thing that keeps you from accomplishing something you might want to accomplish?

And if you're honest, how do you feel about that limitation? How do you feel about that weakness?

I imagine each of us might feel a range of things, and maybe different things at different times.

But I think that sometimes we *hate* that limitation. If it is a person, we may still love the person, but hate the limits they've brought into our lives. Whatever the source may be, physical, emotional, relational, or something else, we hate the weakness those limitations bring. Maybe it makes us angry sometimes. And when we hate it, the reason we often do is because it limits what we can accomplish. It limits what we can *do*, what we can *achieve*. And like many in our culture, we tend to value accomplishment above all else. A lot like the Corinthians.

It is a common pattern in our culture. We live in a culture that believes that *any* limitation in our lives that *can* be eliminated, *should* be eliminated. And so if the religion you grew up in is limiting your options, is inhibiting your ability to live as you want to live rather than enhancing your ability to live as you want to, you should leave that religion for something else.

Or if your spouse is limiting your ability to achieve what you want to economically or socially, or even just limiting your ability to self-actualize, then you should ... some would say you must ... leave your spouse behind. That is what the idea of "No-Fault Divorce" is all about. It's about those times when no one has broken the marriage vows through adultery, or abuse, or abandonment ... but your spouse is just limiting your potential, keeping you from the life that you think you could achieve without them. Such limitations should be eliminated, our culture tells us.

That is even a significant strain of thought behind the idea of a right to abortion in our culture.

In one supreme court decision upholding a constitutional right to abortion, the justices wrote that "The ability of women to participate equally in the economic and social life of the Nation has been facilitated by their ability to control their reproductive lives." [O'Connor, et al.]

In a different Supreme Court case, in a dissenting opinion arguing *against* Federal restrictions on abortion, Justice Ginsberg wrote that when it comes to abortion, the key issues “center on a woman’s autonomy to determine her life’s course, and thus to enjoy equal citizenship stature” [Ginsberg, §I.A]

Now on one level those ideas sound like common beliefs about equality in our culture. But what are they really saying in these particular instances? What they’re saying is that fertility, pregnancy, a baby – these things can be limitations on a woman’s ability to achieve her full potential in her economic and social accomplishments. And she has a right to eliminate any such limitation, whatever the cost.

Now, we evangelicals see the deep flaws in these ruthless forms in which people are told to eliminate weaknesses and limitations in their lives so that they can devote themselves to the achievements they desire.

But I think we tend to share their disdain for limitations and weaknesses more than we think. We may rightly refuse and fight against the specific *means* of eliminating limitations that I’ve just mentioned ... but in other areas we too want to eliminate them almost just as much.

What does that look like for us?

One thing we might do is to simply deny the weaknesses and limitations that have been put in our lives. We deny that they exist, or we at least deny that they limit us. We insist that whatever it is, it doesn’t affect us. The medical condition won’t keep us from doing anything we want to. The mental or emotional or spiritual struggle can be overcome with a little positivity and willpower. The relational issue need not bother us. We can do it all. *Nothing* will limit us.

But it’s a lie. It *does* limit you. You could accomplish more without it. And often, that fact drives us nuts. Because we hate our weaknesses and limitations. We hate how they make us look. We hate how they make us feel.

Or another thing we might do is feed the lie that we can get to a point where our limitations *will* be eliminated. This could take a few different forms.

We might think that maturity will mean no more weaknesses or limits one day. And to feed this belief, we demand perfect-looking leaders. We demand leaders who can stand before us as confirmation that we too can achieve limitless perfection. That’s basically the problem Paul was facing in Corinth. Paul was personally beset by weaknesses. The false teachers in Corinth projected power, and strength, and perfection. And *that’s* what the Corinthians wanted: a perfect-looking leader to confirm their belief that they too could one day mature enough to a point where they would overcome all their limitations. But Paul’s whole point in this part of his letter is that that is a lie. Instead of trying to fulfill their desire for a perfect-looking leader, Paul flaunts his weaknesses in their face, because he knows that maturity in the gospel does not mean the elimination of all limits and weaknesses.

Another thing we might do is to choose to believe that with the right amount of prayer and devotion Jesus will eliminate the things that limit and weaken us. Well ... maybe. But maybe not. Paul throws that in our face too. The shocking thing from Paul's story about the thorn in his flesh is not just that it was given to him, but that when he, the Apostle Paul, pleaded with the Lord to remove it ... the Lord basically said "No." In some cases, no amount of prayer or devotion will lead to the elimination of the limitations the Lord has brought into our lives. [Wright, 132]

Or some of us want to believe that faith will effectively nullify our limitations – that through faith we will accomplish what our limitations might have prevented. Now ... maybe sometimes that happens. But it doesn't seem to be the case here. Look at Paul's life. Think of not just this mysterious "thorn" he talks about here, but all the hardships the Lord brought into his life: the persecutions, the oppositions, the false teachers, the shipwrecks, the dangerous journeys. God surely assisted the Apostle Paul. But do you really think that if those hardships had all been eliminated – if Paul never had to deal with any of them, with any opponents, or persecutions, or heresies, or shipwrecks, or dangers – do you really think that if all those obstacles were removed that Paul wouldn't have planted even more churches? That he wouldn't have preached even more sermons? Written even more letters? Do you really think the Lord's work strengthening Paul meant that he accomplished just as many things as he would have if none of those barriers had been in his way in the first place? We'll talk a little later about what the Lord must have meant when he said "My power is made perfect in weakness" ... but I don't think it means that if we have enough faith, then we will automatically achieve the same accomplishments we would have if we had faced no obstacles or limitations in the first place.

In all these different ways you and I try to convince ourselves that the limitations we face *can* be eliminated. And we tell ourselves that because we *hate* the idea that the hardships we face will affect or reduce our achievements in this world.

This even comes out in people who *give up* trying because of their limitations – who respond to their limitations with despair. They despair because their limitations will keep them from achievement. And that is worthy of despair in their mind, because they too prize accomplishments above almost everything else.

When we approach life and limitations this way, our assumption is that strength – the kind of strength that matters – is *capability* and *competence*. It is the ability to accomplish what we seek to accomplish. After all, productivity, efficiency – these are the idols of our culture. And in that context weaknesses, limitations on our ability to accomplish – these things are to be despised.

And that's exactly the view that Paul's opponents in Corinth held as well.

But Paul's claim in this letter is that this view is counter to the gospel. Paul confronts it. He mocks it. He shows that by holding to this view, the Corinthians are captive to the esteem of their culture. And then he inverts his opponents' view with the gospel.

Paul's message to the Corinthians here, and the Scripture's message to you and me here, is that Jesus gives us weaknesses and limitations, because what he most values for us is Christ-likeness,

not worldly accomplishments. Christ brings weaknesses and limitations into our lives in order to make us more like him, because *that* is what his chief goal for us is.

Let's look at this in our text.

First, note that it is *the Lord* who has given the thorn to Paul – Paul seems to be using what is known as the “divine passive” in verse seven to indicate that the thorn is from God. [Barnett, 570]

Second, note that the Lord's goal for Paul in giving him this thorn, this weakness, is so that he will be Christ-like, rather than so that he will have a high-achieving ministry. In verse seven we're told that the Lord gave it to him so that he would not become conceited. Think about what that means. The Lord was more concerned with Paul's *humility* than his *accomplishments*. That is significant.

And Paul tells us that this isn't an isolated case. Paul himself takes the rationale of why he has been given the “thorn in his flesh” and he applies it to his other weaknesses as well, in verse ten. Paul sees the same dynamic at work not just in the “thorn”, but in all the weaknesses and limitations the Lord has allowed in his life – all the difficulties and hardships he has faced.

And what is that dynamic? It's in verse nine. The Lord says, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” What does that mean?

As I've already said, one thing that I don't think it means here is that Jesus enables Paul to accomplish things just as he might have without his weaknesses. In other words, I don't think Jesus means the same thing by “power” or “strength” as the false teachers in Corinth mean by “power” or “strength”. When the false teachers speak of strength, they have in mind their capability to achieve, to pile up certain worldly accomplishments. It's a little like the Christian workout clothes that have Philippians 4:13 printed on it – have you seen these? Workout clothes that, quoting the Apostle Paul, say on them: “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” When Paul said that in his letter to the Philippians, Paul did not mean that trusting in Jesus would help you do more crunches or run a faster mile than you might otherwise do. In context, what he meant is that Christ gives him the strength to persevere in the faith; he gives him a holy endurance, a patient Christ-likeness.

And in the same way, in verse nine of our text, I don't think Jesus's point is that if you rely on him you can rack up as many worldly accomplishments as someone else.

We said already that we see from verse seven that the Lord's primary goal is to grow Christ-likeness in Paul. It would seem then that the same idea is at work when he speaks here of “power.” He is not speaking of the power to achieve, but the power to persevere in the faith, the strength of holy endurance, of the strength of Christ-like patience. *That* is the power that the Lord is aiming to make perfect through Paul's weakness.

Paul sees that that is the dynamic at work in this thorn, and in every other weakness and limitation the Lord has put in his life.

The Lord gives Paul weaknesses and limitations because his chief goal for Paul is his becoming more and more like Christ.

And that is why Paul can say in verse ten that for Christ's sake he is content with weaknesses. It's why he says he will boast in them in verse five – not because the weaknesses don't limit him or because they are some kind of accomplishment in themselves, but because Paul has come to share the Lord's goal for him. He too desires growth in Christ-likeness above everything else, including above worldly achievements. And so he can be content with the means that the Lord is using to bring about that Christ-likeness.

It doesn't mean those limitations didn't hurt – they often did. It just meant that Paul could be content with the work Christ was accomplishing in him through those painful weaknesses.

Have you thought of your weaknesses, your limitations, in that way?

How maybe patiently serving that loved one who needs more from you, that loved one who is limiting your potential for worldly achievements – how they might actually be the means by which God is working in you something more valuable than any worldly achievement: the shaping of your heart and life more and more into the image of Christ.

How maybe learning to live faithfully with that physical, or mental, or emotional, or spiritual struggle or limitation, that thing that keeps you from accomplishing all you wish you could accomplish – how maybe by learning to live faithfully with that struggle, God is growing in you a holy endurance of far more value than anything you could accomplish in this world.

How maybe learning to faithfully deal with the people or the situation standing in your way, keeping you from your goals – how maybe that is growing in you the persevering heart of Christ, a heart of love, and kindness, and gentleness, and that that is of more value than the thing your situation or opponents are keeping you from.

If Jesus has given you a hardship, if he has placed an obstacle in your life, can you see how he aims to grow Christ-likeness in you through it, and do you see, as he does, how much more valuable that is than whatever it is you may be missing out on in this world?

It's a little bit like weight lifting. I don't particularly enjoy exercise ... but one type of exercise I did like in high school and a bit in college was weight lifting.

You could think of it like this. Imagine a high school football coach walks into the weight room and sees one of his players lying on the bench, doing bench presses ... doing bench presses with just the weight bar, with no weights on it. And he's counting out loud, with a self-satisfied smile on his face: "97, 98, 99, 100"

And the coach kind of tilts his head, puzzled by what he sees. And he comes over and patiently tells the player to put the bar on the rack. And then he goes over to the weights, and he puts a 45

pound plate and a 20 pound plate each side, increasing the weight from 45 pounds to 175 pounds. And then he tells the player to try again.

And the player tries ... and with a lot of stress and strain he's able to do 10 reps ... a lot less than the 100 he easily did with the 45 pound bar. And the coach helps him get the bar back on the rack once he's done, nods his head and says "Ok – I want you to work with that weight from now on when you bench."

And imagine the high school football player gets mad at him. Why did the coach put the weights on the bar? He was doing great before he did that! He had done 100 reps and probably could have done 100 more! Now he could barely do 10! Why had the coach done that to him?

In that moment, the wise coach and the shortsighted player have very different goals. The player just wants to achieve as many reps as he can – to move that bar up and down a lot and then have a huge number of reps he can brag about. If *that's* his goal, then any weight placed on the bar is an obstacle – it's a limitation to be despised.

But the coach has a different goal. He sees how frivolous the player's goal really is, and tries to shift him to a new one. The coach wants to see the player really grow. He wants to see the player acquire a strength that will really mean something – strength that will have value outside of the weight room. And even when the player begins to be able to do more reps with the 175 pounds, the coach's response will just be to add even more weight. Because the coach has a higher goal in mind than counting reps. And so for him, the weights are not an obstacle – they're an opportunity.

Far too often, we are like that football player. We find some worldly accomplishment, and we invest it with all kinds of meaning, and we want to achieve. We want to pile up those reps and tell everyone about it. And Jesus sees us. And he places a limitation in our lives. He adds some weight to the bar. And we are indignant, because we have the wrong goal.

Like an athlete who has realized the value of what his coach is doing, Paul had learned to see things from the Lord's perspective. He had come to see the frivolousness of the achievements, the worldly strength, that he used to pursue, and he had come to see the weightiness of the Christ-like strength that the Lord wanted to develop in him.

And so he became content with the limitations. He could boast in them. He saw what they were there to do.

The process was still hard. That didn't change. But at least now he shared the right goal, and so he valued the right things.

Do we?

Where have you fixated on the wrong goals? Where has Christ given you opportunities for true growth that you have despised as obstacles to worldly success? Where have you been indignant at the coach for putting weight on the bar?

And what would it take to shift your perspective to Christ's? To desire holiness more than you desire worldly accomplishments?

That is what Paul calls us to pursue in this text. That is the target he calls us to aim for: to value what the Lord values, to see the beauty of holiness and long for it in our own hearts and lives.

Then, when challenges and limitations come, we will remember that God's grace is sufficient for us. Then we will look for *his* strength – the strength of Christ-like endurance – in our lives. Then we will be able to say “I am content with weaknesses [...] for when I am weak, then I am strong.”

May Christ work in our hearts that it might be so for each of us.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

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