

The Secret is Christ in Me

2 Corinthians 13:1-4

In a world where there is so much emphasis on outward appeal, we are bombarded with advertisements, commercials, and infomercials about the secrets to anti-aging, fitness, and beauty. Through the altered images displayed on screens of beautiful, seemingly perfect people, those claiming to have the beauty secrets are making billions off of real people in constant pursuit of an elusive image.

Sadly, many adults and especially young people today get lost in the pursuit of outward beauty, which has left many feeling depressed and empty, since it's impossible to obtain the "look" that they are being led to seek.

I'm all for taking care of our bodies and I don't believe it's sinful to want to look presentable and appealing. The problem arises when we put more emphasis on outward appearance than the adorning of what the apostle Peter referred to as *the hidden person of the heart with the unfading beauty*—virtues that magnify the living Christ in our lives. 1 Peter 3-4

As one Christian blogger noted: "Knowing that our beauty is not an outward [physical] trait, we can have confidence in Christ. Too often, we let our perception of beauty denigrate our confidence and confuse our identity as bearers of Christ's image." Grand Canyon University

As we have learned from our studies in 2 Corinthians, the church of Corinth was being led astray by the false apostles who emphasized outward appeal, like health and wealth, as the measurement of success in life and ministry.

On the other hand, despite not having outward appeal, the apostle Paul knew the secret to inner beauty and contentment in all circumstances. The secret enabled him to overcome outside pressures and display the resurrection life of Jesus. Philippians 4:11-13

Many today feel like, if I looked different, had greater physical strength, or a different set of circumstances I would be more fulfilled in life. But, as Paul discovered, God's strength is made perfect in weakness.

There is power from God that we as Christians can experience in weakness, which not only gives us contentment, but can lead others to ask us about the secret to our inner strength and unfading beauty.

Elizabeth Elliot put it this way: "The secret is Christ in me, not me in a different set of circumstances."

Main idea: Ministry practices shaped by the weakness of the cross releases and radiates resurrection power among God's people.

This morning we will consider 3 cross shaped practices rooted in weakness that radiate the beauty and power of the resurrection life of Jesus.

1. Resurrection power is released to stand before the scrutiny of man.

First, resurrection power is released to stand before the scrutiny of man. Keep in mind that Paul had been forced to defend the integrity of his counter cultural gospel ministry in response to false apostles who infiltrated the church. They operated according to the wisdom of this world, which appeals to our selfish nature, whereas Paul operated in the wisdom of the cross. 1 Corinthians 1:18-25

As Tim Gombis noted, "The logic of the world is oriented by pursuits of power, prestige, accumulation of wealth, and exaltation of some people over others. 'Worldly' ways of doing things involve putting on impressive displays and motivating people to join a movement based on the promise of being associated with a powerful and impressive figure...Whereas the world envisions victory by winning, God conquers the powers of evil by dying. This is utterly backward and ineffective according to the logic of the world. —it is foolishness (1

Corinthians 1:23). The cross, however, is the most strategic depiction of how God operates. It represents his very character, it indicates how he achieves victory, and it determines the mode of life for God's people who embody God's presence as the church."

Now, while Paul was away, his detractors were able to use worldly logic to gain influence in the church and turn some Corinthians away from Paul. Moreover, because the church was distracted by worldly pursuits, they were not dealing with the sexual immorality that was being practiced by some in the church.

So, after addressing the worldliness of the Corinthians by letter, Paul discerns that he will have to deal with these problems in the church in person. Rather than avoiding this troubled church or writing them off, Paul is going to confront the issues head on. Beginning in verse one he writes:

'This is the third time I am coming to you. Every charge must be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.' 2 Corinthians 13:1

Notice that as Paul begins to prepare the church of Corinth for his third visit, he points them to a biblical principle from Deuteronomy 19:15 which explains to the people of God that *"Every charge must be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses."* v.1

Commentators agree that the precise meaning behind Paul's reference to the principle in Deuteronomy is unclear. Some suggests that he is referring to legal principles he had already established "against them" in previous letters or during visits while accompanied by members of his ministry team. Others suggest that Paul is reminding them that the accusations "against him" must be corroborated by two or three witnesses. Personally, I lean towards the latter interpretation.

Either way the application of this principle of corroborating witnesses would have stifled some of the dissension in the church. "Think of how much trouble we could avoid if we insisted on this in our dealing with

each other. It would eliminate many of the fallacious rumors that get started and blow up into something destructive. The idea of having the witnesses actually confront the one they are talking about would silence even more nonsense.” Bruce Goettsche

With this in mind, let me ask you, how many of you enjoy conflicts or having to confront and correct a person who has sinned against you or someone else?

As a Pastor, I’ve had to make decisions that I knew could lead to conflict and I also had to confront individuals creating unnecessary conflict. Doing so has been one of the most difficult and stressful parts of being in pastoral ministry.

Where there’s conflict, whether it be in a church, marriage, work or other relationships, many people choose to take a side or separate themselves from the conflict all together, rather than being an instrument of God to bring restoration and reconciliation.

During the political upheaval and Covid-19 pandemic, many Pastors broke under the pressure that came from conflicts in the church. Others broke due to the intense scrutiny and criticism they received from going along with Covid restrictions or opposing them to some degree.

What I mean by breaking under the pressure is that in some cases many Pastors quit the ministry or attempted to operate in a way where they tried to appease everybody and thereby pleasing nobody, which added more stress.

What we often forget is when you enter ministry or when you become a Christian for that matter, you are signing up to receive unjust scrutiny and criticism not only from the world but sometimes from those you love, including other Christians.

As Paul explained in Colossians 1:24, when we suffer unjust criticism or ridicule because of our crossed shaped lifestyle, we complete the suffering of Christ. That is to say, we are engaging in the same kind of

intentionally shaped service and suffering that Jesus engaged in at the cross.

As we will see more in a moment, faithful pastoral work and Christian ministry in general will involve a form of vicarious suffering. “We don’t suffer to atone for the sins of others (like only Jesus did), but we *are* suffering on behalf of others.”

When you operate according to the wisdom of the cross you must be prepared to receive criticism from the worldly. When we run from the scrutiny or compromise biblical convictions, we are not only forsaking our calling, we are also removing ourselves from a cross shaped position that stirs resurrection power.

The apostle Paul could have easily justified giving up on the church of Corinth and writing them off. He could have said, “These people don’t appreciate all the sweat and tears I’ve given to bring the gospel to them and plant the church. And rather than commending me they’ve allowed these false apostles who haven’t sacrificed anything for their good, to cause them to question my fitness for ministry. I’m done!”

But instead, Paul was willing to face the fiery darts of those under demonic deception and do so not for his sake but to restore the church back to a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. He was willing to stand up to the unjust scrutiny which made way for resurrection power to be manifested.

2. Resurrection power is released to speak to the sin in man.

Secondly, resurrection power is released to speak to the sin in man. Having made the troubled church aware of his upcoming visit and after stating the principle about corroborating witnesses, Paul continues in verse one:

“I warned those who sinned before and all the others, and I warn them now while absent, as I did when present on my second visit, that if I come again I will not spare them—³ since you seek proof that Christ is

speaking in me. He is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful among you.” 2 Corinthians 13:2-3

As I alluded to earlier, sometimes there are difficult conversations that we need to have with people that we would rather avoid. We would rather avoid them because they're uncomfortable, and we are also uncertain about their outcomes.

If you recall, the apostle Paul explained in 2 Corinthians 2:1-4 that he hoped that his previous letters would correct the problems in the church so that when he visited he would not need to have those painful, uncomfortable and difficult conversations.

He reiterates that again at the close of this letter in verse ten. He writes: *“For this reason I write these things while I am away from you, that when I come I may not have to be severe in my use of the authority that the Lord has given me for building up and not for tearing down” 2 Corinthians 13:10*

Notice that Paul attempted to avoid having to come to Corinth wielding a rod (1 Corinthians 4:21). However, it wasn't out of fear; it was out of love that he attempted to avoid another painful visit. He would rather spend his time there fellowshiping with the church and building them up in the Lord, rather than rebuking, correcting, and debating his opponents.

The last time he was there it appears that although he witnessed dysfunction, he exercised great patience and extended much grace. But apparently his detractors mistook his meekness for weakness and convinced others to think the same way. In 2 Corinthian 10:10 he wrote: *“For they say, “His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account.” 2 Corinthians 10:10*

Again, it appears that they mistook his meekness for weakness and thought he was all talk but no action. Indeed, Paul was physically weak and his speech perhaps lacked the volume, flare and dynamics that his opponents displayed.

But Paul had what the super apostles didn't have, namely the heart and power of Christ. When Paul spoke, he didn't rely on his cleverness or oratory skills, but rather on the demonstration of the Spirit and power of God to work in him and in the hearts of the hearers. 1 Corinthians 2:4

Paul had exercised great faith, grace and patience in dealing with the Corinthians. As a result, many had come to repentance, as he noted in 2 Corinthians 7:9-13. But the time had come to confront those who remained in opposition to his apostolic authority and others who remained in unrepentant sexual sin.

So, knowing the accusations against him, Paul writes in verse 3: *"since you seek proof that Christ is speaking in me. He is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful among you."* 2 Corinthians 13:3

When Paul says, since you seek proof that Christ is speaking in me, he's not saying that his primary motivation for coming to Corinth was to prove his detractors wrong. His aim and prayer, as he writes in verses 7-9, was to see all come to repentance and restored to a right relationship with Christ.

Nevertheless, they were also going to get the proof that they were asking for in the form of spiritual correction and discipline. Paul was confident that they would receive the proof that Christ was speaking through him and not because he trusted in his own abilities. Rather, he trusted that despite his physical limitations, Christ would be at work among the Corinthians as he spoke to bring them to repentance (v.3b).

Moreover, when they came to repentance he was confident that the church would no longer put up with the false teachers and the unrepentant. Instead, the church, led by the Spirit of Christ, would exercise the church discipline necessary to eradicate the sin in the church.

Similarly, although we would all rather avoid those difficult conversations because either we feel inadequate or uncertain about

the outcome, or we don't want to make the person feel uncomfortable, we must trust Christ to work in us and among us.

To see Christ's restoring work we must endure the suffering of feeling uncomfortable speaking disagreeable truth, either because we feel inadequate or because we vicariously suffer the humiliation of others. These difficult, uncomfortable, humiliating conversations, which require dying to self, are occasions for the resurrection power of Christ.

Although we may feel unequipped with words at times, we must remind ourselves that the power of the Spirit lives within us and is at work among us. God will give us the grace that we need in those difficult moments to accomplish His purposes.

As Charles Spurgeon put it: "If you really long to save men's souls, you must tell them a great deal of disagreeable truth."

Speaking the truth in love to people does not guarantee that they will come to repentance. Initially, many may despise you for it. But you will have sown the gospel seeds that others can water and that God can increase in His good time.

To see the power of Christ we must suffer the scorn of those who may at first despise us for speaking the truth in the confidence that we are joining with our suffering Savior for His glory and for the good of others.

3. Resurrection power is released through suffering for the salvation of man

Lastly, resurrection power is released through suffering for the salvation of man. Confident of the power of Christ that will be manifested in his cross shaped ministry among the Corinthians, Paul continues: "*For he was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God. For we also are weak in him, but in dealing with you we will live with him by the power of God.*" 2 Corinthians 13:4

Remember that Paul's opponents criticized him for his weakness. And by weakness he means both his physical weaknesses, and also his cross shaped other's oriented ministry practices. "Paul's ministerial style, (as Kent Hughes put it), was that of a humble servant—seemingly weak. He sought no prominence. He rejected show. He sought only souls." This is what Paul is referring to when he speaks of being weak in Christ (v.4b).

But those who criticized him for his weaknesses failed to appreciate that his ministerial posture and practice reflected the sacrificial ministry of Christ who was, as he explained in verse 4, "*crucified in weakness but lives by the power of God.*"

On the cross, Jesus not only absorbed the judgment for our sin but in his ministry and crucifixion he also absorbed the wounds of rejection, denial and betrayal from those he loved.

But although his own disciples whom he served in love for 3 1/2 years forsook him, he didn't forsake them. After his crucifixion and resurrection, he pursued them and with resurrection power he restored them.

Likewise, Paul suffered wounds in the ministry not only at the hands of unbelievers who imprisoned him and beat him, but from fellow believers who he brought to Christ. But in the love and power of Christ, which was manifested in his life through weakness, Paul did not forsake the Corinthians, he didn't give up on them. Instead, he pursued them. He went after them.

And although the spiritual condition of the church required that he come with the authority of the living Christ in him to deal with the wolves in sheep's clothing and the unrepentant among them, we will see in the coming weeks that his aim was restoration.

Paul wasn't going there to exact revenge or to demand retribution. But to lead the church back to a pure devotion to Christ so that His presence and power would also be more fully manifested among them.

This power and authority that Paul had in his life came as a result of his cross shaped ministry. If he had not by the grace and love of Christ absorbed the wounds he received from the Corinthians, he would have either written them off, given up on gospel ministry or sought revenge.

In an article titled, “What Do You Do With Your Wounds, Pastor?” John Mark Comer writes, “It goes without saying, it’s a hard time to be a pastor. The past few years were like a battle, and many of us are walking wounded. Endless angry emails, people leaving our church, people we thought we could trust who—it turned out—we couldn’t. I don’t need to go on.

It’s easier than ever to hate the work you’re called to do or to resent the people you’re called to love and lead. But it must also be said, that while it’s socially acceptable to talk about how many churches have been hurt by their pastor (and this is a problem we have to take seriously), we rarely openly talk about the reciprocal truth: *How many pastors have been hurt by their churches.*

There’s a counter-intuitive psychology where people in pain attack their caregivers; think of how children lash out at their parents, even as they look to their parents to comfort and console them.

I’m not saying that “We’re the parents, and they’re the children,” but there is a parental role we play, as spiritual fathers and mothers, and part of that is to absorb other people’s pain, and not give it back in kind.

Anyone who has ever been hurt by a pastor or church leader carries that memory in their body, and your very presence as a pastor or church leader can trigger it. As pastors, because we’re a walking target, people often process their fear by blaming us.

And often, their critique is valid; even if they are just as responsible for the problem as we are. But still, there is a sting: When you’re trying to

love and serve somebody, and nothing you do is ever good enough, and you get accused and attacked for your efforts.

This will often sabotage any kind of bold, courageous leadership, which is the very thing we need to get out of a mess like the one we're in!

So What Do You Do? I can't tell you how often (in particular over the last year) I've felt the temptation just to be silent and keep my head down because anything I say or do is criticized. But that's a temptation rooted in fear (specifically the fear of other people's opinions of me) and emotional self-preservation, *not* in self-giving love.

The invitation of Jesus is to stick my head out of the trench, knowing I *will* get hit, but still doing so in love. **Which is, of course, something the Apostle Paul did.**

Paul seems to be saying [in his letters] that leadership is a form of vicarious suffering; We're not suffering for others' atonement (like only Jesus did), but we *are* suffering on behalf of others.

Bonhoeffer, before he was killed by the Gestapo, echoed something similar: "Even though Jesus Christ has already accomplished all the vicarious suffering necessary for our redemption, his sufferings in this world are not finished yet... Those suffering in the power of the body of Christ suffer in a vicariously representative action 'for' the church-community, 'for' the body of Christ. They are permitted to bear what others are spared."

As pastors, we're allowing pain and wounding and even death into our bodies, so that life and healing and blessing may flow through our bodies to those we pastor. And, at the risk of sounding like a martyr, this is a high and holy task.

Jesus absorbed the pain of others – including you and me – the projection, the blame, and scapegoating of others. He let his body become a graveyard for hate. Centuries before Jesus was born, the prophet Isaiah (in Isaiah 52-53) sees what it will take to heal the world;

it will take a suffering love and sacrificial death. This is the way of Jesus – not power *over* through coercion or control, but suffering love.”

Conclusion

Beloved, only cross shaped actions, attitudes and speech patterns toward others can bear resurrection fruit in the community of faith. “God only pours out resurrection life on Jesus’ cross and on modes of life shaped by it. It can be no other way.” Timothy Gombis.

May the love of the cross shape us to be a people who win others to Christ with a courageous and suffering love that radiates the resurrection power and beauty of Jesus for the salvation of others and to the glory of His name.