



Remember The Paradox

2 Corinthians 12:11-21

Grace Church | 2.29.20

I will not lie, the passage today is a difficult one. It was difficult to study, difficult to apply. Here in our passage we see Paul rounding the bases on his satirical fools speech, and preparing to make his closing arguments to the Corinthians. He repeats many themes from earlier in his letter, reminding them that he is coming soon to visit, and this letter is to prepare them for his visit. And the tone of this portion of this epistle is somewhat unique. It's deeply interpersonal: Paul uses the word "I" and "you" again and again. Make no mistake, this was intended for the Corinthians. The tone also is one of rebuke, correction, and warning. And in all of this ancient interpersonal back and forth, we are tempted to abstract. Where are we in such a text?

And yet, here is what we remember. **First, the Word of God is living and active.** It is not just a dead document where we glimpse history, it is a living sword where we glimpse God. So we come to this interpersonal exchange ready to find God's words there, not just Paul's. But **secondly, we also remember that we have been in this epistle for 21 weeks.** We have wrestled with this letter, taken it to heart, felt its effects on our church culture, our personal faith. It's part of us. And this is the beauty of the Word of God. It's power comes not primarily in pithy statements or in one liners. God has not compiled a supernaturally charged book of inspirational quotes or passages but of letters, poetry and stories. We find the power of the Word when we are patient.

Next week we finish our time in 2 Corinthians. And I am proud of you, I believe you have been patient with it's truth. So before we take next week to close out our series with application, I want this morning to serve as a way of reminder for us. Let's take Paul's words and use them to reflect on our time in this book. The subtitle of our time in 2 Corinthians is *paradox of weakness*. And week after week, our prayer is that this paradox has been hammered into our heads and our hearts. The great paradox of weakness we find in 2 Corinthians can be summed up by Paul's words from last week in 12:10, "For when I am weak, then I am strong." This morning let's remember three things about this paradox: 1) it is essentially apparent, 2) it is for your upbuilding, not your burden, 3) it is meant for unity and repentance.



Remember the paradox of weakness is essentially apparent (11-13).

This is our first reminder in our text. If you remember from the last two weeks, we saw Paul taking on a satirical tone with the Corinthians, essentially playing the fool and acting just like his opponents, the false “super-apostles” acted. But instead of building his resume on his personal accomplishments, he built it on his suffering and weakness, effectively showing just how silly the super-apostles seemed. Last week he went so far as to mention a glorious vision that blows every other vision out of the water, but turned the tables again. This vision of the throne room of God is not where his power comes from, but rather from a “thorn” in his side, a nagging weakness permitted by God for his dependence. By acting like a fool in this way, he has overturned the narrative of the false apostles self-boasting. So we see in verses 11-13 Paul closing out his “Fool’s Speech”. **Read verse 11.** Paul is reminding the Corinthians that the reason he felt he had to take up this satirical tone and act as a fool was no because he wanted to. Rather, he felt like it was his only option. The Corinthians should not have needed it, they should have commended Paul and dismissed the false apostles, but they didn’t, effectively “forcing” Paul into this satirical boast.

Paul wants them to see here that the paradox of weakness that he has shown most clearly in his foolish speech was actually apparent all along, if the Corinthians had just been paying attention. **Look at the last part of verse 11 again.** Paul notes that even though he counts himself as nothing, even though his boast is not in himself, he has never been inferior to these “superlative apostles”. We see this fleshed out in **verse 12-13**. We might chalk up the Corinthians failure to trust Paul to a lack of evidence. Perhaps Paul didn’t show them the same gospel that he did in other places? Perhaps he had an off day? But that isn’t the case. Paul notes that the signs of the true apostles were a specific miraculous power that authenticated their ministry. Just as Jesus’ miracles showed his true identity and gave authority to his message, it worked the same way with the apostles. They were the ones who received the message of the gospel directly from Jesus, and they also received power from the Holy Spirit to validate that message. We don’t know exactly what kind of signs and miraculous works Paul performed in Corinth, but we do know that these miracles were present in his ministry, a sign that the gospel he preached was straight from Christ himself and to be trusted. In Acts we see him heal a lame man, cast out demons, heal the sick with simply his handkerchief, resist poison, even bring a young boy from the dead. And when he came to Corinth, he was not suddenly powerless. He showcased the power of the gospel with his apostolic works, just like he did everywhere else. He tells the Corinthians in verse **13** that he favored them just as every other church, expect in one way: they were not asked to support him financially. So he satirically apologizes, asking their forgiveness for a grievance that they have invented.

What is Paul getting at here? He is reminding the Corinthians of exactly what happened. They were faced with two realities when it came to their interactions with Paul. On one hand, he performed miraculous works that seem to authenticate his apostleship and his message. But on the other hand, he is outwardly weak, unimpressive in speech, and does not boast in himself. And so what did the Corinthians conclude from this evidence? That apparently Paul’s weakness cancels



out his authenticating spiritual power. See, the paradox was there from the very beginning. **Look at the beginning of verse 12 again.** Paul says the signs were performed among them with *utmost patience*. This may also be translated as endurance. When the Corinthians were slow to believe, Paul did not rush them. When they were slow to trust, he had patience and endurance. He persisted throughout persecution and affliction and suffering. He performed his miracles in his weakness, and as we learned last week, through his weakness.

So the Corinthians are without excuse. Paul is not springing this new spiritual concept of strength in weakness. It was there from the very beginning. Instead of seeing his patient endurance as cancelling out his apostolic witness, they should have seen it affirming it. And so Paul is stern with them here, so they will not make the same mistake twice when he comes back to see them. Remember he says, that this paradox of weakness is essential, and it's not hiding. It should be apparent in every Christian's life and witness.

And this is our reminder too, church. After next week we will move on from 2 Corinthians. We will preach a stand alone sermon for Easter, and then move to the book of Lamentations. But we cannot forget the lessons learned. The paradox of weakness is not some footnote of the Christian life that we pull out when we need it. It is essential, it's the way we validate our ministry. We may not possess the same apostolic gifting and miraculous power as Paul, but we are given spiritual fruit and spiritual gifts that authenticate our gospel message. Our hospitality should authenticate the gospel. Our rock solid faith in every circumstance should authenticate the gospel we preach. The way we help those in need should authenticate our gospel message. But in all this, we remember that if our weakness is not also on display, we've lost the point. The world should see our church and see a paradox. On the one hand, they should see our supernatural power through the Spirit. On the other hand, they should see the reality of our weakness and suffering. And instead of trying to pit those against each other, we should set the example for how this paradox is the very blueprint of faithfulness as a Christian.

This virus will test us in this way. Can the paradox of weakness be apparent in our lives, even after we have moved on from 2 Corinthians? Will we see it as essential, as always apparent? I don't know about you, but I am tempted now more than ever to comparison. My social media feed is full of other pastors and churches, and I wonder every day how I measure up. Am I doing enough in this time, am I praying enough, leading well? And I begin to think that I must measure my faithfulness in production value, business, or ministry creativity, instead of by the paradox of weakness. Remember what we have learned from this epistle: your faithfulness in ministry is measured by Christ's sufficiency in you, not by your own sufficiency. We learned this all the way back in chapter 3:4-5...

Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God,

Remember the paradox of weakness is for your upbuilding, not your burden (14-19).



As he prepares the Corinthians for his upcoming visit, he wants them to remember his heart for them. He has been firm at times, rebuking and correcting and pointing out faults. It may seem like Paul just wants the Corinthians to be excessively burdened by this letter. It may seem to us that this paradox of weakness is actually more of a burden than self-confidence, since it requires us to humble ourselves. And it may be for some of you, that our time in 2 Corinthians has not felt freeing. It's been hard to wrestle with your weakness. I can understand that, and the Corinthians could too. So let's see how Paul reminds them. **Read 14-15.** Paul is getting ready to come again, and he wants them to be ready. But he reminds them of his motives here. Remember that we learned in chapter 11 that Paul preached free of charge to the Corinthians, refusing to take up any offering for himself. He is not coming to collect money for himself, he is not writing this letter to soften their hearts so he can take a bigger offering. He is not advocating for weakness and generosity so that he can profit off of it. Look at what he says: "I seek not what is yours by you". His concern is for the heart of the Corinthians, not for their money. His reasoning is fairly simple: he feels as if he is their spiritual father. He instigated and planted their church, and feels responsible for their welfare. Paul isn't an entrepreneur. He doesn't plant churches so that he can retire comfortably from their support. He plants churches ready and willing to provide for them. So he says, you can trust my motives and also my message. It's not for my sake, but for your sake that I write.

Let's read on to see more of this in **verses 15-18.** Paul's opponents had convinced the Corinthians that he was after their money. Perhaps they said he sent Tirus to collect his money for him? He wasn't bold enough to ask for himself, so he sent Titus to gather a collection for Jerusalem and he could take a little off the top. So you see, this "weakness" he is boasting in is really just a way to butter you up and open up your pockets. But Paul denies this strategy outright. He says that just as he would gladly spend all he had and be spent for their sake, so Titus acted in the same way. In all his dealings, he is beyond reproach. And if no ulterior motive exists for his writing, then it must be clear what we find in **verse 19.** Paul answers the rhetorical question on the Corinthians doubt by reminding them that it is not the Corinthians he is trying to please, but God. God is the one to whom he must give an account, and so he is in no way buttering up the Corinthians. His aim, as he already has said in chapter 5:9, is to please God. So he addresses the Corinthians with a warm and fatherly title: beloved. This dysfunctional, mistrusting church is his beloved. And all that he has said in this letter, his rebuke and his teaching and his attempts to display for them the paradox of weakness, have all been for their upbuilding. Not one piece of it was for his own gain, but only that they would grow stronger in Christ.

And here is what we must remember, church. Operating in our weakness is scary, because it exposes us. We don't like to display our weakness, because we are so often afraid that someone will take advantage of us. We put on airs to protect ourselves. We are slow to trust one another, or our pastors, or the word of God, or even Christ himself, because trust leaves us vulnerable. And make no mistake, when we close the last chapter of this book for now, we will be tempted to forget the paradox of weakness in an effort to protect ourselves. But here is what we must remember.



This paradox of weakness, this boasting in weakness, is not to burden you. It's not to expose you to harm and hurt. It's for your upbuilding.

Ultimately, when we embrace the paradox of weakness, it is not just to others that we are exposing ourselves, but to Jesus. It's his power that is made perfect in our weakness, it's his glory that we saw in chapter 2 is being revealed through our weakness. And here is why we can trust that ultimately this word is true and good and helpful and not a burden: Because we can trust God. By the Spirit, God may come to us bearing the discipline of the Father at times. There may be rebuke and exposure and conviction. There will also be suffering and weakness when we trust him. But the Father is not a burden giver, he is a burden taker. He is not expecting you to provide for him. He is not after your comfort or joy, as if by the weakness of the gospel he is simply buttering you up to take advantage of you. No, the loving and sovereign Father knows what is best for his children, and he can be trusted. In Christ, God showed that he was willing to spend it all. He gave his most valuable possession unto death, his son. And that Son was spent for your good, his life and body and blood spilled out and spent for your soul. The good news of the gospel is that God has already proven to us in Christ that he can be trusted. And so when his word calls us to expose ourselves to weakness and rejoice in it, we trust him. We trust that through our weakness and suffering he is preparing us, as we learned in chapter 4, for an eternal weight of glory beyond compare.

Do we trust Christ when we are isolated? When sickness divides the world? Do we trust the way of the cross? Are we willing to spend and be spent for the sake of one another? What might that look like in this time? And Let me ask you this: for what purpose does God have us in this time, where we are unable to be together? Isn't so that that we can learn how much need we have? How we can bear with one another and be spent for one another? So Can you trust that his way is good, that his cross has proven it to you? I love this hymn by John Newton. It's called "I Will Trust and Not Be Afraid". Listen as I share two of the verses.

His love, in time past,
Forbids me to think
He'll leave me at last
In trouble to sink:
Each sweet Ebenezer
I have in review
Confirms His good pleasure
To help me quite through.

Determined to save,
He watched o'er my path,
When Satan's blind slave,
I sported with death;
And can he have taught me
To trust in his name,
And thus far have brought me,
To put me to shame

Trust Christ, the one who spent and was spent. He has not brought you this far in grace to put you to shame. He is not wearing you down for some trick or some dark plan. His plan is for your good. His way, the way of weakness, is not a burden. It's for your upbuilding.

Remember the paradox of weakness is meant for unity and repentance (20-21).



Our last reminder comes to us as we look back on the lessons of 2 Corinthians and remember that our paradox of weakness is a mutual one. From the beginning of the book in chapter 1, we saw how our suffering is meant to drive us towards comfort for one another. We think of all the common ground when we understood the significance of being “jars of clay” or “clay pots”: fragile, unimpressive. And we remember how our calls to generosity in chapters 8 and 9 were calls to care for the whole body of Christ together. So it makes sense that Paul fears that if he comes again and the Corinthians have not taken this letter to heart, there won’t be unity in the body. **Read in verse 20.** Here Paul has a list of his fears: quarreling, gossip, anger, hostility, jealousy, slander, conceit, disorder. What do all these fears have in common? There are sins of disunity. Paul is worried that if the Corinthians continue to reject him, it will lead to a disunited, quarreling church. He knows that the paradox of weakness is the great leveling field. How can you quarrel when humility is the culture of a people? How can you have jealousy, when no one boasts of their accomplishments but is honest about their failure? How can you have anger and hostility among people who have learned to suffer together and comfort one another in Christ? How can there be slander and gossip when no one member is afraid of his or her blind spots being revealed? How can there be conceit and disorder when each of us are looking out for one another with genuine concern for others more than ourselves?

We’ve said this before, and we will say it again: the church that is weak together is strong together. Disunity flourishes in the darkness of pride and comparison. And church, we must remember the purpose of the paradox is that we could be a church with one mind and one mission. It’s so that we could be true and effective ambassadors of Christ, which we saw in chapter 5. When we embrace together our weakness, we are able to represent Christ together, not ourselves. Our mutual call to the unbeliever is “be reconciled to God!”. Our evangelism is more effective in unity, our holiness as a church is only accomplished together. We make it to the weight of glory and our heavenly dwelling of chapter 5 when we do it together.

But the paradox of weakness is not just meant for unity, it’s also meant for repentance and holiness. **Look at verse 21.** Paul’s second fear is that the Corinthians will not have heeded the words of his letter, and when he comes again they will be unrepentant. Instead of mercifully calling those in immorality to repentance as he instructs in chapter 2, they will sit on their hands and do nothing. Remember when we taught on the importance of accountability in chapter 2? This is what is in view here. We must be willing to call one another out in love and to open up the floodgates of grace when we repent. We also think of Paul’s instruction about godly grief in chapter 7. We saw by the example of the text that we should not reject the grief of loving rebuke when it comes, for it is the door to repentance and life. When we expose our weakness, we are able to grieve rightly over the parts that are due to our sinfulness and take rebuke as a gift and not an attack. This is the power of the paradox of weakness: it helps us to kill sin and be a community of holiness. This paradox is meant for repentance.



I will be honest again here if that is okay. Preaching to a more or less empty room is difficult. I know so many of our people are watching, but it feels as if my words are empty. And when I cannot see you on Sunday, I do have some of the same fears that Paul does. I worry that this time of isolation would make us disunified. I worry that all the progress I believe we have made in that front, all the ways we have supported each other, will suffer. I fear comparison and gossip and isolation. And I fear too unholiness. Sin breeds in isolation. The more time we spend at home and idle, the more our guard is let down. The more time we spend away from one another, the less accountability we have, and the fewer opportunities for godly grief and repentance. I fear that normal spiritual disciples will be swallowed up by anxious hearts checking news feeds and social media but failing to run to God in prayer. I fear all of this, truly. Paul felt fear that when he came again it would not be what he expected. I fear that when we get to meet again that also might be the case. This virus has exposed my fear. Not of suffering per se, but of difficulty. And I just wanted to confess that to you church, because as I look back on our time in 2 Corinthians, there is so much to remember. There is so much truth I forget so easily truth I studied and preached and heard from other faithful preachers in our congregation.

But friends, let us not forget. The word of the Lord is powerful and active, like a sword that pieces us through. We may be hearing it on a screen, but it's power isn't lost. You may be drowned right this instant in the screaming and yelling of kids you can't control, but the power of the paradox of weakness isn't lost. The power to fight against fear doesn't come from within, it comes from the paradox of the gospel. When we remember that even our fears act as thorns that drive us to the arms of Christ, they become far less terrifying. When we remember that our weakness is not a mistake, but a gift, we are emboldened for this time. When we remember that our heaviest burdens in the gospel become a means to our upbuilding, nothing can stop us. When we remember that God is working in us and through us even now a unifying love and a spirit of repentance and holiness, we face every situation expectant for growth in godliness. Church, we have to remember the paradox of weakness in every situation it is for us, in the normal time in the special time in the fearful time in the calm time. When we go the way of Christ, the way of the cross, the way of weakness, that is when we are closest to his heart.

My fears don't get the final word here. They are shortsighted fears. When we see one another again, I trust we will find a unique unity. When we see one another again, I trust we will find that our time alone brought us to our knees in repentance more often, not less. And in that moment, when my fears are destroyed, it won't be because we are a really great church whose really great at this whole quarantine thing. It will be because God wrought some supernatural paradox in the midst of our weakness. And when the day comes when we can see that tangibly, let's not forget it.

