

His Grace is Enough
2 Corinthians 12: 7-10

**First Presbyterian Church
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Welcome to one of the largest 12-step meetings in town! Hello, my name is Gerrit, and I'm a recovering independent. Did you know that you've come to a Recovery meeting? It's true. If you believed solely in your own self-sufficiency you wouldn't be here. If you believed there is no one higher than yourself, you'd have no need to enter a house of worship. If you believed in your ability to solve your life, and death, by your own smarts, this hour would be irrelevant. But everyone who walked through these doors this morning has enough humility at least to entertain the possibility that there may be a God who made me, claims me, and can redeem me.

The 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, of course, arose from the principles embedded in Christian faith. They can actually help us see just what treasure we have in Christ. Doesn't this sound like your faith: 1) We admitted we were powerless. 2) We came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity. We are unable. God is able. The immediate problem for some people is alcohol or another kind of addiction. But the reality is that these steps apply to all of us. Life began anew when I admitted I cannot create my own fulfillment. I cannot cleanse my conscience from guilt. I cannot make the world right. I cannot overcome death. I cannot fill up the emptiness or loneliness in my soul. Over these powers I am powerless. But I came to believe that a Power greater than myself could restore me to sanity. His name is Jesus Christ, and he has forged a new path to life for a lost humanity.

The presenting problem for many of us today is stubborn independence. I want to be self-reliant. I want to create my own meaning, blaze my own trail, and solve my own problems. I expect God to be happy if I'm happy. He's surely pleased if I'm doing and getting what I want. And I'd like him to be ready to help me if there are any bumps in a road. I am by nature and practice an independent. But I have come to admit that in reality I am powerless to solve my own life. I am not in control. I cannot overcome sin, death and emptiness. I make a terrible god. Life changed and continues to change when I rely on a Power greater than myself to restore me. As I said, I'm a recovering independent. I'm learning to be a reliant son of my heavenly Father.

These truths are written deeply into the story of the God who made us and came to save us. This is what Paul is writing about in today's passage. Paul recalls the time 14 years earlier when he had a visionary experience. He found himself in the presence of God. He saw marvels too wondrous to describe. He heard truths too sacred to speak of later. Paul got the experiential proof of God's reality many of us long for. He had the kind of spiritual encounter people today write best-selling books about. But he would only speak of it in this one place, and he gave no details. Ecstatic spirituality is not what his ministry was about.

In fact, Paul tells us that the Lord made sure Paul didn't get too full of himself after this vision. He says that God gave him "a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan sent to harass him." That's pretty wild. God sent a messenger of the Accuser to harass his servant Paul. He calls it a thorn in the flesh. That word could just have easily been translated as a stake, or a spike like they drive into people on a cross. It's sharp, painful and debilitating. People have speculated all these centuries about what this thorn in the flesh might have been. Perhaps some physical disability: a disfigurement from the many beatings he received. Or a repulsive eye problem he mentions in Galatians. Or perhaps it was relational: his continual rejection by his own people, or a persistent adversary. We don't know precisely. And that's what makes his experience so applicable to all of us! The actual thorn doesn't matter. We can all relate to the image. We're dealing with spikes in the gut. Piercings. Inside us and out. In relationships, in the body, in finances and projects.

Paul didn't want this thorn. It sapped his strength. It made life hard. He named it. This is a stake that's making me bleed. This spike comes with the accusations from Satan that I won't be able to do what I have to do. He named its reality and its pain. And then he prayed that God would take it away. Our passage says, "Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me." He told God straight up what he wanted: get rid of this. I think the phrase three times represents seasons of intense prayer. Wrestling with God. Being direct. Striving. Pleading. Hoping. These three times might have happened over months or years. We go straight to God about the thorns.

But then there comes a time when you realize this is just how it is. There will be no miraculous deliverance. Only grace to help in time of need. The new normal is here. Paul then had another spiritual experience. The Lord spoke to him. And Paul was allowed to speak of it. The Lord spoke in the usual, efficient, succinct way that a word from God arrives, "My grace is sufficient for you; for my power is made perfect in weakness." That's all. No news about the duration of the

thorn. No information about the future. No promises of particular outcomes. Just news about the present moment. Right now you have a thorn. Right now my grace is sufficient for you. My grace is enough. You may be satisfied in this moment in the very presence of the thorn. I can't help but think about Psalm 23: You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. My cup runs over. The enemy is not removed. The sufficiency of the Lord in the very presence of the enemy makes him feel that his cup is overflowing with goodness. There's a mystery here. How can I find that full-feeling, that full-fulfillment in the midst of suffering? The Lord gave the reason. *My grace is sufficient for you. For my power is made perfect in weakness.* In the weakness of your affliction, my power flourishes in you. God's life in us reaches its goal as thorns and stakes demand that we rely on him.

Hello, I'm Gerrit and I'm a recovering independent. I came to admit that I was powerless over the thorn in my flesh. Then I came to realize that a Power greater than myself could restore me even with the thorn in place. I had to surrender to that power. I had to leave off being independent and become reliant. I had to believe that God's grace was sufficient for the present moment, and to draw upon it. I can't but God can, and does, give me life and joy and hope even while the stake is piercing me.

So what is this "grace" Paul is talking about? What is this "thing" that suffices to fill us even when life is empty rotten hard? Let's think first about what grace is *not*. Grace is not a commodity. Grace is not a substance. The church has often gotten that confused. We ask for a particular grace for some activity. Or ask for grace like an energy drink to give us a little boost. That's not grace. It's not a thing. But neither is grace just an abstract concept. It's not just an idea. I was always taught that grace is "unmerited favor." That's true, but that's not enough. That leaves me cold. Grace is more than a substance or an idea.

Grace is Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is what happens when God acts *graciously* toward the creatures he made who went astray. When Paul writes of grace, he means the whole story of Jesus. He means God's entering the world as one of us in Jesus Christ. He means Jesus' enacting God's love in his ministry of healing and teaching and praying. He means God so loved the world that he graciously gave his only begotten Son. Grace is Jesus' dying on the cross in helplessness and weakness and rejection and scorn in order to take our sins upon himself. Grace is Jesus' rising from the dead, defeating the power of evil and opening everlasting life to all who are joined to him. Grace is the promise that Jesus will return to set all things right. Grace is "Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again."

We know this is what Paul had in mind because just a few verses later in chapter 13 he gives the formula, “For Jesus was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God.” Jesus received the thorn in his flesh, the spikes that pierced him all the way to death in weakness. But God’s power is perfected in human weakness. His faithful dying led to his rising. Jesus rose in the power of his Father to be the new man, humanity recreated and ready for eternal life.

So Jesus himself is the story of grace. Giving himself in obedience unto the weakness of death. Rising in the power of his Father who declared him to be Lord of all. Jesus forged a new path for humanity. He fell deeper than anyone had ever fallen, into the hell of God-forsakenness. He rose higher than any human being had ever gone, to the right hand of the Father. He dug the human story deeper. He took the human destiny higher. We live now in the tracks he ran. We follow in the trail he blazed. We live inside his story, and experience God’s power and purpose and sufficiency *according to the same pattern*: weakness then strength, dependence then power, reliance then sufficiency.

We don’t ever, ever get life arranged where we stand in our own strength, independent and needing no one, not even God. We are never able to say, “I am and there is no one besides me.” I know. I am a recovering independent. I have come to admit that I am powerless to save myself and I rely on a Power greater than I. I have surrendered to the one who for my sake, died and was raised.

Earlier this fall, one of our members was having some nasty internal issues. He was losing weight and just didn’t feel right. The biopsy revealed what he feared. Cancer. It would have to be cut out. To be followed by chemo and radiation. In a blink, his life would be jerked up by the short string. The stake in the flesh was inside him.

Here’s what he reports: I looked down inside myself to find strength. I told myself to take courage. To gear up for the fight. I had faced obstacles in life and work before. I’m an achiever. I’ve always been independent. So I told myself to get it together. And I realized I had nothing. I couldn’t find any strength. I couldn’t summon the courage. I was free falling into the darkness. If this depended on me I was lost. And I got scared. So I cried out. Not a little cry. Not a holy prayer. I cried out from soul, “God help! God save me! I can’t do this alone. Help me.” And almost immediately the burden lifted. I can’t explain it. I was at peace. I was in God’s hands, and he held me. I still had to face surgery. I knew I could still die. Or be drastically debilitated. Of course I didn’t want that. But I knew whatever happened, I wasn’t alone. And it was enough.

It's crucial to know that this guy felt the peace and the joy *before* any results. Because it all could have gone either way. He gave up relying on himself and relied on Christ. The Lord was there for him. Win or lose, live or die, God's grace was sufficient. His power was working through weakness. As it turned out, the outcome was better than hoped. A noninvasive surgery got all of the monster and a mild chemo is all he's enduring.

Now he reflects on what this experience has meant to him. He says he has no more time for the whiners and the haters. Life is too precious to be freaking out over trivial things. He savors life. And now finds doors open constantly to witness to the sufficiency of grace. People ask me how I stayed so upbeat through all this. And I just tell them. I can't. God can. And did. It's the most natural thing in the world. I had nothing. God gave me everything when I cried out to him.

My grace is sufficient for you. My power is made perfect in weakness. So Paul says, "Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me...For when I am weak, then I am strong."

We gather here as a pack of recovering independents. In his mercy, God brought each of us to the place where we had to cry out, "I am powerless. You have the power to restore me. I surrender to you."

So we gather knowing that of all the things we have to be thankful for, the supreme gift is Christ's grace. For grace is Jesus Christ. The one who went all the way down in weakness in order to lift us all the way up in resurrection power. He is enough, more than enough.