

WEAKNESS AND POWER

I know many, many people whose favorite Bible passage is the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians. I don't think I know a single person, down through all the years, whose favorite passage is the thirteenth chapter of *Second* Corinthians. The thirteenth chapter of Second Corinthians is not my favorite Bible passage either. Clearly Paul is in one of those uncomfortable fights over what the church is really for and about. We have them around here from time to time too, though not at the moment, as far as I know. So this is nobody's favorite context, and therefore nobody's favorite passage. But I am fascinated by the theme of weakness and power that keeps surfacing all through the Bible. Indeed, apart from this theme, the entire New Testament would become incomprehensible. In some ways, it is very impressive that this theme comes out even in the midst of this mundane church fight. We touched on it last week, in a very different setting – trying to fathom Paul's perspective on the "thorn in the flesh." "*My power is made perfect in weakness.*" (II Corinthians 12:9) While we resonate with this principle from time to time, we also let it fade out of our consciousness all too frequently. At least it fades out on me unless I keep constant vigilance. It is endlessly annoying how quickly I can slip from the Christian perspective back into the more normal views of the world around me. In a reverse way, this keeps reminding me of how marvelous and wondrous the New Life in Christ Jesus really is. What Paul calls "the Mind of Christ" is truly very different from "the Mind of Our World." On the other hand, I get pretty envious, at times, of my more conservative brethren, who get converted in one moment, and then keep this new perspective unerringly and without struggle for the rest of their lives.

Anyway, the thirteenth chapter of Second Corinthians speaks of this incredible theme of weakness and power, and how God can work far better through our weakness than he can through our strength. That is mind-blowing when we stop to consider that almost all of us are working hard all the time to get stronger, more effective, more in control – more powerful in one way or another. We want to have a greater impact on life and people, on the communities we live in, even on the church, so we keep trying harder. Almost never do we think about the advantages of using our weakness to get any of this done. As I have already confessed, the principle itself keeps fuzzing out on me. "*When I am weak, then I am strong.*" (II Corinthians 12:10) Excuse me? Is this really part of the

Christian Life and WAY? Or is this just one of those sweet pleasantries that sound good but we don't really mean it – and certainly have no intention of taking it seriously?

By the way, there are a lot of religious pleasantries floating around. People like the sound of them, and even feel inspired by them, but they do not help us to move into the Christian WAY. The thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians is a great illustration of this very thing. It's one of the fabulous passages that everybody knows, or at least has heard of: *“If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends”*

Only, this passage is so popular and well-loved because most people don't “get it.” They think it's talking about *their* love, if you can imagine. They like to read it at weddings, as if it has something to do with romantic love. They get all teary-eyed to contemplate the wonders of their passion and emotional attachments, which in most cases will stay patient and kind and live above jealousy and arrogance – until the next time something annoys them, threatens them, or seems really unfair to them.

This passage is not about my love, it is about the love of Christ. This is the Apostle Paul speaking – a man who didn't think there was time for romance or marriage because the “End of the Age” was so close – and he lives to tell people of the Gospel of Christ's love for them. That is what he thinks is important. “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels and do not know the love of Christ – do not know how much God in Christ Jesus loves me – I am nothing ... I have missed it all ... I cannot walk the New Life. If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels but have not claimed Christ's love for me – do not have Christ's love inside me, guiding and directing and forgiving and freeing me – I am nothing.”

Check it out. Is your love patient and kind – never jealous or arrogant or rude? And will reading this passage enable you to have

all these qualities in your own love? That is, by having this lined out, can you make yourself live up to it? Even if you stick this passage on your refrigerator door and decide every morning to live by its precepts, does that work for you? Does that enable you to demonstrate and illustrate such a love? Apart from the transforming love of Christ Jesus working from within, we have no chance, and no clue. We are “nothing,” from the Kingdom’s perspective, without the mercy and love of Jesus to help us. You may not agree with this, but you can be very sure that this is what Paul meant when he wrote this passage. But now this passage has become famous and very well-loved in our world because the world doesn’t “get it.” People have reduced it down to what they want to hear, and wish were true. There are a lot of religious pleasantries floating around, and some of them obscure the Gospel a lot more than they reveal it.

Why does this remind me of a story? An old man was sitting on a bench in the mall when a young man with spiked hair came over and sat down beside him. The boy’s hair was yellow and green and orange and purple. He had black makeup around his eyes. The old man looked at him calmly but steadily, neither turning away nor shaking his head. “What’s the matter, old man?” the boy asked. “Haven’t you ever done anything wild in your life?” The old man answered, “Well, yes, actually I have. Once I got drunk and had sex with a parrot. I was just wondering if you were my son.”

Maybe sometimes we shouldn’t be too clear about what we mean. We are the children of God – made in God’s image. Sometimes we work pretty hard to obscure that; at other times we work really hard to express our true inner beings. Neither one works very well. We must be born anew – born of the Spirit – or there is little chance for the image to take shape and form within us, revealing our true identity and destiny.

But I have sidestepped our theme long enough. “*God’s power is made perfect in our weakness.*” Let’s start with the most familiar. (We are going to do this the old way, starting with Point No. 1.)

1.) God’s power works better through our weakness because in our weakness we let God in.

We do not always mean it to be true, but when we are feeling strong, capable, and in control, our pride grows strong too. If we are confident that we can win through by our own efforts, it is nearly

impossible for us to turn the reins over. Why would we? We already have them. We can already feel the desired goal within our grasp, why risk losing it? In any case, pride is ever the enemy of our relationship with God. Pride is not famous for good results in other relationships either, but we won't get into that.

Pride, by its very nature, is self-sufficient. It tends therefore not to need others, not to value others, not to coordinate very much with others. Pride is unteachable, hard to change, hard to convince, hard to work with. Therefore, humility has ever been the highest virtue of the Christian Life. "*Blessed are the poor in spirit.*" "We admitted we were powerless – that our lives had become unmanageable." Entry into the spiritual life, and most certainly into the Christian Life, has always been through weakness ... through need ... through the willingness to let God have more influence in our lives than ever before. Turn will and life over ...

By the way, you do not have to feel weak in comparison to other humans, or weak in contrast to how the world is operating around you. Awareness of the power of evil; awareness of the magnitude of life's true issues and principles; awareness of mortality, or the distance between what we are and what we long to be like; even the realization of the possibility of beauty, truth, love, and community, and how far we are from our true design – such things are more than enough to blow some people out of their pride and into humility.

In any case, humility is not about lying down and letting life roll by or roll over us. Finding the secret of our weakness is not a recommendation for passive/aggressive lifestyles. Accepting his weakness did not turn Paul aside from any of his purpose. A far more powerful illustration: choosing weakness got Jesus crucified, but it in no way altered His course or changed His purpose or direction. We will come back to that in a moment.

The point is: Weakness itself must be turned over, dedicated, put into the hands of God. Weakness that has simply abdicated is not the same subject. That comes in the category of despair, not humility. There is a difference between surrendering to God ... and quitting, cutting out, giving up. Even so, it's on the road to despair – on the way to cutting out entirely – that some of us find the presence of God for the first time (at least in any magnitude). If, in that darkness, we see a light and hope we never saw before – and turn our lives over to Christ instead – then

clearly we come in our weakness, but suddenly we are very far from despair. The despair has turned to a great hope, and the energy flowing back in is greater than we have ever known before. Only, it's obvious that it is not coming from us anymore.

God's power works better through our weakness because in our weakness we let God in. I apologize for this illustration, but sometimes, especially with important spiritual principles, we need to stick with what we know, to make sure we aren't just making up fancy theories to amuse each other.

For twenty-five years, I worked as hard as I could to become and to be as good and faithful a minister as I knew how to be. I was not without faith and prayer. I studied hard, both on and off the job. I was often obedient to the Spirit's guidance, and at times even humble (believe it or not). Not trying to hide any pride: I got pretty good at some things. I never had "success" of any magnitude, at least not enough to satisfy me. Yet in a world where churches of my denomination were shrinking and dying, the churches I pastored flourished.

To keep it brief, but clear: At the end of that first twenty-five years, the trail ended, at least any trail I could see. I went into a treatment center for alcoholics. That was not as familiar back then as it is today. I assumed my life as a minister was over. I felt ashamed and disgraced. I assumed no congregation could afford to keep a known alcoholic as their pastor, even if, out of compassion, they wanted to. And I certainly had no intention of saddling any congregation with such a burden. So I came out of the treatment program and went immediately to a vocational-guidance firm and started looking for a more reasonable and appropriate job. The church I served at the time was not pressuring me to leave, but I came to an understanding with a few of the key leaders. I thanked them for their patience, and told them I would be gone as soon as I could pull a few things together.

None of the details matter; I am simply pointing out that at this time in my life, I had switched from a stance of strength to a stance of weakness. It was through no wisdom or intention of my own, sad to say. But I can promise you that it was a place of weakness. I was elated to have the alcoholic monkey off my back, and amazed to watch and feel the patterns of that harsh and merciless life slowly falling away. But the function and purpose of my life as I knew it were going with them. I felt

worthless, and incredibly sad at how I had ended up betraying everything I cared about most.

However, there remained a few weeks (I didn't know how many) in which I had to go through the motions of pretending I was still a minister until I could get my life reorganized. That church needed some time to get reorganized as well. Having done so much damage already, it didn't seem fair to suddenly leave them in the lurch. So, much as I hated the thought of going into the pulpit with everybody knowing I was a drunk, it seemed somehow like part of the just punishment. I only hoped it wouldn't be for very long.

And so, for the first time in my life, I preached out of my weakness. I should mention, to keep the picture clear, that when I came to that church, it was as sick as I was. They were fading away in a no-growth community, with no concept of what a church was for or about. No youth groups, little Sunday School, no programs for prayer or Bible study or anything else having to do with Jesus, faith, or a New WAY of Life. They were hoping to grow on the basis of appealing to people to come help them help the poor in Seattle. They hoped people would be drawn to the church because they had a nice hall and were community-minded. Along with that, they had a kind of Corona del Mar mentality. (We don't need Jesus, 'cause we're rich.) I had been there a year and eight months when I went into the alcohol ward. We had some Bible study, a few retreats, and a few more kids in Sunday School by then, but it was not happening fast, and nobody was having very much fun. Nobody in that parish, except for my wife Mariana, had ever seen me drinking more than one drink, so it was all quite a shock.

Anyway, for the first time in my life, I preached out of my weakness. And you will know, before I tell you, what happened. In just a few weeks, it all started to get way out of hand. People began hearing the sermons way beyond anything I expected, even beyond what I thought I was saying. People came flocking to my door, because I didn't seem so scary anymore. And they wanted to talk about what was really happening in their lives, and about everybody they knew who had a drinking problem, because now maybe there was hope. I never decided to stay in the ministry. Most certainly I never got worthy to stay in it. I just got too busy to worry about it. And before long we were a thriving, vital Christian congregation, having huge impact on many lives, far more than we ever talked about or let on publicly. We became the kind of church that, until

then, I had only dreamed about. *This* church is even better, but I won't mention that for fear you'll think you are as humble and faithful as you ought to be.

So when I hear Paul saying, "*My power is made perfect in weakness,*" I think he really means it. This is not just theory or sentiment. This is the Gospel truth. **God's power works better through our weakness because in our weakness we let God in.** In our weakness, we let God work through us in ways we cannot manage as long as we feel powerful, self-sufficient, or equal to the task.

2.) God's power works better through our weakness because in our weakness we become fearless.

We never become fearless in our strength. In our strength, we have too much to lose. In our strength, we have to succeed. And like it or not, success is always precarious in this world. We don't like to think about it, perhaps, but success puts enormous pressure on us. The more success we achieve, the more we have to worry about maintaining what we have achieved. And then we become more and more aware of how many things can go wrong, and how little it would take to bring it all down.

There is, of course, a different kind of success that requires no such effort or maintenance. There is a way to get in tune with God – in tune with the principles of Life as it is intended to be – until the flow of Life in and around us is "natural" (actually, spiritual) and needs no great effort to produce or protect or maintain. It is what's being hinted at in Jesus' comment about "*Look at the birds of the air ... look at the lilies of the field.*" They are not striving with might and mien – they are just being what they were created to be. It sounds like a contradiction, but the effort is effortless. Only, life is not like that very often, or in very many places. The brokenness all around us keeps disrupting natural grace.

We cannot be on the theme of weakness and power without noticing the core of the core of our Faith: the Cross and the Resurrection. The Cross is the ultimate symbol of human weakness, and the Resurrection is the ultimate symbol of God's power working through our weakness. Do not mistake me: I in no way intend to suggest that the Cross and the Resurrection are merely symbols. Because of their *reality*, they have *become* such powerful symbols.

In any case, Jesus does not choose an earthly power by which to force His mission into success in this world. Jesus is difficult to define or comprehend precisely because He does *not* come from earthly strength. He chooses to stay authentic on a very simple level (not simplistic – pure). He does pursue His truth and His aims at any cost – only, the cost is His own. That is, He will not coerce, use strength, or try to force His will on anybody. He keeps His course, and lets the world react and respond however it will. In short, He chooses weakness, and leaves the results to God.

Now, I'm not in any way trying to proclaim or explain or fully expound the meanings and dimensions of the Cross. I just want to remind you of how it is a choice of weakness over power, and in the very categories we are talking about. "*My power is made perfect in weakness.*" Jesus breaks through our resistance, our shields, our egos, our pride – precisely *because* He chooses not to force anything on us. He becomes so nonthreatening that we are finally able, if we are willing, to look straight, calmly, and honestly at what He means and what His truth is. Knowing He will not straight-arm us gives us, for the first time in history, a true choice about our relationship with God. "Hey, this is THE WAY – *I am the WAY* – but make up your own mind." It is an invitation, not a coercion – attraction, not promotion. (Will the church of our time ever learn?)

By the way, I think that this weakness alone could not have reached us like He can. But Jesus, in weakness, is also fearless. That is, we know and see demonstrated, again for the first time in history, a human being who cannot be coerced, controlled, bribed, or changed by any of the great bogeymen in life, not even by all of them put together. Secretly, if not overtly, we know how many forms of fear control us. We stand against many of them, and from time to time we stand even against some of the big ones. But if life gets grim and the stakes keep rising – if life starts to threaten us with poverty, failure, loss of loved ones, ultimate disapproval, ruin, pain, or death – we know how difficult it is to walk our Path and keep true to our WAY. But here is Jesus, threatened by all of these things and more, including Satan, the ultimate evil of this world; rejection by the Jewish religious establishment; being turned over to the power of Rome; and to top it off, desertion by every friend who ever loved Him. But He doesn't have to succeed by any light or measuring stick we have ever heard of. In His weakness, He is fearless. There is nothing left by which to control Him. Beyond

all coercion or control by any of the things that frighten and control us most ... He goes to that Cross. And if we see it – that weakness and that fearlessness together – it undoes us. It blows everything we ever thought was true in this world. It shatters our pride, and reaches to the very center of our infant souls: “Come awake – come with ME – LIFE is so much bigger and dearer than they tell you here. And *you* are far more than they will ever let you be – here. I AM the WAY. Will you follow ME into a very new and different LIFE?”

Resurrection! Not only an event – an ongoing principle of life. God’s power floods in because finally – finally! – somebody trusted God more than anything or anyone else in this world. No loopholes. No contingency plan. Nothing to fall back on. “It’s You, God – or nothing. It is all and only for You. Do with it whatever You will.” And therein we really do see it: “*My power is made perfect in weakness.*” And like it or hate it, we know how far our strength could have gone in comparison.

God’s power works better through our weakness because in our weakness we become fearless. Humans are frequently at their best when they have nothing left to lose. But Jesus is far beyond the accidental. He chooses weakness as a way to let God’s power flow through Him, and more completely and fully than anything we had ever known or seen before. Any human strength of His own that He still claimed or held onto would only cause friction and resistance – could only dilute God’s power and purpose.

But again, please note: It is not Jesus quitting. It is not Jesus uncaring. It is not Jesus forsaking His purpose or mission or truth. He has merely chosen God’s power over His own. And to allow God’s power to flow freely, He has chosen a very different WAY – the Christian WAY: WEAKNESS.

3.) God’s power works better through our weakness because it is how we follow the principle Jesus used, and it is how we give others time.

We let the world have its way, knowing God’s WAY is made clearer that way. To be more specific, we choose weakness because it gives others time and space to make their own authentic choice. Jesus does that for *us* – we do that for others. People are coming over – converting, switching sides, coming into the Kingdom – all the time. Newspapers don’t reveal it. CNN runs no programs about it. Even when the church

talks about it or tries to advertise it, it turns out never to be about the real thing. But individuals are coming over – choosing Jesus and His Kingdom over the ways and goals of this world – all the time. People have been doing this ever since Jesus walked this earth. Sometimes we get to thinking that nobody still makes such choices – that nobody is still aware of such issues, or cares about the spiritual life in such magnitude. But you do! And nobody comes into the Kingdom without choosing to, because God will not coerce us. So if some of *you* are still making such choices – even in jaundiced, prideful, crass, and self-centered Corona del Mar – why would you imagine that such dimensions of life are shutting down everywhere else? Or that nobody notices anymore? Or that people are not still looking around, waking up, seeing through the illusions of life as our culture pretends and presents them – and then choosing on purpose to turn will and life over to Jesus?

However, we never know when this will happen with somebody. We never know when another person will awaken. And if they awaken, we never know when they will authentically choose to follow Christ into a New Life. How often we tend to assume that life will just go on in the way it seems to be going at the moment. If somebody lies to us, will they be a liar forever? If somebody betrays us, will they be an enemy forever? How often we assume that nobody is really likely to change. Yet none of us started out as Christians. Somewhere along the line we changed – made new choices. And, if you remember, there was a time you thought you would never make such a choice. Some of the people who knew you back then would never have dreamed that the day would come when you would throw your old life away for Life in Christ Jesus.

So we choose weakness, because strength pressures people to make choices that are not real, that are not authentic. Strength pressures people to pretend. Strength pressures people into a greater resistance than they would otherwise have. Strength – that is, human strength – is of very little use to the Kingdom. **God's power works better through our weakness because it is how we follow the principle Jesus used, and it is how we give others time.**

Sometimes we believe in people before we see the end of the story. Sometimes we hope for people before we see the change. Sometimes we cut back even further, and trust God's power and love to get through to people when we see no possibility of any human influence ever getting through. But then, that is who we are, and what we are about. And that

is a job for weakness, humility, patience. Most of all, it is a job for God's power. And while we would love to help, we don't want to get in the way. Another word for that is trust (faith) – trust in God, not in ourselves. And when we have done everything we can – and this world has done everything *it* can – we still believe it's not over. The love of God in Christ Jesus has not yet had its say. And since that is what we really count on, we don't want to get our puny strength in the way. After all, we can work just as hard, in fact much harder, in our weakness than we can in our strength. That is because humility, trust, patience, and love are no slouches in comparison to ego, pressure, coercion, haste, aggressiveness, and forcefulness.

God's power works better through our weakness because it is how we follow the principle Jesus used, and it is how we give others time. *“My power is made perfect in weakness.... When I am weak, then I am strong.”* It is no euphemism. Paul is not kidding. He is in dead earnest. Let us pray and hope that we are too.

PRAYER

Lord, You know that we have no constancy by which to master concepts like humility, or patience, or weakness – certainly not in any absolute way. We have long since stopped trusting in our virtues or perfection anyway. It is *Your* virtue – Your love and constancy – that we trust. If You do not keep calling us back from our distractions ... finding us when we get lost ... loving us when we feel absolutely worthless ... forgiving us when we forget You – then there is no hope for us.

But we would love to learn how to be weak, that Your power could flow through us. We would love to learn faithfulness as Jesus revealed it ... compassion as Jesus demonstrated it ... Life as Jesus lived it and revealed it.

We know we have crashed a lot of gates that You never opened for us. And many of the doors You flung wide for us again and again, we have never entered. But the days keep coming, and we are still “in training,” and You do not quit on us. So we have hope. Here in this sanctuary, at this very moment, we renew our love and devotion. And so, we go on, in Christ's light. And in His Name we pray. Amen.