

2 Corinthians 12 Commentary-Wayne Barber

PREVIOUS

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2 Corinthians 11:29-12:9 The Prize Hidden in Weakness

Turn with me to 2 Corinthians 11. We'll go into chapter 12 today. We're talking about "Suffering for the Sake of Christ," and today we want to talk about the "Prize that is Hidden in Weakness." Now, we talked about the pain of persecution last time, but this time, the prize that is hidden in weakness. In the humanistic world in which we live, the word "weakness" is not an acceptable term.

Now, if you're an athlete or have been an athlete, you understand immediately what I'm about to say. You walk into the locker room. I don't know how many locker rooms I've seen this sign: When the going gets tough, the tough get going. I've heard a coach say many times, "Suck it up, boy. Suck it up. What do you mean you don't feel well? Get up. Are you weak? Run 10 laps, boy, and when you drop down, get up and run five more." You see, we just don't tolerate weakness in the humanistic world in which we live.

But I want to assert to you today, contrary to this thinking, in the Christian world it's only in weakness that a believer has, finally, the opportunity to experience Christ's strength in his life. When we realize we cannot do it, when we can't, that's the only time we're going to realize He really can. He said He would and He can.

After illustrating the pain that Paul had gone through and persecution and then expressing his concern, not for one church but all of the churches, he says in verse 29, "Who is weak without my being weak?" The word "weak" in verse 29 is the word *astheneo*. It sometimes translates "sick," but that is not really the meaning of the word. Maybe a context could couch it that way, but the word is much deeper than that. The word means a person is at his weakness point, he's at the end of himself. Now, whether this be spiritually or emotionally or physically or all three, whatever, it's the place in one's journey where failure to do or failure to be has brought someone, a believer particularly, to the point of desperation.

This weakness could have come from many ways. It could have come from one's failure to try to conquer sin in his life, knowing that victory is not us overcoming sin but victory is Jesus overcoming us. And maybe he's trying to conquer it in his own strength and because of that has fallen back into its grasp and grip, and he's failed. It could have come when God put an unlovable person in his life. I've always marveled at this. I think he parachutes them into my life—"You know what, Wayne? You need this person"—and puts them right in my life. And instead of loving them like we're commanded to do, we try to do things in our flesh; and as a result of that we end up full of bitterness and hatred.

You see, weakness is when one is stripped of any and all reason to take any pride in himself and his own ability. But weakness is the place every believer must go if he is to enter the fullness of what Christ offers to him. For Paul to identify with another's weakness as he does in verse 29, he would have had to have been there himself. For you comfort wherein you have been comforted. In verse 29 he reaches out to those who are weak and can do nothing. And I keep wanting to say this: when we see our weakness, something happens. When we get off of our pedestal and we stop thinking more highly of ourselves than we ought to think, and we begin to see flesh for what it is, and we begin to see the weakness and the frailty of it, that's usually the time that we become very sensitive to the sins of our weak flesh.

And, by the way, this is the prelude to revival: When a person is brought to a desperate end, when a person comes to the point of his weakness, when a person is willing to say, "I can't, God, I cannot do it but You can," and begins to see the sins of his religious flesh and begins to see the sins of his rebellious flesh.

So Paul goes on in verse 29 and says, "Who is led into sin without my intense concern?" We've done something with these apostles sometimes that we should not have done. They're not gods; they struggle just like we struggle. We see Paul struggle in Romans 7 when he puts himself up against the pure, perfect standard of the law. He sees his flesh. That's the best time to see your flesh. And Paul says in Romans 7:24-25, "Wretched man that I am!" And that word "wretched" has that idea of "nobody knows the troubles I've seen, nobody knows but Jesus." That's the word "wretched." He's burdened down.

“Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?” It’s called the “body of sin” in chapter 6 of Romans. And then he gives the answer. The same One who set him free from its penalty will set him free from its power. “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” You see, Paul is deeply concerned with those who are weak. He’s been weak. He’s deeply concerned for those who have sinned. He’s sinned. He knows the weakness and the sickness of his flesh. And it’s in the weakened state of the believer, broken and sensitive to the sinfulness of his flesh, that he finally, finally, can open his eyes and see what Christ really offers to him.

In fact, Paul continues and says in verse 30—and this is powerful, this is so contradictory to what we see in the world today—he says, “If I have to boast, I will boast of what pertains to my weakness.” He’s learned the secret, hasn’t he? He’s learned what happens in weakness if we’ll allow it to take place. What a contrast to the arrogant false teachers, these boastful people that were plaguing the church in Corinth.

Paul’s résumé is the résumé of one who, in his weakness, not in his humanistic strength, has come to know the strength and the fullness of Christ. Rather than boast about his strengths, Paul understood now; he boasted about his failures; he boasted about his humiliation; he boasted about his weaknesses; he boasted about his suffering. He had discovered the prize that is hidden in our suffering and the consequent weakness that comes from it, which is to experience Christ.

In verses 31-33 Paul, in utter humility, shares one of the weakest moments of his journey as being an apostle. He had to flee from his enemies in one particular place, and I’m sure the shame was there because he loves to, with integrity, face his enemy. It says in 11:31, “The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, He who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying.” That was a very appropriate thing to say in their culture, because people seem to doubt everything you say so he puts credibility behind it.

He says in verse 32, “In Damascus the ethnarch under Aretas the king was guarding the city of the Damascenes in order to seize me, and I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall,” how humbling, how humiliating to Paul, “and so escaped his hands.” Do you see him boasting in his humiliation? Let me show you. If you followed him very carefully, hopefully I’ve helped you to do that, he is countering everything that is evidently being said by the false apostles in Corinth. All their deceptive claims with false humility they were evidently speaking about how they had suffered. The apostle Paul countered it in chapter 11. He said, “I bear the marks of Christ. I’m insane thinking about you suffering for Christ.”

And then in chapter 12 that we’ll enter into in just a bit, he counters the false claims that they had which made them look more spiritual, and that was the spiritual revelations that they had. They thought they were really spiritual. If you studied 1 Corinthians, this was a huge problem. In chapters 12 and 14 they thought that anything emotional was spiritual, and if you had these great spiritual experiences in revelation you must really be spiritual. Boy, it sounds like the 21st century, doesn’t it?

But let’s remember something here: as we go through this we’re going to talk about an experience that Paul had as he counters the false teachers. Remember, tucked away, hidden in this is the prize of weakness. It’s going to sneak up on you. It won’t come up until the third point, but in the midst of all that we’re going to be talking about we can find that in our weakness Christ’s strength is made perfect.

The danger of spiritual experience

First of all, the danger of spiritual experience. “What do you mean by the danger? I want to experience Him.” I do too, and there’s nothing wrong with spiritual experience, but there’s a danger in it. Spiritual pride is a dangerous thing and it’s usually bred in some emotional, unusual perhaps, experience that we have in our journey with the Lord. Once a person has this unusual spiritual experience, unusual because he’d never experienced it before, the tendency is to think of himself as being more spiritual.

And I’ve just told you that the whole culture of the Corinthian church was based on that kind of thing. If it was loud, if it was emotional, it must be of God and he must be spiritual. Paul detested bragging about any experience he ever had with the Lord Jesus Christ. He does so very hesitantly because he doesn’t want to do this. He says in 12:1, “Boasting is necessary, though it is not profitable; but I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord.”

Now because of the gravity of the problem in Corinth, remember what we’ve been studying, and because of the false teachers’ error that they had been planting in the people’s minds, the apostle Paul feels he must go on and he must counter what they’re saying about these super revelations to show them the falseness of it in the purity of the experience that he’s had with the Lord.

It’s interesting to me: to distance himself from that which he hates to do—he hates to speak of himself, he hates to speak of his experience—he puts this whole situation, this whole illustration we’re about to look at, in the third person as if it’s happening to somebody else. He steps aside and talks about this person as if it’s someone else when it really, in reality, is Paul. Look at verse 2, “I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago—whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body I do not know, God knows—such a man was caught up to the third heaven.”

Wow, this is really interesting to me. He has not said anything for fourteen years since this incredible event took place in his life. Do you see a contrast to today? If that would be today somebody would have made a denomination out of that experience. "We're the Third Heavenites," and on whatever day he had it they'd meet together on that particular day. Like Jesus when He healed somebody put mud in his eye, and one time He spoke and different things, spittle one time. Three denominations broke out of that: the Muddites, the Spittites, and the Speakites.

We have to talk about our experience, don't we? You see, Paul is going to show you what's much more valid in our Christian walk. "I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago—whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body I do not know." Why did he say that? Why did he leave it so vague? Paul knew that when he shared this experience there were going to be these false teachers that were going to go through it with a fine-tooth comb. And the Greek thought was that the body was totally filthy and bad and could never become anything. And so that's why he had to teach on death back in chapter 5, and in 1 Corinthians 15 he spent a whole chapter talking about the resurrection, bodily, of the body. And he says if you don't believe in the bodily resurrection of Christ, you don't even believe the gospel.

So in order to discourage any debate over how the experience happened, he focuses instead on the experience itself. And he says in verse 2, "I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago—whether in the body I do not know, or out of the body I do not know, God knows—such a man was caught up to the third heaven." I love that word. He's caught up to the third heaven. The term "caught up" is the word *harpazo*. Guess where it's used? It's also used in 1 Thessalonians 4:17 which is used to describe what I believe is the rapture of the church. "Caught up," taken up to heaven.

The term "third heaven" describes in a beautiful way a picture of the "heavenlies." Most of the time you see the word heaven it's in the plural; it's the "heavenlies." When you leave the building today look up. That's the first heaven. There's another heaven that you can't see until the sun goes down, and tonight look up and you're going to see the second heaven: the stars and the moon and all of that.

But the third heaven is a little different. The first two heavens can be seen with the naked eye. But the third heaven has to be seen only by faith because it's there and that's where God dwells. Paul equates this with paradise: heaven with paradise. He says in verses 3-4, "And I know how such a man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, God knows—was caught up into Paradise, and heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak."

Now Jesus Himself equated heaven with Paradise on the cross when the thief cried out to him and Jesus said in Luke 23:43, "And He said to him, 'Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise.'" And by the way, there's a huge teaching on this that I almost chased down the road, but I decided that's for another time. So all of you that understand more and more about that term, just rest assured that we'll get to it one of these days.

This is where John was taken up on the island of Patmos and he went up and he was taken up into heaven. He got to see the throne; he got to see the crystal sea; he got to see the brilliance of that place. And he got to put it in writing in the book of the Revelation. Paul was taken up into heaven—now think with me—fourteen years before he penned the letter of 2 Corinthians and had never said a word about it.

Verses 3-4, "And I know how such a man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, God knows—was caught up into Paradise, and heard inexpressible words, which a man is not permitted to speak." He heard "inexpressible words." That's the word that means they were forbidden to ever be uttered after you've heard them. Paul goes on to reiterate that. He says, "which a man is not permitted to speak." Whatever God told him when he was there, whatever revelation came to him while he was there, he was not permitted to share it with anybody else. Even though the experience was worth telling everyone about, Paul was not about to do it.

He says in verse 5, "On behalf of such a man will I boast; but on my own behalf I will not boast, except in regard to my weaknesses." Can you imagine if Paul lived in today's time and had a different mentality and took a CD and tried to record all the experiences he had with the Lord? You couldn't put them on a CD. He says in verse 6, "For if I do wish to boast I shall not be foolish, for I shall be speaking the truth; but I refrain from this, so that no one may credit me" —I don't want anybody to credit me with more than he sees in me. Listen carefully now—"with more than he sees in me or hears from me."

Paul had plenty to talk about concerning his experiences but he was not about to do that. What was more important to Paul was to be judged on the basis of how he lived and by what he said. "Don't judge me by my spiritual experiences; I'm never going to use that as a crutch to make people think I'm spiritual. No sir, you judge me by how I treat people, you judge me by the way I live. You judge me by whether or not I talk behind people's back, you judge me by what I say." That's the way a man ought to be judged; not by his spiritual experience that he wants to parade and boast about. But how does he live? How does he treat the waitress in a restaurant when you order peas and they bring beans and they're cold? How does he treat the people in traffic? How does he treat the people around him? That determines what a man is, not what experience he says he's had. And to me that's a profound word to people in

the 21st century who say, "Oh, I've had all these experiences."

Verse 7, "And because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me—to keep me from exalting myself!" You see the danger of any spiritual experience, yes, they're wonderful in your journey with the Lord Jesus Christ, but the danger is that you tend to exalt yourself. I do the same thing; all of us do. And that's the danger that lurks in it. It's like a cancer. It's hidden in the flesh and it's eating away. That's the humility that we could have had if we would have just bowed in the presence of God. It eats that away and it builds that spiritual pride.

We should all desire to be judged by what we are in any given moment and by what we say rather than some illusive spiritual experience we want to boast about. "But, well, I've spoken in tongues. I know where you stand but I've spoken in tongues." So what? "I've been in a healing service and I'm seeing somebody healed." So what? God's not impressed, why are you so impressed? He's impressed when He looks at you and sees Himself. He's impressed with how you live every day. Some of the rudest, meanest people I have ever met are the people boasting about some type of spiritual experience that they've had. It makes me want to turn and run every time I hear somebody talk about it.

I don't care. And the world doesn't care. What they care about is the realness of who we are as we live amongst them. What they care about is when they look at us and see the reality of an experience that took place way back in our life when we got saved and they see a growing, they see a respect, they see a reverence in our life for the awesomeness of the Lordship of Christ. That's what they care about. That experience is just something that is very nice along the journey but it's not what makes us spiritual. Christ is our spirituality.

The discipline of Christian experience

Secondly, the discipline of Christian experience. That's a good word. God knows the danger in any spiritual experience. He leads us in His journey and He'll give us experiences that will just be utopia in our minds. Like the Mount of Transfiguration when Peter, James and John were there. He'll give certain situations in your life, and it's different in different people's lives. But there's a discipline. He's way ahead of us. And He puts this discipline in our life to keep us from doing what some people evidently choose to do.

Verse 7, "And because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me—to keep me from exalting myself!" God knows how vulnerable we are when we have these deep spiritual experiences and as I said, He's always faithful. God is faithful all the time. He's always faithful to keep us depending on Him.

Somebody asked me one day, "How do you stay humble?" You have about three hours? God's the One who keeps us humble. God's the One who keeps us in that place that keeps us from exalting ourselves. Paul alludes to the awesome experience when he says, "Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations." What he's saying here is, "This experience in my life tops anything I've ever experienced except for my salvation on the Damascus Road. For this reason, to keep me from exalting myself."

See, the purpose is very clear why the pain had to come into Paul's life immediately after having this awesome experience with God: "there was given me a thorn in the flesh." This is so interesting to me. The word "thorn" is the word skolops, and it's something pointed. It is something like a stake that you'd drive into the ground. It's something like the point of a fish hook. It's something that brings excruciating pain.

I think it's so wonderful that Paul doesn't tell us what that thorn is. Oh yes, there are a lot of opinions about it. Let me tell you some. Some people think it's a physical ailment, probably an eye because there's a statue they tell me in Italy somewhere that has a drooping eye; and the reason they think that is because of Galatians 4:14-15. Paul says to the Galatians church, remember they met him and he had a physical problem and he describes it. He said in verse 14, "and that which was a trial to you in my bodily condition you did not despise or loathe, but you received me as an angel of God, as Christ Jesus Himself. Where then is that sense of blessing you had? For I bear you witness, that if possible, you would have plucked out your eyes and given them to me." They think that this is what he's talking about. There was a terrible eye disease during that time and it would cause pus to just run out of the eye, and you could lose that eye.

In Galatians 6:11 they use that verse: "See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand." That's a very good argument that that is what his problem was. Something physical that he had to deal with that slowed him down and kept him depending upon God.

Others think that it was a person that was in his life that just didn't let up. I've always told you there's a school for mean people and they train them and send them wherever I pastor. Actually I usually tell that as a school for mean women. But there could be a person. Why do they say that? Because the word "messenger" there, *aggelos*, is sometimes translated that way: a pastor or person.

Remember, there were a lot of people that really gave Paul a hard time. Alexander the coppersmith said, "Watch out for that guy, Buddy, he gave me a hard time." Called him by name.

Others think it was a temptation in his life to a particular sin. Not that he succumbed to it, but he just couldn't seem to get around the corner of it. Remember in Hebrews it says to lay aside the sin that does so easily beset you. And perhaps it was a besetting sin. Maybe it was his religious fervor that he used to have, trying to do things his own way, and God had to deal with him over and over and over about it.

I don't know what it was, but whatever it was Paul called in a "messenger of Satan to torment me." The word "torment" is the word that means to strike or hit with a fist over and over and over again. Paul was not interested in identifying the thorn. He leaves it wide open; but rather, in showing the purpose of the thorn in his life, he says, "And because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason"—very clear, "to keep me from exalting myself—"there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me—to keep me from exalting myself!" He mentions "to keep me from exalting myself" twice. That's his point.

The word "exalting" is the word *huperairo*, and it means to exalt above measure; to think of oneself as more spiritual as others. Why? Because "I had this experience and I really am spiritual." That's exactly what God doesn't want. I hope we're hearing this. People sometimes walk up and say, "Brother Wayne, in my quiet time this morning God spoke to me." Some people think that these types of things make them more spiritual. No, sir! It's Christ that is our spirituality. It's how we live. It's how we allow Him to be who He is in our life and what we say and how we walk.

This thorn, whatever it was—a physical disease, a hateful person, a sinful temptation, whatever it was—kept Paul in a weakened state. It kept him depending upon God and steered him away from pride and arrogance and self-dependency. Paul saw this thorn as the instrument of Satan; but really, you know this, don't you, that Satan is on a leash. He's only got temporary authority. God, when he goes too far, just jerks that chain. He said in the book of Job, "You can do this, this, this, and can't do this—can't kill him. And don't you even think about it." He's on a leash and He conquered him when He came into our life. So really, it was God's discipline even though He used a wicked man, even though He used a terrible way, still God was in control to keep Paul from exalting himself.

Someone once said to a patient who had walked with God and was stricken with a disease in his body, lying in pain and helpless in his bed, he said this and I've never forgotten it: "We are not laid aside to illness. But we're called aside to stillness." It's in those still moments that we see our weakness. It's in those still moments that we realize our desperation. It's in those still moments that God keeps us from exalting ourselves. God keeps us in that humble position of saying yes to Him.

So the danger of spiritual experience is that one thinks that he's more spiritual than other people; exalts himself. The discipline is that God will put something in our lives that keeps us depending upon Him, that keeps us from exalting ourselves. That's the beauty of God's faithfulness.

The desperation of spiritual experience

But then thirdly, the desperation of spiritual experience. Watch this point carefully, because this is where the prize in the midst of weakness sort of appears. The pain of this thorn was so great that Paul cried out to the Lord in anguish. You're talking about desperation. You talk about a man who had been lifted into the third heaven, a man who had been into the heavenlies and had seen what's there, just like John. And then immediately, he's in such anguish that he cries out to God and he says in verse 8, "Concerning this I entreated the Lord three times that it might depart from me."

This is a short verse but there's so much packed into it. Three times he implored, my translation says, "the Lord". The word "implored" there is the word *parakaleo*. It can be translated "came alongside, encouraged, etc.," but this is a different word. In this context it means "to cry out for help." Three times he cried out "Help me, God; help me, God." And what was the obvious answer that God gave back to him? "No," three times no. I can just picture this—and I know this is not sanctified imagination, but it is imagination—"God, this is Paul. This is not anybody else. You know, the greatest missionary in the whole New Testament. The one You took into see You in the heavenlies. You have all power over Satan, God. I'm asking You. I'm asking You as Paul, to take this thorn out of my way. It's getting in my way. I've got things to do and places to go." And God says no. "God, listen." "No." "But..." "No." "But God, I'm your greatest apostle. I'm going to do great things for You." "No." That's interesting, isn't it?

Here comes the prize in the midst of his desperate cry. Right in the midst of it; crying out imploring of God, it says in verse 9, "And He has said to me," if you don't love these words you just need to get right, "My grace is sufficient for you." "What you need is Me. Whatever is over your head, Paul, is under My feet. Experience Me, Paul, experience Me. Don't just talk about Me, don't just sing about Me, don't just pray to Me. Experience Me. Experience My living grace. Experience My divine ability in the midst of your frail human weakness. Cry out to Me, Paul, cry out to Me." "My grace is sufficient for you."

The word "sufficient" there is the word *arkeo*, which is the word which means "that which fully satisfies a person." It's that which enables a person to do whatever is demanded in his life. It's divine ability in the midst of desperate weakness. It is everything one

needs to bear up under and to press on in the midst of excruciating difficulty. This sufficient grace found only in Christ is hidden in the midst of suffering and appears only when one realizes his weakness.

Let's get this down to where we live. Manley Beasley who was such a great friend, used to say to me, "Listen, you'll never walk by faith until you're at the point of desperation." Weakness is where God has to get every one of us. He has to get us there His own way. I don't know what the thorn is that He'll put in our life. I don't know what He'll do to render us weak, but until you get weak you can't have a clue what we're talking about; about Jesus being Jesus in your life.

You see, the biggest problem that most of us have is our strength. We can do, we can it. If we just have this program; if we just have this plan; if we just strategize the right way, we can impress God. We can get the job done. And God said, "I am not in any way impressed. You're not weak enough yet for Me to be able to do what I'm yearning to do in and through your life. My grace is sufficient." I've had people tell me, "I haven't experienced it yet." I know, because you're not weak enough.

I remember one day when I was pastoring and I was the only one left there at the church. That's a bad thing. When somebody has a need and somebody walked in and said, "Can anybody help me? I've got a problem." I said, "Well, I'll try." "Who are you?" "I'm the senior pastor." "That's who I'm looking for." I'm thinking to myself, "I don't think so."

He told me a story that would just make some of the soap operas look bad. It was the worst thing I've ever heard in my life. And he said, "What am I going to do?" And I said, "Well, praise the Lord." "What do you mean 'praise the Lord'?" I said, "Man, for the first time in your life you're at the end of yourself. For the first time in your life you're a candidate to see God do something in your life." "Is there anybody else in here that can help me?"

You think people want to hear that? You wonder why people aren't flooding in the doors. You wonder why people don't come to this message. Because they don't want to hear it. They don't want to go to the cross. They don't want to be weak. They don't want to be desperate. They don't want to have to cry out in anguish and say, "Oh God, help me." And God says, "I'm going to help you, but in a way you never thought about."

There's a prize that is hidden in your weakness. Have you discovered it yet? And the prize is that when you listen to what God is saying, in my weakness, in my weakness His strength is made perfect in my life. You say, "Wayne, there's so much here, you haven't touched it." I know. That's why I'm going to come back to it. We're going to camp out here for while, folks. This is the essence of how we learn the message. And if a person can't see that, there is still too much of them and they haven't realized the prize and they're going to be bitter, they're going to shake their fist in God's face. They haven't bowed yet in their weakness and received the strength that only God can give them in the midst of their circumstance.

The danger of spiritual experience. Boy, there's a big danger. You think of yourself as more spiritual than other people. You say, "I've never done that." Well, I can't identify with you because I have. Look down your nose on people because they don't understand the Word. Look down your nose on people because they haven't studied this. Listen, that has nothing to do with it. It's how you live every day. How do you live every day?

Secondly, the discipline of spiritual experience is a thorn. God is so awesome. He knows our hearts, He knows exactly what our flesh is like, and therefore He heads us off at the pass. But some people misinterpret it. Some people think it's a curse and some people think it's this or that. They have to call it something else. They don't want to look at it as that which God is using to bring them to their place of weakness.

And then there's the desperation of spiritual weakness, when people finally get to the end of themselves. There's no place else to turn. There's no plan B. They've exhausted every other avenue and now what a novel idea: they turn to God and they say, "Oh God, I'm weak, would You be my strength." And that's when they begin to learn what the Christian life is all about. Weakness is a good word. Not a bad word.

I talked about Manly Beasley awhile ago. He's in heaven today. He's one of those guys in his prime, when he was young, healthy, good looking, I don't like people like that. Had that dark hair and just a nice looking guy, big built, muscular. Could get anything done. Became the greatest preacher on faith when he got his first terminal disease. Ended up having 14 different terminal diseases that could have killed him at anytime. God just decided not to let him go yet. He got to where the last three years of his life, if you ever heard Manley, you had to help him to the pulpit, literally help him to the pulpit. And right at the very end he had to sit down. But when he'd get up to the pulpit he'd fall over on the pulpit and everybody would just gasp and think, "Can he make it?" And then he would get into the Word and buddy, when he got into the Word, you're thinking, "Where'd that come from?" In the midst of the man's weakness Christ spoke. This is one man who is changed by the message that he spoke. I'm telling you, he touched people that he'll never know about. He knows it now because he's in heaven.

Manley was asked to go into a hospital room of a lady who had also had a terminal disease and she was suffering deeply and gravely. And they said, "Manley, you're one who could minister to her. You've been there." And so he went into her room and she

looked up at him and she said, “Brother Manley, will you pray for me?” If you know anything about brother Manley, he may and he may not. He said, “I don’t know if I will, don’t know if I won’t.” He said, “Let me do something first. Tell me about you and Jesus during this time of suffering. I want to hear what He’s been doing in your life.”

And for about an hour, with tears streaming down her face, said it was the greatest time in her whole entire Christian walk because in the midst of those dark hours, in the midst of those weak moments, she cried out to her Savior and He was there, just like He said He would be. And He did in her life what she’d never experienced before. And when she finished, Manley said to her, “Are you sure you still want me to pray for your healing?”

We’ve got it backwards, folks. We’re doing everything we can do to stay down here. God’s doing everything He can do to get us up there. We’ve got it so upside down it’s incredible. We get all we can, can all we get, sit on the can, and poison the rest. We don’t realize God gave us the funds to give to missions and to take care of others. Everything we do is backwards. That’s why we can’t understand weakness. When you’re at the end of yourself, the encouragement this message will be is to somebody who is in this auditorium this morning and you’re going through a time that you’ve never known before and you don’t understand it. God says ‘You don’t have to understand it. You just trust Me. Cry out to Me. You let Me be to you, you let My Word come into your mind and you’ll understand it like you’ve never understood it before if you’ll yield to Me.’

You can go one of two ways when you get in this spot. You can turn cold and hard and bitter, or you can turn and yield and experience Him like you’ve never known Him before. He said, “Paul, there’s a prize, there’s a prize. In your weakness, My strength is made perfect. Everything you need, I am. Would you like to experience Me, Paul?”

Would you like to experience Him this morning; know Him like you’ve never known Him before? Just open up to Him, lay every agenda you thought you had down and say, “God, it’s all about You.”

It’s not Him being your co-pilot. You get in the trunk of the car, hand Him the keys, shut the trunk, and say through the little light in the keyhole, ‘God, You put any kind of gasoline You want in this car and go anywhere You want to go. I just trust You.’ That’s what it’s all about. Are you there today? It’s not a onetime thing because once you get there and you think you’re more spiritual God keeps you there. He’s always ahead of us.

What’s God saying to your life today? What’s he saying to you today?

2 Corinthians 12:9-10

Ce Mare Har (What Great Grace)

Turn with me to 2 Corinthians 12. We’re going to be looking at two verses today. I told you we just sort of brushed by verse 9 and I want to make sure we don’t do that. It’s a very powerful verse. We’re going to look at verses 9-10.

Well, we’ve been talking about “Suffering for the Sake of Christ.” But today the message is entitled, “Ce Mare Har.” Do you know what that means? It means “What (Ce) Great (Mare) Grace (Har)”; What Great Grace. I want us to talk about that today.

At the finish of one of our sessions there in the conference that we had in Romania—over 100 pastors were there from all over Romania, Moldova, Ukraine, all the way from Moscow—the light came on in their understanding. You have to understand that people in that part of the world only know the law. They do not understand grace and, oh, how I wish you could have been there when they began to pray. You see, when they finish a service they’re not in a hurry to get out. When they finish a service, they stand in respect and honor of God’s Word and then they will pray in actual response to what the Spirit has revealed to their hearts.

And I couldn’t understand what they were saying. It so blessed me later on to hear the actual words of what was prayed during that time, but then suddenly, without any announcement whatsoever, somebody, and it was a male, strong voice, led out in ce mare har. That’s a song that they have over there. It’s very much like our “Amazing Grace.” I had already learned “ce mare har.” I don’t know the rest of the words, so every time they’d come to those three words I could sing it with them. But the way they sang, this happened over and over in the two conferences you sent me to preach in Romania.

By the way, I want you to understand something about me. When I go out to preach the Word of God, the word of grace, I always preach that in every conference I do, no matter where it is, I always feel like I’m taking you with me. I never want you to think that I’m out doing my own thing. I don’t want you to think that. But what I’m doing is extending the message that we hear here every week, week after week. And I’m trying to get it out, not only in our nation but around the world to people who have never heard it once.

In these two conferences 70% of the people, by the way, were brand new people who had never heard this message. The message of living grace; the hope of glory; Christ in us; the hope of glory, traveled all the way to Moscow. God allowed me to preach to over

200 pastors in two different conferences literally, like I said, from all over, but it affected the whole nation of Romania; it affected Moldova; and it affected Moscow. And the response is already coming back.

One pastor in Moldova—which I hope you understand is a communist country under a different name and the mafia completely runs that country—one pastor wrote back and said, “My life will never be the same.” Another pastor came to me and in his broken English said, “This message is so critical to be heard in all of Europe, but particularly in the eastern bloc.” Folks, they saw it. It’s incredible how you can have four days set aside and people see it so quickly. I asked myself a thousand times on the way home, “What made them see it so quickly, when over here in our country sometimes people hear it, it goes in one ear and out the other, they don’t even know what they’re listening to?” And the only thing that hit me was that over there they are more desperate. Over there they have been weakened to the point that their hearing has moved up in its sensitivity to God’s Word about 10 octaves.

Folks, they got it. And it was incredible to watch. *Ce mare har*; What great grace. It’s this grace that we’ve been talking about in 2 Corinthians and I think it’s one of the best places that we see in the apostle Paul, what he’s taught. He’s taught it, modeled it, but particularly in 2 Corinthians. We’ve seen in this book how that it was God’s grace that comforted him in the midst of intense affliction.

In 2 Corinthians 1:3-4, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort; who comforts us in all our affliction so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.” It was God’s grace that was Paul’s adequacy in everything that he did and that produced life in those who would hear.

In verse 4 of chapter 3 it says, “And such confidence we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God, who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant, not of the letter, but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.”

It was God’s grace that kept Paul from losing heart in his ministry. In chapter 4:1, “Therefore, since we have this ministry, as we receive mercy, we do not lose heart.”

It was God’s grace that caused his message to be only of Christ and never of himself. It says in verse 5 of chapter 4, “For we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your bondservants for Jesus’ sake.”

It was God’s grace that was the treasure within his weak, frail flesh. Nothing more than an empty clay pot. In 4:7, “but we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassing greatness of the power may be of God and not from ourselves.”

It was God’s grace that kept his focus on the glory that was to come. In 4:16-17 it says, “Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison.”

It was God’s grace that kept his ministry from being discredited. It says in 6:1-3, “And working together with Him, we also urge you not to receive the grace of God in vain—for he says, ‘At the acceptable time I listened to you, and on the day of salvation I helped you;’ behold, now is ‘the acceptable time,’ behold, now is ‘the day of salvation’—giving no cause for offense in anything, in order that the ministry be not discredited.”

It was God’s grace that comforted him in times of emotional struggle, and Paul had those emotional struggles. In 7:5-6, “For even when we came into Macedonia our flesh had no rest, but we were afflicted on every side: conflicts without, fears within. But God, who comforts the depressed, comforted us by the coming of Titus.”

It was God’s grace that was so overpowering in his life that he would only boast in the Lord. He just wouldn’t boast in himself. He says in 10:17, “But he who boasts, let him boast in the Lord.”

It was God’s grace that taught him the secret of being weakened through many hardships so that he could be strong in Christ, and we just covered this in 11:23ff. It says, “Are they servants of Christ? (I speak as if insane) I more so, in far more labors, in far more imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death. Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren; I have been in labor and hardship, thorough many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure upon me of concern for all the churches. Who is weak without my being weak? Who is led into sin without my intense concern? If I have to boast, I will boast of what pertain to my weakness.”

It was God’s grace that allowed him to be taken into the third heaven, but also, on the flip side of that, it was God’s grace that put a thorn in his side that tormented him night and day. In 12:7, “And because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this

reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me—to keep me from exalting myself!”

Paul experienced the glory of this *ce mare har*, God’s great grace, in his weakness so that he chose to only glory in that weakness. And in our verse 9, “And He has said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.’ Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in me.” Again, *ce mare har*, what great grace.

You know the wonderful thing about this is? If you’re here today and you’re not walking in that grace, you can experience the same grace that Paul talks about. That grace is a free gift of God only through the Lord Jesus Christ. And if you are a believer, listen, you can experience the grace. I want to put a microscope on verse 9 and also verse 10 and that’s going to be our message today because I don’t want to run through this. I don’t want to assume we’ve picked it up. I want to make sure we’re hearing what the Word of God is saying.

The source of this great grace

Verses 9-10 there are four things I want you to see about this great grace that, hopefully, will bless and encourage your heart. First of all, the source of this great grace. I love in verse 9, “And He (God) has said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you.’” The “He”, obviously God, but Christ is God, but it’s Christ in the context. “Christ has said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you.’” Just like he said in John 14:27, “My peace I give unto you; My peace I give to you; not as the world gives, do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful.”

The word “grace” is a beautiful word. If you study that you find out that the first way it was ever used, before it ever got baptized into the Christian vocabulary, the word “grace” really means “to rejoice.” It comes from the root meaning “to rejoice.” It’s the word *charis*. When it was first used in secular situations it was used to describe a beautiful person. If you said somebody is beautiful, you’d say “That person is full of grace.” But then it began to be more defined. They began to realize that a beautiful person was one who gives to others. So they said, “Yes, he’s beautiful, because look what he does. An example of that is he gives.” But then it continued to extend itself and it came to mean “He gives, yes, but he gives to people who don’t deserve it and could never pay it back.”

So grace in its very origin was not just what a person did as we think of it, but it was who a person was. The undeserved and enabling grace that we experience in Christ was first brought into our Christian vocabulary to describe Who God is and what He wants to do in the individual human life. Each context in which it is used in Scripture just further shapes and defines the word “grace.” It takes it into a deeper, more profound meaning. It’s defined in this passage by the word “sufficient.” It’s the sufficiency to supply what is lacking in our weakness.

But God says, “It’s My grace. It’s My grace.” You know, in our country particularly people don’t seem to realize that there is no other source of this grace. All of us can experience the weakness, but how many people really experience His grace? So many people, including believers, are looking in all the wrong places. It’s only found in Christ; the same One that saves us is the same One that continues to enable us to be everything He demands in our lives.

The source of all of God’s grace is the Lord Jesus Christ who lives within the believer. That’s right: it was given by God the Father to believers in Jesus Christ. It says in 1 Corinthians 1:4, “I thank my God always concerning you, for the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus.” So all the potential of experiencing that grace is living within us as believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. It can only be known and experienced as we learn to yield fully to Him. That’s what worship is, by the way. When we yield ourselves to Him and to the Lordship of Christ in our life, then we’re chained to His chariot and that’s when we experience His victory in His grace and His triumph in our life.

The Corinthians had repented in chapter 7 and they knew this grace. They knew the grace of repentance. They knew a brand new meaning of repentance, the godly sorrow had led them to repentance and now they’ve turned back towards Paul. And so Paul says in 8:9, “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.” You’ve experienced this grace. You know what I’m talking about. This grace can be experienced.

I guess the applying question today would be: are you experiencing that grace today? Since you got up this morning have you experienced consciously the grace of God? In your weakness have you experienced His strength in your life? *Ce mare har*; what great grace. Jesus is the source of all God’s grace. Don’t ever forget that: it’s nowhere else. The church is not a source of God’s grace. Christ is the source of God’s grace. We are His church.

The strength of God’s great grace

Secondly, the strength of God’s great grace. It says in verse 9, “And He has said to me, ‘My grace’—My Grace, My grace—is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.” You see, it’s this grace, found no other place, that sufficiently gives us the ability to bear up under whatever comes our way, in the unannounced circumstances that life throws at us. Joshua in Joshua 1:8

was in a different covenant. God was with him but not in him, but the principle was the same. God said, "Joshua, I'm going to teach you how to be strong and courageous. Now when you cross over the Jordan River with this two and a half million people, I want you to meditate on My Word. I don't want you to lean from it to the left, or lean from it to the right, and when you get over there, you won't fall apart. When those situations come at you and you don't know, you're on sealed orders, Joshua. You know that faith will carry you through, but you're on sealed orders. You don't know what's ahead of you. But when it comes, it's unannounced and when it comes it will be a surprise and it will hit you from all sides. But when it comes, you'll have success."

Now that word "success" doesn't mean what we think it means. It's translated "twelve times wise and twelve times understanding" in the Old Testament. He's talking about something different from what the world says success is. He says, "Joshua, you'll have the discernment, the wisdom, to know what to do; but, Joshua, you'll have My power to get through whatever it is and My Word that you can stand upon. And you can experience this, Joshua, if you'll just do what I tell you to do."

The verb, "is sufficient" in our verse is in the present tense active voice. Do you wonder why I look at those kinds of things? Because it's important. God's grace in Christ is always sufficient. There's never a time that it's not sufficient: sufficient yesterday and sufficient today. It's in the present tense: continuous action all the way through. And the wonderful thing is that it's in the active voice, which means God chose to make it that way. And the active voice means He took full control. This is His heart, He wants His grace to be available to whoever will call out for it in whatever circumstances they're in.

The word "sufficient" is the word *arkeo*, which means to have exactly enough for whatever the need is. Now we know from Romans that it's abundant grace. It's even more than enough. And we sang "More than Enough" just awhile ago. But the thing he's trying to get across is that it's exactly what you need; it's exactly. It does mean enough. That same word translated in John 14:8 is translated "enough." It says, "Philip said to Him, 'Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us.'" And that is the same word.

The word "sufficiency" carries the idea of being content in His grace and in fact it's translated "content" in Hebrews 13:5, "Make sure that your character is free from the love of money, being content with what you have, for He Himself has said, 'I will never desert you now will I ever forsake you.'" Now God told Paul, "My grace is enough." "My grace, Paul, is enough." Yes, it's more than enough, but you're going to discover that it's exactly what you need in the situation that you're in. It will sustain you; it will replace your weakness with His power.

Oh, me. One of my favorite epistles in the New Testament is the book of James. People always ask me, "What's your favorite book?" Really, it's whatever I'm teaching at the time because I just love God's Word. But James is one of my favorites. And you remember in 1:2 it says, "Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials." And the word "various" in the New American Standard version is the word *poikilos*, multi-colored trials. And James is getting across the same point that Jesus got across to Paul in 2 Corinthians 12.

The word "multi-colored." Do you realized your trials are color-coded this morning. What do I mean? In 1 Peter 4:10 it says God's grace, that enabling power, is also color-coded: "the manifold grace of God." And it's the same word, "multi-colored." Over in Ephesians 3:10 it says the wisdom of God is multi-colored. "What? You mean to tell me if I'm going through a red trial God gives me the red grace and gives me the red wisdom, exactly what I need, even more and above, to walk through that trial?" That's exactly what he's saying. And that's exactly what Paul's teaching right here.

God said, "Oh, Paul, don't run to this person and don't run to that person and don't run there and don't run here. Listen, run to Me, Paul, and confess to Me that you're weak. And in your weakness My strength is perfect, it's sufficient, it's exactly what you need. It's even over and above. But, Paul, you're going to find something in your weakness you never knew existed."

In this text this grace that is so sufficient is what this grace produces when we're weak. You see it more in the next statement. "My grace is sufficient for you, for power [His power] is perfected in weakness." The word "power" there is the word *dunamis*, and it means the ability to do whatever is assigned, whatever is there, whatever is needed. It is the strength of Christ rising up within us in the midst of our acknowledged, pitiful weakness. Whether or not it be under the crippling influence of a disease that has imperiled your body; whether or not it be in a person that you can't love; whether or not it be in a sin that you can't seem to overcome and the temptation keeps coming back to you over and over again; whether or not you're under heavy criticism; God says, "Come to Me, come to Me. Admit you're weak. That's your problem: you won't admit you're weak. Admit you're weak. And in your weakness you're going to discover what you never knew in yourself. You're going to discover My ability, My power and it's going to be exactly enough. You're going to sing with everybody else, 'It's more than enough.' You're going to see the abundance of My grace, but you have to come to Me and you have to admit to Me that you're weak."

James teaches us that He doesn't give grace to the proud; He gives grace to the humble. Those people who are willing to finally admit, maybe it's at 4:00 in the morning when you couldn't sleep; maybe somewhere else; but you're at the point when you say, "Oh, God, I'm weak. I can do this and I can do that and I can do this, but, oh God, I can't handle what the problem is. You're going to have to do it." And those sweet moments of honesty, in those sweet moments when God sees that you're willing to be open with Him, He

floods your heart with that which you possibly didn't even know existed in you until that very moment. His strength is made perfect.

God's strength is never seen when we're strong in ourselves. Paul's been contrasting the false teachers that rampaged the church there in Corinth and they bragged about what they could do and they bragged about how smart they were and they bragged about what they had. And the apostle Paul said, "No, no, no." The contrast in Christianity is so far beyond that; it's so different as night and day when a person is weak and we cry out to Him is when we discover His strength.

Ficely and a man by the name of John—John is 40 and Ficely is 34 years old—they're both taekwondo world champions. But they've been studying the Word since the time they got saved. Now they're trainers. They've been all over the world now. They go in areas I'm not even allowed to tell you and they go in with absolutely no worry whatsoever because God has led them and they let Him be their strength.

Ficely gave me his testimony the day he had to leave. He told me how he was raised in a Communist home, he was raised in a religious church there in Russia and Romania. And he said he wanted to learn taekwondo. He said he went to Moscow to learn. And he'd just married a young girl a few years back and they'd had a little baby, and he went over to Moscow to learn. And John was there and said "I'll teach it to you." He was already a world champion. And he said, "but before you can be in any of my classes, you have to take one hour of Bible study first." So he got into the Bible study and he got saved while he was there. God just overwhelmed his heart.

He called his wife from Moscow and he said, "You won't believe what's happened to me. I'm a totally different person. I met Someone that changed my life." She said, "I can't wait for you to introduce me to Him," thinking it was somebody that he was going to bring home with him. And he did, but in a different way that what she thought.

And he came home and she said, "Where is the one that's changed your life?" She saw the light in his face and he said, "He's in here." And she said, "What do you mean?" "Jesus Christ has come to live in me." She turned her back on him, her family turned their backs on him, basically excommunicated him out of the religion that they were in. He affected everybody around him. He had no idea. All he did was get saved. He didn't realize all the mess it was going to create.

And one day he was on his knees before God and the Bible was open in front of him. And he was weeping as he's telling me this. And he finally said, "Wayne, I almost turned my back on Jesus. My wife had turned her back on me, her family had turned their back, I had no friends, I had no place to go. My Bible was open and I didn't even know how to really read it. I had learned to study one book, but I didn't know where to go. I had it open to 1 Corinthians 10:13 and my eyes fell on that verse, "No temptation has overtaken you but as such is common to man. And God is faithful who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you're able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also so that you'll be able to endure it."

And he said, "I grabbed my Bible and I hugged it to me like it was my precious child. That's when I went on and God in my weakness became my strength." And he had never heard this message of grace, of Christ living in and through you. You see, it's not my message, it's God's gospel. This is what's in the Word, but you have to be weak before you can even get a clue what he's talking about.

So the word "perfected." He said, "My power is perfected in weakness." And the "my" that is in the verse carries to the word power. The word "perfected" is the word teleo, which means "my power is fully accomplished only in those who are humble enough to admit how desperate and how weak they really are." Paul, in his weakness, has experienced for himself the Source of this great grace. He's experienced the strength of God's great grace.

We have the sweet sounds of God's great grace

The third thing I want you to see is we have the sweet sounds of God's great grace. It's the most beautiful thing when you hear somebody that just can't shut up talking about the power and the strength of God in their life. When you hear them use their own weakness as a backdrop but their emphasis and the spotlight is on His power and on who He is.

Verse 9, again, "And He has said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.' Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in me." The words "most gladly" is the word hedeos. It's the word which means "sweet." Isn't that interesting? In fact it's the word that means "to relish" something. Like when you go out after church and you cut open that beautifully cooked New York strip. It's cooked to perfection. And you put your fork into it and the juice just sort of emerges out of it. It was cooked just right; it was seared enough on both sides to keep the juices in it and you took your knife and it cut like butter and you relish it and you can't wait to tell other people about what you've experienced. That's the word "most gladly." and when it's used figuratively as it is here, it means that whatever you're doing, with great joy. You don't have to be coerced. I've always struggled with programs that teach a person how to witness. Admit that you're weak and start living in His strength and you can't shut up. It's most gladly that you begin to share with other people.

It's incredible to me how much blindness is in America because we have so much; we can't cut through it to get to the desperation to where the strength is made perfect in weakness. Paul uses that same word in verse 15 of this chapter and he says, "I will most gladly spend and be expended for your souls." Same word—I'll most gladly; you don't have to twist my arm. You don't have to beat me over the head.

So he says in verse 9, "Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in me." Do you realize what he's saying? Because he'd experienced the sweetness of what only God could do in his life, that sweet attitude just overwhelmed in his life and he gladly opened his mouth. And instead of boasting about what he could do, he boasted about what he couldn't do. And they said, "But look at all the things you've done, look at all the churches you've started." He said, "I want you to know that was Christ in me and through me."

Most gladly; most gladly. You want me to share? Yes, but it won't be about myself; it'll be about Him. "Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in me."

At the conference they gave me a title and the title was, "Preaching Jesus Will Build a Great Church". When I got up to speak I had a real confusion in my mind. I told them, "I'm really sort of bothered by my title today, because what constitutes a great church in our mindset in America, we think if it's big it must be great. And so I'm going to leave that to the discussion in another room. I want to talk about whether or not you're preaching Christ and we're not preaching ourselves."

That's so often the message. We're not preaching Him; we're preaching what we can do for Him. "And oh God, we know that You're so busy, would You just bless our humble efforts?" "Most gladly, therefore, I would rather boast about my weaknesses." His weaknesses were the backdrop to enhance the message of Christ's power in his life. And what a contrast to these false teachers who only bragged on how much they knew, how much they had, and how much they could do. What a contrast to Christianity in the 21st century, especially in the US.

Paul was willing to be weak so that the power of Christ could dwell in him. The NIV and the JKJV translates it that "Christ's power might rest upon me." Understand what he's saying here. Paul knew that only when he was weak could he walk in the power of God in his life. The more Paul thought he could do, the less people would ever see of God's power in his life. He would actually rather have the pain of the thorn than he would to miss out on experiencing God's power in his life. How sweet it is, oh, how sweet it is when someone in the midst of his weakness cries out and discovers the power of grace, of Christ working in him, and he just can't wait to share it, can't shut up, he can't wait to tell people about what Jesus had done in his life.

There's a man from Romania, he's been fighting Communists all of his life. He grew up thinking that people were his problem. He stayed for the second conference this year and I preached one night on the fact that people are not your problem, they're your opportunity. People are that which drive you to the end of yourself. When you get around an unlovable person, you're weak immediately and you don't know what to do. That's when God's power is made perfect; that's when His love can exude through your life. That's when that individual can be transformed.

After it was over with he prayed and I couldn't understand a word, but after that was over someone came to me and said, "Wayne, do you understand who prayed and what they prayed?" And I said, "No, tell me." They said, "He prayed and said, 'Oh, God, I've been fighting people all of my life, and I was going to win. Oh, God, the problem is not them, the problem is me. I'm the problem and I've not been weak enough to let You do through me what only You can do.'"

I got on the plane to go to Vienna and a lady walked up to me. She had been working over there with a team and we'd flown in on the same plane. And she said, "What in the world happened in your conference?" She mentioned this man's name that had helped her group over there. She said, "He can't shut up. He's gone to everybody to tell them what God showed him, that it was him that was the problem, not people."

That's what I'm talking about. You didn't have to coerce him; he didn't have to have a spot on somebody's program to give his testimony. He didn't have to go through a class and be trained on how to do it. He just couldn't shut up. He'd been in his weakness and God met him and revealed to him truth that had transformed his life.

Paul experienced the source of God's grace in his weakness, the sufficiency of God's grace in his weakness, the sweetness of God's grace most gladly. You didn't have to even urge Paul to share about it. Paul said, "It will never be about me. It'll be about who Christ is and what He's done through me."

The satisfaction with God's great grace

And finally, the satisfaction with God's great grace. In verse 10, "Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong." Paul expands what he said in verse 9 in understanding God's grace being sufficient and sweet in his life by saying "therefore." Any time you see a therefore, you

always look to see what it's there for.

"Therefore I am well content." What makes the statement so profound is the list that follows: "Therefore I am well content with weaknesses." That doesn't fit—yes, it does. "Weakness" is *astheneia*, and it means "those things that bring me to the total end of myself." And Paul goes on and shows what about this weakness. He said, "Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults." That word "insults" is the word *hubris*, and it's a violent word. It doesn't mean what you think it means. It doesn't mean just what people say. This is something that brings physical injury to you as a result from somebody who's very insolent. It's much more than to say insulting things; it's physically insolent, injurious.

Acts 27:10, "and said to them, 'Men, I perceive that the voyage will certainly be attended with damage and great loss, not only of the cargo and the ship, but also of our lives.'" That's the word used there. In Acts 27:1 it translates damage and loss again. "When they had gone a long time without food, then Paul stood up in their midst and said, 'Men, you ought to have followed my advice and not to have set sail from Crete and incurred this damage and this loss.'" That's the word that we're dealing with.

It goes on and says, "with insults, with distresses." You know what distresses are? Distresses are the inevitable—it's coming whether we like it or not—that come from people that are morally depraved. They haven't got a clue. Jesus uses the word in Matthew 18:7 in a very profound way: "Woe to the world because of its stumbling blocks! For it is inevitable," that's the word, "that stumbling blocks come; but woe to that man through whom the stumbling block comes!"

Next Paul uses the word "persecution," *diogmos*. That's to be pursued with the intent to kill. And that's going to be in our life until Jesus comes back. The next word he uses is "difficulties," which is the word *stenochoria*, and it describes the inner stress when hostility is all around a person and it's coming in on him and crushing him to his very core and that emotional stress and mental stress and physical stress that he feels. That's what he's talking about here.

All of this for Christ's sake, Paul said it very clearly in verse 10: "Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong." And you could even put in "only then."

Paul never once bemoaned his circumstance even though he had been painfully victimized. But God would not allow him to live as a victim. I want you to hear that again, because we're living in a society that glorifies the victimized. But God said, "No, I know you've been victimized because it's inevitable. It's going to come if you're a believer. It's going to come. However, I don't allow you to live as a victim because those were the very things that drove you to the end of yourself. And when you got to the end of yourself you saw Me and you experienced Me in a way that you've never experienced. So therefore glory in what made you weak." Because that's the only time you can experience who and Whose you are.

The pain had caused him to be weak, and it was in the weakness that caused Christ enabling power to be manifest. *Ce mare har*, what great grace. The source of this great grace, "My grace," Christ said. The strength of this great grace is sufficient, for in weakness my power is perfected. The sweetness of this great grace causes a person to overwhelmingly want to share it with everyone. And the satisfaction of this great grace, you can even be satisfied though life has thrown you a curve ball since the day you were born, God says "that's the very thing I'm using to let you amongst all these others, experience something that many Christians don't know anything about. Because it's only in weakness that you experience My strength."

We know all about saving grace. One day we're going to understand dying grace. My prayer is that in between time we get a clue about what living grace is. Do you understand how desperate you are this morning? "You wouldn't believe what I've made of my life. You don't know how many cars I've got and where I live." And God says, "That's not what I'm talking about. You're just as needy as the people in Romania. The only thing is they've had everything stripped away to where they understand it."

Do we know because we know because we know the great grace of Jesus Christ in our life?

2 Corinthians 12:11-21

The Part People Play In Weakness

Would you turn in your Bibles today to 2 Corinthians 12 and we're going to finish the chapter today. That means we only have 14 more verses to finish 2 Corinthians. Some of you thought you'd never live to see that day. It's not over yet: you may not. We have awhile yet.

We've been talking about "Suffering for the Sake of Christ" and this is Part 4 of that mini-series as we've been going through 2 Corinthians verse by verse. I want to talk today about the "Part People Play in Weakness." I used to say this all the time, I don't

know why I would do that, but if it wasn't for people I could live the Christian life. Let me ask you a question: have you ever said it or thought it? Be honest. You've been the same place.

Now that I've lived for a little longer and understand a little more about the Christian life I realize that now if it wasn't for people, I wouldn't even understand the Christian life. I don't know how it works in your life, but in my life, God uses people more than anything else to drive me to the end of myself. He'll parachute a brother that I didn't know existed into my life and He'll command me to love that brother when I don't even like him. He'll bring me to the place of understanding what He's been trying to teach me in the Word. I can't, He never said I could; He can, and He always said He would.

Most Baptists particularly can't even get along with themselves, much less anybody else. I heard about that Baptist guy that got on his plane one day and he decided to see how far he could fly out over the ocean. Didn't realize the tailwind that was behind him. And the further he flew, the wind was carrying him even further. And he got so far out he turned around and realized he didn't have enough gas to get back and made a crash landing on an isolated island. And for 30 years nobody found him. He lived by himself on an island for 30 years. One day miraculously they discovered him and when they saw him there was great joy and they looked around in amazement at what he had done to that island. He'd built three buildings by his own hands. Made his furniture, made everything out of his own hands. He'd really learned how to survive. So he took them in and showed them his house and all that he had made there and they came out and said, "What are these other two buildings?" He said, "Well, that building there is the church I used to attend, and this is the one I go to now."

That's about the way we are, isn't it? The reason I bring this up is because it was people, the hurtful, critical people of Corinth that brought Paul to his knees. That was really the essence of his weakness. His weakness was largely because of what they did to him and what they said about him. Almost every word used by Paul in verse 10 of chapter 12 was the result of what people had done to him.

It says in verse 10, "Therefore I am well content with weaknesses," and any time Paul makes a list, look at the first thing, that's the main thing, the rest of it seems to sort of edify that, "with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake." But the sweet thing about it was, that's the bitter part, the sweet part of it was that in this weakness that people had driven him to, he found that Christ's strength was made perfect. He had to be weak in order to understand the message that he preached to everybody else.

He says, "for when I am weak, then I am strong." Because of the pain that was caused in Paul's life by those in Corinth, many think that the thorn he mentions back in verse 7 that we've already talked about, that the thorn could possibly be a person that God put into his life. But that's one of the reasons, because when he talks about his weaknesses, it's in what people have done to him. We don't know for sure, but if there's one thing I want you to realize, in our weakness God's strength is made perfect, and that is truly what happens. He teaches us to love. He not only teaches us how, He enables us to love. He produces His love in us: that's the fruit of His Spirit working in our lives. Even for people that are critical and hurt us and do harm to us.

But I want you to know today that even though His strength is made perfect in weakness, don't ever make the mistake that weakness is painless. Don't think that. Paul realized the strength of Christ living in him and he loved the Corinthians as much and maybe even more than he did other places because of the bad way they treated him. Sometimes it works that way. But he still felt the pain of what they had done and said about him.

I can promise you there is no greater pain, and if you've lived long and you've been in the church and you've been a Christian for a long time, there's no great pain than the pain that one believer can cause upon another. Now we expect it in the world and that's why I'm making this statement. You don't expect it inside the church.

We used to do this in our new members classes. The first day that they met we'd say, "We're so glad that you're here, but let me tell you, it probably won't be a week until somebody in this church offends you." It was like, "Thanks a lot. We're really looking forward to this." But we were trying to help them understand what's real. Not everybody within the church wants to live a surrendered life to Jesus Christ. There are different levels of faith. There are some people that won't give Him time of day. There are some people that will come to church and never even look at the Word of God and they're going to live after their flesh and their flesh is going to offend and that's when it catches us off guard.

And this is what brought Paul to his knees. It wasn't the persecution of the Romans or the persecution of the world, it was the persecution of the believers in the church that criticized and brought him down. In verse 11 and following in chapter 12 we hear the pain, or at least I do. I hear the pain coming out of Paul's voice. He's getting to the end of the letter now and you can sense that there's almost like a weariness that's in him. A weariness of having to deal with the criticism that was first of all completely off the wall, based on wrong information, you can just sense it coming out of him. Instead of being respected for his calling and respected for his walk and respected for the work of the Holy Spirit that had been done through him, Paul is really left hung out to dry by the people that should have stood up for him.

Paul should never have been put in a place to where he would have to defend himself. He hated to do that. He hated to speak of himself, but the unfounded, evil accusations against him from those he served with all of his heart forced him into having to defend himself. How bittersweet it really is. It's bitter in the sense of the pain and you will feel the pain, but it's sweet in the fact that God will even give you a love, a servant love for the people that treat you the way they treat you. Paul's greatest hurt was inflicted by those that God has used him to set them free.

Verse 11, "I have become foolish; you yourselves compelled me. Actually I should have been commended by you, for in no respect was I inferior to the most eminent apostles, even though I am a nobody." It's interesting some of the words he chooses to use here. The verb "I have become," that little phrase, is in the perfect tense. Perfect tense means that something has happened to cause me to do what I'm doing. And the word "compelled" is the word *anagkazo*, which means to force somebody into doing something.

Paul says, "You forced me to defend myself and you know I hate to do that." "I have become foolish; you yourselves compelled me. Actually I should have been commended by you, for in no respect was I inferior to the most eminent apostles, even though I am a nobody." Paul's reference to the eminent apostles here is tongue in cheek, a little sarcasm here, spiritual sarcasm I guess you'd say, because these people were calling themselves apostles and he says they even called themselves cheap apostles and he says that ridiculous.

And then he says, "though I am a nobody," is probably referring to a phrase the critics were using of Paul. But you notice something else here? If you study the apostle Paul's life, he never thought of himself as a somebody. Have you ever been around Christians that think of themselves as a "somebody"? Paul never did think of himself as a somebody. He was a nobody who had a Somebody living in him. And he found his identity in Him. And so the nobody pointed to a Somebody. It's kind of an interesting twist of words, but Paul never saw himself as a somebody.

It's like what he said in 1 Corinthians 15:10, "But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me." See, God was so using the apostle Paul that you would wonder how could anybody in the church of Corinth miss the validity of his life? But flesh, this is the point that I think we all need to understand, flesh cannot see beyond itself. People that live after the flesh have no spiritual discernment whatsoever. And so once again, we see Paul and I picked it up, it's a weariness that's in him having to counter the deceitful, hurtful criticism that has been hurled his way.

And don't ever forget. Yes, in our weakness His strength is made perfect, absolutely. But don't ever think that weakness is painless. It's very painful and you will bear the pain of what people say about you, what they do to you, you'll bear it for a long time. But grief is a clean wound. It just takes time to heal. It will heal, but you'll feel the pain—we're human. And we're not there yet and we will feel the pain just like Paul did.

Well, always be assured it is those whom God commends that are approved, whether they're appreciated by man or not. Paul was a proven man, they just couldn't see it; but he was unappreciated by those who should have known better. There are three ways in which he was proved and I want us to take this message and apply it to our lives this morning. Let it be an encouragement to you if you're seeking to live a life yielded to Christ and people do not appreciate that fact and maybe people are criticizing you for one thing or another. But also let it be a challenge to you. Make sure that every day you can truthfully go before God and know that these things are present in your life. This is what Christ does in and through a yielded believer. And He will prove us. It's never a matter of what people say. That's not it at all. Remember: he that God commends is approved. And if you can live that way, don't worry about mankind. God will prove you amongst them when he gets good and ready.

He was proven by the effectiveness of his ministry

Three things: First of all, he was proved by the effectiveness of his ministry. Verse 12, "The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles." You say, what are the signs of a true apostle? What are you talking about here? What is a true apostle?

First of all make sure we understand this morning that we don't have true apostles today like those appointed by Christ in New Testament times. I've said this before and I hope you will help me with it. If I ever get up here and say God has commissioned me to be an apostle, walk up here and take me by the hand, lead me someplace and have me committed because I've lost my mind. We don't have apostles today like you had apostles then.

Now you can take the word *apostolos*, which is the word for apostle, one who is sent forth with a message, you can use that in the generic sense of a missionary, but you do not have apostles today like the apostles that were appointed by Christ and they served to get the gospel out, but they also gave us the New Testament, the canon's closed, it's not open, we don't have apostles like this today.

But the signs of a true apostle were not in how much they charged for the people to hear them preach, because that's what they

were being judged by in Corinth. And it was not how successful they were in getting a crowd. That certainly wasn't a sign of a true apostle. But God had chosen to identify them through signs and wonders and miracles. This is God's way of affirming them as to who they were. It is so sad that many believers think that in our day that signs, wonders, and miracles are the evidence of someone who is truly filled with the Spirit of God. That's absolutely ridiculous. Signs, wonders, and miracles were never, ever, you can't show me in the New Testament ever a pattern for anyone except for Christ and His appointed, specific apostles during those times to identify them as to who they were.

The author of Hebrews helps us to understand this in Hebrews 2:2-4, "For if the word spoken through angels proved unalterable, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense, how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard, God also bearing witness with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will." Who were the "them"? Who were the "those" who heard? It's the apostles; and God used that to identify them just like He used signs, wonders and miracles in His own life to identify who He was. But we do not need signs, wonders and miracles now. We have the Scriptures; we have the Holy Spirit living in us. We're living in a brand newness of time. And so don't think that your life has to have signs, wonders, and miracles in it. Can God do that in specific people when He chooses? Well, certainly He can. But it's not a pattern. It's not what we look at to see whether or not a person is valid today. That's what validated them back then.

Signs, wonders, and miracles were simply the manifestation of the Holy Spirit in the people's lives to give credibility to what they did. "What signs and wonders did Paul do? I didn't know he was involved in that" I'm glad you asked. In Pathos God enabled Paul to blind a man by the name of Edymas the Sorcerer for opposing the gospel. That's in Acts 13:6-12. In Iconium God enabled Paul to perform many signs and wonders as he talked about in Acts 14:1-3. In Lystra God enabled Paul to enable a crippled man to get up and walk, Acts 14:8-10. He described in detail the signs and wonders that God had done in the Gentile world through him to the Jerusalem council when he met with them in Acts 15:12. In Philippi God enabled Paul to exorcize a demon from a demon-possessed girl in Acts 16:16-18. In Ephesus and throughout all of Asia Minor God enabled Paul to perform all kinds of miracles including a handkerchief that he touched that actually would bring healing to people. In Troas God enabled Paul to bring Eutychus back to life after his deadly fall in Acts 20:9-12. In Malta God enabled Paul to heal Publius' father and other sick people on the island in Acts 28:1-10.

These were the signs that identified him as a true apostle in his day and it says he performed them with all perseverance. Do you realize what that says? The implication of the word "perseverance" is the word *hupomone*, and it means to "bear up under." And what he's saying is that even in the midst of the miracles that God was doing through us, people still rejected us. It wasn't the miracles that did anything for a lot of people, but yet they were severely treated even in the midst of God's identifying them through the miraculous things He was doing through their life.

But Paul is saying, "Why don't you judge me by the effectiveness, the spiritual effectiveness of the ministry God has given to me? Why do you compare me to these false teachers who have all kinds of crowds and they charge for what they do, there's no integrity with them at all?" You see, the greatest miracle that is done through an individual's life is the miracle of a transformed life. Not the signs, wonders, and miracles. They were used, but the greatest miracle that we're part of even today is the transformation of other people's lives.

He says in chapter 3, "You are my letter," I love that, "read by all men." The Corinthians had forgotten evidently what they used to be and how God miraculously had transformed their lives. That's the truest miracle of any miracle you'll ever want to be a part of. In 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 Paul wrote these words, "Or do you not know that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, shall inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you;" he speaks to the congregation there at Corinth, "but you were washed," and that's a miracle, "but you were sanctified," and that's a miracle, "but you were justified," and that's a miracle, "in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit of our God."

So the effectiveness of the ministry Christ was doing through him was clearly seen by everyone. He pointed to Christ, he never pointed to himself. He really believed he was a nobody apart from Christ. Christ was the Somebody that lived in him. Listen, though you and I will never be seen by the signs, wonders, and miracles to give us creditability, when we allow Jesus to be Jesus in our life, you can write it down, He's going to do eternal transforming things in the lives of others and that always shows the effectiveness and the realness of who we are. He will positively affect others whether we're appreciated or not. So to me, make sure daily, when you go to bed at night, make sure that you've dealt with any sin that has come up in your life and you've confessed that and you've sought to repent by trusting God in it. And make sure that you're just no agendas other than just Jesus being Jesus in you and you can write it down: God will at some point prove you to men even though you're unappreciated by them now. You just wait; God will vindicate you, God will prove you, as long as you're living in that right relationship with Him, you don't have to worry about what men do or what they don't do, what they say or what they don't say. God will prove you. God will prove you to be real and to be a believer.

Years ago I had a situation. Two people on my staff almost within a short period of time turned on me and it was one of the most difficult things I've ever gone through in my life. Things were said about me that weren't true. It was amazing. And I was listening to the radio one day feeling sorry for myself. Ever feel sorry for yourself? Have you ever noticed when you have a pity party nobody shows up but you? And I was riding along just feeling sorry for myself because I couldn't seem to answer them the right way. Nobody would listen to me and I was listening to Joseph Stowell on Moody radio. Joe said that day on the radio, "If you've been maligned, if you've been criticized, if somebody is trying to tear down who you really are, there are two things you can hang onto today that will encourage you. One is truth and the other is time. Truth and time will be the two things God will use to prove you to be the one who is genuine. But you don't have to do it yourself. You just let God do that. You just walk proven before Him. He that God commends is approved. You live that way and let God commend you before other men. Let God prove you before other men, but it'll be truth and it'll be time.

Two years, almost to the day when I heard that program, I had a letter from one of these individuals asking me to forgive him for what he did. And the other one called me on the same day, living in different states, not even having talked with each other. And I thought to myself, you don't have to jump out there trying to say this or that. God will prove you. Live a life before Him that you know that you and He are okay. That you know that you've dealt with any sin that's in your life. That you're seeking to only be about His will. If you'll live that way, don't you worry about what people say about you. God will prove you amongst men as long as you live proven before Him. That's the bottom line that I want you to see as an encouragement to your heart.

Paul was proven by the integrity of his methods

But the second thing about Paul is he was a proven not only by the effectiveness of his ministry, Paul was proven by the integrity of his methods, how he went about his ministry. You see, it's not just the ministry that God has through an individual, it's how they go about that ministry. I've said many times it's not what you do for people, it's how you go about doing it: that's what proves you. Not what you do, but how you go about the spirit that you go about doing what you do.

Verse 13, "For in what respect were you treated as inferior to the rest of the churches, except that I myself did not become a burden to you? Forgive me this wrong!" Paul asked them a question that has an easy answer to it because they know the answer. When he says, "in what respect were you treated as inferior to the rest of the churches," you see, they knew this. Christ in Paul had loved those people just like he had loved others. In fact, when you deal with rebellious children sometimes the love is even seen in a greater way. And they knew that.

The only thing that Paul did differently with the church of Corinth that he didn't do with the other churches was that he didn't take one dime from them. This is what he means by the phrase that "I myself did not become a burden to you." He realizes now that they totally did not understand this and, in fact, used it as a criticism of him. You see, what Paul taught was free and the teachers of the Greek culture there, they would charge people to come and hear them. What Paul taught couldn't be marketed on the street with today's world's ways. That wasn't what he was doing. Instead he was preaching a message that would set people free, and it was free of charge. You didn't charge for people to hear it. His not charging those, however, was one thing that led the false teachers to criticize him: He must be a nobody.

But he says rather sarcastically, "Forgive me, this wrong!" I love the way he just goes back and forth here. Not because he saw it as wrong, but because he realized in their foolish way of thinking they couldn't see the forest for the trees and they saw it as wrong. In fact, Paul felt like a father to them and as any father would be to his children, he would never ask anything of them. He'd want to give to them.

He says in verse 14, "Here for this third time I am ready to come to you, and I will not be a burden to you; for I do not seek what is yours, but you." What he's saying is, "I just want you to understand the message and live in the fullness of what Christ offers," "for children are not responsible to save up for their parents, but parents for their children." As a true father he loves the child more than the child ever thought about loving him. He says in verse 15, "And I will most gladly spend and be expended for your souls. If I love you the more, am I to be loved the less?"

It was true: Paul loved them more than they ever thought about loving him. And why would they criticize somebody that loved them? You can hear the critical words of those opposing Paul just by what he says, verse 16, "But be that as it may, I did not burden you myself; nevertheless, crafty fellow that I am, I took you in by deceit." That's another tongue in cheek way of saying, "that's what they're saying, isn't it: 'I took you in by deceit'?"

That was so opposite of what Paul did. Isn't it interesting though, you would think the apostle Paul, who could miss it? But they missed it. They didn't even realize what was in their midst. They didn't even realize that Paul was a man God had put in their midst. They didn't see it. And he had not only not taken advantage of them, but the people he would send to work with them had the same spirit and they didn't take advantage of them.

It says in verses 17-18, "Certainly I have not taken advantage of you through any of those who I have sent to you, have I? I urged Titus to go, and sent the brother with him. Titus did not take any advantage of you, did he? Did we not conduct ourselves in the same spirit and walk in the same steps?" It's just amazing to me when I think of the Corinthian church and I think of Paul. The proof was right in front of them but they just didn't get it. They just didn't get it. They had a true apostle standing right there in front of them and yet they did not in any way appreciate who he was and what God was doing in his life.

God will affirm you though. You see, Paul was affirmed even though they hadn't seen it yet. But Paul was being affirmed by the effectiveness of his ministry. What do I mean? By what the Holy Spirit chooses to do through your life, that points not to you; that points back to God. But also if you will just hang in there and trust God, He will prove you by the integrity of your methods. You see, you might be here today and have a husband who could care less about the Lord Jesus Christ and you may have to go home every day as a wife who loves Jesus with all your heart, and you may have to hear all the horrible things he says to you and all the things he does to you and you think, "Why can't he see the realness of my life? Why can't he see the change that's in my life?" You just leave it alone. You know that God's approved of you and God is your completeness and God is your sufficiency. And in your weakness just continue to let Him to pour out His strength in you and God will prove you. In His time and in His way by the effectiveness of Christ loving through you and by the integrity of the way you go about doing what you do. I want to say that again: it's never what you do for people. It's the way you go about doing it that points to Christ.

Any person that doesn't even know God can do good things, but they cannot do it in the fruit, the love of the Spirit of God. That's something nobody can refute and that's something that everybody understands.

Paul was proven by the purity of his motive

But then thirdly, he was proven by the purity of his motive. Christ in Paul had produced such a love for the believers in Corinth that caused him to do everything that he did for their benefit, even his defense of his own actions which he hated to do. He was using that to help them; it wasn't just simply that he must defend himself. It's more than that. He's trying to help them see something.

Verse 19, "All this time you have been thinking that we are defending ourselves to you. Actually, it is in the sight of God that we have been speaking in Christ;" it's the difference of reacting by defending yourself and there's a difference in what you say in defense to help somebody else understand something.

"And all for your upbuilding, beloved." The word "upbuilding" is the word oikodome, which means to "build up." Now we have another word that's very similar which means "to edify." "Everything I've done is to build you up, it's not to tear you down even when I said the hard things," Paul says. It's to build you up. Ephesians 4:29 uses this word in the life and the character of a believer and it says, "Let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification according to the need of the moment, that it may give grace to those who hear