

This morning, I am in the tenth week of my sermon series entitled “Strength in Weakness,” looking at the New Testament book of 2 Corinthians. If you are unfamiliar with this book, it is a letter written by an early church leader named Paul to a church he had started around the year 50 AD in the Greek city of Corinth, which in Paul’s day was part of the Roman Empire. After he had started the church and built it up, he moved on to start other churches, but he visited Corinth and wrote letters to them as issues arose in the church. One of the biggest issues was that false teachers had come into their community and were tearing down Paul’s reputation, winning the hearts of many of the Corinthians, and causing tension in Paul’s relationship with this church that he loved so much. This left Paul in a really difficult situation. If he ignored the attacks, the Corinthians might think that the false teachers were right. But if Paul defended himself, boasting in his credentials, he would be stooping to their level and appear foolish. In the passage we will be reading today, Paul takes a very unique and creative approach to handling this issue. In the process, he helps us to understand how to identify false teachers, and how to access God’s power.

^{NIV} 2 Corinthians 11:1 - I hope you will put up with a little of my foolishness; but you are already doing that. ² I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him. ³ But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ. ⁴ For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough. ⁵ But I do not think I am in the least inferior to those "super-apostles." ⁶ I may not be a trained speaker, but I do have knowledge. We have made this perfectly clear to you in every way. ⁷ Was it a sin for me to lower myself in order to elevate you by preaching the gospel of God to you free of charge? ⁸ I robbed other churches by receiving support from them so as to serve you. ⁹ And when I was with you and needed something, I was not a burden to anyone, for the brothers who came from Macedonia supplied what I needed. I have kept myself from being a burden to you in any way, and will continue to do so. ¹⁰ As surely as the truth of Christ is in me, nobody in the regions of Achaia will stop this boasting of mine. ¹¹ Why? Because I do not love you? God knows I do! ¹² And I will keep on doing what I am doing in order to cut the ground from under those who want an opportunity to be considered equal with us in the things they boast about. ¹³ For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ. ¹⁴ And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. ¹⁵ It

is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness. Their end will be what **their actions deserve**.¹⁶ I repeat: Let no one take me for a fool. But if you do, then receive me just as you would a fool, so that I may do a little boasting.¹⁷ In this self-confident boasting I am not talking as the Lord would, but as a fool.¹⁸ Since many are boasting in the way the world does, I too will boast.¹⁹ You gladly put up with fools since you are so wise!²⁰ In fact, you even put up with anyone who enslaves you or exploits you or takes advantage of you or pushes himself forward or slaps you in the face.²¹ To my shame I admit that we were too weak for that! What anyone else dares to boast about-- I am speaking as a fool-- I also **dare to boast about**.²² Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Abraham's descendants? So am I.²³ Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again.²⁴ Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one.²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea,²⁶ I have been **constantly on the move**. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers.²⁷ I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked.²⁸ Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.²⁹ Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?³⁰ If I must boast, I will boast of the things **that show my weakness**.³¹ The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, who is to be praised forever, knows that I am not lying.³² In Damascus the governor under King Aretas had the city of the Damascenes guarded in order to arrest me.³³ But I was lowered in a basket from a window in the wall and slipped through his hands. **NIV 2 Corinthians 12:1** I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord. ² I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know-- God knows. ³ And I know that this man-- whether in the body or apart from the body **I do not know, but God knows**-- ⁴ was caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell. ⁵ I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses. ⁶ Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say. ⁷ To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a **messenger of Satan, to torment me**. ⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it

away from me. ⁹ But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. ¹⁰ That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong. ¹¹ I have made a fool of myself, but you drove me to it. I ought to have been commended by you, for I am not in the least inferior to the "super-apostles," **even though I am nothing.** ¹² The things that mark an apostle-- signs, wonders and miracles-- were done among you with great perseverance. ¹³ How were you inferior to the other churches, except that I was never a burden to you? Forgive me this wrong!

Paul begins this section by comparing himself to a father protecting the purity of his daughter until she are joined to Christ - *I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him.* He is so concerned about how they are being deceived by these false teachers. And I share that concern, for there are many charismatic people out there teaching things that are not true, and I do not want you to be deceived. As we read this passage, I believe we learn about three things that can mark false teachers. Because trust me, they are all around you. They might be a false teacher if...

1) They preach a different Jesus, different Spirit, or different gospel

2 Corinthians 11:3-4 - *But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ. For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough.*

In the passage, Paul tells the Corinthians that just as Eve was tricked by the serpent in the garden of Eden, they have been tricked by these super-apostles. And he tells them that Satan masquerades as an angel of light.

¹³ *For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ.* ¹⁴ *And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light.* ¹⁵ *It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness.*

This passage is so incredibly important when it comes to recognizing false teachers. Paul tells us that Satan comes to us not with horns and a pitchfork, frightening us, but he comes to us with attractiveness, with seduction, as a

charismatic leader with special knowledge, as an ascended master with some new revelation, as a supposedly enlightened personality who knows exactly how to make you feel special. And then they take God's truth, and they twist it ever so slightly. It's been Satan's tactic since the beginning – "Did God really say that when you eat the fruit of the tree that you would die? You're not going to die. You will be like God, knowing good and evil." He takes what God has said and adds just the right amount of error, and usually just the right amount of self-centered ambition – you will be like God, or you will be enlightened, to lead you astray.

³ *But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ.*

⁴ *For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough.*

How do you know someone is a false teacher? They are teaching a different Jesus, a different Spirit, or a different gospel. Let me give a couple of examples:

Think of **Mormonism**, otherwise known as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. Their website says this about what they believe about Jesus: "He is the Son of God and our loving Savior. His perfect example shows us the way to live. His teachings give us direction. But most importantly, He suffered and died for our sins so that we can be forgiven when we repent. Through Him, we can find lasting happiness and look forward to living again with God someday." Not exactly as I would have said it, but not bad. But when you dig further, you find that the background teachings on Jesus include this:

Mormons believe that Jesus Christ is a created being, spirit-brother of Lucifer, the firstborn spirit-child of the heavenly Father and one of his goddess wives. Jesus then progressed to deity in the spirit world. He was later physically conceived in Mary's womb, as the literal "only begotten" Son of God the Father in the flesh.

In the beginning, it sounded like we worship the same Jesus, but as you dig deeper, you realize that they are teaching a different Jesus, who is not the real Jesus, who is eternally existent as God the Son, the second person of the Trinity, not created, and not the spirit-brother of the devil.

False teachers preach a different Jesus, and sometimes a different Spirit. Listen to what the Jehovah's Witnesses teach about the Holy Spirit:

The holy spirit is God's power in action, his active force. God sends out his spirit by projecting his energy to any place to accomplish his will... The holy spirit is not a person.

Jehovah's Witnesses teach that Jesus is not divine, that the holy spirit is not the third person of the trinity, and that the Trinity is a false doctrine. But the Bible does teach that God the Holy Spirit and God the Father are distinct persons within the Trinity, that the Holy Spirit is personal, not an impersonal force of God. How do you know someone is a false teacher? Different Jesus, different spirit, different gospel.

And what is the gospel? Remember how Paul defined it to the Corinthians in his last letter:

***1 Corinthians 15:1-8** - Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. ² By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. ³ For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. ⁶ After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, ⁸ and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.*

The gospel is Jesus Christ crucified for our sins, risen from the dead. By this you are saved from the penalty of your sins, eternal separation from God. Nothing needs to be added to that. But out there, you will hear many different gospels, different "good news" of how you must be saved. Some will tell you that salvation is not by grace alone through faith in Jesus alone, but that salvation is grace plus works, or grace plus sacraments, or grace plus baptism, or grace plus speaking in tongues, or grace plus anything else. Or, worse, salvation is enlightenment, becoming more like Jesus through your knowledge and actions, or becoming divine yourself. Salvation comes based on your good works, your obedience, or your own spiritual efforts.

No! The true gospel is that the only way to be right with God is not through enlightenment or special knowledge or good works but only by trusting in Jesus' death for your sins. Paul tells the Corinthians that these false teachers are

proclaiming a different Jesus, a different spirit, and a different gospel. And they need to see it for what it is and reject it.

2) They point people to themselves

Remember what Paul said near the end of the last chapter:

2 Corinthians 10:12,17-18 - We do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some who commend themselves. When they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise ... But, "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord." For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends.

Paul wants the Corinthians to open their eyes and see that these false teachers for the charlatans they are. They are commending themselves. They are charging money for their ministry. They are boasting of their pedigree, their wisdom, their visions and their revelations. They are trying to gain a following through presenting themselves as the spiritual elite who know the way to life. They are not pointing to Jesus and the gospel. They are not proclaiming the Jesus who died on the cross and calls us to pick up our cross and follow Him; they are using the name of Jesus to make money and to advance their own interests. They are pointing to themselves. And the Corinthians, instead of seeing through this charade, are impressed. They are attracted. They have been seduced.

How do you know a teacher is false? They point to themselves, not to Jesus. All over this world, there are charismatic leaders drawing people to themselves, talking about their great knowledge and spiritual experiences, lifting themselves up and seducing people to follow them as enlightened masters, as spiritual gurus, as a higher class of spirituality.

Paul, however, will have none of that. He goes out of his way to tell them how foolish it is that he has to defend himself to them, because they have been seduced by these false teachers. Because he has already told them:

2 Corinthians 10:17-18 - But, "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord." ¹⁸ For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends.

A true man or woman of God, a true teacher, isn't trying to point people to himself or herself, but to Jesus. Paul points to Jesus, and see himself as nothing more than a

servant, a slave. That is how he almost always introduces himself in his letters, as the servant of Jesus Christ. And a servant does not point to himself, but lives for the one he serves. Because he knows what Jesus has said:

Mark 9:33-35 - *They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the road?"* ³⁴ *But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.* ³⁵ *Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the **servant of all.**"*

Notice in chapter 12 how Paul can barely bring himself to talk about the great revelation. Apparently, he was caught up to heaven, hearing things that no one is permitted to say. But he will only refer to himself as “a man in Christ.” He isn’t quite sure what happens, and he doesn’t want to talk about it. He’s not proclaiming himself and his great spiritual experiences as proof that he is some great teacher or man of God. He would never have mentioned this if the Corinthians waywardness had not forced him to. Because Paul knows it is not about him! It is about Christ!

It’s like John the Baptist, when Jesus appeared on the scene and his disciples complained that people were no longer following him but were following Jesus:

John 3:28-30 - *You yourselves can testify that I said, 'I am not the Christ but am sent ahead of him.'* ²⁹ *The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete.* ³⁰ *He must become greater; I must become less.*

That is the attitude of the real spiritual ones. A humility that does not preach their own resume and spiritual experiences but points to Jesus as the one who saves. False teachers love to talk about their spiritual experiences in order to commend themselves and draw followers to themselves. But Paul will have none of that. He knows that talking about your spiritual experiences doesn’t build up the community, just the ego of the one telling the tales. And he only wants to point people to Jesus.

3) **They boast in their strengths**

The false teachers in Corinth boast in their Jewish heritage, their accomplishments, their rhetorical eloquence, their ecstatic visions and special knowledge. And they put down Paul for his mediocre speaking ability and unimpressive demeanor. But

Paul knows that while man's charisma and appearance and talents can attract people to themselves, and can even build a church or religion, there is no true spiritual power in those things. Man's abilities can not save anyone. They can not free anyone from sin. They can not transform a person from spiritual death to spiritual life.

And so, Paul will not boast in his strengths. Instead, Paul boasts in his weaknesses:

2 Corinthians 12:9 - Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.

Once again, forced to talk about himself in order to rescue the Corinthians from deception, Paul shares that yes, I can match their pedigree. But then he goes on to boast in his suffering, recounting all the ways that he has suffered as he follows Jesus, even though the false teachers point to this as evidence that he is not a true man of God, because, after all, a true man of God would only have testimonies of success, and promotion, and blessing, and favor!!! **No, says Paul. It is precisely these times of weakness, of suffering, where God's power has been at work the most powerfully. My credibility is not found in my life of worldly victory and success. My credibility is found in my conformity to the cross of Christ, and the spiritual power that has sustained me and worked through me to save and sanctify others.** And so, I will boast in my weaknesses, in the insults, in the hardships, in the persecutions, and in the difficulties, for that is where God's power is found.

Paul ends with a story about his heavenly revelations and the thorn in the flesh that followed. He tells them that he had an experience where he entered heaven, and heard inexpressible things that he is not even permitted to talk about. But then he continues:

⁷ To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. ⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. ⁹ But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.

The Greek word that is translated here as "thorn" is the word "skolops," which refers to a pointed piece of wood, such as a stake for impaling, a medical instrument, or thorn. It isn't just some tiny thorn off a rose bush. Notice that Paul does not tell them specifically what this stake in the flesh is, whether it is a

physical affliction or relational difficulty or something else. And that's probably for the best, because it allows us to read our own tormentor into the text. He says that the torment came from Satan, but that despite his pleading, God refused to remove it. Can't you just picture Paul? God, why would you allow this? Please remove it! **I could be so much more effective in my ministry if this were gone!** But God says no. Why? Two reasons are given. The first is "To keep me from becoming conceited." Why would that have been bad? Apparently, a proud Paul boasting about himself and his spiritual experiences, exalting himself, would be of no spiritual good. But a humble Paul, not talking about himself but pointing people to Jesus, would be spiritually powerful, able to be greatly used by God. And so God says no, to keep him from becoming proud.

Secondly, God tells him that his grace will be sufficient for him, and that his power will be made perfect in Paul's weakness. Somehow, Paul's weakness, submitted to God, will be the way in which God's power works in and through Him. More than giving God his strengths and talents, it is giving him his weaknesses, his hardships, his humiliation, his difficulties, that will allow God's power to flow through him. And so, once again, God takes what Satan intends for evil and uses it for good.

My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. When I am weak, then I am strong. If Paul were relying on his own strength, he would be spiritually weak. But in his weakness, he will be spiritually strong, as God's power is made perfect in his weakness.

Listen to these words, and take heart. For all of you who have prayed earnestly for God to remove what feels like a stake in the flesh, take heart. It is right to pray for relief from the pain, for healing, for peace in a difficult relationship. But if his answer to your cries is no, it is not because he does not love you. His grace is sufficient for you, even in your weakness and your pain. And His power is made perfect in weakness.

Consider this, from Brennan Manning about a play by Thornton Wilder:

There's a scene in Thornton Wilder's play "The Angel that Troubled the Waters." The scene is a doctor comes to the pool everyday wanting to be healed of his melancholy and his gloom and his sadness. Finally the angel appears. The doctor, he's a medical doctor, goes to step into the water. The angel blocks his entrance and says, "No, step back, the healing is not for you." The doctor pleads, "But I've got to get into the water. I can't live this way." The angel says, "No, this moment is not for you." And he says, "But how can I live this way?"

The angel says to him, "Doctor, without your wounds where would your power be? It is your melancholy that makes your low voice tremble into the hearts of men and women. The very angels themselves cannot persuade the wretched and blundering children of this earth as can one human being broken on the wheels of living. In love's service, only wounded soldiers can serve."

If you would possess true spiritual power, you must begin in weakness, and get used to weakness, hardships, insults, persecutions, and difficulties. It is the way to true spiritual strength.

Paul concludes by saying that he will boast all the more about his weaknesses. Let me leave you with three ways to embrace your weakness, that you might experience true spiritual power:

1) Confession and repentance

Think of the 12 steps movements such as Alcoholics Anonymous or Narcotics Anonymous: the first step to healing is found in weakness, in admitting that you are powerless over your addiction. And salvation begins in a similar place, with an admission of weakness, that you are powerless over sin and in need of a Savior. Spiritual power is found not in pretending you have it all together, but in confessing to God those areas where you fall short and need His grace and mercy and strength.

2) Dependence

Recognize your continual need for God. Not a moment goes by where you are not completely dependent upon Him for every breath. You must stay plugged in to the power source. Often God allows the thorn to remain because it reminds us of our utter dependence upon him, because that is where the power is found. And then you will have the strength to rejoice, even in the trial.

3) Vulnerability

Be open and honest about your weaknesses and suffering to others. There is great spiritual power in vulnerability, as you receive support and strength from others, and as your honesty encourages others. When we only share our strengths, people may put us on a pedestal, and we may inspire people to want to be like us, but when we share our weakness, we foster a deeper connection with each other.

Others are encouraged and strengthened by our vulnerability, and we can receive encouragement and strength from them, so that together we can point each other to the one where true strength is found, Jesus Christ.

His grace is sufficient for you, for his power is made perfect in weakness. Let me close with the words of Charles Spurgeon: *“God does not need your strength: he has more than enough power of his own. He asks for your weakness: he has none of that himself, and he is longing, therefore, to take your weakness, and use it as the instrument in his own mighty hand. Will you not yield your weakness to him, and receive his strength?”*