

Daily Living in Light of God's Grace

2 Corinthians 12:1-10

By Rev. William Joseph

If you would, open your Bible to 2 Corinthians chapter 12. We'll be looking at verses 1 through 10. As we come to this passage, I'd like to tell you a little story about my third week here at First Presbyterian Church and this leads to why I picked this sermon. I was here, I was sitting at Wednesday night supper — I had already gained about thirty pounds more than I had when I came, but by then I had put those comfortably on and was sitting there — but I reached in my pocket that night and I pulled out my medicine thing that I usually carry, and the one I had that night was a little bit bigger, and I twisted it open and I poured down all six of my pills and drank the water and drank it down, which is my normal habit. Some of you are already upset; I can tell! The person across from me said, "Billy, did you just take a whole bunch of pills?" And I said, "Yeah." And they said, "Do you do that regularly?" And I said, "Yeah." "All at one time?" — and they said that very regularly. And I said, "Yeah." Well, there was an older gentleman sitting next to me and that older gentleman said, "Well I can take nineteen at one time!" (laughter) And one of our interns was sitting on the other side of me and suddenly he started laughing. I said, "What are you laughing at?" He said, "Medical trash-talk."

I really didn't know how to label this sermon, how to, what topic to give it. I wanted to give it, "Trash-talk for Jesus" and you'll see as we read it why that crossed my mind, but that's really not an appropriate title for a sermon I don't think. So let's look together at this passage, you'll see why, and then I'll let you tell me what you want to title it later, okay? But it brought up the whole issue of boasting. And what is boasting for the Christian and how does that fit into the Christian's daily living. So hear the Word of God. And before we read let's look to the Lord in prayer. Let's pray.

Father, we thank You that whenever we come to Your Word, whether it's myself as I prepare to preach the Word or Your people as they prepare to hear the Word, or as any of us in our daily times in Your Word or even as we're driving about and it comes to our memory, O Lord God, we come and acknowledge that we are totally and completely dependent upon You for both understanding of Your Word, for the application of it, and we need Your help whenever we read, study, hear, or proclaim, or think about and meditate upon Your Word. So O Holy Spirit, tonight we ask that You would do the job of opening our hearts and our minds that we might see the truth of our Lord Jesus in this Word that we might be

conformed to His image, that we might bring glory to You. We ask in Jesus' name, amen.

Hear the Word of God from 2 Corinthians chapter 12, beginning at verse 1:

I must go on boasting. Though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven — whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. And I know that this man was caught up into paradise — whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows — and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter. On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. Though if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me. So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. 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 of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Paul, in this book — it's a really interesting book because of some words that occur almost here and nowhere else in the Scriptures. In the sense of the word, "boasting," in the word, "sufficient," there are just some great words that appear in 2 Corinthians. But Paul here dealing with self-designated, trash-talking, so-called "super apostles" — people who have presented themselves as godly, super-godly, and extraordinarily godly, and he has come, in dealing with them, and he has had to defend his own apostleship, which Paul didn't really like to do, because Paul wanted to draw attention to who Jesus was, not to who he was. But he comes loaded with lots of evidence. If you look at the context, going back to chapter 11, he says this. He says, "a little foolishness, but bear with me" — and I'm quoting Paul there. He said, "They say they're Hebrews; so am I. They say they're Israelites," Paul says, "so am I. They are offsprings of Abraham." Paul says, "So am I. They're servants of Christ." He says, "I am a better one. I'm talking like a madman. They say they have far greater labors, far more imprisonments, and countless beatings and often near death." And then he gives his list. "Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I have been beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked, at night and day I was adrift at sea. On frequent journeys in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, dangers from my own people, dangers from Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers at sea, dangers

from false brothers, in toil, in hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst and often without food, in cold and exposure. And then apart from all these, there was the daily anxiety for all the churches.”

These are Paul's evidences of his apostleship and how, on top of that, he then comes to our passage where he presents the piece de resistance — the one that is going to top all of the things that everybody else is going to say. But he's nervous about it. He starts off by saying, “I must go on boasting.” He starts out and he talks about himself in the third person, as a man that he knows. He's trying to distance himself from this vision or whatever it was that he had. Paul had a lot of reasons to be boasting as a Christian in the strength and in the abilities, the things and the experiences he had been through. He had lots of reasons, but he is very, very cautious about doing so. Why is he doing it? Because he knows that even with that kind of vision, even with that kind of special gift that God had given him, to take him up to what's called the third heaven and to see things that he couldn't even tell anybody, that even with that experience, even with that experience, he knew the sinfulness of his own heart.

Did you catch it? Verse 7? Verse 7 says, “So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given to me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to harass me, to keep me from being conceited.” Now I know that none of you have problems with being conceited; not a single one of you in here thinks of yourself most of the time. It's probably just Paul; it's probably just me. No, I can't even put myself in there. Paul was concerned about deceit, and yet he's talking about boasting? When we think of boasting and we think of conceit, we think of boasting to be to speak or to assert with excessive pride, with excessive pride. And here's Paul saying that he needs to be guarded against conceit. So God does what? God gives him a thorn in the side. And we're not sure exactly what that means. We're not sure whether that meant some physical condition that Paul had, whether it was a spiritual reality that Paul struggled with; we're not told, other than it buffeted him. We're not told other than what we read here. We're not told.

But in the midst of that, we see a very interesting thing about Paul's boasting. In the midst of this thorn, Paul prays three times. He prays three times that he will be free from this thorn. And the answer is a strange one. It's a quotation of Jesus that doesn't appear in other passages of Scripture. The quotation of Jesus where Jesus says to him, “My grace is sufficient for you. For my power is made perfect in weakness.” The first thing we want to look at is that when Paul is struggling with this conceit and God gives him this and doesn't answer his prayer, what God gives him is grace. When he doesn't hear the answer he wants — by the way, when you think about it, wasn't there somebody else that asked God several times to be delivered? Wasn't there someone else who, in the Garden of Gethsemane, prayed that the cup would pass from Him? That if there was any other way that the Lord would take that cup away from Him? That's important for us to understand if we're going to understand grace. Because you see, Paul and

Jesus asked God three times or more that the cup, that they wouldn't have to suffer the things that they are suffering.

And yet their answers are different. Did you notice? Their answers are both, “No,” but they’re still different. Jesus’ answer was, “No.” Jesus’ answer was, “I’m going to leave You.” Jesus’ answer was, “You’re going to take the full, unadulterated wrath of the Father on You that is due to everyone of you that trusts in Christ, to every person who has ever trusted in Christ, whether they trusted back on Christ the way we do or they trusted forward on Christ the way the Jews did, the way the Israelites did. Whoever trusted in Christ, their sin was going to be placed on Jesus and Jesus was going to satisfy the divine wrath of God on every person who would ever trust in Him. And the answer to Him was, “No. You will not only suffer; You will die. You will not only die, but You will die and suffer the punishment of eternal sin.” And Jesus said, “Nevertheless, not My will but Your will.”

Wrath was extended to Jesus, where Paul was given grace, grace that was sufficient. Grace — God's riches at Christ's expense — for those of you who have been to Vacation Bible School so many times you don't know how many to count. God's riches; God's favor. God's favor where? In the midst of the struggle, the thorn; in the midst of the things that would keep him from being conceited. In the midst of his weaknesses, God's grace was sufficient, and Paul was pleading with God and God said, “It is sufficient. It is sufficient because you need to go through these things so that you will be more like Me. You will be more like My Son. You will be like Him in the sense that you will understand the pain and the suffering of life. You need to go through these things so that you are not conceited. And even though I have blessed you to preach the Gospel, even though I have blessed you to show you things that no one else has seen, what you need to boast about is not what I have done for you, but you need to boast about your weaknesses.” He draws a very interesting dilemma for Paul, and that dilemma is that Paul has to boast based on truth that he knows; the truth that Jesus has died, that the grace that Jesus extended to him is sufficient, and he therefore has to learn to endure the thorn in the flesh.

But notice the second thing that is said to him by Jesus — “For my power is made perfect in weakness.” Boy, we forget that, as we struggle to know who Jesus is, we forget what Jesus did to become man. Philippians gives us a hint. It says, “Though He was in the form of God, in the form of God, He did not count equality with God a thing to be held on to, but He emptied Himself by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of man.” This is the God of heaven who has been taking the form of a servant and being born in the likeness of man, the very man that He created. “And being found in human form,” it says, “He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death.” He was crucified, 1 Corinthians 13 tells us, He was crucified in weakness but lives by the power of God. Jesus is the demonstration, not just of grace that is sufficient, but power to save dead sinners. If the grace is not sufficient, the favor of God given to those

who deserve His anger and His wrath and His curse, then the power of God to take dead sinners and to make them alive, to take dead sinners and to give them a High Priest who can understand every difficulty that they have. And then, a High Priest who not only understands their difficulties, but then demonstrates His love toward them and then gives them a message — the message of the cross, of dying for others, of sacrifice for others. The message of the cross of one who died. The power of the Gospel for Paul, who was weak with a thorn in his flesh.

So the two things that God, that the Lord Jesus gives him in this quotation — “My grace is sufficient for you. For my power is made perfect in weakness” — these two things are like a boast themselves. They are — the first part of the boast. Have you ever thought about what boasting — let me give you an illustration. In 1986, the NBA, at the — sorry guys, I have to do sports. Ligon has to do *Lord of the Rings*; I have to do sports. In 1986, for the first time ever, they had three-point shooting contests along with the dunking contest. And before the contests started, the eight players were all in the room, they had all been out shooting and practicing, they went and met in the room, and Larry Bird was in there, and Larry Bird was kind of walking around and Larry Bird wasn't saying anything.

Now if you know anything about Larry Bird, you know that he is probably known as the greatest trash-talker ever to play in the NBA. And I'm not going to tell you all of the really bad ones, but anyway, he walks around and he looked at the guys and there are guys like Dale Ellis that played for Tennessee who'd never saw a layup in his life; shot layups from like thirty feet out. And he walks around and all of a sudden he says, “Well guys, I'm just looking around to see who's going to be in second place.” You see, he spoke what he knew was going to be the truth and he knew that he had the power to do it, and so he spoke truth and he spoke power. And that's really what a boast is, if you think about it, except for one little added addition. Well now Larry Bird went out and won the three-point shooting contest, hitting I think eleven in a row at one point, but just — and did it three straight years in a row. Phenomenal to see somebody do that. You see, he backed it up. He didn't just speak truth and he didn't just have the power, but he did it. And that's the real secret of good trash-talking, see? You don't just say it; you've got to carry it through. The more you carry it through, the more powerful it becomes.

But that's exactly what happens here. You see? Because the third thing that's needed for good boasting is action, which demonstrates and proves the truth and the power. It's seen right here; it's seen right here. Look at what Paul says in the end of verse 9. “Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weakness so that the power of Christ might rest upon me.” That's a loaded statement, y'all. That's a loaded statement because it's saying that he will gladly boast about his weaknesses. And what will be the result? The result will be that the power of God will rest. The word there is “tent, tabernacle.” That the power of God will be with him wherever he goes. Whoa, whoa, whoa. You have to have truth and the power and you've got to live it out to boast. And he's not boasting in his ability,

he's not boasting in the things that he can accomplish for Jesus, he's not boasting in the things that would make Paul look good. No, he's boasting in his weaknesses so that the power of God will rest on him. He's boasting in his inabilities, in the areas of his life that are lacking, the areas of his life that you and I identify more with. His everyday struggles become the basis of his boasting, not his successes, not the things that are going great, not the six, seven, eight, nine weeks of being in the Word every day and spending three hours studying your Bible. No, he's going to boast in the fact that he hasn't had one in three days and he misses it and he should have been in the Word but he wasn't because he's weak. He's boasting in his weaknesses folks! The believer who understands the sufficiency of God's grace doesn't boast in the things that they can do for the kingdom of God. They don't boast in the things that they will do, the things they might do. They boast in their weaknesses.

We celebrated recently our 175th anniversary of this church. I guess it's an anniversary; I can't remember exactly what you call it, but anyway, we did celebrate. We talked about how God had blessed this church. But you know, there's a passage of Scripture that says, "Where sin abounds, grace much more abounds." This church has seen God's grace; there is no doubt. You have experienced God's grace; there is no doubt. But it's because you and I are still struggling with our weaknesses. We're still struggling with our sin. That is our boast, because you see, when we talk about what we cannot do, what we are unable to do, then anything that's accomplished through us, anything that's accomplished in spite of us — whether it's spending ten minutes in prayer or whether it's going to prayer meeting before each service, whatever it may be, it is a work of God's grace in your life. You understand, don't you, that the Scripture says that "apart from Him, we can do nothing." We need to be people who boast in our weaknesses, what we cannot accomplish, because then we will be forced to acknowledge that anything that does occur will occur because of the grace of God and the power of God. Let's pray.

Father, we would boast gladly of our weaknesses. We would even learn to be content with our weaknesses, because even as this passage says, "When we are weak, then we are strong." O Lord Jesus, thank You that while we were yet sinners, You died for us. While we were Your enemies, You redeemed us. Then You gave Your Spirit to draw us to Yourself and great power to resurrect our lives and to change us and to cause us to have hearts of flesh rather than hearts of stone. Oh, may our boast always be that apart from Christ we are nothing, but it may also be that we glory in the cross of Jesus our Savior and that through our boasting in our weaknesses, He might receive glory and honor. This we ask in Jesus' name, amen.

Let's stand for the benediction.

And now may grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, be and abide with each one of you both now and

forevermore. Amen.

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