

SECOND CORINTHIANS

Chapter 12

Introduction

The apostle Paul was a **weakling!**

Five times he used the Greek word *astheneiais*. It is translated into three English words - *infirmities*, *weakness*, and *weak* - but it is the same Greek word. Paul referred to his physical weakness and also to his spiritual weakness. He didn't regret being a weakling; he rejoiced in it! God's strength was made perfect in Paul's weakness; therefore he delighted in being a weakling.

We don't ordinarily put much value on weakness. We don't hire or promote people who are weaklings... We don't vote for weaklings. Yet here was Paul, boasting about being a weakling. We'd better understand what he means.

Twice in verse seven Paul uses the phrase, "lest I be exalted above measure." We love to measure things by using various standards. At school you measure using test scores and grades. At work you measure using sales and productivity figures.

When it comes to spiritual things, what is the standard of measure we should use? Often we use the same standards we would use in the world. Let's use ourselves as an example. Here we are, meeting at the YMCA, with no building of our own. Having a building is for many the measure of spiritual strength, growth, and progress. Is that the standard we should use?

The standard of spiritual measure Paul used was weakness. God's strength can only be made perfect in weakness; when you are weak, then and only then are you strong. In these verses he applied that standard to himself – to his *words*, to his *walk*, and to his *work*. As we follow him through the text, we want to measure our own *words*, *walk*, and *work* by the standard of weakness.

#1 Measure Your Words

By The Standard Of Weakness

(v1-6)

These verses are about Paul's words. In verse six he said,

2 Corinthians 12:6 For though I might desire to boast, I will not be a fool; for I will speak the truth. But I refrain, lest anyone should think of me above what he... **hears** from me.

You should measure your words by the standard of weakness.

2 Corinthians 12:1 It is doubtless not profitable for me to boast. I will come to visions and revelations of the Lord:

The Corinthians had sunk to a point where they would only listen to boasts. Paul was reluctant to boast; he considered it altogether unprofitable. He engaged in boasting only to get their attention off of the false teachers and back on Jesus.

The false teachers apparently boasted about receiving visions and revelations. Paul had many visions and revelations, too, and he discusses one now:

2 Corinthians 12:2 I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago—whether in the body I do not know, or whether out of the body I do not know, God knows—such a one was caught up to the third heaven.

2 Corinthians 12:3 And I know such a man—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows—

2 Corinthians 12:4 how he was caught up into Paradise and heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter.

In verse seven you learn that this “man in Christ” was none other than Paul himself. Fourteen years earlier he had been “caught-up to the third heaven.” “Caught-up” is the same word we derive the word *rapture* from. The “third heaven” is a phrase that describes the dwelling place of God. The Bible speaks of the atmospheric heavens, the stellar heavens, and heaven – the dwelling place of God. “Paradise” is a word which is used to describe the dwelling place of the righteous dead. Before Jesus Christ rose from the dead, Paradise described a compartment in Hades where the spirits of believers went. After Jesus rose from the dead He took those believers to heaven.” Now when believers die they go immediately to be with the Lord – to Paradise, to the third heaven, to heaven. Paul didn't know if he had died and gone to heaven or if he was simply transported there while still alive. The things he experienced

in heaven were too glorious to ever express in human language. “Not lawful... to utter” means it would be a crime to try to describe the beauty and wonder and majesty of heaven. How interesting that so many people who claim to have beyond-and-back experiences are able to describe them in detail.

For fourteen years Paul had refused to even mention this experience, let alone boast in it. While others were boasting of visions and revelations, he could have blown them away with his many visions and revelations – including his rapture to heaven. Why didn't he? **Because he measured his words by the standard of weakness.** Rather than exalt himself and his experiences through his words, he shared the Word of God.

2 Corinthians 12:5 Of such a one I will boast; yet of myself I will not boast, except in my infirmities.

2 Corinthians 12:6 For though I might desire to boast, I will not be a fool; for I will speak the truth. But I refrain, lest anyone should think of me above what he sees me *to be* or hears from me.

A person who has been to heaven and back ought to be able to boast. *But Paul didn't want to!* He would rather come across as “weak.” He didn't want people to put any emphasis whatsoever upon the messenger – only on the message.

Let's be more contemporary. You're stuck with me... But suppose for a moment you had to choose a new pastor. Would you be willing to apply the standard of weakness? Most churches would not. They would require seminary training; knowledge of Hebrew and Greek; a degree from an accredited institution. If several men applied, they'd “candidate” by teaching. The teaching would be judged by its style – *and length!* It takes real spiritual discipline to instead apply the standard of weakness and choose the man who himself is weak that the power of God might be evident working in him and through him.

Don't get me wrong: Weakness isn't lack of preparation; it isn't dullness. It doesn't mean you never share your experiences or your testimony. It means that you understand that your words can have no effect unless they are attended by God's anointing. It means you prefer God's Word over your own words.

#2 Measure Your Walk
By The Standard Of Weakness

(v7-10)

Paul had many visions and revelations. He saw Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus on the day he was saved; he had a vision when he was called to minister to the Gentiles; it was by a vision the he was sent to Macedonia; when things got tough in Corinth God encouraged him with a vision. In the future, he would have others: After his arrest in Jerusalem; in the midst of the storm at sea that would leave him shipwrecked on Malta. Add to all these that Paul had spent some three years in the desert receiving teaching directly from the risen Lord. That is some of the background for what Paul said next.

2 Corinthians 12:7 And lest I should be exalted above measure by the abundance of the revelations, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I be exalted above measure.

“Thorn” is the translation of a word used of a *tent-peg* or a rather large *stake* upon which you were tortured or impaled. “In the flesh” indicates it was a physical infirmity. There are a multitude of theories as to what it was; we just don’t know. “A messenger of Satan” means it was a satanic strategy designed to stumble Paul. It does not mean it was a demon who oppressed Paul. It is similar to the situation with Job in the Old Testament. Satan desired to destroy Paul, and God allowed him to attack Paul with a physical infirmity for Paul’s own good and God’s glory.

2 Corinthians 12:8 Concerning this thing I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might depart from me.

Paul immediately went to prayer; he prayed repeatedly to be delivered from this infirmity. I would suggest that his motive was that he would be better able to serve the Lord if free from the infirmity.

2 Corinthians 12:9 And He said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

When Jesus answered Paul, he realized that the infirmity was serving the purpose of keeping him humble. He further realized that God’s “grace” is always sufficient for every situation you face. “Sufficient” means *adequate to provide contentment*. Paul understood that Satan’s attacks were regulated by God for his good and God’s glory. They allowed “the power of Christ” to “rest upon” him. The word

“rest” is *tabernacle*. Jesus Christ tabernacles, or dwells, with you, in your infirmities. They do not need to be removed; you need to rest in them.

2 Corinthians 12:10 Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ’s sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

The things that *discourage* you ought to *delight* you. If they are “for Christ’s sake,” then you can expect His power to be resting upon you in and through them. Your weakness is the stage upon which the strength of God reveals itself to the audience of friends and family.

#3 Measure Your Work By The Standard Of Weakness (v11-21)

Paul returns to the topic of his work among them.

2 Corinthians 12:11 I have become a fool in boasting; you have compelled me. For I ought to have been commended by you; for in nothing was I behind the most eminent apostles, though I am nothing.

2 Corinthians 12:12 Truly the signs of an apostle were accomplished among you with all perseverance, in signs and wonders and mighty deeds.

2 Corinthians 12:13 For what is it in which you were inferior to other churches, except that I myself was not burdensome to you? Forgive me this wrong!

The “most eminent apostles” is a reference to the false teachers whom Paul sarcastically called “super apostles.” Even though they considered Paul “nothing” in comparison to their own credentials and background, God had used Paul in a powerful way. Paul’s work in Corinth had been attended by “signs and wonders and mighty deeds.” The believers had been greatly privileged to see the power of God. They should have been “commending” Paul against the condemnation of these false teachers. The only valid accusation against Paul was that he refused to receive wages from them!

2 Corinthians 12:14 Now *for* the third time I am ready to come to you. And I will not be burdensome to you; for I do not seek yours, but you. For the children ought not to lay up for the parents, but the parents for the children.

2 Corinthians 12:15 And I will very gladly spend and be spent for your souls; though the more abundantly I love you, the less I am loved.

These two verses are a profoundly accurate summary of Christian ministry. You are sent to bless, not burden, God’s people. You should make sacrifices for them the way a parent sacrifices for his

children. The more you love others with God's love, the less they seem to love you. No matter; you "gladly" go on "spending" yourself into their lives until you are "spent."

2 Corinthians 12:16 But be that *as it may*, I did not burden you. Nevertheless, being crafty, I caught you by cunning!

2 Corinthians 12:17 Did I take advantage of you by any of those whom I sent to you?

2 Corinthians 12:18 I urged Titus, and sent our brother with *him*. Did Titus take advantage of you? Did we not walk in the same spirit? Did we not *walk* in the same steps?

2 Corinthians 12:19 Again, do you think that we excuse ourselves to you? We speak before God in Christ. But we *do* all things, beloved, for your edification.

The false teachers said Paul was "crafty" and "cunning." They accused him of sending Titus and the other "brother" to receive the collection only so it would seem that Paul was not receiving any wages. In other words, he was going to steal the money! None of that was true. Paul's only cunning was to refuse any wages so that he might not burden the believers. He made no "excuses" for his work among them because it was only always for their "edification."

2 Corinthians 12:20 For I fear lest, when I come, I shall not find you such as I wish, and *that* I shall be found by you such as you do not wish; lest *there be* contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, backbitings, whisperings, conceits, tumults;

2 Corinthians 12:21 lest, when I come again, my God will humble me among you, and I shall mourn for many who have sinned before and have not repented of the uncleanness, fornication, and lewdness which they have practiced.

This is a list of the sins that were present at Corinth. Paul wasn't looking forward to returning because he would be obligated to confront the believers living in sin. Nevertheless God would "humble" him and, though a weakling, would empower him to discipline believers who refused to repent. Paul would plead and mourn, and plead some more and mourn some more... He would seem weak, but God would honor his humility.

Paul had founded the church at Corinth. The people there refused to defend him against false accusations. They didn't love him. They preferred the teaching of men who were using them for their own glory. They attacked his personal life, even his appearance. They were known for their many sins, and for being unrepentant.

Would you care about such a congregation? Would you still seek to work among such people? You would if you understood the standard of weakness. Don't get me wrong. God is not honored by the

reputation or behavior of a church like Corinth. But as you work among such people, you are like Jesus Christ Who came to earth and worked among such people.

Look at it this way: Prior to His resurrection, would you say that Jesus was successful in His work? Not if you judge by the world's standard of measure! At the end of three and one-half years of ministry He had few followers. He had no buildings; He didn't even own anything except the clothes He wore. Two of His key disciples had betrayed Him; the rest of them had scattered. The crowd that had hailed Him as their king called for His crucifixion. They preferred to release a murderer rather than let Him go. He was crucified as a common criminal and hung naked and shamed upon a cross outside the city. Passersby insulted Him.

Are these the kind of people you would work among? Jesus did. He understood that through the weakness of His life and ministry that God would be glorified. Two thousand years later His work continues - one life at a time.

Conclusion

Alan Redpath wrote:

"I am fearful for so many people who imagine they are serving the Lord when they have given Him their voice, or their talents or abilities, even their pocket books, but have never given themselves to Him... Here is the heart of the ... matter... to get you living... with no extraneous motive, no limit to your availability, no expectation of reward..." (*Blessings Out of Buffetings*, p. 228).

God has given you words to speak, a walk to share, and a work of serving. In those three areas, ask yourself:

1. Do I have ulterior motives?
2. Is there a limit to my availability?
3. Do I expect a reward prior to heaven?

Measure yourself by the standard of weakness. It is only when you are weak that you are strong.