



Living a Paradox
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2 Corinthians 12:1-10

August 8, 2021

I have always enjoyed the meaning of names. My name, for example, *Charles*, means “manly, strong.” I remember, years ago, at a Christian bookstore, we bought for each member of the family name plaques which picked up on the original meaning of a name, with an added Christian twist. So, under my name, “Charles,” was “Man of God” and then a Bible verse at the bottom, which was this line from 2 Corinthians 12:10, “for when I am weak, then I am strong.” Sort of puts a whole different perspective on “manliness” doesn’t it? Perhaps, a better one.

We call this a paradox. The Bible has many: John the Baptist said, “I must become less, and he—Jesus—must become more.” Why? Because less is more. Less of me, more of him! A mustard seed-sized faith, a yeast pinch-sized faith, has great effect. Jesus said: “The greatest in the kingdom is a child” because a child-like—not *childish*—faith is great! When I know, really know, that I am weak in a variety of ways, admit it to myself, deal with it and the why of it, and take the right steps in that weakness, *then* I will

become stronger; then I can possess and live out strength that is *real* strength because it comes from the source of strength.

There's another statement that has always been meaningful to me: "When the student is ready, the teacher will come." Put both thoughts together: when I am ready to admit that I am weak, then the teacher of real strength will come. When I am ready to see where my true weaknesses are, then I will learn how to become truly strong. When the student is *ready* the student is *teachable*; then the teacher will come, and real learning that can really be lived can begin.

Here, Paul is writing to a proud people. They're proud because of their spiritual accomplishments. Some of them have spoken in tongues. Some of them have had spiritual visions. Some have had intense spiritual experiences. Some have had dreams where they felt God was showing them something. Some claim to have heard God speak—audibly.

They're all puffed-up, talking about it, bragging about it, trying to outdo one another, each of them holding themselves up as the gold standard of "real" Christianity. "I AM STRONG!!"

Paul's point here: "I have had way more of these experiences than any of you and I know people who have done and experienced greater things than any of you. If anyone has a reason for pride, I have! If anyone has a reason to think that they're really strong, I do!" But Paul doesn't go there. In verse 6, he writes: "But, I refrain...." (2 Corinthians 12:6). Literally translated: "I spare myself." I spare myself the damage that spiritual pride would inflict upon me—I don't want to do that to myself. And neither should you! That's why he wrote, "If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my *weakness*" (2 Corinthians 11:30). "... I will not boast about myself, except about my weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:5), adding, "for when I am weak, then [and *only* then] I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:10).

I'd like to unpack this principle on a number of levels where we all need to live it:

First, when I see myself as a sinner, and when I admit it to myself, when I recognize that a Holy God holds me accountable for my sins and that I cannot save myself, when I admit it to the One against whom I have sinned and accept His provision of a Savior in Jesus Christ, then I am: 1) saved from my sins; 2) saved from the consequences of my sin. 3) I am forgiven; and 4) my relationship with God is restored; which means that 5) the power of temptation is lessened. "For when I am weak, then I am strong."

Paul, at one time, hated Jesus. He was happy when Christ was crucified. He was angry about the rumors that Jesus had been raised from the dead. He tried to do everything he could to shut people up who said anything about it. He was there when one of the followers of Jesus, Stephen, was stoned to death and he approved! Paul was brilliant, highly educated. He knew the Old Testament

backward and forward; he was convinced that he was right, justified in what he was doing. He was proud, spiritually proud. Arrogant! Self-sufficient! But, when Jesus appeared to him (you can read about it in Acts 9), Paul was converted. He later wrote, “Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst! But for that reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience for those who would believe in him and receive eternal life” (1 Timothy 1:15-16).

You could say, “When the student was made ready, the teacher did come.” When Paul became weak, admitted his sinful state, acknowledged Jesus as Lord and Savior, then he became strong—very strong. Most importantly, he saw this form of weakness as a good thing, as the basis for his salvation, his new life in Christ.

It is a good thing! I’ll ask you: Have you become weak this way? Do you see yourself as a sinner who sins, and as

someone who can't save yourself? Do you know that you need a Savior, or you're doomed for eternity? Has Jesus become your Lord and Savior? "The student was ready—and the teacher came!"

If you are someone listening to me who hasn't done that yet—well, you should. God has been patient with you. He wants you to repent and believe and receive forgiveness and eternal life. But, I just trust that when the student is made ready by Christ himself, when you're willing to admit that you're just that weak, the teacher will come.

For followers of Jesus, it doesn't end there. There's another level of "weak-ness" that you will find sprinkled throughout Paul's writings. It's this: when you recognize that you're blind without God's light (his Word); when you realize that you're deaf without God's words and you admit it—and you open Scripture to read it and learn it; when you pray asking to understand God's word and put it into practice, then you will receive guidance. The Holy Spirit will

lead you. God's will shall be revealed, and He will help you to live it. When you don't live it as you know you should, He tells you to confess your sins daily, believing as Martin Luther wrote in the first of his 95 Theses: "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent,' he intended that the entire life of believers should be repentance."

"When I am weak, then (and only then) am I strong."

It doesn't matter where you are on your spiritual journey: you might know and do a lot. There's always more. You might be a beginner and know a little, trying to put everything you know into practice, feeling like "there's so much more." That's OK, just keep going—you'll get stronger. We will all fail—Christians sin! Confess!

Any of us who think we've arrived, "I know it all and do it well," are actually in the most danger, for "when I think I'm strong, then will I be weak." But, as long as you feel weak, in need of more and better, that's a good thing; then you'll get stronger. If your attitude is, "I'll do it my way,"

you'll become weaker, not stronger. "I don't need to go to church, I can teach myself"—weak and getting weaker! If we think, "I can go it alone without God's light," it's only because we are weak and we will stay weak. Our Bibles gather dust at our own peril. We fail to pray and ask for God's help at the risk of our very spiritual vitality.

Wherever you are, whatever your current habits, I know, "when the student is ready, the teacher will come." Do you really want to grow? You will!

But, there's a third level at which this principle, "when I am weak, then I am strong," needs to be lived. It is this: when I recognize that I need other people in order to flourish, when I reach out to other people and accept what they have to give me, then I will gain wisdom, and I will find support. I will feel encouraged, and I will gain strength. When I know that by myself I am weak, then I will be strong because of the strength that comes to me through other people.

The poet John Donne wrote, “No man is an island.” If we make ourselves an island and think “I can go it alone,” “I can fix it myself,” that’s not a sign of real strength, but of weakness, and we won’t become stronger, only weaker. But, when the student is ready, the teacher will come. The first time I ever saw a counselor, in the fall of 2002, only because of my wife’s urging (because I was too proud), she showed me into the room and sat by her desk, turned to me and asked, “So how are you?” Honestly, my first thought was, “Well, how do you think I’m doing? If I was doing well, I wouldn’t be here!” But, I didn’t say that. Rather, I said, “Well, I’m used to sitting in *that* chair, not this one—I’d rather be sitting on your side of the desk, not this one.” In other words, I like giving, but I don’t like taking. Basically, I was saying: “I like the feeling of strength, but I don’t like feeling weakness.” Are you like that, too?

Yet, deep down I knew that I needed to be there. I submitted to the process, and she really helped me. In October of 2008, I was burnt out, ready to quit the ministry, I

had another counselor, eighteen years younger than I was. (He was three when I became a pastor!) Nate was a great guy. I thank God for his skills. He actually helped me to realize that I needed to quit that church. And I did.

If you look at Paul's letters, you'll find that he writes about a lot of people. All sorts of names and the names of churches made up of people, are scattered throughout his writings, people with whom he served, who served him, who supported him physically, emotionally, financially, spiritually. He's the great apostle Paul with all these gifts: brilliant, powerful, capable, the great evangelist to the Gentiles; but he knows that he can't go it alone, he can't do it all himself. None of us can! Consider Romans 16 (I love this chapter): "I commend to you our dear sister Phoebe... for she has been a great help to many people, including me. Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus. They risked their lives for me....." And it goes on like that: "greet this one, greet that one, greet him, greet her." Think of Barnabas, whose name means "son of

encouragement,” and you wonder how much counseling Barnabas gave to Paul.

Paul wrote, “If I must boast, I will boast in my weakness” (2 Corinthians 11:30). Then he gives an example: “In Damascus, the governor... had the city guarded in order to arrest me. But I was lowered in a basket from a window in the wall and slipped through his hands.” Can you imagine? Paul in a basket, slithering down a wall, running for his life. He’s not too proud. He doesn’t care what people think! He’s not embarrassed to accept help. He’s not afraid of appearing weak! And neither should we be. “When I am weak, and look for and accept the help of other people, then I am strong!”

How often, for example, do we hide behind masks everywhere we go, even when we come to church? Someone asks how you’re doing, and you respond, “Oh, great, great! And how are you?” Yet, how many times have you been thinking “I feel like absolute crap and I just wish I could tell

someone! I'm not fine! I'm not great!" Even here! Maybe especially here! We'll see a professional for a slow-pumping heart, why not for a broken heart? We'll tell a friend that we have the "C-word"—Cancer, but why not when we're living the "D-word"—Depression? If we don't deal with physical pain, eventually it will deal with us. The same thing is true if we don't deal with emotional pain. When I admit I'm feeling weak and reach out for help, then I will be stronger. Listen: when the student is ready, the teacher will come.

There's another, a fourth, level where we can live the "when I am weak, then I am strong" mindset. It's not just about what we get from God or from other people, but what we give to others. When I know that "I am weak" and on that basis approach other people, then I make them stronger. Can you be the kind of person with whom others just know that they can be honest? Can we be the kind of church where no one has to hide behind a mask; where we know we can come and that there's always someone with whom we can be honest? Paul here is honest with the fact that he has some

physical weakness, “a thorn in my flesh” (though we never find out what it is). First, he’s glad for it because it keeps him prayerful, dependent on God’s sufficient grace. Second, he’s glad for it because it keeps him humble. But third, he knows Christ’s power for his ministry is made perfect in his weakness and that while he’s not 100%, Christ is! Therefore, he always extends that grace and mercy to others. The same guy who writes uncompromisingly about what constitutes sin also wrote in Galatians 6: “... if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore them *gently*...” because God can do anything through you for someone else.

1. When each of us comes to grips with the fact that we are sinners who sin and that there are things that we have done that we’d sooner die than have them be known—that should change the way we look at and treat everybody else.

2. When we recognize that we’re blind without God’s light and deaf without God’s Words, that should change the way we think about everybody else. Someone once said that

sharing the truth of God's Word is nothing more than one beggar showing another beggar where to find bread.

3. When we know that we need other people to help heal our physical pains, when we know that we need God's help and the help of others to deal with the hurts and needs and stresses of life, then we can also know how much someone else needs us, and that we could be the person who is known to be the one, that someone to whom anyone can walk up and drop their mask and say, "I'm so glad you're here because I just need to talk to someone and I know you'll listen."

When I am weak and know it—and that's why I deal with you the way I do—then we together will be strong. If you think about it, you don't really need to know any of the people you see week to week out there, in this building, even the person sitting near you, all that well, in order to extend to them grace and kindness—especially in a large church like this one—*because you know you*. You know, deep down that

you're weak. You know you're a sinner. You know you need divine guidance. You know you need the wisdom of others. You know you don't have all the answers even if you have some. You know you have your own hurts and needs. *YOU know you!* And on that basis, you can extend a hand of compassion, a listening ear, without passing judgment. And, you can forgive, just as you would want to be forgiven. You can put down your own mask and be real. "When the student is ready, the teacher will come."

A long-time ago, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ became weak so that we might become strong. He, God, became a human being, born a baby, in weakness. He was tempted, just as we are. He got hungry and thirsty, just as we do. He was betrayed, falsely accused; he was mocked—just like we are sometimes. He was killed in the worst way possible, and he could have called down angels by the thousands to spare him, but he wouldn't because he believed: "When I am weak, they can be strong."

Now then, if you have really heard me about all of these things, you will take the time to figure out for yourself what all of this could look like in your own life, because I know: “when the student is ready, the teacher will come.”