

Power Made Perfect in Weakness
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I want to start by saying that I preach this sermon with fear and trepidation. Here is why; preaching a sermon on humility is a tricky thing. It's tricky because preaching on the virtue of humility is paradoxical; it's the virtue that "as soon as you think that you have achieved it, you've lost it." So, I want to preface this sermon by clarifying that I do not preach this sermon today because humility is Christian virtue I believe to have mastered; in fact, quite the opposite, it is a Christian virtue that is a growing edge for me. I preach on the Christian virtue of humility because that is truly what this passage is about.

Ironically, this 2 Corinthian passage on humility started with Paul boasting. And before we as a community and as individuals reflect more in-depthly on humility, I wonder if it would be helpful to better understand Paul's boasting. Paul was boasting in this passage ultimately to defend the Christian gospel...and he was boasting as a last resort. He was being attacked quite publically by Jewish-Christian missionaries for not being spiritual enough, having too strong of a spiritual voice in correspondence and not having enough of a powerful and charismatic presence in person. And unfortunately, some of the Corinthian church started to follow those Jewish-Christian missionaries who were also called "super apostles." So Paul finally defended himself.

Even though Paul was boasting to defend himself, the larger context of 1 and 2 Corinthians informs us that something much greater than Paul's defense of his apostolic authority was at stake. The integrity of the gospel as followed by the Corinthian community was at stake. Corinth was a mecca of commerce. And while there were and are good things about commerce, in Corinth, commerce brought with it much extravagance, idolatry, prostitution, and hedonism. Paul was involved in significant correspondence with the Corinthian Church about

troubling issues in the church community that were being tolerated, ignored, or accepted. Paul's correspondence with the Corinthian church was filled with guidance and feedback on what practices fell inside or outside of Jesus Christ's message and teachings. Paul was standing up for what he as an apostle believed and knew according to the ministry of Jesus Christ to be right.

Paul's boasting ended with him boasting of his weaknesses. He ended this passage talking about a "thorn" in his side that was a source of much pain and suffering. Even though scholars don't know exactly what that "thorn" was referring to, most scholars believe it was referring to a literal, chronic, physical condition that affected Paul. It was a condition that debilitated Paul so much at times that he described himself as desperately pleading with God to remove his "thorn." We are told that God did not take Paul's thorn away. Paul accounted for his "thorn" in this passage as how God kept him humble. God's response to Paul in the passage doesn't seem to address the purpose of Paul's "thorn." Instead, God's response to Paul appears to point out to Paul that one of the most important virtues of Jesus Christ's apostles was humility. God's exact response to Paul in verse 9 was "my grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness."

So, all of this to say, that Paul's boasting was really conviction because ultimately, Paul was standing firm in defending the gospel when the integrity of the gospel of Jesus Christ was at stake. While defending the gospel, he revealed an incredibly vulnerable struggle, "the thorn in his side" that brought him much anguish and was quite visible to his critics. While he begged God to remove his "thorn" God didn't. Through this passage and other Pauline writings we learn that Paul came to see that "thorn," Paul's weakness, ended up a blessing that kept Paul humble; we also learn through this and other biblical passages that it is through our weaknesses, our humility, that we best experience and share God's love.

Now I'd like to invite all of us to shift gears a little to reflect on the virtue of humility and how God's power is experienced and seen in weakness. I'd like to share with you some verses in the Bible on humility. There will be silence in between the readings during which I'll offer some questions to consider for reflection. Then we'll close in prayer.

Matthew 18: 1-5 "At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" He called a child whom he put among them, and said, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me"

In what ways can we as individuals embody a childlike sense of wonder, awe, and trust when it comes to our faith in God?

In what ways can we as a community embody a childlike sense of wonder, awe, and trust when it comes to living out our faith as a community?

Romans 12: 3-8 "For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.

Why is humility such an important virtue when it comes to being a part of a Christian community?

How can humility foster relationships within our lives, families, and Christian community?

Matthew 23: 12 "All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted."

What are some things you can do in your life to embody a humble spirit in your every day interactions with others?

Are there areas in your life that you seek to exalt yourself, that results in your pain or humiliation? How can you change those areas?

1 Peter 5:5-6 “In the same way, you who are younger must accept the authority of the elders. And all of you must clothe yourselves with humility in your dealing with one another, for “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble.”

For those younger in this community, what are ways you can honor and appreciate the wisdom that comes with age?

For those who have more years in life that often bring wisdom, how can you be more humble in dealing with the errors and hubris of youth and inexperience?

What does it look like for you to “clothe yourself with humility?”

Philippians 2:1-5 “If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interest, but also to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.

What does it mean to you to regard others as better than yourselves?

How does humility help us look to the interest of others?

2 Corinthians 12:9 “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness?”

How can we as a community remind one another that God’s grace “is sufficient for each of us?”

How have you seen God’s “power made perfect in your weakness?”

I thank you for your time today and your willingness to reflect on these Biblical passages on humility today. Let us end in prayer.

*Lord, let not our hearts be proud,
nor our eyes be haughty.
Let us not pursue too great things,
nor matters too lofty for us.
Rather let us have a stilled soul,
calmed like a hushed child.
Like a weaned child in her mother's arms,
so let our souls within each of us be.
– Psalm 131*

Amen.