“MY GRACE IS SUFFICIENT FOR YOU”

2 Corinthians 11:1–12:10

Key Verse: 12:9

“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.”

What do you like to brag about? Be honest. Even as Christians we might secretly rejoice in how we do things better, know more or understand better. When we’re trying to impress, we strive to look and act our best and certainly wouldn’t mention our flaws, shortcomings or sins. But in today’s passage Paul does just the opposite: he gladly boasts about his weaknesses, even while he’s being criticized. Why? Where did this come from? What did he hope to accomplish? The secret is found in Jesus’ words to him: “My grace is sufficient for you.” In this study we want to learn why these words were so important to Paul, why they’re so important for us, and how and why we all need to experience them personally. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his living words today.

As we saw last week, in chapter 10 Paul again begins to address the problem of his opponents who had recently arrived in Corinth and were attacking his leadership behind his back. They criticized Paul for boasting about his apostolic authority (10:8). They criticized him for his speaking and writing style (10:1,9–11), implying he was a fake. They were commending themselves to the Corinthians as better leaders (10:12). Paul responded by boasting about how God had used him to spread the gospel to many people, and especially to these in Corinth (10:13,14). His enemies were trying to take credit for ministry that in fact was done by the sacrificial, hard labor of Paul himself (10:15,16).

Now in chapters 11 and 12 Paul further defends his leadership. It seems discouraging that so much time has to be spent on this. But it’s not just a conflict or competition between powerful leaders. To Paul, the gospel itself is at stake. He says Satan is working through his opponents to lead believers away from Christ. To persuade the Corinthians to stay devoted to Christ purely, Paul goes into detail describing his life of unmatched suffering (11:23–33) as well as his unmatched spiritual experience (12:1–4). It culminates in his honest testimony about the thorn in his flesh (12:7,8). Paul’s main point in all this is that, in contrast to his opponents, he chooses to boast about his weaknesses. Paul’s story may seem exceptional or extreme, but it’s actually very relevant to us. It’s a vivid example of how we, as Christians, should be living out our faith in a world that’s living in a completely opposite way.

Paul’s enemies evidently had been asking the Corinthians how they could put up with Paul in all his seemingly extreme behavior and words (11:1). How did he respond? Read verse 2. Paul was trying to protect these believers. He had the best possible goal for them. He wanted them to be “pure virgins” married to only one husband, Christ. For that purpose he was striving like a good father to protect them. But what does it really mean to be a pure virgin to Christ? Read verse 3. A pure virgin to Christ is anyone, man or woman, who lives in sincere and pure devotion to him. It’s someone whose mind is not deceived or led astray by anyone or anything else, or by any other teaching. Read verse 4. Paul’s enemies were not just rivals to his leadership; they were trying to change the gospel message. They didn’t really know Jesus personally, so they were emphasizing very different things about him. They didn’t really have the Holy Spirit, so they were trying to influence the Corinthians with a different spirit. They weren’t holding to the simple gospel message of repentance and faith in Christ; they were trying to change the gospel into a moralistic, ritualistic, ultra-spiritual gospel that would make people self-righteous like themselves.

We learn something important here. The serpent, called the devil, isn’t a fantasy; he’s real. He’s still actively at work in the world today, trying to deceive us and lead us away from Christ. How so? He’s always trying to pull our hearts away to other people or things that seem more wonderful, more satisfying. He’s always trying to distract and confuse us, and ultimately, to make us compromise with other loves, other kinds of teaching, so that our love for Christ grows colder and colder. The best way to fight him is not with our own strength or wisdom, but by asking God to help us, by his grace, to love our Lord Jesus Christ with an undying love (Eph6:24). This should be our prayer for others, too.

Look at verse 5. Paul repeats this again in 12:11. Who are these “super-apostles”? They don’t seem to be the “false apostles” Paul exposes in verses 13–15. Paul would never compare himself as “inferior” to such devilish people. But some in the Corinthian church seem to have been saying that Paul was less than the highest ranking apostles, James, Peter and John in Jerusalem (Gal2:9), and overexaggerating the status of Christ’s original apostles. Paul says he was in fact in no way inferior to any of them (cf. Gal2:6–8).

How else were people trying to say Paul was inferior? Look at verse 6. Evidently some of Paul’s opponents in Corinth preferred leaders who had professional training in public speaking. The city of Corinth attracted many such impressive public speakers. When we read Paul’s letters, we can see that he was highly educated in philosophy and rhetoric. But in preaching the gospel he didn’t depend on eloquence or human wisdom, but only on the power of the Holy Spirit (1Co1:17; 2:1). Yet he adds in verse 6, “I do have knowledge.” What’s he talking about? It’s definitely not worldly knowledge; it’s the knowledge of God and his glory through Christ (2:14; 4:6; 10:5), the knowledge of the mystery of Christ by the help of the Holy Spirit (Eph3:4,5; cf. 1Co2:6–11). Because Paul had this kind of knowledge, he was abundantly qualified to be their spiritual leader.

Look at verses 7–11. Here Paul boasts about his self-supporting ministry in Corinth. The Bible tells us that when he first arrived there, Paul worked with his own hands, along with his friends Priscilla and Aquila. He was a tentmaker during the week, then shared the good news of Jesus in the synagogue on the Sabbath (Ac18:1–4). Later, when Silas and Timothy came to Corinth, Paul devoted himself exclusively to sharing the gospel (Ac18:5). That was when he started living on financial support from the Macedonian churches that Silas and Timothy must have brought him. Paul insisted on not receiving any financial support from the Corinthians, he says here, because he wanted to preach “the gospel of God” to them “free of charge.” He emphasizes that he kept himself “from being a burden” to them in any way (cf. 12:13,14,16), meaning financially. Why is he emphasizing this? It’s another way of exposing the motives of his enemies who had come to Corinth. Evidently they’d been asking the Corinthians for financial support. But Paul loved the Corinthians with real, self-sacrificing love. Look at verse 12. Paul’s enemies were trying to make themselves equal with Paul by boasting about their speaking ability or knowledge or respect for so-called “super-apostles.” But Paul was determined to cut the ground from under them.

Read verses 13–15. These men were “false apostles” because they were not sent from Christ. They were preaching a different gospel (4). They were using deceptive techniques, disguising who they really were. They were not serving but dominating (8,20). They didn’t have the character of Christ (10:1; 13:4). It tells us that we need spiritual insight to see who people really are. And we need the courage to expose them in order to protect God’s people.

Now let’s look at verse 16. It develops verse 1 where Paul asks the Corinthians to put up with him “in a little foolishness.” Here he defines foolishness more specifically as “a little boasting.” Paul says boasting in self-confidence is foolish (17). Boasting the way the world boasts is foolish (18). Boasting because others are boasting is also foolish (21). In fact, in chapters 11 and 12 Paul repeats the word “fool” eight times. Why? At the beginning of 1 Corinthians he frequently mentions how the Corinthians love human “wisdom” or “wisdom of the world” (1Co1:17–22,24,25,30; 2:1,5–7,13; 3:19). He addresses this again at the beginning of 2 Corinthians when he says that in his dealings with them he relied “not on worldly wisdom but on God’s grace” (1:12). Now he actually rebukes them with biting irony. Look at verse 19. They think they’re so wise, but the fact that they’re putting up with Paul’s enemies, who are such boasting fools, shows that they’re becoming just like them. In fact, their desire for human wisdom was making them even more foolish. Look at verse 20. Evidently Paul had heard how his enemies were treating the Corinthian believers. They were using bullying tactics to get them to turn away from Paul and his Christ-centered gospel. And the Corinthians were “putting up with” it. Paul repeats this expression “put up with” six times here (1,4,16,19,20). It tells us that when we’re devoted to Christ, we shouldn’t put up with foolish, boasting people.

But in order to help the Corinthian Christians wake up spiritually, Paul goes on to “a little boasting” about himself. Look at verse 22. He starts out with his Jewish credentials. His enemies felt superior about their Jewish pedigree, but Paul had the same ancestry, so he was in no way inferior to them in this regard. Next, Paul moves on to boast about something very different from his enemies. Read verse 23. This is not what people usually boast about. Especially in their culture at that time, sufferings were something to be ashamed of, a sign that a person had done something wrong (cf. Jn9:1,2). Sufferings were a sign of weakness. But Paul considered that his own sufferings were a sign that he was a genuine servant of Christ. He felt like a madman even to mention these things, but he did it in order to help the Corinthians open their spiritual eyes. In this letter Paul has mentioned his sufferings for Christ several times already (4:8,9; 6:4b,5,8–10). Now he goes into the most detail: hard work, imprisonment, flogging and repeated exposure to death. And that’s just for starters.

Read verse 24. It may sound like mere words, but experiencing this even one time actually killed many people. It’s what they did to our Lord Jesus just before they crucified him. Paul went through it five times. We can only imagine what such a repeated terrible beating did to his body. Read verses 25–27. Paul’s life was one of extraordinary hardship, more than most people will ever experience. We can see some of the details of these things when we read about Paul’s life in the Book of Acts. Why is he listing all these things? It’s to show the kind of loyalty to Christ he really has. He wants to help the Corinthians repent of their worldly way of thinking, recognize Christ’s true servants, and really value the lifestyle of suffering for Christ. Then Paul mentions another kind of suffering. Read verses 28,29. His personal sufferings didn’t make him self-absorbed—he was even more concerned for God’s people and all they were going through. Read verse 30. Paul says this because he wants the Corinthians and us learn how to boast in the Lord in the same way, by boasting about our weaknesses. He even mentions his humiliating escape from Damascus (31–33) to show how he depended only on God to preserve his life.

Read 12:1. Paul goes on to this no doubt because his opponents in Corinth thought they were having such superior spiritual experiences. Read verses 2–5. Paul mentions this extraordinary event only here. Basically, it’s a “surpassingly great revelation” (7a), something not even the most spiritually ecstatic Corinthian boaster could claim. When Paul talks about it, he refers not directly to himself, but to “a man,” because he considered it almost blasphemous to boast about such a thing.

But what’s really important here is not the details of his experience but what happened to him afterwards. Read verse 7b. Many people have speculated what this “thorn in his flesh” was, but most likely it was some kind of illness (Gal4:13), perhaps an eye infection. It caused Paul “torment,” and Satan was using it to try to make him give up and give in. But from God’s point of view, God was using it to keep Paul from becoming conceited because of his spectacular revelations. What did Paul do? Read verse 8. He didn’t plead about all his other sufferings, but he pled with God about this one. It must have been making him so miserable. And what was the answer? Read verse 9. This was an answer from the Lord Jesus Christ himself. He didn’t take the thorn away; he just reminded Paul that his grace would be sufficient for him.

What do these words mean? They mean that the grace of Jesus would sustain Paul to endure the torment of his thorn. In fact, it was the grace of Jesus that enabled him to endure all the sufferings he mentions. Paul knew that. He just needed to keep relying on his grace. Paul’s struggle is a metaphor for our lives as Christians. We may not have such extreme experiences as he did, but we all can have some kind of painful thorn in our lives. Our initial response is to ask God to take it away. But often he doesn’t. Why? It’s because God wants us to learn in the midst of our hardships and difficulties to hold onto his grace and rely on his grace. It’s his grace that really comforts our souls (1:3–5). His grace is better than anything else in this world. Knowing his grace is better than enjoying good health, prosperity, people’s recognition or an easy, seemingly peaceful life. When we know his sufficient grace, it changes what we boast about.

Read verses 9b,10. When Paul realized how blessed he was with this grace, he became free to boast all the more gladly about his weaknesses. He could experience Christ’s power in the midst of insults, hardships, persecutions and difficulties. Do we want to experience Christ’s power in our lives? Then we need to learn how to rely on his grace in all our weaknesses and boast only in his sufficient grace. Without his grace, we can’t be devoted to Christ purely. Without his grace, we can only get deceived by Satan and sucked into this world of foolish boasting. May God help us hear the voice of our Lord Jesus personally: “My grace is sufficient for you.”