

## Barriers to Community: *Spiritual Pride*

2 Corinthians 12:1-10

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on August 14, 2016

### Introduction

- ❖ We're in a series this month that's addressing *Barriers to Community*. So far we've looked at factions and divisions in the church, and we've stayed in 1 Corinthians looking at how these barriers have manifested themselves in the church of Corinth. This morning we're going to keep our focus on the same first-century church but we'll shift to 2 Corinthians.
  - It was written by the Apostle Paul a few years after 1 Corinthians and follows up on the same concerns. If you were with us a few weeks back, we saw in 1 Corinthians 1 that factions were forming in the church. Members were elevating leaders over against each other, and Paul and his apostleship was definitely being undermined.
  
- ❖ **These faction leaders in the church were putting down Paul by elevating themselves.** These “*super-apostles*” (as Paul sarcastically nicknames them in 2 Cor. 11:5) were high achievers and highly competitive. They were really into resume building. They called them “*letters of recommendation*” (cf. 3:1). And they would often call attention to them.
  - These letters boasted of these men and all their strengths. They were skilled orators, able to capture an audience and win over a crowd with beautiful words (cf. 11:6). They carried themselves with an air of confidence. **They presented themselves as strong and gifted apostles and set themselves in contrast to Paul, whose physical presence and speaking style was apparently nothing impressive** (cf. 10:10). They boasted – or they simply let others boast – about their strengths.
  
- ❖ But that’s not surprising. **Boasting about our strengths, our skills, our achievements while covering up our weaknesses, our flaws, our shortcomings – is that some sort of strange, foreign behavior?** Of course not. That’s what *we* do.
  - I’m sure on your resume there’s a list of your awards and accomplishments. But did you happen to list all the competitions where you failed to medal? Did you mention all the awards you lost to someone else? Of course not. Nobody does not. And you might argue that’s the nature of interviewing, whether trying to get into grad school or get a new job. You have to set yourself apart from others. You have to boast a little.
  
- ❖ But we do this even in the church. If we’re not comparing our grades, our salaries, our job titles, we’re comparing our testimonies, our devotional lives, our knowledge of the Bible. Of course, we’re much more subtle in the church. We don’t write down our accomplishments on a spiritual resume. We’re subtle. **We Christians have perfected the art of the humble brag.** “I feel so weak, so helpless. I guess that’s what happens when you fast for 30 hours.” “Man, my knees hurt. I’m so out of shape. I think I should switch to just sitting down when I pray.” “I was so convicted of my sinfulness when I was reading Romans 3 . . . in the Greek.”
  
- ❖ It’s just comes so instinctive to us. **We’re geared for boasting – boasting in what makes us look good.** But that right there is one of the greatest barriers to genuine gospel community. It’s called spiritual pride.

- ❖ The reality is that what we experience here in this church is not **genuine community** if no one is being real, if we're masking our weaknesses and afraid to express our neediness. And it's not **gospel community** if we only present ourselves as strong and put-together because that obscures the grace of the gospel and conceals the power of Christ, which is manifested most clearly in our weaknesses.
  - **If we want to foster genuine gospel community in our church, we need to confront the reality of spiritual pride in each of us.** And together, we need to not only acknowledge our weaknesses but get to a place where we actually boast in them.
  
- ❖ That's what we see Paul doing in this letter because many of the Corinthians were enamored by the boasting of these super-apostles. Remember, they were trying to undermine Paul's credibility as an apostle. It got to such a point that in chapters 11-12, Paul is driven to reply with a little boasting of his own. But what you'll notice is that his boasting is fundamentally different from his opponents'. They boasted in their strengths, in accomplishments that made them look good. **But Paul goes on to boast of all the things that make him look weak.**
  - *11:30 – If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.*
  - *12:5 – On my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses.*
  - *12:9 – Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses.*
  - *12:10 – For the sake of Christ then, I am content with weaknesses.*
  
- ❖ Now that is some strange, foreign behavior. No one does that. But maybe Paul is the normal Christian and that's normal Christian behavior. Perhaps we're the strange ones for failing to boast in our weaknesses and rather focusing instead on our strengths.
  - So let's figure it out by asking four questions of our text. **First**, what are these weaknesses that we should be boasting in? **Second**, What is their source? Where did they come from? **Third**, why should we boast in them? And **fourth**, how can we become a community that actually do this?

### **What are these weaknesses we should be boasting in?**

- ❖ The first question: *What are these weaknesses that we should be boasting in?* We begin by defining these weaknesses because I want to make it clear that Paul is not referring to all types of weaknesses. Paul is *not* saying that every weakness we have is boast-worthy.
  - **For example, he is *not* telling us to boast in the weaknesses that result from our sinful choices.** If you abuse your body with alcohol, you'll likely have a weak liver. In that case, Paul's not saying you should boast in that particular bodily weakness.
    - Or let's say you're harsh and abrasive with people or you're a bitter person, then likely you will have few, if any, solid relationships. In that case, Paul's not saying you should boast in your broken relationships or your loneliness.
  
- ❖ So we're not talking about boasting in the negative consequences of our sin. **The Bible is clear that the proper response to sin is to *repent from it not to boast in its consequences.*** Our only recourse is to rely on Christ to forgive our sin. And our responsibility is to change that sinful behavior by the grace of God and the power of his Spirit.

- ❖ *So if Paul is not referring to weaknesses that result from our sinful choices, then what is he referring to? Look at v10 and notice he uses four terms to illustrate. 1) When Paul spoke of weaknesses he meant **insults**.* Paul was often insulted. In chapter 10:10 he says he knows his opponents describe him as unimpressive and a poor speaker. But instead of returning insult for insult, Paul agrees that he's not a trained speaker and goes on to boast in that fact.
  - Church, are you ready for insults? **Do you realize that some of the most basic tenets of our faith are considered flat-out ridiculous by the prevailing culture?** If they heard you believe in talking snakes, in angels and demons, in miracles and miracle workers, in a man who died and rose again, who ascended into the clouds, and is coming back one day out of the clouds riding on a white horse – they might call you ignorant, naive, brain-washed. And if they found out you still hold to a biblical sexual ethic, then they'll label you a bigot, narrow-minded, intolerant. *Are you ready to receive these insults, much more to boast in them?*
  
- ❖ **2) When Paul spoke of weaknesses he also meant hardships.** This can range from physical hardships (i.e. a sickness or disability) to emotional hardships (i.e. academic failure, a troubled home, a mountain of debt, a loss of friendship, or a bad relationship).
  - Starting in chapter 11:23, Paul goes through a list of hardships he faced as a servant of Christ. He often went without sleep or food or shelter. He was always on the verge of death. He was in danger everywhere he went! It seemed like hardship was the norm for Paul. That shouldn't surprise us. **We're told in Scripture to count it all joy when we face trials of many kinds, not if** (Jas. 1:2). So we *will* face hardships. That's not the question. The question is: *Will you boast in them? Or will you let them discourage you and cause you to shipwreck your faith?*
  
- ❖ **3) When Paul spoke of weaknesses he also meant persecutions.** He not only experienced hardship but also direct persecution for the faith. Look in 11:23 again. He was frequently thrown in prison and flogged, and I quote in v24, *“Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned.”*
  - Granted we're not being killed for our faith, yet we mustn't forget that believers around the world are. **But in our context we can still be persecuted, perhaps in the form of exploitation, marginalization, or direct pressure to violate your Christian convictions and conscience.** *Will you boast in persecutions?*
  
- ❖ **4) When Paul spoke of weaknesses he also meant calamities.** Paul is referring to calamities, like tragic accidents and disasters, that have the potential of crushing you and your faith. Paul was shipwrecked and lost on sea three times! **As children of God, we have no guarantee that we won't experience tragedies, accidents, and calamities.** These storms will come (if they haven't already). The question is: *Will you boast in them?*
  
- ❖ So when Paul talked of weaknesses he was referring to circumstances and trials that we often have no control over. He was talking about weaknesses that are difficult to bear, that crush us. He was talking about weaknesses that we plead, like Paul, for God to remove.

## What is the source of these weaknesses?

- ❖ This leads to our second question: *What is the source of these weaknesses?* Do they come from Satan or from God or both? **We need to know the source because our ability to boast in these weaknesses depends on knowing if they come from a heart of love or hate.** So let us consider Paul's thorn. After boasting of things that show his weakness in chapter 11, Paul goes on boasting about an unspeakable vision he received 14 years ago.
  - **I realize in v2 it sounds like he's referring to another man who received this heavenly vision, but commentators agree that he's talking about himself.** In v6 he says if he were boasting about this vision, he'd be speaking truth. And in v7 he says these great revelations were, for him, a potential source of spiritual pride. Which clearly means he saw them. They were given to *him*.
    - Some suggest Paul spoke in the third person because he's doing his best not to boast like his opponents. He's doing what he can to deflect attention, but in the end he acknowledges that it's *his* vision because his point is that its surpassing greatness could precipitate spiritual pride.
  
- ❖ **So in v7, Paul explains that to keep him from becoming conceited because of these revelations, he was given a thorn in his flesh to torment him.** Now it's been speculated for centuries as to the exact nature of this thorn. Was it a physical ailment? Was it some mental or emotional anguish? Was he referring to the attacks from the super-apostles?
  - **No one knows exactly what the thorn was, but we do know that it pierced Paul to the bone.** It hurt him. He called it a "*messenger of Satan*". That word "*harass*" literally means "to strike someone with a fist". So he's saying a messenger of Satan was pummeling him with a thorn, which resulted in a severe weakness.
  
- ❖ That's why, in one sense, we can say that the source of our weaknesses come from Satanic oppression. **Sometimes weaknesses are devices of Satan to harm us by discouraging us and shaking our faith.** Satan is more than willing to use a tragic accident, the loss of a loved one, betrayal by a friend, divorce of your parents, the diagnosis of cancer – he'd love to use these thorns to cause harm, to cause misery and despair, and most of all to cause unbelief.
  
- ❖ **But notice that Satan is not the only one at work behind our thorns and weaknesses.** Paul says in v7 that the thorn was given in order to keep him from "*becoming conceited*". Now clearly that was *not* Satan's aim. Clearly Satan's intent was *not* to humble Paul. If anything he *wants* Paul to become conceited and full of pride!
  - *So if the purpose of the thorn was to humble him, who could have such a purpose in mind?* Answer: God. Listen to this: **Sometimes weaknesses are devices of Satan, but every time they are devices of God with the intent to humble us.** That's why Paul prays *to the Lord* three times for Him to take it away. Only God can take the thorn away because it was ultimately ordained by his sovereign will.

- ❖ Notice in v9 how Jesus replies to Paul's plea. "*My grace is sufficient for you.*" Think about this: **That means the amount of grace in Paul's life is just enough.** Jesus could have given more grace to completely remove the thorn.
  - **Or He could completely withdraw his grace and Paul would end up with 99 more thorns (deservingly!).** But our Lord, in his wisdom and goodness, gave the right amount of grace in Paul's life – not so little grace as to overwhelm him and not so much grace as to remove all pain – but just enough grace to keep him weak for a very good, divine purpose.
  
- ❖ Think about what this means: **Our weaknesses often come from Satan's intention to harm us with thorns, be it insults, hardships, persecutions, or calamities. But in all our weaknesses, it is the Lord's intent to sovereignly work all things for our good.** *Doesn't that give you so much hope?* To know God is so wise and so good towards his children that he has allowed just the right amount of weaknesses in our lives.
  - **He knows that too much would lead you to despair but too little would lead you to self-reliance, so the thorns in your life right now are exactly enough.** They're not too much. They won't overwhelm you.
  
- ❖ That's not to say you shouldn't pray for God to take your thorns away. Feel free to pray that in faith. But if the thorns remain, then in faith receive these same words from the Lord as if spoken to you, "*My grace is sufficient for you.*" I've given you just enough grace.
  - It's about trusting that Jesus knows exactly how much weakness and how much grace you need to one of his servants, one of his witnesses to the ends of the earth.

### Why should we boast in our weaknesses?

- ❖ That leads to our third question regarding the purpose behind thorns: *Why should we boast in our weaknesses?* By understanding God's good intent behind our weaknesses, we can more easily boast in them.
  
- ❖ But before we consider why we should boast in our weaknesses, let us first look at why we *should not*. **We should not boast in our weaknesses because we think weaknesses are good in themselves.** It's not because pain feels good or because weakness is a virtue, or because humility merits God's favor. Look at v10, "*For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses.*" Paul is not content in weaknesses for weakness' sake but for Christ's sake.
  - **That means boasting in your weaknesses is not asking you to ignore your pain or sorrow.** Paul is not calling a "thorn" a good thing. He hated his and pleaded for it to be removed. Don't get the impression that weaknesses are good in and of themselves.
    - *So why should we boast in our weaknesses?* Look at v9 again. Paul prays that his thorn would be removed, but Jesus responds by saying, "*My grace is sufficient for you, for [because, since] my power is made perfect in weakness.*"

- ❖ **Jesus tells Paul that he's leaving the thorn in him because Jesus' power is made perfect in Paul's weakness.** *Now what does that mean?* Does that imply there was something imperfect or lacking in Jesus' power before Paul's thorn?
  - No, Jesus is telling Paul that – though his thorn is not enjoyable in itself – it affords an opportunity for divine power to rest upon him and to be displayed in all its glory in contrast to all of Paul's weaknesses.
  
- ❖ He definitely took this to heart, and he already expressed the same idea a couple of times earlier in the letter. In **chapter 1:9**, he recounts how the afflictions he experience in Asia was intended by God to make him rely not on himself but on God who raises the dead.
  - And in **chapter 4:7**, Paul describes himself as a jar of clay and says the treasure of gospel ministry has been placed inside weak, fragile jars of clay like myself, *“to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.”*
  
- ❖ **So Paul's saying that God sometimes will leave us in pain, in weakness for the purpose of magnifying the power of his Son and his sufficient grace in our lives.** Now to the world, such an idea is crazy, even considered cruel. But to those who have been granted spiritual eyes to see – this is all the motivation we need to boast in our weaknesses. Notice how Paul continues in v9 with, *“Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.”*
  - So the reason we should boast in our weaknesses is because by recognizing that we are weak and Jesus is strong – **his power will rest on us in all its strength, and he'll be glorified in us as we serve him in that strength.**
  
- ❖ Years ago I attended a pastor's conference at a large church in Dallas. There were some big name speakers there, but in one session, a pastor at the host church was scheduled to preach. Now I never heard of this guy, so I was ready to tune him out.
  - Then he started to speak. Immediately I picked up on a distinct stutter in his speech. it wasn't just nerves. It was a speech impediment. It got to the point that I felt uncomfortable and embarrassed for him.
  
- ❖ But then he addressed his stuttering. He spoke of the challenge he had in seminary. How he believed God was calling him, of all things, to be a preacher. But nobody believed it. Still he pressed on and entered the pulpit knowing he had a preacher's worst thorn.
  - He shared how the story of Moses sustained him. Moses obeyed his calling, even though at first he was hesitant because he was slow of speech. But through Moses' weakness, God was able to manifest his mighty power to save.
    - That encouraged this pastor to boast in his weaknesses, and I could sense the power of Christ resting on him throughout the rest of his sermon. **What was initially a weakness and distraction, suddenly became a source of great strength.** And that day he gave one of the most powerful, memorable sermons I can recall because I saw the power of Christ magnified through a weak man.

- ❖ **This example really speaks to me about what it means to boast in weaknesses because not only do I also feel called to preach but I also stutter.** It's drastically improved over the years, but for those of you who remember me as a kid here at HCC, there were times you would hear me struggle to start a sentence. It was a mental thing and often situational. For a season, when on a plane I knew the flight attendant would be coming by for my drink order, and for some reason I had a mental block where I couldn't reply without stuttering. A number of times I had to ask Theresa to order for me.
  - I used to be ashamed. And it still happens if I'm suddenly forced to speak Chinese. I stutter. But I want to boast in it now. **I want to boast in my weaknesses because I want everything I accomplish that might be praiseworthy of recognition to not be attributed to me but to Christ who works his perfect power through me.**
  
- ❖ Read v10, "*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's delight in his weaknesses was grounded in his belief that when he's weak, he's actually strong. Again, not with a strength found in himself – but a supernatural strength found in Christ.
  - **And when we live out of this strength and persevere in it, we magnify Christ and his power to the world.** When the world sees Christians trusting in Jesus' sufficient grace, boasting in our own weaknesses, and still serving God and others in our weaknesses – then they'll see just how satisfying Jesus is for us, how strong he is for us, and how he can be the same for them!
  
- ❖ **That's how a church can proclaim the gospel of grace – not just with our preaching and teaching – but with the quality of our community.** Genuine gospel community is like a city of a hill. Like a lamp on a stand. Like salt and light in a dark and decaying world.
  - Let's be that kind of a church – where we're free of shame or fear that our weaknesses might be exposed. If we're in Christ, there's no reason to hide or try to save face. **When we come together as a church, there's no need to present ourselves as a strong, capable Christians who have it all put together.**
  
- ❖ Who are we fooling? **By not boasting in our weaknesses, we're obscuring the grace of the gospel and concealing the power of Christ.** Let's start voicing our needs and sharing our struggles. If you're going through hardship or calamity, don't bear that burden alone. Of all places in this difficult world, a gospel community ought to be the one place where we can be honest and vulnerable with our weaknesses.

### **How can we become a community that boasts in our weaknesses?**

- ❖ *But how do we do it?* Because our gut reaction is to hide weaknesses. We've been trained to put our best foot forward, to put on a face, and to present ourselves as strong and competent. *Boasting in weaknesses doesn't come naturally, so how can we become a community that actually does this?*

- ❖ **First, we have to admit that we can't do this on our own.** Confess that this doesn't come natural. We naturally avoid pain. We naturally dislike weakness. **The simple fact is that you can't just tell yourself to start boasting in weaknesses.** It takes more than sheer will power.
  - You see, when the insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities arrive, your natural instinct will not be to boast in them – but to curse them. Humanly speaking, this kind of attitude towards weakness is impossible. No one lives like this!
  
- ❖ Except for one man. There was One Man who came to his own but his own did not receive him (Jn. 1:11). He experienced **insults** – being mocked by his captors. He faced **hardships** – being beaten by Roman soldiers. He endured **persecution** – being unjustly condemned to die. He suffered the greatest **calamity** – being nailed to a cross and forsaken by his Father.
  - **But instead of cursing life or cursing God, this man boasted in his weaknesses.** For the joy set before him, Jesus endured the cross (Heb. 12:2). He embraced his Father's will for him to suffer as a sacrifice of atonement for our sins.
  
- ❖ Jesus did this *for us* because we are weak. Sin has weakened each of us – spiritually, emotionally, for some even physically. We live in a sin-cursed world where suffering is an ever-present reality.
  - And think about this: **Without Jesus, your weaknesses are just that – weaknesses.** Nothing more. There is nothing to hope for. There is no reason to boast in them. They're just painful, bitter reminders of sin's curse upon us.
  
- ❖ But that's why the gospel changes everything! **In the gospel you discover that Jesus became weak so that you could become strong in Him *even in your weakness*.** In his weakest moment, hanging on the cross, Jesus secured for us a strength greater than our sins. This *strength in weakness* was powerfully demonstrated in his Resurrection and is now available to all who put their trust in him.
  
- ❖ **The only way we'll ever become a people who genuinely boast in our weaknesses is by encountering Christ in the gospel – by embracing the Strong One who became weak for us that we might become strong in him.**
  - Then you'll have new eyes to see your weaknesses in new light. The power of Christ will rest on you giving new meaning to your thorns. No longer will they be a reminder of sin's curse. **For those who have turned to Christ, our weaknesses are now showcases to display to the world the perfect power of Christ in us.**
  
- ❖ I think a great place to start showcasing is in your small group. If you're not in one, this is a good reason to join. **A small group of weak sinners equally in need of Jesus' grace and power provides a perfect opportunity to boast in your weaknesses and to manifest the all-sufficient grace and power of Christ in the gospel.**
  - It's probably going to take a few courageous group members to break that ice. To set the pattern, to develop a culture, where we stop pretending and posturing and we start boasting in our thorns and weaknesses. *Who's willing to start?*