

Sermon on 2 Corinthians 11:16-33 prepared by Jonathan Shradar

The way up has always been the way down.

This week I read some comparisons between 2020 and 1968. While I am confident 2020 has unique challenges that were yet still unimaginable in '68, there certainly is a political similarity. A gentle reminder that history repeats itself, with different camera angles but the same types of brokenness and longing for something better.

And I am convinced the similarities to previous times go further back... without a doubt to 55 AD and the experience of a young church on a peninsula in Achaia, in a city called Corinth.

There were arguments over what it means to be a Christian. Camps stirring up division among believers. A church on the edge of adopting the ways of the world as its posture with attempts to get ahead as defined by their cultural surroundings.

Just as important today as it was then, Paul models and calls the church to the way of Jesus.

Boast in weakness, see Christ's power.

2 Corinthians 11:16-33

The way up has always been the way down.

The apostle, the pastor, the church planter, has been giving the church warnings (stating the dangers of continuing as they are), and prodding the believers to what is true and right.

This section of the letter to the Corinthians church is one of confronting those that have opposed Paul and remain unrepentant. He has uncovered the heart of Christ for his people. Shown the pastoral heart that gives and is jealous for them. He has also written of the lure of distractions that lead the church astray.

Now he shifts to the silliness of boasting.

In so doing, we gain two key insights. Bravado is bunk, and weakness is the way. Even these phrases may unsettle us but as we progress my hope is that we will see through the smoke of what is going on in Corinth, and our own hearts, and settle on Jesus.

1) Bravado is Bunk

Jordan Peterson, in his book *12 Rules of Life*, tells the story of the lobster. How the male lobster will stand tall, the equivalent of his shoulders spread and chest out to seem impressive... in telling this story from nature Peterson says to readers, to get ahead, stand up straight, throw your shoulders back and be confident. Be the boasting lobster!

It sounds appealing, and it might actually work in the world around us... but is this bravado Christian? Can we claim it? It certainly sounds different than what we read here.

What is happening in Corinth? We are all experts at this point! Teachers have come into the community claiming that they were right, and more than that, the only “real” Christians. They were more spiritual, had more blessing, and were the only ones to be trusted.

In the fog of this boasting, somehow the church has to learn to stand normal cultural values on their head, to live the upside-down life, or rather the right-side up life, of the servants of the Messiah!

So Paul writes to this young church in danger of being sucked into the ordinary cultural life of the city - saying “look at how ridiculous this all is, live under Christ!”

In idolatry, some in the church were blinded to the abuse of the so-called “supers.” It is hard for us to see how Scripture is twisted, and our minds seek

after affirmation of parts of us actually opposed to Christ. It is so bad in Corinth Paul has to resort to full-on sarcasm to awaken them.

2 Corinthians 11:19–20 “For you gladly bear with fools, being wise yourselves! [20] For you bear it if someone makes slaves of you, or devours you, or takes advantage of you, or puts on airs, or strikes you in the face.” (ESV)

The bravado of the false apostles, really of any idol that we let direct our lives away from the way of Jesus, manipulates and harms.

I can hear the strain in Paul’s voice as he says “can’t you flipping see it, how easily you are drawn away by the injection of keywords into the bravado - their boldness meant to impress.”

It is foolishness... and Paul is entering into the crazy talk to prove his point. “I am talking like a madman.”

In their boasting, he writes that if you look past the veneer there is nothing impressive there... It’s all bunk! He too is a Hebrew, an Israelite, an offspring of Abraham, and servant of Christ... an even better one than they are. And he lists his qualifications that trump theirs... his suffering.

“Paul’s opponents boast of superiority, of being ‘super-apostles’. Yet the effect of their ministry is to enslave and manipulate those who succumb to them. Paul, however, is the servant of Christ in his ministry to the churches. As opposed to the triumphalism of these newcomers, the essential character of Christ is the meekness and gentleness of a crucified slave. Christ’s glory is his divinely humble service of others. This is the message of the cross which Paul seeks to embody and express in his ministry of evangelism.” Barnett

2) Weakness is the Way

It is essential for us to recognize that when you come to Christ the typical definitions don’t always apply. The definitions are wrong - the false apostles, and many voices today, see weakness as a corrupt culture would, something to

despise rather than honor, something to avoid on our way to success and celebrity.

Paul puts that thinking on its head and boasts in his sufferings - his very real, lived weakness.

“With far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beating, and often near death... five times he received forty lashes minus one, three times he was beaten with rods. Three times shipwrecked. In danger from rivers, robbers, his own people, Gentiles, in the city and wilderness, at sea, and now these false brothers.

I think of the entrepreneur conferences and the line-up of speakers, everyone with a great success story. Paul doesn't need better PR to highlight his successes, the books he has written, the churches he has planted, the leaders he has mentored, the visions he has seen... what is in his letter of recommendation is weakness.

In toil and hardship, through sleepless nights, without food. And on top of all of that, he has daily anxiety over the churches... for their thriving, health, and commitment to Jesus.

The dangers he faced and the hardships he endured were not the sort of thing that cultured and educated people, the great and the good, would put up with; they would have insisted on a military escort, or at least on traveling with people who could protect them. They wouldn't expect to have to go hungry, or cold, or without sleep; that would be very demeaning. Yet these are precisely the things that Paul boasts of.

"Paul's obsession in this letter is with how unimpressive he is, or at least with the fact that the only impressive thing about him is his weakness" Bauckham

He is not necessarily calling everyone to the same experiences, but to not despise it. He is staking everything on his belief that the gospel of the crucified and risen Jesus is true, and that truth holds the power. This is the posture that straightens our backs, which raises our countenance.

"He does not have to pretend to be a miserable worm in order to let God be God. He simply sees that he is human, not superhuman, and need not step outside his human weakness in order to be an apostle of Christ."

Weakness is the singular apostolic qualification, not human strength. And that extends to all of us as followers of Christ - people in need.

Because it is the way of Jesus.

All Paul has ever been doing is preaching Christ and him crucified and imitating his Savior.

Philippians 2:1–8 “So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, [2] complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. [3] Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. [4] Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. [5] Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, [6] who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, [7] but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. [8] And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.” (ESV)

The Creative Word of the Universe sets aside his “bigness” to get low. To take on humanity, to enter the world through blood and water. Familiar with mud, with toil, with hunger, pain, weakness. He becomes a servant, and not to the elite, but to the lowly.

Jesus preaches the good news of the kingdom with different definitions, where faithfulness looks different. This is Jesus of the turned cheek. Of going the extra mile. Of giving the tunic and cloak. This is Jesus of the cross.

Luke 23:3 “And Pilate asked him, “Are you the King of the Jews?” And he answered him, “You have said so.” (ESV)

A moment for bravado, for the truth, yet he knows what is before him. A way of rescue and redemption for all.

There is a danger that we and many claiming Christ wouldn't like Jesus very much if we really knew him... we are too attracted to bravado, "confidence," abuse, and idolatry.

"Some of us are so familiar with Jesus that we're no longer impressed by him. That's a very dangerous place to be." Kevin DeYoung

But in the weakness, this is where power is. That through the cross, from death forgiveness comes, wrath against sin is met and you can be with God again. The evil abuser is defeated. That through the resurrection, when there seemed to be no hope, light broke forth into eternity, new identity, purpose, empowerment.

"As Christians we must acknowledge and embrace our weaknesses, because as we give them to Christ, they become occasions for his strength and glory." Hughes

Redemption looks different than we might expect, and it is what we are called to. It is silly to be weak, it is foolishness to boast in suffering... **1 Corinthians 1:25** "For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men." (ESV)

Hebrews 12:1-3 "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, 2 fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. 3 Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart." (NIV)

"As we understand our own trials and sufferings in this light, we discover that, far from disqualifying us from experiencing and proclaiming the gospel, they actually qualify us for it. God uses the hardest and most shameful experiences of our lives to soften us and bring us to fuller understanding of his surpassing benefits. In our

isolation from the world's provision, we learn that we are fully satisfied when he is our portion (Ps. 73:26). He uses our sufferings to demonstrate his sufficiency. And he uses our afflictions as the occasion for dispersing comfort and the deepest realities of his abiding care (2 Cor. 1:3–11)." GTB Stephen Um

Weakness is the way.

This is good news because it means we can get in! The standard is need. Our need for a Savior, to solve sin and our disregard of God. It is not our achievement, our ability to keep up appearances. In our weakness or our strength, we come fully dependent on the work of another - Jesus.

He only takes people that don't have it all together.

Paul ends this section with the story of being lowered down a wall in a basket to escape death. This is the ultimate story of being weak. But when we understand the mentality of first-century Corinth it drives the point all the further home.

In the world of ancient Rome, where military might and bravery were regarded as the highest of virtues (especially when told with bravado!), the highest honor was the *corona muralis*, or the 'crown of the wall.' It was a literal crown, made to look like a city wall, everyone knew what the award meant and why people were awarded it.

The *corona muralis* was awarded and had been for centuries by the time Paul writes this letter, for one military achievement alone. The central method of warfare was the siege, camping around a city and forcing it to submit. This could be a long endeavor so a crucial step for an attacking army would be making a way for soldiers to make it up tall ladders over the top of the city wall into the city.

This was a dangerous proposition. The defenders would wreck the ladders, pour boiling liquids on you, throw stones. And even if you made it over the wall you were likely to die because you would be terribly outnumbered. Given that, the *corona muralis* was often awarded posthumously - you really might not live to tell the story. Because, if you were the first over the wall, you might be the only

one to know it. You can imagine this would have people coming out in droves to claim the award if they didn't have to prove it!

So a solemn oath was instituted, invoking the gods to witness that the soldier was telling the truth. 'I swear before the holy gods, who know I'm telling the truth, that, when we were attacking the city, I was the first one over the wall.' Then the crown would be awarded.

Paul, though, goes after a different crown. **2 Corinthians 11:31** "The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, he who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying." (ESV) 'I escaped through a window in the wall...' He gained the *corona Christi* - the crown of the Messiah.

"In effect Paul views the incident in Damascus as a paradigm for his life. God's strength would be perfected in his weakness. Paul tells us by this story that weakness was at the heart of his calling from the very beginning of his apostleship." Hughes

It is at the heart of our calling in following Christ and it is the way to real life in him.

The way up has always been the way down.

Be Suspicious of Bravado - Don't fall for the bravado of the false apostles.

"Anyone who knows only his strength, not his weakness, has never given himself to a task which demands all he can give. There is no avoiding this weakness, and we should learn to suspect those models of human life which try to avoid it. *So many are* never "weak" because we are never affected, concerned, involved or committed beyond a cautiously safe limit. That was neither Jesus' ideal of life nor Paul's. To be controlled by the love of Christ means inevitably to reach the limits of one's abilities and experience weakness."

Walk in the Way of Jesus - Bring your weakness and come to Jesus. For forgiveness, identity, hope, life. If you must boast, boast in your need for Jesus and his provision of himself for you.

2 Corinthians 12:10 - 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.” (ESV)

This is our life, it is where we are supposed to be in Christ. Let's go!