



# FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“THE PARADOX OF WEAKNESS”

Scripture Lessons: II Corinthians 12:1-10

*This sermon was preached at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina, by Dr. Daniel W. Massie on Sunday, January 17, 2010.*

Paradox is a word often used to characterize the Christian faith and the Christian world and life view. Whether we like it or not our faith and our lifestyle are full of seeming contradictions. Critics of Christianity say that these are not seeming contradictions or paradoxes at all. They are just contradictions plain and simple! For example, we are reminded that the first shall be last and the last first. We are told that the only way to find life is by losing it and the only way to lose life is by holding on to it securely. We are told that the best way to destroy an enemy is by loving him. We are taught that true greatness is characterized by servant hood and that the people who are genuinely free are the ones who are slaves to Jesus Christ. In the Beatitudes Jesus tells us that those who are hungry are the ones who will be satisfied and that contrary to popular opinion, the meek shall inherit the earth. So you see the Christian faith contains paradox after paradox.

Of course, we can understand why many philosophers criticize Christianity for its paradoxical nature. They argue that paradox is merely a refuge for irrationalism and obscurantism but some of the better philosophers and some of our own theologians, such as Soren Kierkegaard and Paul Tillich have also defended the use of paradox and claim that it is sometimes the most effective way of getting at truth. That is to say, reality can best be understood on occasion by putting together two contradictory categories or juxtaposed sentences.

Today I would like for us to examine one of the great paradoxes of Christianity. In our morning lesson the Apostle Paul had been cataloging some of the trials and difficulties and failures that he had experienced in his outreach to the Gentile world. He had many detractors and opponents who challenged his apostolic authority. On the one hand, he had known the heights of ecstasy and tells of a strange, almost out-of-body experience in which his words were inadequate to describe. But on the other hand he had also known the depths of despair and difficulty.

He even mentions a “thorn in the flesh”, the precise nature of which alludes. Perhaps it was a physical ailment. It could have been a particular temptation he was unable to overcome. It may have been a relationship that was especially difficult and discouraging. But whatever the “thorn in the flesh” was there is little question but that Paul had his trials and tribulations which were far greater than most of us will ever experience because of our faith. But then he concludes his discussion by saying: “Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.” (II Corinthians 12:10)

Now would you not agree that Paul’s words here constitute a paradox, a seeming contradiction, perhaps even an outlandish claim? What could he possibly have meant, this servant of God, when he says that when he is weak, then he is strong? The word paradox is a term originally from the Greek that means “that which is against common opinion.” Well, we would certainly say that most of our contemporaries today, like those in Paul’s day, would not regard weakness as a strength. It goes against the grain and certainly against “common opinion”. So in what sense is our weakness a strength?

Let me first begin by debunking the image of the Apostle Paul that most of us carry around within us. If you are like me, then you have probably been guilty of nearly deifying Paul, or at a minimum robbing him of his humanity. We think of him as a giant among men. After all, here was the greatest of the apostles, the greatest of the missionaries, the greatest of the preachers, perhaps even the greatest of the saints. Not only was he a Hebrew of the Hebrews but also a man among men. He was a devoted, passionate, articulate servant of Jesus Christ. He was the articulator and the advocate of the Christian faith in a hostile Gentile world. He possessed a legally astute mind. It almost appears that he could do anything, suffer anything, become anything for Jesus Christ. This worker of miracles, this possessor of all spiritual gifts and graces, this solver of all church problems, this caretaker of the faith, this writer of holy scripture, this confronter of tyrants, is for nearly all of us a most heroic figure.

Now if you were to make a movie of the life of the Apostle Paul who would you cast in the lead role? Would it be a Sean Connery, a Clint Eastwood, a Harrison Ford, some character who exudes strength and confidence? I well remember how disillusioned I was when I first began to study Paul and came across the only physical description of him in existence. Some question the authenticity of this description but we read the following words in the Apocryphal book entitled Acts of Paul and Thecla: "And he saw Paul coming, a man little of stature, thin-haired upon the head, crooked in the legs, of good state of body, with eyebrows joining, a nose somewhat hooked, full of grace: for sometimes he appeared like a man and sometimes he had the face of an angel." My word, this doesn't sound like Sean Connery or Clint Eastwood. No, this is more like Woody Allen, Dustin Hoffman, or David Spade! What a sacrilege! How dare Paul be a mere mortal? How dare he be subject to failure, to disappointment, to rejection and to all the frailties and weaknesses of our common life that you and I know only too well? And yet he was.

And yet, Paul had a perspective on weakness that you and I may need to hear and to embrace. As a matter of fact, Paul is convinced that in his weakness was his true strength. What did he mean by this? Let me share with you three ways in which human weakness can be an asset in the life of a Christian. And perhaps this is what Paul had in mind though he doesn't offer further insight.

To begin with, when we are weak we learn to acknowledge and even appreciate the limitations of life. As far as I am concerned one of the surest signs of spiritual maturity and health is the ability to recognize and accept the limitations of life, and especially our personal limitations. I guess that is why I have always appreciated so much the prayer made famous by Reinhold Niebuhr embraced by Alcoholics Anonymous and others which says: "O God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I can not change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." There are some things, my friends, which we will never be able to change despite our best efforts. And I am talking about things about us and things within us.

If you live long enough life will finally force you to come face to face with your own limitations. As disturbing as this may be initially, there is also something quite liberating about it. There are some areas of life where you will undoubtedly fail because you are not strong enough, wise enough, rich enough, patient enough, pretty enough, talented enough, young enough, old enough, or whatever enough. No matter how much you may desire to do or be certain things, they may remain forever beyond your reach or your capacities.

When I was in high school I loved football as much as anything else and my dream was to play football in college. The desire was certainly there and I had tremendous work habits and commitment if I don't mind saying so myself. But over time I came to understand that there wasn't a great market for running backs of my caliber. I had some pretty good games in high school but the Southeastern Conference doesn't have much room for running backs weighing 145lbs.

The Apostle Paul knew full well that there were certain things he would never accomplish and certain successes he would never see. He could not win over all of his opponents. They would remain through out his days. He could not convert all of his listeners. He could not visit all of the places he longed to visit. He could not escape his past or deny the kind of person he had been prior to his conversion. There is even evidence to suggest that he may have been incapable of breaking certain habits or overcoming certain sins. In Romans 7 he says of himself: "I can will what is right, but I can not do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not what is what I do." (Romans 7:18-19)

"Now wait just a minute, preacher, haven't I heard you say before that we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us and isn't that something Paul wrote as well?" (Philippians 4:13) I have said that and that too is something of a paradox. If you read that verse in its context in Philippians you will see that Paul is not saying that he could personally accomplish everything he desired, but rather he was convinced that God would accomplish through him whatever God wished to accomplish. And that is quite another matter.

In our passage today Paul admits that he is incapable of ridding himself of this mysterious "thorn in the flesh", whatever that was. Three times he had fervently prayed to God for its removal but for whatever reason, God's answer was no and Paul had to accept this limitation. And so, my friends, weakness can be a strength if and when it enables us to acknowledge in all honest and sincerity the limitations of life.

Secondly, when we are weak we often become more open and sensitive to the needs and hurts of others, and that in its self is a strength. You see, if we are conscious of our own failings, our own weaknesses, our own flaws and sins, we are much more likely to empathize with others in their places of need and to reach out to them in genuine love and concern. By contrast, if consciously or unconsciously we arrogantly assume that we are somehow better than others, that we are brighter, more pious, more moral, than we automatically cut ourselves off from ever offering a word of encouragement or assistance to people in need. There is no person listening to my voice this morning that does not have his or her weaknesses, limitations and failings, yet regrettably we often look down our noses at those whose short-comings may be different from our own. As Jesus once put it, "We are so busy finding the splinter in our brother's eye that we ignore the log in our own."

Persons who have faced up to their own weaknesses are not only more compassionate towards others but they tend to be more humble about themselves as well. Paul confesses in our scripture lesson today that his "thorn in the flesh" had kept him from being "too elated." The Good News Version of the New Testament puts the verse this way: "But to keep me from being puffed up with pride because of the many wonderful things I saw, I was given a painful physical ailment, which acts as Satan's messenger to beat me and to keep me from being proud."

Finally, when we are weak we discover as never before how to depend upon God and not ourselves and only then can we discover the grace which Paul describes as "sufficient for us" and which is "made perfect in our weakness." It is only in the midst of weaknesses and failings that we dare to turn to God for the help that we need beyond ourselves.

Can we talk honestly here? Submission to God is frequently the last resort for too many of us who call ourselves Christians. Most of us would prefer to manage our own lives and to control our own destinies. We want to be independent, self-reliant, self-directed, and self-assured and if we achieve some kind of success along the way we feel that we can take the credit for it. But sooner or later each of us and all of us will fail. Sometimes we will fail publicly and everyone will know about it. Sometimes we will fail privately and we are the only ones who are conscious of it. But sooner or

later we all fail. We come face to face with our own sinfulness, our own ineptness, our own impotence, our own inability to do what we want to do or be what we want to be by our own strength alone. And for many people it is at this point that they are forced for the first time to open themselves up to the forgiveness and the power of God. Unfortunately, some people will never rely upon God so long as they can hold out the possibility that they can depend upon themselves alone. I love the old expression, “man’s extremity is God’s opportunity.”

And that may be why Paul says that he boasts in his weakness and in his places of need, for these were the precise places where God had stepped in with transforming power and accomplished what Paul could not have dreamed possible on his own.

My friends, when we are weak, when we fail, when we make a mess of our lives, we not only open ourselves to the influence and help of God, but we are enabled to see those darker areas of our lives that need our time and attention if we are going to grown into the people God would have us to be. John Claypool has written that “God is more interested in our growth than in our innocence.” What that says to me is that God is not so concerned that we never make a mistake or that we keep an unblemished record, as if this were even possible. But our God is concerned that we learn and grow through each and ever experience, good or bad, and that we see our desperate need of God and claim the grace that he offers.

The dark and dismal and weak places of life can prove to be a fertile ground for growth and service. On previous occasions I have advised you that whenever you are going through a difficult moment in your life that you should ask two questions: What am I learning through this experience? And how might God use me through this experience? So often in my ministry I have noticed how people who have gone through a difficult time: a death of a child, a divorce, a crippling disability, bankruptcy, depression, discover in the midst of that valley the presence and the power of God. And not only that, but it is these people who are equipped to reach out and say a word of encouragement and hope to others who will travel that same path in their life.

So then weakness is a strength if it reveals with clarity our limitations and our own needs, if it increases our empathy for others and keeps us humble and if it teaches us to rely upon God and God’s grace. Therefore, let each of us say with the Apostle Paul that for the sake of Christ we are content with weakness, insults, hardships, persecutions and calamities; for when we are weak, then we to are strong!

*Prayer:*

*Dear God, give us the grace that will enable us in our weakness to acknowledge our limitations, to become sensitive to the needs and hurts of others, and to learn complete reliance upon your grace which is sufficient in the midst of every trial of life. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*