

2 Corinthians 11:1&5,16-12:11; 13:3-4
(Jeremiah 9:23-24; Matthew 7:24-27)
“I Will Not Boast, Except of My Weakness”

Introduction

We return this morning to our study of 2 Corinthians, a letter that we studied together during the last half of 2014, setting it aside at the end of the year for the holiday celebrations. It is a letter that rubs against the grain of a culture that boast in human wisdom and power. We need look no further than our own hearts to see that it addresses us where we “live and move and have our being.” We tend to feel good about life when we believe ourselves to be in control, to be respected, successful, on top. We feel depressed and anxious when circumstances seem beyond our control, when people doubt us, when we are uncertain whether or not we can work things out the way we had planned.

Paul’s opponents in Corinth claimed special spiritual maturity on the basis of their apparent success in life and ministry. They accused Paul of not being sufficiently eloquent or attractive or powerful. But Paul warns the church in Corinth that such trappings of success can be deceiving if they stand over against the message of the cross and the call to follow Jesus, not only into places of joy and success but into places that involve deep pain and seem to the world to be marked by failure.

The danger for those of us who study the Bible is that we are so accustomed to hearing this counter-cultural message in a biblical context that we may not notice how easily we reject it in our daily lives. *We run the risk of unconscious, unintentional hypocrisy: agreeing with the Bible when we study and teach it, but then holding completely contrary views when we close our Bible and return to our other activities.*

In no other letter is Paul as personal and autobiographical as he is in this particular passage before us this morning. Usually I find it best to study Paul’s letters by taking small portions and unpacking the rich theological truths that Paul expressed so magisterially. But here we find Paul making what debaters call a *reductio ad absurdum* argument, mocking his opponents’ boasting by pretending to boast about his own life and ministry. Lest we think he is being serious, he continues to say, “I’m talking like a fool,” but his point is really quite serious. His opponents boasted to make themselves look great. In doing so, they robbed God of his glory. Paul boasts to make himself look foolish and weak so that all glory will go to God.

So to feel the full affect of what Paul is doing in these verses, I think it is important to take the whole passage together, to hear Paul heap story on story, in order to make the one great point that it is only when we humble ourselves and exalt the Lord that he reaches down and lifts us up. How, then, does Paul make his case, and how are we to apply it to ourselves?

Body

1. The counter-cultural message at the heart this letter:

God's strength is displayed in human weakness (12:8-10). Paul has made this the centerpiece of his defense. Over and over again he has shown that God is most glorified when we are shown to be completely dependent upon him for every good thing.

Thus, our only boast is in those things that magnify God's power—his glory in jars of clay (12:9). If our concern is merely for our own reputation, then we will tell those stories that tend to make us look good. But when our concern is for God's glory, we will tell the truth about our sin and his grace, our weakness and his strength.

2. The two life stories that should under-gird every Christian's understanding of this message:

One's own life story: Here, Paul's strength in weakness (11:16f). Paul first uses his own life story to show how unattractive boasting is and how it leads to one thinking that he is better than anyone else. He then lists his sufferings, the things for which his opponents mock and belittle him, as the very marks of his apostleship, as one who has shared in Christ's sufferings for the sake of the church. He then says, in effect, so you want me to tell you stories that demonstrate my spiritual power and miraculous experiences? How about these? Can we tell such stories? Are we aware of God's incredible grace toward us, not only in times of joy and success but also in times of grief and failure? If someone were to ask, could we do something of what Paul has been doing in much of this letter, namely showing that when he is weak, God is strong, that indeed God's grace is made perfect in our weakness?

Christ's life story: His strength in weakness, the cross and the crown (13:4). Our comfort in times of suffering and failure comes supremely from the life of our Lord Jesus, who for our sake was crucified in weakness. Here is the central message, not only of this letter, but also of the entire Bible: life comes through death, the crown only through the cross. "Let this mind be yours which is in Christ Jesus ..."

Conclusion

Paul has been saying this throughout this letter. He wrote of being like a prisoner being led to his death at the end of the triumphal procession. He wrote of God's glory being entrusted to little jars of clay. He boasted in the things that showed his weakness and God's greatness. Can you and I yet say with Paul, "We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us" (4:7)? God grant us such a clear, liberating and joyful view of life!

© John M. Wood, all rights reserved