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A Sermon Preached by  
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## “How To Handle Our Handicaps” 2 Corinthians 12:7-10 (Common English Bible)



I share with you what has become, perhaps, the most important text in all of the New Testament for my ministry in the past 32 years. As I have been invited into the lives of persons who have experienced brokenness and handicaps of every kind, this passage has grown increasingly powerful. Listen to what Paul has to teach us about how to handle our own handicaps in life. I am reading from the Second Letter of Corinthians – the Twelfth Chapter – and I am beginning to read at the Seventh Verse.

### **Listen for God’s Word:**

*“I was given a thorn in my body because of the outstanding revelations I received so that I wouldn’t be conceited. It’s a messenger from Satan sent to torment me so that I wouldn’t be conceited. I pleaded with the Lord three times for it to leave me alone. He said to me, ‘My grace is enough for*

*you because power is made perfect in weakness.’ So, I’ll gladly spend my time bragging about my weaknesses so that Christ’s power can rest on me. Therefore, I’m alright with weaknesses, insults, disasters, harassments, and stressful situations for the sake of Christ, because when I am weak, then I’m strong.”*

That wonderful author, Ernest Hemingway, writes a true story that he experienced in his travels through Spain. He discovered during his time in Spain that there was a father and a teenage son who had become estranged from one another. The teenage son left home. Soon after the son ran away from home, the father began to look for his son. He carried a photograph of his son with him, and he would ask hundreds and hundreds of people if anyone had seen his son; that he was looking for his son who ran away from home. The father shared

that he loves his son and he wants his son to come home. After spending some time looking for his son, and having no luck whatsoever, this father placed an ad in the largest newspaper in Madrid. The ad read, “Paco, please come home. All is forgiven, and I love you. Meet me in front of the newspaper building tomorrow at Noon.” Ernest Hemingway writes that at noon the next day, 800 teenage boys by the name of Paco showed up in front of the newspaper office – 800 boys by the name of Paco who are estranged from their father and who wanted to come home.

*All of us are desperate  
to come home to God  
in some way.*

Friends, I believe there’s a little bit of Paco in every one of us. All of us are desperate to come home to God in some way. And that is particularly true for those of us who struggle under the weight of a handicap of any kind. It may be a handicap that is physical. It may be a mental handicap. It may be an emotional or temperamental handicap. Maybe it is a handicap we were born with or a handicap that

came to us during this life. But whatever the handicap may be, we long to come home because many of us, as we struggled with that handicap, have raged against God. We said to God that it is simply unfair that we must endure this handicap. We’ve asked God to take that handicap away from us, and God had not done it, and so therefore, we run away from God – we run from God – we run away from home.

The difficulty when we run away from God with our handicaps is that we still have our handicap, don’t we? It’s just now we don’t have our Father’s love to strengthen us to move through the handicap. We are like Paco; there’s a little bit of Paco in all of us and we want desperately to come home.

The Apostle Paul writes in his second letter to the church in Corinth that he has a handicap. He doesn’t tell us what the handicap is and there has been much speculation as to what the handicap could be, but Paul doesn’t tell us what it is. Paul simply tells us that it came to him after he accepted Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior. He wasn’t born with it – it came after he

became a Christian. And not only did it come after he became a Christian, it is a handicap that torments him every single day. He describes it like a thorn in the flesh. Now, many of us, if not all of us, have been pricked by a rose's thorn, or have had a splinter in our finger, and we know what that feels like. It hurts continuously until it is removed and begins to heal.

Well Paul tells us that he has an affliction – a handicap that is like a thorn in the flesh. And on three different occasions, he has asked God to remove that thorn so that he might be more useful to God. What he is saying is that, “I’m diminished” because of his handicap. “Remove the handicap, O God, and I’m all yours and I can be more for you.” But after the third time, he asks God to remove the handicap; God says, “No.”

Wow! Here is a man, who on the road to Damascus, encounters the risen Christ; gives his life to the service of Jesus Christ; he is now the author of two-thirds of the New Testament, and is regarded as the best Evangelist in the Christian Church even today, and he simply asked God to remove the handicap from him that came after his

conversion, and God says, “No.” And Paul’s response to God’s, “No”, becomes an important lesson for every one of us who struggles with handicaps today. In fact, I have found in my own study of Paul, at least three responses that Paul has that are instructive for us of how to handle our handicaps today.

*Paul is asking that we not become bitter as we struggle under the weight of a handicap.*

The first response is that Paul doesn’t grow bitter. By Paul’s example, Paul is asking that we not become bitter as we struggle under the weight of a handicap. Some months ago, I was jogging from the church, west on Atlantic Avenue, to the gym to work out with my personal trainer, Bill Dorton. And as I was jogging up Atlantic, I noticed a woman approximately my age who’d looked like that life had been terribly unkind to her. And she was struggling across the street with a walker. I thought I would share a bright moment in an otherwise dreary day for her. So as I jogged past (I made a large circle so as

to not frighten her – she didn't see me coming), I shouted a cheery, "Good Morning." It was then that she released a string of expletives that frankly scared me, and I kept on running. She struggled under some handicap that she had to use a walker, and she was no older than me, and she had grown bitter and angry and could not even accept a good morning from a stranger.

I wish I had felt that this woman would have welcomed a story of another woman that I knew in a former church. In that church was a woman who had grown bitter and angry with God. When she was 14 years old, she told me, she dreamed of being married and having children. She very much looked forward to being a mother. Well, when she grew up, she did find the love of her life and she married. Then she soon discovered she was unable to have children – that medically it would be impossible for her to bear children. With only half of her dream realized, she blamed God. She was regular in worship except on Mother's Day. She could not worship on Mother's Day. Her anger and her bitterness were such that she could not be in church as the congregation celebrated Mother's Day. She felt that God had cheated her of the opportunity to be a mother. Year after year, she remained bitter and she remained

angry. She would come to my office and rehearse the same bitterness and the same anger over and over again. Why would God deny her the opportunity to be a mother?

And then one day, an opportunity came to her to go to a nearby hospital that specialized in the care of terminally ill children. She began to volunteer on a regular basis – to go to the hospital and to love these children who were dying – to listen to them – to read stories to them – to celebrate their birthdays – to laugh with them – to love them deeply. And slowly, she began to release her bitterness as she owned motherhood in another way. She still never came to church on Mother's Day. Not because she was bitter, but because on Mother's Day, she was at the hospital with her children!

*Bitterness is not the  
answer to our handicaps.*

I so wanted to share that with the lady walking up Atlantic. But again, she was in no place to listen to a pastor tell her not to be bitter; that the Apostle Paul demonstrates for us that bitterness is not the answer to our handicaps.

*Regardless of the handicap  
that you struggle with, you  
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best today and tomorrow,  
with what you have.*

The second thing that we see in the witness of the Apostle Paul is Paul's call to us to do the very best with what we have. Regardless of the handicap that you struggle with, you are called to do the very best today and tomorrow, with what you have. Paul asked that the thorn be removed from his flesh, and God said, "No." Yet, Paul went on to write two-thirds of the New Testament. Additionally, Paul becomes an evangelist who took the Gospel throughout the known world in his day. Pay attention to his story. He was shipwrecked. He was bitten by a viper in his hand and he was healed from it. He endured suffering of every imaginable kind. And all of this was in addition to his unnamed handicap. Paul continued to press on, preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and composing letters of encouragement to struggling churches. He did the very best that he could with what he had. John Milton became blind in both eyes and after his blindness, wrote Paradise Lost. Beethoven was deaf. Charles Darwin, in his own words, was "continually

unwell". That's how Darwin put it. And yet, they have impacted humanity in unimaginable ways, in spite of their handicap.

Or a story closer to my own life – one that I shared five years ago with this congregation (I looked it up to see – it was January of 2014) of a relationship that I had with a professor when I was a student at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia, Ludwig Dewitz. Ludwig Dewitz was an esteemed professor at Columbia Seminary teaching Old Testament Literature in Hebrew and late in his life, (he had never married) suffered a stroke – a crippling stroke where he lost the use of an arm. I was invited by the Dean of the Students to move in and care for him as he sought to learn how to live life without the use of an arm, and I did. A relationship was forged that is deeply meaningful to me, even to this day.

One day as I was sitting in Ludwig Dewitz' home, I asked him, "How is it, Dr. Dewitz?" And he asked, "How's what?" I'm choosing my words carefully now. I said, "Living after the stroke." And with a puzzled look in his eyes, he said, "You speak as if I'm disabled. I'm not disabled. I have a handicap. 'Disabled', Doug, literally means unable. I have a handicap,

which means I am able – with difficulty. At this very moment, my car is in the garage, being specially equipped for a one-armed person to drive. I have just received last week, music for a one-hand pianist.” Dr. Dewitz loved to play the piano, and now he is learning to play all over again with the use of only one hand. “Doug, I am not disabled. I am handicapped. I am able, with difficulty, but able nonetheless. This handicap has not defeated me!” Paul asked us to make the very best of what we have.

*We must move from  
self-reliance to  
depending upon  
God’s grace.*

And then finally, the Apostle, Paul tells us in his own life that we must move from self-reliance to depending upon God’s grace. God says as much to Paul when God says “No” to his request. God says, “My grace will be sufficient for you.” All that you will need will be provided by the grace of Almighty God right in the midst of your handicap.

Some of you; perhaps many of you, remember the name of Robert Schuler. If you don’t, well, you’re just saying

how young you are and good for you! But Robert Schuler at one time was perhaps the best known clergy person in this country next to James Kennedy: Robert Schuler and the Crystal Cathedral in Orange County, California. *The Hour of Power* was the name of his national television broadcast. Robert Schuler’s daughter, Carol, suffered a tragic accident where she lost a leg and, as one can imagine, after she lost a leg, she went into a period of deep depression, and bitterness, and anger toward God. She would rail against God.

She says, “I am the daughter of the great Robert Schuler. It falls upon me to continue the great legacy of my father and have a robust ministry that touches lives through Jesus Christ in this nation. And now I have lost a leg! How am I to do the work that falls upon me without a leg?” And then Carol said one night, as she was lying in bed, unable to sleep, she experienced a presence. She said, “I do not know how to describe it except that ... just a presence was with me. And I heard that presence speak to me. Not in an audible voice, but it was as clear as if it was audible. The presence said, ‘Carol, I am right here with you. I have never left you and my grace is sufficient for you to carry forward with your father’s ministry’.” And at

that point, she resolved to stop feeling sorry for herself; she released her bitterness, and then she fell in love. She said it was not a love based on physical attractiveness, but a love that went something much deeper than that. She learned to live with the loss of a leg – to love deeply and to carry forward her father’s ministry following his death. She said, “I was trying to be self-reliant – to be the person who could do it on my own; on my own strength and I learned that I needed to rely, rather, on the grace of Almighty God.” And she declares, “All that I’ve accomplished since the loss of my leg has been by God’s grace and not by my strength or my intelligence or my will.”

The Apostle, Paul teaches us these three lessons of how to handle our handicap. First, Paul teaches us not to grow bitter. Second, to discover how we can make the very best of what we do have available to us and, third, to move from self-reliance to God’s grace.

Some many years ago, I was sitting in the *Harrington Center* at Columbia Theological Seminary for some continuing education. I was sitting alone in the living room of the Harrington Center, watching TV. A man walks into the living room and

says, “What are we watching?” I turned to see John Claypool, one of the most distinguished pastors that filled the pulpit of this nation in that day. When I realized it was John Claypool, I picked up the remote, turned the TV off and thought, “Wow, I have a private audience with one of my heroes of the pulpit!”

*We fall down.  
We skin our knees.  
We stand back up.  
Then we ask God,  
‘How can we be  
of use to you today?’*

John Claypool shared with me that evening a story of an Italian peasant who one day, walking alone, noticed a monk coming down from a mountain-top monastery. The Italian peasant asked the monk, “Father, can you tell me what it is that you and your colleagues do up there day after day after day up in that monastery?” And this monk addressed the Italian peasant and said, “You want to know what we do every day? I’ll tell you what we do every day. We fall down every day. And we skin our knees. And then we stand back up. And then we ask God, ‘How can I be of use to

you today?’ We fall down. We skin our knees. We stand back up. Then we ask God, ‘How can we be of use to you today?’” The monk smiled and said, “We call ourselves the Society of Skinned Knees”.

The Apostle, Paul recognizes that many of us, if not all of us, from time to time fall down, perhaps because of our handicaps. We skin our knees. The Apostle, Paul calls us to follow him to stand back up, skinned knees and all, and to say to God, “How can I be of use to you this day?”

May it be so for you and for me.  
Amen.

*With appreciation to Anita Briggs for transcribing this sermon.*  
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