

Lesson 72: A Ministry of Grace and Power: 2 Corinthians 12:1 – 13:14.

God's final and most promising word to Paul was "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness", 12:9. Divine grace worked in him and through his ministry, but God's power did not set him free from weakness of the thorn in the flesh, of life's perplexing problems, of frustration and hurts. As he lived his life in Christ, and practices the ministry of liberating reconciliation, he realized that God's grace was sufficient.

All Paul's Christian life and service depended on the divine grace and power. He spoke frequently and widely about grace in 2 Corinthians: 1:2, 12; 4:15; 8:1, 7, 9; 9:8, 14. Basically, grace – undeserved favor – is the outpouring of God Himself in Christ and Christ's outpouring of Himself through the Holy Spirit. It is by grace that a man becomes a Christian and a minister of reconciliation.

Only by the means of divine favor was Paul made a servant in the church and in world-wide mission. The power of the Lord's all-sufficient grace was what made the apostle's constant suffering and hardships tolerable and enabled him to continue his work. When he was weak – despised, humiliated, poor, scorned by the world, and misunderstood by his spiritual children – he found strength. His human weakness set the best possible stage for the manifestation of God's mighty power. "The greater the servant's weakness, the more conspicuous is the power of his Master's all-sufficient grace." – Philip E. Hughes

For Paul it was repugnant for a Christian to boast of his exploits. So if he must boast, he would boast only of his ministry in which he accepted weakness and found strength in grace to be more than adequate.

I. His Visions and Revelations: 12:1-10.

The intruders at Corinth boasted of their special spiritual experiences in which the Lord appeared to them. Their claim impressed the Corinthians and made them wonder if Paul was an equal to the "super-spiritual" rivals. The whole business of boasting was distasteful to him, but now in the interest of the church he felt that he could not evade the questions: "Had he had visionary experiences as they?" Though he had misgivings about what good would be served by sharing with them his most intimate and mysterious religious experiences, he would do just that. Again, however, he would revert to the theme of weakness that magnified God's grace and power in his ministry.

A. An Experience in the Third Heaven, 12:2-4.

Boasting about his "visions and revelations" was not to Paul's liking. Because of that he chose to veil his claim to visionary experience by referring to a third party – "a man in Christ." As verse 7 in the third heaven, the highest heaven, and that the experience was so magnificent that he did not know whether or not he was transported out of his body. This vision of God gave him knowledge that was inexpressible. The things that he was permitted to behold were so mysterious that human lips could not repeat them. Seeing the glories of the invisible world was a personal blessing and encouraged him in his difficult work, but these revelations were not to be told to others. Likely his opponents described in great detail what they saw and heard in their spiritual experiences, but Paul did not describe a single thing seen nor in their spiritual experiences, but Paul did not describe a single thing seen nor did he tell anything guttered. This might have been a rebuke to those at Corinth who cultivated mysterious spiritual experiences for public consumption.

Being caught up into Paradise was a great privilege and was strength for ministry, but Paul refused to boast about it. He would boast only of his weaknesses. It was these – imprisonments, beatings, anxieties, and embarrassments, 11:23-33 – that kept him from carnal

pride and made him ready to receive God's grace and power, the only means by which he could effectively serve Christ. Should he have chosen to brag about his "visions and revelations" he would not have turned out to be a fool. Why? He would not have exaggerated but told only the truth about his spiritual experiences. It was likely that his rivals could not have in all honesty made that claim. They were spurred by the desire to be impressive and probably had boasted of religious experiences they had not had.

The apostle had no desire for false praise. Therefore, he had deliberately refrained from boasting "so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say." He did not ask people to judge him by his secret visions but only by the life he lived and the message he proclaimed. If men's opinion of him had been too high, that would have obscured the fact that it was his message of reconciliation, not he himself, that they were to heed. He wanted to be understood and appreciated on the basis of his service. It is well for all servants of Christ to have the respect of those among whom they labor. Some have the respect of others because of their reputation for scholarship or spiritual gifts, but it can be sustained only by the life they live and the message they declare. A life consistent with the gospel will do more than anything to insure that people will continue to have confidence in us and give us a hearing.

B. An Experience of Pain: 12:7-10.

After the apostle received "these surpassingly great revelations," he was sent the discipline of a thorn in the flesh. He had been caught up to Paradise. What he had seen and heard was too wonderful for utterance, but the next phase of his experience was with pain, which, except for the grace of God, would have been too much to bear.

1. His "thorn in the flesh", 12:7. Knowledge, particularly of the mysteries of God, could easily puff up a man. Paul could have been tempted to have unchristian pride in his vision. To keep him from becoming conceited he was given what he called "the thorn in the flesh." The word thorn (skolops) can be translated "stake," which was used for torture and execution. Exactly what the thorn in the flesh was we cannot be certain, but it was some kind of ailment, a stake that was sticking in his flesh. He described it as "a messenger of Satan," suggesting, therefore, that the ailment had come through a satanic messenger.

Whatever it was, "the thorn in the flesh" was for the purpose of keeping Paul's many visions and extraordinary experiences from going to his head. He was constantly tormented by the thorn, and it made the daily discharge of his ministerial duties more difficult. The habitual drain of the painful discipline taught him humility. It reminded him that he was a man of like passion with those to whom he preached and made him depend on the grace and power of God. Thorns of life in our own flesh serve the same purpose. They are conducive to humility and Christian service, but spiritual pride is always fatal to usefulness in the Lord's work.

2. His prayer for deliverance, 12:8-9a.

The thorn really hurt. Smarting from the pain, the apostle prayed earnestly to be relieved of his trouble. Three times he begged God to set him free from it. The Lord said, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Christ did not give him a pre-packaged solution to his problem, or three steps through which he could overcome the weakness. He was assured of something better – the powerful grace of Christ. He was summoned by the Lord to accept his weakness and to find his strength in grace.

Grace can be stern. The Lord put aside Paul's prayer in which he pleaded and begged to be spared of any further pain of the thorn and told him: "My grace is all you need" _

NEB. The grace that he received was sufficient to bear the pain and to endure the strain. His weakness did not hinder the effectiveness of God's power, but rather it provided the greatest opportunity for the display of divine power. "My power," as the Lord said, "is made perfect in weakness." The fact was, as Paul realized, that precisely where he was weak God could be strong. And that was better for the apostle and his ministry. God cannot help or use self-sufficient people but only those who have a deep dependence on Him. Where there is weakness and openness to divine grace His mighty power comes clearly in view. As with the apostle, human inadequacy may be an occasion for the triumph of grace.

3. His submission to the Lord, 12:9b-10.

The kind of bragging that Paul's rivals did was foolishness. He wished to show that he could boast also, only in a different way. His was a strange sort of boasting, but it reflected submission to the Lord – "I will boast all the more gladly about my weakness." The divine answer to his prayer was that power would come, not by overcoming his weakness but by bearing it. Apparently some weaknesses are not to be overcome. Through them God's power is perfected.

The apostle did not take a fatalistic attitude toward his weaknesses, but he "more gladly" took delight in his troubles. When he accepted the Lord's answer, he was willing to settle for weaknesses. The fact is that he gloried in them, not because the endurance of pain was in itself virtuous but because they were the means of something greater. Here is a profound truth: Paul's weaknesses would end in power. He knew that Christ's power would rest on him as God's cloud of glory had rested on the Temple. That was why he took delight "in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties." These meant power, for as he said, "when I am weak (by human standards), then I am strong."

Nothing but his total reliance on God's powerful grace was Paul's boast. Christ did not ask him to become infantile and turn his back on all that he had learned from the hard experiences of life. It was not that God's grace denied him his own strength nor does it deny us our strength. The experience of Paul reminds us that human strength is not to be at the center of our lives. To rely on our strength is to implant our own self firmly at the center. All that God asks is that our weakness and strength be conformed to the likeness of Christ.

In serving Christ there are no guarantees of freedom from trouble. The Savior never promised us that. Paul, one of God's greatest servants, did not find it that way. It was when he was weak in his ministry, lacking physical and spiritual strength that the power of God would work through him. The fact is that grace has always been and will always be enough – sufficient for the tasks that confront us.

II. His Commendation and Trust: 12:11-21.

The Corinthians had failed Paul. They had not defended him against the vicious attacks on his character and ministry. The truth was that they listened to his critics. Because his spiritual children did not take his side, he was forced in his own defense to commend himself. Against his better judgment he boasted. Therefore, he admitted: "I have made a fool of myself." The commendation of the Corinthians would have spared him of such foolishness. Though they did not take his side, he was confident that because of the grace and power of God in no way was he inferior to the "super-apostles." He was really superior.

A. Marks of an Apostle, 12:12.

The oppression had claimed miracles, that is, the very marks of a true apostle. These were described by Paul as "signs, wonders and miracles." It would be a mistake to sharply distinguish these one from another. Signs are events which are seen to have spiritual

significance and to reveal the grace of God at work. Wonders and happenings that are astounding and extraordinary in character. Miracles stress the power of God at work and are seen especially in physical healings.

All these had marked Paul's ministry at Corinth. The spiritual gifts operated through him and mighty deeds accompanied his ministry. No claim was made by him to have performed miracles, but rather he said that they "were done among you" by the power of God. Healings and other supernatural signs confirmed his ministry. Though the charismatic gifts worked through his ministry, the Holy Spirit did not exempt him from suffering. Apparently. Unlike his opponents, he never let the ministry of miracles get out focus. He recognized, as we should, that many gifts other than healing are needed – faith, wisdom, knowledge, teaching, generosity, prophecy (Rom. 12:6-8; 1 Cor. 12:8-10; Eph. 4:11).

Spiritual gifts are for the whole community of faith. They are not restricted to exceptional individuals or super-charismatic personalities. Some people have made grandiose claims in regard to the gifts of the Spirit, but the gifts are not for the purpose of exalting those through whom they operate. When a man lays his hands on us in prayer, there is no power in those hands. They are flesh and no more, but God may minister to us through him.

The biblical view of gifts is that they are manifestations of God's grace and power and have a servant role. Gifts are bestowed on Christians so that they may serve others and build up the church.

B. Freedom from Greed, 12:13-18.

The Corinthian Christians had been treated the same as all the other churches, with one exception: Paul had not been a financial burden to them. In the midst miracles had been performed, but they felt "inferior" (hessothete, "you were put lower") to the other churches because Paul had refused to take support from them. That was no sign that he thought less of them, but apparently they were offended because of it. He wanted to be reconciled to the church. Therefore with some irony he said, "Forgive me this wrong! If that were a barrier between them, he wanted their forgiveness so that their fellowship could be restored. The apostle was interested in their spiritual welfare, not in their money.

1. His interest was unselfish, 12:14.

For a third time Paul planned to visit Corinth. On his forthcoming visit he would make no change in his financial policy. He still would not be a burden to the church. For he wanted the Corinthians, not their possessions. He desired to cultivate and maintain warm fellowship with them and to see them committed fully to Jesus Christ. He had begotten the Corinthians as Christians. As their spiritual father, he did not expect material returns for nurturing his children. His financial policy was justified by a simply analogy from human life: Children are not expected to provide for the future security of their parents but parents for their children. The basic necessities – food, clothing, and shelter – are not normally provided by children. Parents have the responsibility for providing these. The apostle was prepared to accept his full responsibility for his children in the faith. More than anything he desired to see them give wholehearted devotion to Christ.

2. He planned to spend himself for their spiritual good, 12:15.

Time, energy, and love Paul had, but he had little else. Gladly he would be spent and would spend what he had for his beloved children. The verb spend (dapanao) refers to Paul's manual labor to support himself and his ministry. He was ready to spend himself completely and labor untiringly in their behalf. No matter the cost, he was eager to help the Corinthians.

What disturbed him was their ungratefulness. He had lavished his affection on the Corinthians. Ordinarily love kindles love. It was most unnatural for them to lessen

their love for Paul since he would spare no effort to serve them. The influence of the intruders seems to have cooled their affection for him. Less love on their part did not stop him from loving them just as parents go on loving their rebellious children. He did not bluntly condemn them. He left the way open for his ungrateful children to change their attitude and to meet him with love.

3. He did not take advantage of them, 12:16-19.

That Paul had not been a burden was undeniable. Though he had not asked for money for himself, he had been a “crafty fellow,” his adversaries said, using Titus and others to get money from Corinth and thus took them “by trickery” (doloī = guile or deceit). This attack was directed against the raising of the collection for the poor Christians in Jerusalem. The charge was dismissed. He had not exploited (pleonekteō = “take advantage”) them through Titus and the unnamed Christian brothers. These men were honest and made nothing out of the church. Paul, too, had precisely the same spirit of integrity and acted in the same way.

The apostle had defended himself against the charges of the “super-apostles.” The saving of his reputation, however, was not his concern. What he had said was spoken “in the sight of God.” His case had been argued, not so much before the Corinthians, but before the judgment bar of God. It was God’s standards that he would have to satisfy. If he were not seeking to justify himself in their eyes, why did he bother to speak? His reply was: “Everything we do, dear friends, is for your strengthening” (oikodomes= “building up”). His aim was to clear away the obstacles erected by the trouble makers to hinder Christian fellowship and to create a climate in which differences could be resolved. His controlling desire was for reconciliation, a relationship rooted in God’s grace and characterized by mutual love and trust.

- C. Apprehension About the Spiritual Condition of the Church: 12:20-21.

When Titus brought him news of the Corinthians’ repentance, Paul was more than pleased, 7:9-16. Despite his joy, he was not going to overlook what could prove to be detrimental to the church. Reconciliation required alertness to spiritual dangers. There were still some problems which made Paul concerned about what might become of the church. When he visited Corinth again, he warned that they might find his words far from pleasant. Should he find that some had not abandoned the “works of the flesh”, they would not find him to their liking. He would have to exercise his authority and deal sternly with sin. On his next visit he was afraid that he would discover two things.

1. He feared finding divisiveness in the church, 12:20.

The intrusion of the rival apostles was disruptive to the Christian fellowship. Paul listed eight sins that he dreaded to find: “quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, factions, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder.” This catalogue consists of spiritual sins which frequently do not appear sinful to those who are involved in them. These sins are not the flagrant sins of vice and sexual immorality but of carnal disposition. These destroy the peace of the church. These are divisive and cause schisms in the body of Christ.

2. He feared being humiliated before them, 12:21.

Paul had had moments of humiliation. He had been grieved by the unfaithfulness that he had found at Corinth, 2:1; 7:12. He feared another unpleasant experience like that. If he found on his third visit that some were unrepentant of sins of impurity, he would be humbled again. That would have been defeat for him. His rivals could boast that he could not get his converts to mend their ways and live righteously. He feared this humiliation. The reason was that the strengthening of the church meant everything to him. Through his own strength Paul could not build up the church. He himself had

weaknesses, but he was a minister of reconciliation in whom the all-powerful Lord dwelt. Thus there was power in weakness.

III. His Power and Authority: 13:1-9.

The “super-apostles” had created a divisive spirit in the church. Paul knew that and, too, that there was the danger of moral disorder. Should that be the circumstances that existed on his third visit, he would deal sternly with the offenders. Of course he preferred to exercise his authority by love rather than by power, but he would take disciplinary action if it was necessary.

A. His Warning, 13:1-2.

Upon coming again, he would deal sternly with those guilty of moral laxity and of contention and strife. First, he would execute justice. According to the Mosaic law no one could be condemned on the evidence of one witness (Deut. 19:15). There had to be two or more corroborating witness before a charge could be considered proven. The apostle would not hesitate to execute justice, but it would be carried out in accord with the Old Testament principle: “Every matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witness.” Second, he would not spare the sinner. The time of forbearance was past. On the immoral and the troublemakers who refused to repent, penalties would be imposed. He hoped that this warning would lead them to change; but as a last resort, he was prepared to exclude them from the church, see 1 Cor. 5:1-5.

B. His Authority, 13:3-4.

With typical directness Paul made clear that he would not spare the obstinate and unrepentant. By their own deeds they had alienated themselves from the grace of God. His rivals demanded proof that Christ was speaking through the apostle. They insisted that they saw no evidence of the power of Christ at work in Paul. The apostle would not accommodate them by offering them some striking evidence of his authority and spirituality.

Paul’s opponents did not understand that in weakness God’s power is perfectly revealed. He saw himself as weak but strong through God, 12:9-10; 4:7; 10-12. The weakness and power in the experience of Paul was paralleled in Jesus Christ. On the cross Christ appeared as only a helpless man, and He died in weakness. Through that weakness was released God’s power that triumphed over death and that provided the ground for reconciliation. Christ’s resurrection and life showed His divine power. Crucified in His weakness, “he lives by God’s power.” So no matter how contemptible and weak Paul appeared to the world, yet as a servant of Christ he manifested the power and authority of God. He was confident that God would grant him sufficient strength to deal with the situation at Corinth. The power of the risen Christ would enable him to deal decisively and effectively with the dissidents and the immoral. His desire was to build up the church, not to destroy it.

C. His Call for Self-Examination, 13:5-9.

The troublemakers at Corinth had been testing the wrong person. They had insisted that Paul present evidence of his authority, but they were to test themselves, not Paul. They had kept looking for faults in him and had doubted the purity of his motives and demanded proof of his power, but it was their position in Christ that was suspect. Three times he challenged them and us - “Examine yourselves...test yourselves...realize that Christ is in you.”

1. The purpose of the test – “whether you are in the faith”, 13:5.

They had wanted him to offer a sensational proof of his authority. Now he challenged them to look at themselves. To them he submitted one test: Were they in the faith? Could they show evidence of their salvation and sanctification? They were to give what assurance they could that they were saved and not lost. There was doubt that some of them were really Christians. Believers can test their faith. There are the measuring instruments of the Holy Spirit and the Word of God. Besides these are purity of life, kindness, love, good works, worship, and others.

2. The possible results of the test – “that we have not failed the test”, 13:6-9.
Through Paul’s ministry the Corinthians become Christians. He hoped that before he arrived in Corinth those who had doubts about his authority would realize that he was a true minister of Christ. If they realized this, they would repent and work at restoring Christian fellowship among them. Therefore they would become zealous of spiritual improvement, and he would not have to deal with strife and sin in the church. That would make it unnecessary for Paul to be severe with them.
The apostle prayed for reformation. He prayed that every church members would act rightly, even if he failed the test. He could not work against the truth but only for it. His desire was for the truth of the gospel to prevail. To it his whole life was committed. His ministry of reconciliation, as he had often said, involved his weakness. But he was glad when they were morally and spiritually strong, though he was weak. His prayer was for their perfection (kataritisis=”restoration”). A number of the Corinthians needed to bring themselves in line with the gospel so they could be restored to the Christian life.

IV. Closing Appeal: 13:10-14.

Away from Corinth Paul had written as he had, so that he would not have to discipline some in the church. God had given him authority to build up but not to destroy them. However, he used the divinely conferred authority, even if he had to take drastic action to restore them to the Christian life, it would be in accord with the Lord’s will. The real work of the ministry is always constructive. Its aim is the building of Christian fellowship.

A. Final Exhortations, 13:11-12.

As Paul brought the letter to a close, he struck a note of encouragement and urged the readers to mend their ways and live in harmony.

His last appeal to them was fourfold:

- 1) First, “Aim for perfection” – literally, Pull yourselves together.” This called for reformation among them and continuous growth in grace. The challenge was for them to restore the broken relationships that still existed among them. The divisive parties were to become one and live in harmony.
- 2) Second, “Listen to one another”. They were to keep on encouraging one another and engage in a mutual ministry of exhorting one another to pursue the Christian life.
- 3) Third, “Be on one mind.” Divisive tendencies were common at Corinth. They were urged to be willing to agree with one another and assume responsibility for creating harmony.
- 4) Fourth, “Live in peace.” Living in harmony required the continuous process of reconciliation. If they do these things, Paul assured them that “the God of love and peace” would be with them. “The peace of God” here is reconciliation which is through the divine gift of grace and issues into restoration of fellowship with God and with one another.

B. Benediction, 13: 14.

The very heart of reconciliation is grace, love, and fellowship, all of which Paul included in the benediction. “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ” has opened the way to reconciliation with God and man. “The love of God” reached out through Christ to put an end to man’s estrangement and to restore him to fellowship with God. “The fellowship of the Holy Spirit” is the fellowship which the Holy Spirit calls into being within the church. The Holy Spirit, who is the Spirit of love and fellowship, creates a community of reconciliation that crossed all frontiers, creates a community of reconciliation that crosses all frontiers of race, class, and other human divisions and that embraces those who are similar and dissimilar.

V. Conclusion.

Committed to the gospel, the apostle Paul by divine authority proclaimed and defended the message “that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ”, 5:19. He was consumed by the ministry of

reconciliation, which indeed, is a ministry of grace and power. The pivot of the ministry of reconciliation is Jesus Christ and His cross. "When the time had fully come, God sent his Son", Gal. 4:4. The Old Testament discloses that God sought to enter into fellowship with man in earlier historical periods, but His reconciling work moved out into the open and took a decisive leap forward in Jesus Christ. The ministry of reconciliation was accomplished by Christ.

God has transferred this ministry to us all. Everyone who calls himself a Christian is intended to be a reconciler. Jesus' ministry was to break down the partitions that separated men from God and from one another and that He did, but the ministry of reconciliation is a continuing task. Many are still unreconciled. They need to hear the invitation to a new and fulfilling relationship, offered as a gift of grace from God in Christ.

What is so tragic is that the barriers to great spiritual accomplishments are often so petty. Many local congregations are immobilized because of personality conflicts, and this says nothing about serious disagreements among church-men in high places which stymie whole denominations. There is no doubt that the line between creative diversity and destructive divisions in the church is difficult to draw with precision; but the problem of a strife-torn church is nothing more than the problem of sin and reflects the poverty of the relation of the members to Christ.

No child of God has any basis for complacency. Every Christian needs to strive to build up the church and to make manifest its unity. However, the fullness of reconciliation must wait until the Last Day when everything is put in subjection to Jesus Christ, "so that God may be in all: 1 Cor. 15:28. That will bring the ultimate triumph of reconciliation. Alienation, estrangement, conflict, meaninglessness, and despair will find no place in the final reign of God. The broken world will be transformed in the coming kingdom and complete justice, true freedom, unlimited love and everlasting peace will be realized. "People will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God" Luke 13:29. "The creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God", Romans 8:21.