

**Core Seminar**

**New Testament**

**Class 12: 2 Corinthians: The Weakness of the Kingdom**

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It was 1960 and John F. Kennedy was in a heated battle for the presidency with Richard Nixon. And on the fateful evening of September 26, the two candidates faced one another in a debate, much like the public debates that had been election-season standards for many years, but with one key difference - this debate was on live television, seen by 80 million people. Those who listened on radio? They thought Nixon was the winner. Those who saw it on TV? Kennedy by a long shot. The young Senator appeared tanned, rested, and composed, in contrast to the sweaty and nervous Vice President Nixon. America had entered the television age.

Well, regardless of whether you prefer Nixon or Kennedy, this historical tidbit points us to something that humans in a fallen world have struggled with throughout all time: the tendency to be deceived by appearances. While this temptation may seem particularly potent in our media age, things weren’t significantly different in the church in the city of Corinth we have been considering last week and now this week. We can’t escape appearances, but it’s what’s beneath the surface that matters. And that’s the point that Paul makes in 2 Corinthians: God’s Kingdom isn’t made visible by strength and success; rather, God’s Kingdom is the kingdom of the weak. To get into this letter, let me start with some background.

# Background – the Story

As we saw last week when we looked at 1 Corinthians, Corinth was an important city. Both land and sea traffic came through Corinth, and so it was one of the major commercial and philosophical centers of the 1st century Mediterranean.

After writing 1 Corinthians, Paul intended to eventually visit Corinth, but he was in no hurry to leave a profitable work in Ephesus (I Cor 16:9). So, he sent Timothy to bring a report back on how the church responded to his letter. Timothy arrived to chaos and disarray in the church. The letter of I Corinthians seemed not to have done the good that Paul intended for it.

Upon hearing of the church’s condition, Paul set out for Corinth, a visit that he had warned them in 1 Corinthians 4:21 would be painful if he had to make it. During his stay, some self-appointed leaders of the church who may have called themselves apostles attacked him in deeply insulting ways (2 Cor 2:5-8, 10; 7:12). Paul apparently felt this visit to be a complete fiasco, and he left, hoping that his departure would bring the Corinthians to their senses. This decision left him open to charges of being fickle and uncaring. But Paul wasn’t ready to let the gospel witness of this church be smothered. He wrote yet another letter *“out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears”* as he described in 2 Cor 2:4. This letter, which has not survived, was delivered by Titus and it assured the Corinthians of his love for them but also had stern words of rebuke. Despite the turmoil in the church, Paul tasked Titus with receiving a collection from the Corinthians, for the impoverished church in Jerusalem. Meanwhile, Paul left Ephesus after a riot and went to Macedonia to wait for Titus. He was afraid that his severe letter had hurt the Corinthians, but Titus brought back a good report and his concern turned to joy.

Let’s look at 7:8-9 together: *“For even if I made you grieve with my letter, I do not regret it – though I did regret it, for I see that that letter grieved you, though only for a while. As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting.”*

So, in response to this good news from Titus, Paul penned 2 Corinthians a year or so after he had written I Corinthians, probably around AD 56, and in the first nine chapters you can feel his joy at a relationship healed, and his relief that the worst for the Corinthian church seems to be over. The church had repented, and it appears from 2:6 that an opponent of the gospel may have been disciplined by the church. But before sending off the letter, Paul must have received some more disturbing news from Corinth. It seems that once again the so-called “super apostles” were challenging his authority, and ultimately, the gospel. As a result, 2 Corinthians ends with more strong rebukes and warnings for the church. So . . . with that as background, let me summarize a bit about *why* Paul wrote this letter.

# Purpose

Paul writes the second epistle to the Corinthians for public, personal and practical reasons. First, Paul was still concerned about the *public* conduct of some of the Corinthian church members. So, Paul wrote to better explain some key doctrines of the faith and to give instruction and warning to some members of the church. Second, Paul was *personally* criticized and so he wrote to defend his ministry, authority, and personal integrity. Third, Paul had *practical* concerns for the church in Jerusalem. So, he wrote to solicit funds for the relief project going on there.

And Paul addresses all these concerns through his main message about the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom, he says, is not about us exerting our own personal strength, but in weakness depending upon the Lord. As Jesus says in 12:9, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Those who would be deceived by Paul’s opponents because of their apparent *strength* would miss the true nature of the Kingdom. For the rest of our time, we’ll consider what characterizes this Kingdom. And specifically, we’ll look at three themes about the true nature of the Kingdom that run through this letter. *[ANY QUESTIONS?]*

**Kingdom Apostles Display God’s Power in Weakness**

First: kingdom apostles display God’s power in weakness. The Corinthian church needed weak apostles, like Paul - not so-called “super apostles.” The defense of Paul’s apostleship takes up a large part of the book, including most of the first 6 chapters and chapters 10-12. This is not at all because Paul is some kind of self-promoting egoist. Rather, it is because in being drawn away from Paul, the Corinthians are being drawn toward those who *are* egotistical, and what is worse, those who do not have the apostolic commission from Jesus that Paul has.

Those who were opposed to Paul seemed to be taking advantage of three aspects of Paul’s apostleship that they suggested exposed Paul as untrustworthy.

1. First, Paul had planned to visit the Corinthians again, but in the end decided not to. His critics were claiming that this was because he was **fickle**. We hear echoes of their criticism in 1:17, *“Was I vacillating when I wanted to do this? Do I make my plans according to the flesh, ready to say ‘Yes, Yes’ and ‘No, no’ at the same time?”* Paul explains that once he had realized that there were real problems with the church in Corinth, a quick friendly visit wouldn’t have been appropriate, and a quick stern visit wouldn’t have been kind or encouraging; so, he thought it would be better *for the Corinthians* if he not visit until things had been cleared up. He says in 2:1, “*So I made up my mind that I would not make another painful visit to you.”*
2. Not only was Paul supposedly fickle, but second, his critics accused him of being **harsh**. They pointed to the severe letter that Paul had written about a matter of discipline. The church seems to have misunderstood the letter, thinking that the discipline was to be permanent. But Paul encourages them in 2:7-8 to be reconciled with the brother who had sinned and now repented.
3. Third, the so-called “super-apostles” pointed out that Paul **lacked credentials**. Paul had none of the letters of recommendation from other communities that itinerant preachers in this time would use to prove that they were legit, the real thing. Paul, for his part, insisted that worldly commendation has no place in Christian ministry, in 3:1-2: *“Do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you, or from you? You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all.”* Far better than recommendation letters, the faith of the Corinthian people showed that Paul’s ministry was blessed of God.

But most significantly, Paul’s major defense of His apostleship comes not through responding to petty accusations, but simply through laying out a positive vision of the ministry of an apostle, which he had carried out faithfully--but of which the self-styled super-apostles had fallen far short. And here we have one of the clearest, most valuable sections of teaching on church leadership in the entire Bible. Paul shows us not just what makes a true apostle, but what sort of ministry our own church should pray and strive for. Here are a few things that Paul teaches us about Christian ministry and how it displays God’s power in our weakness:

**1.** **The glory of the ministry is the glory of the gospel, not the glory of human appreciation.**

2:14-16

 14But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumphal procession, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. 15For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, 16to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things?

In other words, proclaiming the message of Jesus Christ is glorious regardless of whether people reject or embrace it.

**2.** **Power for this ministry doesn’t come from human ability, but from God’s grace.**

3:4-6

 4Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. 5Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, 6who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

**3. The focus of the ministry is not the messenger, but the subject of his message: the Lord Jesus Christ.**

4:5-6

5For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake. 6For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

**4. The concern of Kingdom Ministry is the heart, not outward appearances.**

4:16-18

16So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. 17For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, 18as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

**5. The agent of Kingdom Ministry is God.** We are only ambassadors; *God* reconciles sinners to himself, using the message of the Gospel. 5:20-21

20Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. 21For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

**6. The result of Kingdom ministry is changed lives.**

6:14, 7:1

“Do not be un-equally yoked with unbelievers” . . . “Since we have these promises beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.”

So, that is what the ministry of a “weak” apostle looks like. It’s not about outward appearances, but spiritual realities - the reality of God glorifying himself by showering grace upon undeserving, weak sinners like us.

And Paul solidifies his case towards the end of the letter, in chapters 10-12. Apparently, Paul’s opponents believed that if a teacher was popular, successful, and lived a life of good fortune, then his message must be true. How can anyone driving a Beemer be wrong? Paul, in contrast, seemed like a real loser - he was always getting beaten up, put in prison, chased out of cities. You can almost hear the “super-apostles” make fun of him: “What a failure! Who would listen to someone who suffers so much? Maybe he’s cursed!”

For their part, the super-apostles would pile up lists of all the achievements and qualifications that they hoped would impress their audience. Paul engages in the same type of argumentation in these last chapters. He amasses a giant pool of evidence, citing example after example to make his case - except everything he lists is utterly *unimpressive*! From pain to sickness to shipwrecks to persecution to being tormented by demons to the famous “thorn in the flesh” - Paul’s resume is a catalogue of weakness. He’s “boasting,” but he’s boasting like a fool from the world’s eyes, because as he says in 11:30, he will only boast in the things that show the glory of Christ and his own weakness.

And this is a good question for us to consider. Do we value the same things the world values? Should we choose a church primarily because we like the way the pastor sounds, his pedigree, his people skills, or do we choose a church based primarily on the message being preached - even if the messenger is unimpressive? Paul is telling us not to put any credence into appearances, but instead to look for the work of the Spirit in changed hearts. Do you see how this informs us in how we can pray for our elders? Let’s pray that they would not put their trust in worldly wisdom, in money or impressive achievements, but that they would consider all of that to be worthless compared with the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus as Lord. And pray that they instead would teach with the wisdom that comes only from him.

The weakness of the kingdom is demonstrated in the apparent deficiencies of Paul when compared to the super-apostles. But that’s not all - it is also demonstrated by the true citizens of this kingdom. And that brings us to the second theme that we see in this book: the citizens of the kingdom display God’s generosity in weakness.

**[ANY QUESTIONS?]**

**The Citizens of the Kingdom Display God’s Generosity in Weakness**

We see this theme in Paul’s instructions about the collection for the church in Jerusalem. The meeting that Paul was earlier unable to make with Titus, he has now made. The account of this meeting (7:5-16) serves as a link for the Corinthians’ restored fellowship with Paul. He’s heard the good report from Titus, and now he’s sending Titus back to collect funds for the believers in Jerusalem, who are in extreme poverty. And this collection’s significance isn’t limited to 1st century Corinth - it tells *us* something of what citizens of God’s kingdom are like.

Let’s look at 8:9 together: *“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.”*

The exhortation to give is a test of whether the Corinthians have grasped Paul’s teaching about the Kingdom of God - a kingdom built on the sacrificial generosity of Jesus. These believers have a responsibility, and a glorious opportunity, to serve their brothers and sisters in need.

We’ve been saying that a central truth of Christianity is the *weakness* of those in God’s Kingdom, and of course one of the most common weaknesses both in the time of Corinth and today is poverty. So in providing for the Jerusalem Christians who were poor and evidently weak, the Corinthians would be fighting against the ever-present temptation to mainly use your money in ways that will strengthen *you*. Paul calls them to give - and in so doing, to make a *spiritual* investment.

How do you approach giving to other Christians in need? Do we welcome opportunities to sacrifice what we have? What would it look like for us to be characterized by the heart that Paul says the Macedonians exhibited in 8:1-4? “For in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part. For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints”(8:2-4). Does this type of attitude characterize us today? Are we the kind of people that give “even beyond our ability?” Or do we give only when comfortable, only to whom we really want to give to? Generosity is a fruit of faith in Christ. Instead of trusting our money for ultimate security - we trust God’s sovereign care for his children.

Therefore, this book teaches us that the healthy church is a church that gives to the needs of others for the spread of the gospel and the building up of believers. Those who participate in this grace should do so cheerfully and liberally, because Paul says in 9:7-9, “*God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work.” (9:7b-9).*

So that’s our second theme: the weakness of the kingdom’s citizens. But finally, one last theme we see running through this letter—is the result of such weakness in our churches: the churches of the Kingdom display God’s grace in weakness.

**The Churches of the Kingdom Display God’s Grace in Weakness**

Throughout this letter, Paul stresses the importance of the church. He teaches that the church is where God dwells, and therefore Christians are called to holiness. 6:16: “What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, ‘I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be there God, and they shall be my people.’” The church is where the presence of God rests; and therefore the church displays the glory of God to the whole universe. What does that mean for us a local church - as a congregation of God’s people here on Capitol Hill? Paul identifies a few passions that should characterize us as a church body.

#### A Passion for Weakness

Not surprisingly, first is that we should have a passion for weakness. One aspect of this letter that you cannot ignore is Paul’s passion to exalt God in his ministry. And one of the great ways that he does this is by demonstrating God’s strength in accomplishing great things through Paul’s weakness. As we’ve already seen, Paul continually refers to his own sufferings in this letter (1:6-9; 6:3-10; 11:16-29; 12:1-10). With a joy that seems alien to our comfort-seeking ears, he *boasts* about these weaknesses as they give glory to God. We, too, are described as weak: our bodies are called “jars of clay” in 4:7 because of their frailty - but it is precisely in our brokenness that God reveals his strength. That’s why Paul exalts in God even for his limitations.

Look at 12:8-10:

*Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 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.*

What about us? When suffering comes along in our lives, do we see it as an opportunity for God’s power to be displayed to the world? Or do we indulge in self-pity? We can learn from Paul to thank God for circumstances that humble us, that cause us to depend more on God’s grace and less on our own strength. Have you ever thought about how a trial in your life could be used by God to make his glory known to your family, to your friends? Listen to what pastor Paul Tripp says about this passage: “The closer we get to the Lord, the longer we walk with him, and the more fully we understand his Word, the more we are gripped with our weakness, inability, and sin. Paul said that he would ‘boast all the more gladly about his weakness.’ It was not because he loved being weak, but because it was in weakness that the power of Christ rested on him. Our weakness will not get in the way of what the Lord wants to do with us - our delusions of strength will! The power of God is for the weak! The grace of God is for the unable! The promises of God are for the faint! The wisdom of God is for the foolish!”[[1]](#footnote-1)

So that’s the first passion we see that should characterize churches of the kingdom. We embrace weakness, because weakness reveals the sufficiency of Christ. Second, we see a passion for the gospel.

#### A Passion for the Gospel

Paul’s ministry had been under attack and his authority questioned by the super-apostles. In response, he highlights the true gospel - because by reminding the Corinthians of this central message of forgiveness of sins through Jesus Christ, he would expose his opponents as false teachers who had failed to grasp the reality of God’s grace.

As such, thepriority of the gospel should be evident in our church, especially in our preaching. The gospel is what Paul preached - and it is why he preached. Like Paul, we preach Jesus Christ as Lord (4:5a) because we are Christ’s ambassadors. Look at 5:14-15 and 18-21:

14For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; 15and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.

*And then down to verse 18,*

18All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; 19that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. 20Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. 21For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

That last verse, verse 21, is one of the most compact summaries of the Gospel in the Bible. Before a holy God, every human being stands guilty because of our sin. Our sin deserves punishment. But Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, was sinless. He deserved no judgment. But out of his love, Jesus stepped into our place and took the punishment we earned, dying on a cross. And Jesus rose again, offering the gift of his perfect righteousness to all who would turn from their sinful lifestyle and believe in him.

This message of Christ being a substitute in our place - being sin for us, bearing the punishment of God - was central to the health of the Corinthian church, and it is central to the health of our church. We should pray that this good news would not become old hat, but that the Holy Spirit would ignite our passion for the gospel - because remembering the Gospel will protect us from the sorts of false teaching that had enticed the Corinthians. A church passionate for the gospel is also careful to refute false gospels that do not preach the Biblical Jesus. So in 11:13, Paul declares his intention to *“undermine the claim of those who . . . are false apostle, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ”* (11:12-13). Such is the passion of a God-driven ministry for the gospel of Jesus Christ.

#### A Passion for Repentance

Finally, we see in 2 Corinthians that there should a passion for repentance in the church. Repentance simply means turning away from sin and turning to God. Paul is overjoyed with the news from Titus that the Corinthians turned away from their prior sin, and he is eager that they continue on in this path of repentance. Let’s turn to 7:8-13 and see what he says:

For even if I made you grieve with my letter, I do not regret it – though I did regret it, for I see that that letter grieved you, though only for a while. As it is, I rejoice, not because you were grieved, but because you were grieved into repenting. For you felt a godly grief, so that you suffered no loss through us. For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death. For see what earnestness this godly grief has produced in you, but also what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what longing, what zeal, what punishment! At every point you have proved yourselves innocent in the matter. So although I wrote to you, it was not for the sake of the one who did the wrong, nor for the sake of the one who suffered the wrong, but in order that your earnestness for us might be revealed to you in the sight of God. *Therefore we are encouraged.*

# The type of church Paul is encouraging is first and foremost concerned with godliness. It’s not concerned with prominence or perceived success, it is primarily concerned with seeing the body of Christ built up and one day presented to God, “spotless and without wrinkle.” And that is why we as those who have tasted God’s grace in saving us from our sins should pray for a passion to continue repenting of our evil ways and to continue relying on the love of Christ in faith.

# CONCLUSION

Well, in conclusion, I wonder if you can see something of yourself in the Corinthians. They certainly weren’t the greatest role models. But isn’t it amazing to think that this church – this ignorant and boastful, immoral, and undiscerning church – *this* church was God’s chosen plan to glorify himself in the city of Corinth and around the world. These were the people who God had elected and chosen to save as he told Paul in a dream back in Acts 18. And these were the people that Paul poured so much of his heart and soul and sweat and tears into during his short ministry here on earth. If we don’t get anything else from these letters, then let us understand this: The church is never promised to be perfect. If anything, as Paul reminds us, the church is made up of those who are apparently weak and foolish and insignificant in this world. But our weakness is the soil where God’s power makes real fruit grow to his glory – and we follow a Savior who modeled just that. 2 Cor. 13:4: “For he was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God. For we also are weak in him, but in dealing with you we will live with him by the power of God.” As those who hope in the resurrection of Jesus, may we trust God as he transforms a selfish, cranky, impatient and *weak* people like us into his glorious and radiant bride. I’ll close with the familiar words of 2 Cor. 13:14: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” Let’s pray.

1. Tripp, Paul. *War of Words*, p. 130 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)