

Evergreen Presbyterian Church

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Sermon Title: Christ Crucified: The Power of God

Sermon Text: 1 Corinthians 2:1-5

1Cor. 2:1 And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom.

1Cor. 2:2 For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

1Cor. 2:3 And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling,

1Cor. 2:4 and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power,

1Cor. 2:5 so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

Main Point: The glory of God is seen in the humiliating, denigrating death of His only begotten Son, so that we also might not trust in superficial wisdom and power.

Outline:

1. The Apparent Weakness of the Crucified Lord
2. The Seeming Weakness of Preaching
3. The Powerful Resting Place of the Cross

Introduction

When Paul wrote this letter to the Corinthian Christians, he was writing in the context of the empire of Rome – an empire that is still regarded as the greatest that ever stood on the face of the earth. It was an empire that greatly prized power and strength, wisdom and cleverness. And so when we see Paul here today speaking about how his own ministry approach with the Corinthian Christians was one of weakness, you need to know that Paul was extolling something that would have been very countercultural in Paul’s day.

And it’s still countercultural to us, isn’t it? If I asked you what is a great church growth strategy, for example, which of you would say, “Weakness. Weakness is the way!” You see, weakness as a method doesn’t seem like it would make much sense, does it? Like the Romans we aren’t strangers to the suspicion that weakness is a terrible idea, and that strength is wonderful.

Paul does extol the importance of weakness here (and we’ll explore that more today). But we need to be careful, as though we make it sound as we look at this passage, as though the bible *never* speaks positively of strength.

Instead, when we come to the Bible we do see strength being commended, in one sense. Here are some examples of what I mean:

- God, speaking to Joshua (who was Moses’ successor), said these words, “Be strong and courageous,” and he repeated it over and over to him (Josh. 1:6-7, 9).
- Paul, in Ephesians, preparing them for spiritual warfare, said, “Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might” (Eph. 6:10).
- And then when he was writing to Timothy Paul said, “Be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 2:1).

But think about weakness and what it is. Really, weakness is inadequacy. It is the thing about us that is not up to the task before us, whatever that might be. And so when Paul or God tell his servant to be strong, what he is doing is fortifying them for what is coming because they do, in fact, lack something. It is because we are weak that we have to be reminded to be strong and courageous. And yet it is in this idea of weakness that the very strength of the gospel is the strongest and most clearly set before us.

The whole point of these commands to Joshua, the Ephesians, and Timothy is, you are weak. But be strong not in yourselves but in the Lord.

You see, here is the interesting thing. Paul says something very important in 2 Cor. 12:10: “when I am weak, then I am strong.” And this is something Paul discovered in his own life: that in his service to Christ, he was more useful to Jesus when he felt his inadequacy and faced his weakness than if he had tried to talk himself up and to find some kind of power in his own heart and life. He was far more useful in his weakness.

When Paul was writing in this letter, he was dealing with a church where his critics seemed to have made real inroads against him. And so in the letter Paul, instead of saying, “No way. I’m strong and powerful. These guys are the real wimps...” instead, Paul deals with his critics by doubling down on his weakness. Instead of acting like a strong man, he talks like a weak man.

In chapter 12, he talks about the thorn in his flesh that was sent to torment him... We don’t know what this thorn in his flesh was, but we know that God sent it to make Paul feel his weakness and neediness, and his limitations. And then in verse 8 of that chapter he talks about the thorn even further. He says, “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’” (12:8-9).

What an amazing and potent thing God says here. God intentionally does not heal Paul of whatever this thorn is. Whatever this thing is, you and I would think, Paul can be more effective if this trouble gets lifted from him. Instead, Paul responds to God’s word with acceptance. Listen to this incredible statement that Paul gives in response:

“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” (12:9–10).

And so today, I want us to reflect on and rejoice in our own weakness instead of our own strength. I want us as a church to be more eager to double down on

weakness than to be known as a powerful, strong, and great people. Far better for us to be weak people who proclaim a great Savior than to be a headstrong bunch who are known for our power.

What does that mean? What does that look like? Paul will show us today. And so I have three points for us this morning. First, the apparent weakness of the crucified Lord. Second, the seeming weakness of preaching. And then third, the powerful resting place of the cross.

What kind of Christians – what kind of a church – does God really want us to be? He wants us to be strong through the *cross*, and weak when it comes to *ourselves*.

1. The Apparent Weakness of the Crucified Lord

First, Paul presents us with the apparent weakness of the crucified Lord.

In chapter 1 of 1 Corinthians Paul was very occupied with talking about the Corinthians and their situation, but here in chapter 2 he talks about himself. He is now turning to his own preaching, the manner of his ministry to them, and how he did it. What is methodology was.

The Corinthians lived in a culture where people really prized the art of public speaking. And it was an art. It's an art that in some places (especially where classical training is valued) it is still practiced. Paul reminds the Corinthians that he didn't come like the professionals or like the flamboyant attractive speakers. Instead of coming to them in strength, he says he came in weakness and humility.

How does he say it? He says in verse 2, "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified."

There's an intentionality here. A resolution. He says, "I decided." He made up his mind. He thought about it and resolved before he ever preached one word to them. He resolved it to himself. He knew he could have deployed the depths of his wisdom and education... he could have probably destroyed his enemies with vitriol, claims of power, and raw authority and syllogisms. He had that gifting.

Instead of getting them to submit the way the world so often does, though, he made a different decision: "I will come to them in weakness. I will come empty

handed. I will come to them with the crucified Christ. I will show them God's way, and it will be shocking in comparison with the way the world does this."

We see the weakness of Jesus in his earthly ministry. He lived in the backwoods of Israel, not in the places of power. He ministered primarily to the country folks and the farmer-types. He went into the homes of tax collectors and prostitutes, not the wise scholars, for the most part. He faced hatred, persecution, and mockery, and didn't return evil for evil. He was quintessentially self-controlled, and never lashed out or lost control. Jesus Christ's whole earthly ministry was done in weakness.

[application] Much of what we are told is masculinity today hinges on this idea of almost letting go of restraints and self-control, as though self-control and gentleness are somehow *feminine* traits. And yet Jesus was not feminine. He was a man's man. This modern cartoonish idea that it is manly to be a rage beast who shoves his way through crowds and bullies his way through life needs to go far, far away from the church. The biblical model of masculinity is first and foremost the man as spiritual. Someone who is defined by "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." Those are manly traits, and Christ modeled them for us.

But when the world sees these things, they do see weakness. They call them effeminate. They talk them down, but in the process they really are talking down the Lord Jesus himself.

I want us as a church to be biblical, and not worldly when it comes to what it means to be a Christian. We who follow Christ are spiritual, not fleshly, not worldly. We have to let Jesus show us what manliness looks like. And the picture he presents to us is very different and far more spiritual than what the modern masculinity complex is trying to sell to us.

The weakness and self-sacrifice of Christ is meant to be reflected in the ministry of God's servant. How strange if *Jesus* ministered to us in weakness, but the *minister* was supposed to be an agent of strength. That is why I say there is a definite counter-cultural aspect to what Paul is calling for in himself and in others.

Paul came in weakness. Remember again, that word that I used “apparent” weakness. Paul tells us in 2 Cor. 13 that his weakness was only apparent weakness. Listen to what Paul says later:

“Christ is speaking in me. He is not weak... 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” (2 Cor. 13:3–4).

Christ *was* weak, but he is no longer weak. He was *crucified*, but now he lives. And in the same way, there is a strength in the believer that is not our own. We are weak, but we live by his power. So we do have power and strength, but it’s his power and strength. It is borrowed strength. Strength on loan.

We fool ourselves when we try to live by ourselves, by our wisdom. We are never more secure than when we give up thoughts of our own security. We are never stronger than when we are weak, and leaning upon the savior for all of it.

2. The Seeming Weakness of Preaching

Second, Paul presents us with the seeming weakness of *preaching*.

There are lots of ways that we might apply what Paul says here, but his real focus in the passage is in how he preached to the Corinthians. He refers to the *manner* in which he proclaimed Christ to them. He says his speech wasn’t in “plausible words of wisdom.” He says he preached “in weakness and in fear and much trembling.”

Notice, I keep using words like “apparent” and “seeming” in each of these points. This is because preaching does *seem* to be weak in one sense.

Something about preaching is deeply strange if you think about it. Perhaps preaching doesn’t seem strange to you, but I’m often struck when I come to the pulpit that in one sense, you are just listening to a guy talk for 40 minutes each Sunday. It’s not merely that, but it *appears* to be only that. In reality, God is speaking. In reality, Jesus is preaching for his church when the Scripture is faithfully proclaimed. So there is more going on than it appears. But still: how odd is it that God’s plan is to use a guy talking each week to change your world, to

equip you for spiritual battle, and to prepare you for the difficulties ahead. That is counter-intuitive, isn't it?

Preaching seems to be weak, but preaching actually is *not* weak, when it is done in full dependence on Christ and in God's strength instead of our own. Preaching is actually the greatest, most powerful means that exists in the world for changing hearts and turning people to the Savior.

Earlier in 1 Corinthians 1, Paul mentions this explicitly: "It pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe." So think of how Paul contrasts what we do with what it does. What we do is this thing that looks really silly and ineffective to the world: we preach.

But then look at what it does: it saves. How amazing is that? And this is God's way. God is in the business of using things that look weak to pull off amazing upsets.

- In Judges 7, God tells Gideon, "The people with you are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hand, lest Israel boast over me, saying, 'My own hand has saved me'" (Judges 7:2). It's got to be God's victory, and so he uses 300 men instead of 30,000 men.
- The walls of Jericho. Is there anything sillier than marching, shouting, and blowing horns as a way of conquering a city? What would Alexander or Hannibal have thought of that approach? Yet God gives Israel the strangest possible strategy to take down this fortified city.
- In 2 Chronicles 20, the Moabites and Ammonites come against Israel for battle, and Jehoshaphat is afraid. And his plan is to cry out to God. And God tells Israel, "Do not be afraid and do not be dismayed at this great horde, for the battle is not yours but God's" (2 Chron. 20:15). So what do they do? They send a choir, and as the choir sings, God causes the enemy armies to destroy one another. Who on earth imagines that as a viable battle plan?
- And Paul seems to add preaching to that list of ways that God shows his power through human weakness, too. "It pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe."

True preaching doesn't lead people to the minister or to focus on the church for its own sake. True preaching takes people to the cross because only the cross is the power of God unto salvation. If we don't take people to the cross, we will take

them to our wisdom. If we don't dwell on Christ and him crucified, we will dwell on strength instead of weakness and we will rest in the wisdom of men instead of God.

But in true preaching, the message is Christ. In human wisdom, the message is our best ideas. And if you take the best idea I as a preacher can think of, and compare it to the smallest thing in God's word, there's no contest. You want God's worst over my best any day of the week. Why? Because my word leads you to me. But God's word leads you to Christ. Every jot and tittle of God's word is precious and drives us to Jesus. But when men speak from their own heart and their own wisdom, they're just leading you to themselves.

Thomas Brooks, the Puritan, said, "He is the best preacher not that tickles the ear but that breaks the heart."

I remember once when I was still in seminary, I preached, and looking back it was a sermon preached entirely in human strength and wisdom. I was very new at this, and very insecure and wanted to prove myself, and I preached this sermon that I just thought was so smart, so thoughtful. I pulled out all the stops and did my very best. And afterwards, a lady came up, and in full sincerity she said, "I can tell that you're very smart. You said things that I couldn't even see in the text." I believe she was being honest and not passive-aggressive, but almost immediately I knew it had been a bad sermon. For lots of reasons, (after all, the text didn't speak, I did) but especially because she came away thinking of me instead of Christ.

In true preaching, the preacher should disappear so that you are really hearing a sermon by Jesus that is leading you to the cross. True preaching does seem to be weak, but God speaks powerfully through the simplicity of his word, preached to human hearts and applied by his spirit. Our weakness is his strength. Our shortcomings are a beautiful opportunity for him to show his real glory.

3. The Powerful Resting Place of the Cross

Third, Paul brings us to the powerful resting place of the cross.

Paul, in verse 2 says, "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified."

One of my saddest memories was my 7th birthday. I had the flu, and I was so sick that I couldn't even play video games. I just lay there and did nothing. I remember that my parents gave me a toy bus for my gift, and I couldn't even play with it. I just looked at it, and I was so tired and so weak that I couldn't even really do that. I couldn't move a muscle.

What do you do when you are really weak? You feel your weakness, you sense your weakness, you know how far short you fall... what do you do?

The problem with weakness is, when we sense that we are weak, it can cause a cascade of other failures. It can generate a sense of inferiority – a sense of uselessness and worthlessness. These are not pleasant things to experience. And so the question is, what is a Christian supposed to do when we've been struck by our weakness, and we realize for ourselves our lowly condition?

Well the answer is in the gospel. Here's what I mean. If we really believe that we need to be great, that we need to be strong, then our weakness (when it happens) is going to crush us. If we are finding our worth in ourselves, then weakness hurts even more because we lost the thing we're building it all on top of. We feel it, other people see it... we may be embarrassed by it. But what does Paul say in 1 Cor. 4:3-4? He says he doesn't care about those things. "With me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you... it is the Lord who judges me." It is who we are before God that matters far above all else – especially in our weakness.

Who cares if people see our weakness? God already sees it and knows it before anyone else does – even before we see it for ourselves. He knows us better than our own self.

And God's answer to your weakness was the greatest weakness of all: the cross. When you really see your helplessness, your lack of strength, the answer to this is the cross. In the gospel, Jesus Christ bears our sin, carries our sorrow, and embraces us apart from any deeds or works or accomplishment that we do. In other words, he does not regard us because of some strength that we have. So if we don't *feel* like we have strength, guess what? God in Christ accepts and loves us.

Go even further. Look back to Paul's thorn in his flesh. Listen to those words again: "My *grace* is sufficient for you." It is something about God that sustains us (his grace). And this thing about God is "sufficient," it is enough. It's all that we actually need. We don't need to be strong because his grace is sufficient.

All of Scripture is meant to drive us to this realization. God disarms us, and takes us to the cross. Martin Luther said that there is nothing in the Bible that can be understood apart from the cross.

Let me apply this to us as a church. We should fairly ask ourselves: do we minister in wisdom and strength, or would it be right to say that we minister in weakness, humility, and dependence on God's Spirit instead of ourselves?

One measure of this is our prayerfulness. Are we people who cry out to God, or is our default to "figure it out"? Not saying that it's wrong to have a plan. But notice again, Jehoshaphat is a man of prayer before God gives them victory. It is in prayer that God tells Joshua how the walls of Jericho will fall. It is when Gideon speaks with the Lord that God winnows down the army, weakens them, and gives them victory. I would suggest this: prayer is a sign of weakness, but promotes the strength and glory and greatness of God. When we pray we are declaring our weakness, and asking God to grant us his strength so that we can make it. The preaching of the word and prayer. Two foolish and weak things in the eyes of the world, but it is the very power of God.

It is not the strength, the power, or the finances of Evergreen that will make us a great foe or enemy of Satan. It's not those things.

What makes Evergreen great is the Savior we serve, and his great power to destroy sin and rescue sinners. It is our very weakness, dependence, and need, that will always be the true secret of our success. Instead of being a strong church, we are meant to be a weak church that cries out to a great God.

That is the secret of our strength, just as it was the secret of Israel's strength. When we are weak, then we are strong. When we are weak, we are more driven to the God who really can accomplish the very things he calls upon us to do.

Let's pray.