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MY GRACE IS SUFFICIENT[1]

2 Corinthians 12:1–10

One Main Thing

An inflated sense of self-importance is incompatible with the Christian faith. Rather, as disciples of Christ, we should rely on God's grace to keep us humble during good times and inspire us in more challenging circumstances.

Introduction

Relationships can be tricky to navigate, and Paul's association with the Corinthians was certainly

[1] The following resources were particularly helpful to me in developing this study: Frederick W. Danker's *II Corinthians* (Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament, 1989), Sze-kar Wan's introduction to 2 Corinthians in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha* (Oxford University Press, 2010), and *Paul for Everyone: 2 Corinthians* (Westminster John Knox, 2004) by N.T. Wright.

complicated. Paul first visited the important commercial city of Corinth during his second missionary journey (see Acts 18). His time in Corinth included meeting Aquila and Priscilla, a husband-wife ministry team, who would become two of Paul's dearest friends. They worked together as tentmakers,[2] while Paul participated in synagogue discussions every sabbath. He found some evangelistic success, with Crispus a synagogue official (among others) becoming a believer in Jesus as the Messiah. But Paul faced opposition, too. He was brought before Gallio, the proconsul of Achaia, although he was released after a brief hearing. After staying a "considerable time" in Corinth, Paul returned to Antioch leaving a new group of believers behind—a group that included mostly those who lacked education, power, status, and wealth (1 Cor 1:26–28).

These new converts faced ethical, theological, and social challenges. These tests served as the basis for a series of letters and visits between Paul and the Corinthians that likely took place over a few years. These interactions included (1) our letter of 1 Corinthians, (2) an earlier letter that Paul had written (cf. 1 Cor 5:9), (3) a letter or letters that the Corinthians addressed to Paul (cf. 1 Cor 7:1), (4) a "painful visit" Paul made

[2] The term translated "tentmakers" may indicate those who work with leather or canvas to fashion temporary structures used for dwellings or even theater props (see *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd Edition, ed. Frederick William Danker, p. 928–929).

to Corinth (2 Cor 2:1), and (5) another letter written by Paul "with many tears" (2 Cor 2:4). Many scholars believe 2 Corinthians to be a composite of several letters with chps. 10–13 constituting this "sorrowful letter" mentioned in 2 Corinthians 2.

By the time of the writing of the last section of 2 Corinthians, several issues had developed that strained the relationship between Paul and the Corinthians. Earlier, an individual had publicly opposed Paul, but that issue had been rectified (2:5–11). In addition, the Corinthians felt insulted, because Paul did not accept financial assistance from them, as he did other churches (12:13). And a group of rivals had emerged that Paul mockingly described as "super-apostles" (12:11). They claimed Paul's "letters [were] weighty and strong, but his bodily presence [was] weak, and his speech contemptible" (10:10). These opponents boasted of their apostolic credentials over against Paul's, and Paul worried that his relationship with the Corinthians was in danger of slipping away.[3]

Paul responded to his critics by listing some of his own sufferings for the cause of Christ (11:21b–33). Then,

[3] Fortunately, Titus arrived with good news for Paul concerning the Corinthians' faith (2 Cor 7:13–16).

however, it's as if Paul catches himself in midsentence, and concludes "nothing is to be gained by [boasting]." He then proceeds to tell a strange story about an out-of-body experience and a "thorn in the flesh" that had taught him some important lessons: (1) boasting about your own self-importance is foolish; and (2) there is great value in relying on God's grace. God's grace can humble you when you're feeling a little too proud of yourself, and it can lift you up when you're struggling.

Going Deeper

Even though Paul claims to see no profit in boasting about himself, he claims he must go on to discuss "visions and revelations of the Lord" (12:1). This may serve as a rhetorical device: "I don't want to brag, but if I have to because of my opponents, then I have an impeccable resume that they can't touch." Paul's credentials include a direct relationship with Christ. Paul tells a story about "a person in Christ." Referring to himself in the third person adds dramatic effect. It denotes sarcasm, while also leaving the impression of humility. This experience was evidently a major event in Paul's life, because he remembers the exact year ("fourteen years ago"), but he's also intentionally fuzzy on the details ("in the body or out of the body I do not know").

Paul explains that he was caught up to the third heaven (the significance of the distinction in the numbers of heavens here is unclear) or Paradise (12:2, 4). Paul's

description of his own apotheosis[4] is intended to place him not in the place of God, but in close proximity to God. Paul knows his place. He understands he's a mortal and acknowledges there are some things permissible to utter and some things that aren't. He doesn't want to establish his own personality cult, although he certainly could have done so. To guarantee Paul's humility, "a thorn was given [him] in the flesh." He describes this "thorn" sarcastically as a gift or messenger of Satan. There's no real value in trying to fill in the gaps of Paul's story to determine what this "thorn of the flesh" was; it evidently is something that manifested itself physically that brought some sort of pain or humiliation to Paul.

In Scripture, as well as in Jewish and Christian traditions, Satan operates only in the realm of God's permission. In other words, the Satan can only do what God allows him to do. So, Paul appeals to the Lord three times to have the source of pain or weakness removed. The Lord's refusal to remove the impediment is presented in benevolent terms: "My grace is sufficient for you" (12:9). Thus, we learn that the kingdom of God operates on different terms than typical earthly structures. For Paul, weakness is a gift, because it allows him to act ("power") in ways that allow him to experience the way of Christ in all its fullness ("perfect").

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[4] The term "apotheosis" refers to the assimilation of a human person to a god. This notion was prominent in the ancient Greco-Roman world. See *Oxford Concise Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford University Press, 2nd ed., 2006), p. 33.

Application

There are two extremes when it comes to one's spiritual mentality. One you might define as egotism—an exaggeration of your own importance. The other is self-scorn. The problem with both extremes is that they accept what some have called "a Jesus-plus theology." On the one hand, someone might think, "I'm so important, have so many gifts, and offer such precise obedience that the will of God can't possibly be done on earth without me." Another might conclude, "I have so many challenges the Lord couldn't possibly use me to do the will of God on earth." Paul's excursus at the end of 2 Corinthians disputes both of these possible scenarios. No one is indispensable, but neither is anyone beyond reach. God's grace is sufficient.

This realization has the potential to affect positively how we interact with each other in our homes, churches, and communities. If we reject arrogant pride and completely surrender to God, we are better situated to welcome everyone as worthy of love, because God's grace is sufficient. If we endure humiliation as Christ did, we are better prepared to understand our own utter dependence on God, because God's grace is sufficient.

Conclusion

There is a local homeless ministry in our community that uses the tagline, "Everyone Matters." If everyone matters, then no one is more important than another.

All of us have gifts that we can use to share in what God is doing in this world, because God's grace is sufficient to remake this world into something that resembles God's kingdom. If everyone matters, then no one is less important than another. All of us have challenges that can remind us to remain humble, realizing that this is God's work and not our own. This notion is expressed well by C.S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity*: "[The Christian] does not think God will love us because we are good, but that God will make us good because He loves us."[5]

Discussion

1. How does Paul's complicated relationship with the Corinthians underscore the value of God's grace?
2. Describe a time in your life when you felt like weakness was a blessing instead of
3. a curse.
4. List ways that worldly institutions rely on power to function. How do these ` assumptions differ from an understanding power in the kingdom of God?
5. In what ways would rejecting arrogance and pride enhance family, church, and community relationships?
6. What practical steps can your local church take to support the "everyone matters" ideal?

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[5] C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Scribner,1952), 49.