

# Paul's Gracious Boast

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, good morning. My name is Tommy. I'm a pastor here at Church of the Advent.

I'm delighted to be here. We're in a series that Jeff started last week, looking at Paul's letter to the Corinthians, the second letter that we have in the Bible, what we call 2 Corinthians. And really, this is a series that is all about power.

And I think power is a pretty relevant topic for us today. As we look, for instance, at what is happening right now in Ukraine, a lot of that is about power. We've had this ongoing conversation in our society about cultural power, who has it and who doesn't, and what people are willing to do to get it. As we think about the imbalance of power and privilege that sits behind a lot of injustice in our society, or even as we think about our own personal power, our own personal sense of efficacy, and how that can be so easily tied to worth. You know, D.C., for those of us who live here, is unabashedly a meritocracy, where you really are worth only as much as your resume might indicate.

So, power is a big recurring central theme in life, in our society. And this is a series all about power and the fact that the gospel turns power and weakness upside down. Because when we look at the gospel, God's greatest display of power, God's greatest display of glory, God's greatest display of majesty and might, His greatest victory occurred through a man who became like a servant to all people, and who is subsequently mocked, humiliated, rejected, and ultimately crucified like a common criminal.

And so, what that shows us, what the gospel shows us, is that true power, true spiritual power, often looks like weakness in the eyes of the world. So, that's what this series is all about.

[ 2 : 21 ] And we're going to begin to see these themes emerge as we dig into the meat of this letter, beginning in chapter 1, verse 12. We're going to go through chapter 2, verse 11. This is admittedly a larger chunk of text than I normally like to preach at any one time, but it all holds together, and I hope you will see why. Because we begin to see the inversion of power and weakness put on display actually in Paul's own life. So, we see three things happening here in this passage.

First, Paul sets an example of power and weakness being turned upside down. He sets an example of this in his own life in the way he boasts to the Corinthians. We'll look more at that.

And then he explains why he does what he does. Why does he live this way? And then finally, he then offers an exhortation to the Corinthians to follow the example that he has set. So, that's going to be our outline. Paul's example, Paul's explanation, and then finally, Paul's exhortation to the Corinthians and then to us. Let's pray.

Lord, we thank you and praise you for your word. We thank you and praise you for your presence in our midst. We thank you and praise you that even if it feels like things are spiraling out of control, you have history and us firmly in your grip. We pray that you would speak to us this morning, not merely as followers or servants or skeptics, but as friends, as children, as a loving father would speak to his most beloved children. Lord, we need your words in us this morning. We pray this in your son's holy name. Amen. So, first of all, Paul's example. It says in verse 12, for our boast is this, and I think actually this controls the entire passage. He says this and then he kind of unpacks it throughout our passage. For our boast is this, the testimony of our conscience, that we behaved in the world with simplicity and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom, but by the grace of God and supremely so toward you. Now, what we need to understand is in Corinth, boasting was pretty commonplace. It was very, very typical to be with your friends having lunch and to be boasting about all of the things that you were most proud of. This was a glory culture, and so glorifying yourself was expected. That's how you built a name for yourself and built reputation for yourself. So, at first, it sounds like Paul is going to be doing the same thing. Well, here's my boast.

Here's our boast. Here's what we have to offer. But then, if you look at the actual content of his boasting, you realize what he's doing. He's taking the entire concept of boasting, and he's turning it on its head. He's turning it upside down. He says very unexpected things because he's boasting about things that no Corinthian in their right mind would ever boast about. When most people boast, if you think about it, when most people boast, most people want to put the spotlight on the things that make him look good, right? People want to put the spotlight. You kind of want to minimize the things that are embarrassing, and you want to spotlight the things that make you look impressive. [ 5 : 40 ] But what Paul does is the opposite. He is actually spotlighting things that make him look weak. And this is the content of his boast. Essentially this, he says, here's our boast. We behaved in the world with simplicity and godly sincerity. And I just want to look at what he's talking about here. First, simplicity. Now, you say, what's the problem with simplicity? I like simplicity. You have to understand that Corinth was a lot like Washington, D.C. This is a vibrant cosmopolitan center of commerce, and people immigrated to Corinth from all over, hoping to make a name for themselves, hoping to find their fortune. And so the culture was one of ambition and competition and self-promotion. Sounds a lot like where we live. So Corinth was the kind of place where you might have been valedictorian and class president in your village. And then you come to Corinth and you realize that valedictorians are a dime a dozen.

Class presidents and state champions are a dime a dozen. And all the things that made you a hot shot in your village don't count for anything in a place like Corinth because everybody you meet is more impressive than the last. And so Corinth is a place of competition and self-promotion. And yet Paul is, even though it says in 1 Corinthians, the first letter, that Paul is actually intimidated when he first comes to Corinth. He actually says that when he first comes to Corinth. He's intimidated. He's like, these people are brilliant. They're culturally sophisticated. What am I going to look like when I say the message that I've been sent here to say? And yet what he ultimately does is he's faithful to his calling. And he comes into a place like Corinth. And instead of trying to sound sophisticated and impressive, Paul simply shares what he has seen and heard in Jesus. There's no rhetorical pyrotechnics, no fog machines, no laser shows, just the simple truth of what he has heard and seen in Jesus. And he highlights that. He says, you know, I'm willing to look foolish in order to preach the simple truth of the gospel. People scoff at that kind of simplicity.

[ 8 : 02 ] Nevertheless, he does it. And then we see in Paul, we see sincerity. Paul is sincere, meaning he's honest and transparent, even though it makes him look weak. And we see this in a couple of ways. Jeff preached on the first last week. We see that Paul is transparent about his suffering. He's transparent about his suffering.

You know, in a culture like Corinth or in a culture like DC, it can be very tempting to act like everything is okay, even if it's not. Right? People say, hey, how you doing? And we say, I'm fine. I'm fine. You know, in the addiction world, what they say fine stands for? Freaked out, insecure, neurotic, and emotional. Right? Oh, you're fine, are you? But why do we say that? Why do we say I'm fine? Well, it's because deep down, I think most of us are afraid if we really admitted the honest truth, I'm not sure if I'm doing okay. I had a really hard time getting out of bed this morning. I'm filled with anxiety. If we really began to say that, then people would think that we're weak. That people would sort of look at us and say, well, they obviously, you know, he or she obviously can't handle life. There's not cut out for life in a place like this.

So most of us don't really admit when we are struggling. It's just not done in certain circles. And yet Paul, back in verse 8, he says this. He's willing to admit that when severe persecution broke out in Asia, listen to what he says. He says, we were, I was so utterly burdened beyond my strength that I despaired of life itself. I despaired of life itself. He's honest about that.

So he's honest about his suffering, and even though it's going to make him look weak, even though people are going to say, he's an apostle and he can't even, he's struggling to get out of bed in the morning. Surely, surely he's not a legitimate, because if he really had faith in Jesus, he wouldn't struggle like that. And then he's transparent about the fact that he had changed his plans.

Now, this is really confusing. Let me just give you a little context to help you understand what's happening here. Paul had started the church along with Timothy and Silvanus, Silas, back in, we read about that in Acts chapter 18. Then he starts the church in Corinth, then he leaves, and then he hears that there's all kinds of stuff going down in Corinth, conflict, division, immorality, heresy. So then Paul writes them a letter. Now, that letter is what we have as 1 Corinthians, right? We did a

series in 1 Corinthians about 10 years ago. So Paul writes them a letter to this church that he planted. At the end of that letter, he promises that he's going to come visit them again in order to help them sort out all of these issues. He's like, you got major stuff going, I'm going to come in person, I'm going to help you out.

[10:49] And so then Paul comes back to the church that he planted, fully expecting a warm embrace, a warm welcome, but that's not what happens. The visit is an absolute disaster. Paul is mocked, he's ridiculed, he's rejected. There are other teachers that are gaining popularity in Corinth, what Paul later refers to as the super apostles, the super faithful, impressive, probably very tall, good-looking, eloquent teachers that are very, very impressive next to Paul. Paul is such a boring teacher that at one point at Acts, we read that as he's teaching, somebody literally falls asleep and falls out the window and dies. And Paul, in utter embarrassment, has to resurrect this guy because he killed him, right? So Paul is not a very effective preacher, right? And so, and they know this, and these other really tall, good-looking, svelte, impressive leaders have come in. And so, and so Paul knows that he's being ridiculed, and yet he comes and they reject him, right? And so when he leaves, things are even worse than before. He's lost a ton of credibility. So then Paul writes another letter, and this is a letter, here's the confusing part, the second letter that Paul writes is a letter that comes between 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians. So it's actually a letter that's been lost to history. We don't have that letter. But he writes this, this letter, and in that letter, he says that he's going to come back and visit them yet again, actually two more times. So they're expecting yet another visit from Paul. But then he changes his plans. He cancels his visit, and he decides to write them a third letter instead of coming back in person. And that third letter that he writes is what we are now looking at, 2 Corinthians. Hopefully you're tracking with this, right? So he writes 1 Corinthians, he writes another letter that we don't have, it's lost to history, then he writes a third letter, which is the one that we're looking at. And this is the letter that they get in place of Paul himself. So he changes his mind. Now, you may say, well, that's not a big deal. People change their minds all the time. But listen, if you've ever been in any kind of position of leadership, you know, you're leading an organization, leading a business, leading a ministry, leading a church, you know that when you change your mind, and if you change your mind too much, that can drastically undermine your credibility as a leader, especially if you're an apostle who theoretically is supposed to be hearing from the Holy Spirit, right? How can a person who has a direct line to God and the Holy Spirit, he's been commissioned by Jesus himself to lead this church, how can he vacillate like this? And so if you're in a position of leadership, it can be very hard to admit when you've changed your mind. I mean, I remember this happened in our church a few years ago.

We had started a new worshiping location in Brooklyn, and originally we thought that eventually this new worshiping location was going to become a standalone church. That was the plan.

Two and a half years later, our leadership team, through a lot of prayer and discernment, had realized that in our long-term desire to have a gospel impact in Washington, D.C., that we need to reprioritize, and that we needed to prioritize getting a permanent space over starting new congregations in rented spaces. And so we reprioritized, and we pulled the congregations back together to focus all of our efforts on getting a kind of base of operations for ministry and worship in D.C. from which we could do ministry for hopefully many generations, right?

And so we reprioritized, and I remember even though we prayed about it, even though we all believed it was the right decision, our leadership team, when it came to communicating that, there was a lot of, what are people going to think? You know, some people, you know, was this your plan all along? You know, are you really hearing from the Holy Spirit?

Why are you vacillating, right? So you'd be very hard when it comes to actually communicating that you've changed your mind, and yet Paul is willing to do that. And he knows that by changing his mind, some people are going to say that he's weak, and they do. But in chapter 2 verse 1, he's very transparent about the fact that he did change his plans. And so what I want you to see here is that in all of these ways, Paul is turning boasting on its head. He's not covering up his weakness. He's not spotlighting only the impressive things. He's willing to put the spotlight on the unimpressive things. And in doing so, he's literally giving ammunition to the super apostles. He's giving ammunition to his worst critics who are at this moment slandering him and criticizing him for these very things. And you know, just think about that as we think about life here in DC. We're not as inclined to openly boast. That's not as culturally acceptable here as it was in Corinth. But we're very good at sort of humble bragging, at covert boasting, right? Name dropping, right? I was with

so-and-so, oh yeah, oh yeah. You know, and or we'll, you know, we're much more likely to sort of casually admit the five-mile run we did than the like one-gallon tub of ice cream we polished off alone last night, you know? There's a selectivity in what we're willing to sort of, you know, casually introduce in conversation that tends to fall along the lines of boasting. So we have to ask, why would anyone do what Paul does here? How can we make sense of it? What's the explanation? Paul's explanation.

[16:27] If you look at Paul's explanation for all of his behavior, which is the sort of middle chunk of this text, he essentially is saying this. He's saying this, everything that I've done, everything that I've done, my visits, my letters, what seems like a back and forth to you, all of this was motivated because I love you. This was all motivated by my desire to love you. All of the times I humiliated myself, all of the times I looked foolish, I was acting out of love, and my concern was primarily for you. So he says in chapter 1 verse 15, I wanted to come to you again so that you would have another chance to experience grace. The whole reason I wanted to come is so you would experience grace.

And then chapter 1, 23 to chapter 2 verse 2, but I decided not to come, not because I was indecisive, not because I was vacillating, not because I was a coward, which is what some people were saying, but I decided not to come in order to spare you. It was for your sake because I didn't want to cause you more pain. He's like, you're the ones who bring me joy. I didn't want to come and cause more pain to people in whom I want to see joy. The last visit didn't accomplish anything. What makes anyone think another visit is going to accomplish anything? And then he says in chapter 2 verse 4, you know, when I wrote to you, I was in tears. You can imagine him almost saying, you know, the tears were staining the paper. Right? I was in tears. My words were not meant to cause you more pain. My words were meant to convince you how much I love you. Don't you see all of this, all of this is about my love for you.

And what that means is that Paul is not concerned about his reputation. He's not concerned about his reputation. His sole focus was loving the Corinthians.

And in the path of loving the Corinthians, Paul had to decide, am I going to choose to do this thing or to say this thing that's going to protect my reputation but won't be as loving?

Or am I going to choose to love them even if it makes me look foolish? Am I going to prioritize what I believe is best for them even if it makes me look weak? And that's what he's saying. So he says, you know, because of my desire to love you, I'm willing to face humiliation and mockery and scorn and rejection, whatever it might take.

[18:53] And you say, well, how is this possible? Is this really true? Is Paul really this loving toward the Corinthians? You say, well, how is this possible? You see back in verse 12, Paul says, our behavior has been motivated not by earthly wisdom, which would say, you got to make sure your name is protected. You got to protect your reputation. That's earthly wisdom.

But it's not motivated by that. He says, we're motivated by the grace of God. There's an entirely different motive driving our behavior. The reason Paul is willing to face humiliation and suffering in order to love the Corinthians is because of grace. It's because his life has been transformed by that exact same kind of love. At one time in his life, Paul was one of the most impressive, influential, successful people around by worldly standards.

And he had built his career on persecuting followers of Jesus. But then Paul met Jesus face to face. And he realized something about Jesus. He realized that even though Jesus was somebody that he had rejected, even though he was persecuting and dragging into the streets, people who followed Jesus, he was trying to shut this movement down, even though he had rejected Jesus, Jesus had been willing to face humiliation and mockery and scorn and suffering and death because of his love for people like Paul. Because of his love for people like Paul. And that's why it says in verse 20, that's why Paul says, for all the promises of God find their yes in Jesus. This is Paul's epiphany. He realized that his entire religion, all of the scriptures that he had by and large memorized, were filled with promises that God had made to his people and to the world. His entire religion was about waiting for God to finally fulfill his promises.

A faithful Jew trusted faithfully that God would do that. And he realizes when he meets Jesus, that Jesus is the fulfillment of all of God's promises. And he realizes in the truth of the gospel that ultimately, Jesus is God's yes to a world that has rejected him. Jesus is God saying yes to a world that has said no to him over and over and over again. In Jesus, God says yes to a world and he says, even if you hate me, I love you. God says, even when you seek to do me harm, I love you.

Even when you flee in the opposite direction, I love you. I will pursue you because I am for you. And this is what grace is. This is the essence of grace. Grace means saying yes to someone. I love you. I am for you. I want to bless you. Even when they say no to you. Even when they reject you. [ 22 : 15 ] Even when they seek to do you harm. That's what grace is. It's giving somebody something that they don't deserve. That they didn't earn. That they can never repay. And this utterly transformed Paul.

And what you see in Paul's life is that he's willing to look weak. He's willing to look foolish. He's willing to endure mockery. He's willing to face all of these things in order to say yes to the Corinthians. In order to love them even when they don't love him back. And the point for our larger series is this. In the eyes of the world, this looks like weakness. This looks like foolishness. But what we see in truth is as we see this reality, we're looking at the spiritual power of grace. This is the spiritual power of grace on display. And it's grace that is willing to love and serve people even when they reject you. Grace that is willing to look foolish because it is blessedly self-forgetful. Grace that doesn't seek its own glory. It just seeks to build others up.

Grace looks like weakness. But in truth, it has the power to transform the world. It has the power to heal all that has been broken. And so what we see here is Paul setting an example of grace. He's explained where this comes from. It's because he's received grace in his own life. And lastly, we see Paul challenge the Corinthians and us to go and to do the same.

[ 23 : 58 ] If you've experienced grace like this, like I have, that must be shared. That must be extended to others. And you know, as we said before, there are some people in Corinth who are actively slandering and criticizing Paul. Some of these super apostles and some other people. And apparently there were maybe a few who had just been particularly harsh toward Paul. And apparently other people in the community, probably the majority of people in the community, have actually, since all of this happened, have disciplined those rabble rousers. They have shut them down. They brought some kind of formal church discipline to bear. And so people have kind of risen up to fault Paul's defense and they have silenced his worst critics and accusers. Now you would think at this point, Paul would say, you're getting what you deserve. Get rid of those people. They have no place in our community. I'm only, I'm only interested in the people who are truly loyal to me. Anybody who questions me, anybody who pushes back, you're out of here. I never want to see you again. I never want to talk to you again.

You're dead in my eyes. Now you would think that that's how Paul would respond. That's how the world would say to respond. But here's what Paul says in chapter 2 verse 5. Now if anyone has caused pain, he's caused it not to me, but in some measure, not to put it too severely, to all of you. This is a communal reality. When one person struggles, we all suffer. When one person sins, we all suffer. For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough. Because we are one, because this community is a family, to be ostracized, to be cut off, to be disciplined by the family, that is so severely painful that in most cases that's enough. He says, so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.

So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him. Now he's talking about his critic. He's talking about the person who was out to get him, who's trying to take him down, who's trying to undercut his authority.

To put it simply, Paul's saying, I'm willing to extend grace and mercy to those who are criticizing me, to my worst critics. I've forgiven them. I'm reaffirming my love for them. And now I want you to do the same. All right, again, earthly wisdom says, if somebody is slandering you, you have every right to seek retribution. Shut them down. But Paul is not motivated by earthly wisdom. He's motivated by grace. So his primary concern is what? Not his reputation. It's the well-being of his critic.

[ 26 : 48 ] His primary focus is, I don't want him to be crushed by excessive sorrow. So please remind him that you love him. Remind him that I love him. Remind him that he's part of a family and that we're here for him. Now that's amazing. And so he's exhorting the Corinthians, don't let this come between you. Don't let this divide you. Don't start thinking in terms of good guys and bad guys.

This person is a part of our family and the main thing we need to do now is to love him. We've told him this sin is serious. We've told him that he needs to repent. Now we need to love him.

Right now, what does all of this have to do with us? Well, I think that there's a tendency these days to sort of downsize biblical faith into kind of a private decision that we make at some point in our lives based on an intellectual ascent to believe in and follow Jesus. And we sort of think of faith as

something that we do. Yeah, I decided to be a Christian. But then by and large, we simply continue living our lives as we otherwise would have anyway. And there's a kind of disconnect.

And so for a lot of us, what that means is that our lives end up being shaped much more by earthly wisdom than by God's grace. Because there's no integration. There's no integration. When I was growing up, churches tried to counteract this with a movement built around the phrase, what would Jesus do? I was told growing up by the kind of Christians in my life, when you're thinking about how to live, you should always ask yourself, WWJD, what would Jesus do? And I actually had a bracelet. It looked a lot like this one. This isn't the actual bracelet, but I had a bracelet like this. It was a blue bracelet. And a lot of us in those days wore the WWJD sort of paraphernalia around to kind of remind us, you know, I'm like, you know, hard, tempting situation. And then I look at my arm, oh, okay, you know, what would Jesus do, right? And then I do the right thing. But, you know, even as a kid, that's how it was supposed to work, right? Even as a kid, even as a kid who I wouldn't really consider myself a Christian back then, I had a lot of problems with this. You know, for starters, most of the situations that I had to navigate as a teenager in the 90s were not in the Bible. You know, I didn't have, you know, Jesus at the mall, you know, like flirting with the girls in the food court. Like, and how do you handle that situation? Like, I, you know, I didn't have, you know, so it's like with a very few exceptions, I just had to kind of imagine what Jesus would do.

[ 29 : 25 ] Because I didn't know. I mean, it's just not a lot of parallels in the kind of ancient Greco-Roman world and like Winston-Salem, North Carolina. And so, I had to kind of imagine that. And then here's the bigger problem is, even if I did know what Jesus would do, he's the perfect eternal son of God.

And I'm like a hormone crazed teenager with a death wish. And I'm supposed to somehow do what he would do? And so, for me, it was a massive setup for a lot of failure and futility. It's like, well, this religion is absolutely worthless and impossible. There's no way I can do this, right?

And what we see in Paul's life is a very different understanding of faith. For Paul, faith is not a kind of one-time private decision that you make and then just kind of go on with your life. You kind of get your ticket punched and you're good to go. For Paul, faith is an ongoing, and here's the key, it's an ongoing dependence on God's grace in the present that shapes every aspect of his life. In other words, Paul never lived his life asking the question, what would Jesus do? That's what he used to do when he was a Pharisee. What Paul does now is he always asks the question, what has Jesus done? What has Jesus done on the cross? When I'm facing critics who are trying to take me down, what has Jesus done? When I'm facing people who accuse me of being weak and vacillating, what has Jesus done? Right? When my life is in danger and I can't get out of bed in the morning because I'm filled with despair and fear, what has Jesus done? In every moment of every day, Paul was asking that question, what has Jesus done for me? And then he's living his life in response to that grace. And so as we look at Paul's example and we look at this explanation of grace and then we look at his exhortation to us, we ask, what does it look like for all of us to live life in response to the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross and the grace and the love that God is pouring into our lives right this minute? How does that transform our priorities like it did Paul's? How does that transform our boasting and what we are willing to shine the spotlight on in our lives? How does that transform the way we see our enemies and the people who seem to be most out to get us?

How does this transform what we believe about power and weakness? Because here's the thing, grace looks like weakness, but grace alone has the power to heal and transform the world.

Let's pray. Lord, we love you, but nothing like you love us. We desire to follow you and to be for you, but that doesn't come close to the truth that you're for us, that you have pursued us even when we fled, that you have loved us even when we rejected you. That as Paul says in Romans, while we were still sinners, Jesus gave his life for us. Lord, I pray that we would not be a community simply marked by our desire to do what Jesus would do, although praise God if we could. I pray that we would be a community marked by grace, that the truth of what Jesus has accomplished on the cross would set us free.

[ 32 : 53 ] Lord, that this would be a community of joy, of grace, a community where people may be the only place in our lives in D.C. where we can be honest about our weakness, where we can admit when we're struggling, when we can be transparent. Lord, because we know that even though much in our lives look like weakness, that Lord, through our weakness, your strength is made known. Through our weakness, your name is glorified. And so, Lord, I pray that we would be so transformed by grace that we would be this kind of community. Lord, that is grace-driven, that is

other-centered. And that through our weakness, through our brokenness, through our struggle, your name, not our name, would be the one that is lifted up. And we pray this in your son's holy name. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.