

Power Through Weakness Pt 7

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Date: 03 April 2022

Preacher: Rev. Thomas Hinson

[0 : 0 0] Good morning again. Welcome to Church of the Advent. One of the things that we notice immediately when we look at the early church and the composition of the early church is the incredible diversity. And one of the reasons for that, that kind of unprecedented diversity, is the fact that the early church was a place where profound reconciliation had become possible.

And profound reconciliation was taking place in a very real way, and that affected the makeup of the people who were sitting together in worship. So you had all of these groups of people that had historically been divided from one another because of race or class or ethnicity or even gender. And in the early church, you have all of these groups coming together and worshipping one another in this amazing way. And you look at that kind of reconciliation, and I probably don't have to spend too much time convincing you how necessary, how vital that kind of reconciliation would be in today's context, as we look at how divided our society is, how divided our world is. And in our study of 2 Corinthians, we come to this amazing place in 2 Corinthians chapter 5 verse 10 through chapter 6 verse 2, where Paul really talks about this ministry of reconciliation. And he talks about the power that makes this kind of reconciliation possible, the source of power that makes this kind of reconciliation possible. And, you know, if you think of a battery, a battery has both a negative charge and a positive charge. And you need both in order to create the kind of power necessary to drive things. And it's the same here. The battery, so to speak, that powers Paul's ministry of reconciliation has both a negative charge and a positive charge. The negative charge is the fear of Christ. And the positive charge is the love of Christ. So, we're going to look at each of those and how they make reconciliation possible. Let's pray. Lord, we thank You for Your Word, and we thank You for what we're about to talk about, the fact that You're a God who is drawing together people from every tribe, tongue, and nation. Lord, that it was Your great secret hidden through the ages, even from the angels, and now made known through Your apostles that You were going to send Your Son to bring blessing to all the nations of the earth. And, Lord, that comes through reconciliation. And we pray that You would bless our time and study of Your Word, that You might work in us, make us into such people. Lord, we pray this in Your Son's holy name. Amen. So, first of all, the negative charge that makes reconciliation possible, the fear of Christ. We see this in verses 10 through 16. Paul says,

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil. Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others. The fear of Christ means knowing that there's an ultimate standard of right and wrong that supersedes all earthly standards. And the fear of Christ means recognizing that one day we are all going to stand before Christ who is going to judge us according to our lives, according to this ultimate standard. And you say, well, that doesn't sound like very good news. Well, it's actually tremendously good news. This is actually the foundation of the argument that William Wilberforce used in his argument before the British House of Commons for the abolition of slavery. You know, Wilberforce lived in a time in a society where society had widely accepted slavery as a necessity. And like many other societies throughout history, we and they, the British society, had discovered that you can amass enormous amounts of wealth if you have such a cheap labor force to do so with. And so the primary argument for slavery was the economic benefit that it provided to the society as a whole. How can we do away with this? Our economy will collapse. And so Wilberforce stands up, and this is the core of his argument. He says this, there is a principle above everything that is political. There is a principle above everything that is political. And when I reflect on this, believing the authority to be divine, how can I dare to set up any reasonings of my own against it? He says, and when I think of eternity and of the future consequences of all human conduct, what is there in this life that should make any man contradict the dictates of his conscience, the principles

of justice, the laws of religion, and of God?

[5 : 36] Just because some ideas are popular, just because some ideas are at a given time widely accepted, does not make them right. He's saying the reason that we should abolish slavery is not simply because it is good policy. It's because there is a standard of right and wrong, a standard of moral truth that exists above popular opinion. It exists above government policy, and slavery is a violation of that standard. And this principle, this idea that there is an ultimate authority above all human authority, this has actually fueled Christians to fight against and resist totalitarian regimes on the political left and right throughout history. So appealing to recognizing this ultimate standard, and that there is an ultimate judge who will hold all human authorities accountable, that is very good news. It has been very good news throughout history for people who have been oppressed or victims of injustice. But it also leaves us with a massive, massive problem. Because unlike earthly judges, Christ is a perfect judge, meaning he judges all things according to perfect standards. Here's the problem. Not only will Christ judge all of the

Pol Potts or the Putins for murdering countless people, he's also going to judge those of us who have murdered people in our hearts by harboring hatred against them. Jesus himself says this. Not only is he going to judge those who perpetuate corporate greed and environmental degradation, he's also going to judge those of us who have ever coveted anything that wasn't ours. Right? Not only is he going to judge those who perpetuate injustice in the world, but he's also going to judge those of us who have committed the greatest injustice of all, which is living in this world that God made and ignoring him. Living as though he doesn't exist.

And so it presents us with this question, if this is true, how does God destroy evil without destroying us? Right? This is the great question of the Old Testament. How does God destroy and judge evil without destroying us? And that's why along with the negative charge of the fear of Christ, we also need the positive charge of the love of Christ. The love of Christ which we see just resonating through these verses, it says in verse 14, for the love of Christ controls us because we have concluded this in the face of this problem, that one has died for all, therefore all have died. And 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. This is the extraordinary news of the gospel.

In fact, this section may be my favorite place in all of scripture where we see the gospel laid out. Here's the gospel in a nutshell. The judge is also the savior. Our judge has become our savior. Imagine a judge who pronounces a sentence, right? The trial is over, all of the evidence has been presented. The judge hands down the sentence, and it's a sentence of death, and everybody in the room says, this person deserves it. If anybody deserved it, this person deserves it. And then after handing out the sentence, the judge comes down out of the stand, takes off his judge's robes, and takes the place of the prisoner, and then carries out that sentence on himself so that the prisoner can go free. That's what Paul is describing here. And that in itself would be amazing, but that's not where Paul stops. Paul keeps going. It actually gets better. When we come to Jesus in faith and repentance, when we're baptized into his name, we actually become one with him. And that isn't just a kind of cute metaphor. It's a spiritual reality. Paul says in verse 17, therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he's a new creation.

[10 : 10] The old has passed away. The old covenant, the old system under the law, the old sacrificial system, the old you. The old has passed away. Behold, the new has come. And that union with Christ leads us into one of the most extraordinary verses in the entire Bible, verse 21. Listen to this.

For our sake, he, Christ, or God, made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. That alone, thousands and thousands and thousands of pages have been written just about this verse. This is the highest form of intimacy there is. And in the union between us and Christ and Christ and our baptism, an exchange takes place. Jesus becomes sin.

God in the flesh who knew no sin, who never committed a sin in his life, who lived a perfect life, becomes sin, becomes the embodiment of sin.

We become the righteousness of God. We become righteousness because we are in Christ. We take on the righteousness of Christ. So it's not just like the debt has been paid, your account is at zero, and go and try to do the best you can. We actually become the righteousness of Christ. And so when we come to Jesus in faith and repentance, when we're baptized, our identity and Christ's identity are actually merged together into one identity. So we gain the identity of the only begotten

child of God. If you've ever looked at how the Father looks upon his only begotten Son, read the story of the baptism of Jesus, Jesus, where God the Father speaks words over his Son. And these are words that every human being longs to hear.

Right? I heard somebody say one time that everybody is born looking for someone who is looking for them. We're all born looking for someone who's looking for us. And I remember hearing that, and it just struck a deep chord in me. And the Father at Jesus' baptism speaks these words over Jesus, this, this is my beloved Son.

[12:45] In Him I'm well pleased. He delights me. Those are the words that we're born longing to hear. And what this is telling us is that when we come to faith in Jesus and when we're baptized into His name and our identity with Christ is merged, it means for the rest of our lives, God speaks those words over us. This is my beloved child. In this child I delight. I am well pleased.

So it's not like our account is kind of here and then we do some bad things and it goes down here and then we do some good things and it kind of goes up here and then we do some really bad things and it goes down here and God kind of after a while is frustrated with us and, you know, kind of tolerating us. Well, I said I would forgive you, so I'll one more time, but don't do it again.

And that's how human parents are. That's how I am with my kids, I hate to admit it. But that is not how God is. God delights in you. He delights in you every moment of every day.

He delights in you as His favorite child. He delights in you. That's what this is saying.

And for Paul, this was the most extraordinary act of love he could imagine. That's why he says the love of Christ controls us. He's like, I've never found anything like this. I'm going to live the rest of my life in response to this love. And so these two forces, the fear of Christ, the negative charge, and the love of Christ, the positive charge, they electrified Paul's heart and they empowered his ministry of reconciliation. So what does this mean for us? What does this mean for how we think about our lives, our relationships, in particular, our broken relationships? And we all have them.

[14:33] We all have them. I have them. I've been struggling this past weekend with broken relationships in my family, in the broader church community. This is reality for all of us. So what does this mean?

Well, the ministry of reconciliation, powered by the fear and love of Christ, has a vertical dimension and then it has a horizontal dimension. The vertical dimension is what makes possible the horizontal dimension. So reconciliation begins vertically. This is what Paul is showing us here. It begins with God and it begins with what God has done for us. And what he's making clear here is that God has done everything necessary to reconcile people to himself. Christ's sacrifice is sufficient to atone for the sins of all who come to him. What's the problem with that? Not all people come to him.

That's why Paul uses such strong language. He says, we implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. And this is not advice. This is not him saying, you know, you should make peace with God. That's advice. You'd probably be more at peace in your life if you made peace with God. That's not, the gospel is not good advice. The gospel is good news about something that has happened. God is reconciling people to himself because of what he's done in Christ. Therefore, we implore you, be reconciled to him.

God has done it. All we need to do is to respond to it. It's here for the taking, but you need to ask. You need to come to Jesus. That's the vertical reconciliation of the gospel. But then, if you look at the rest of this letter and if you look at Paul's other letters and you know anything about his life in ministry, that vertical reconciliation then begins to pour out into the community and it begins to transform horizontal relationships. And so, those of us who have been reconciled to God become ministers of reconciliation in the world. We're given the ministry of reconciliation.

And again, this is fueled by those two great forces, the fear of Christ and the love of Christ. And it's very practical. The fear of Christ says what? It says, guess what? Justice does not ultimately depend on us. And that is really good news if you're wanting reconciliation.

[16:56] We're called by Scripture to pursue justice with every fiber of our being to do all we can to bring justice, but we'll never achieve perfect justice. There's always going to be people who never face justice in this life. There's always going to be situations where justice is never done. There's always going to be people who avoid and escape accountability. There's always going to be people in our lives who never even admit they did wrong. And that is going to drive you crazy. That's going to be sometimes as painful or worse than the hurt they did to you, was them refusing to admit it. But that does not mean that justice will not be done. You know, sometimes when I'm meeting with

people and we're talking about hurt that they've sustained and ways they've been, and we struggle together over this absence of justice and why can't there be justice for this, you know, I like to say, you know, sometimes I think God says about a particular situation, I want to handle this myself personally. I'm going to handle this situation face to face. Justice may not be done by us, but justice will be done, and that day will come.

And then even as we confront sin in the world, it's easy when you're confronting sin and seeking justice to get filled with a kind of self-righteousness, right? Because you're kind of, you're coming to save the day, and you're bringing justice to the oppressed, and you're confronting sin in other people's lives, and it's very easy to start to feel good about yourself. Maybe even you're a better person than other people. But the fear of Christ reminds us that even as we confront sin, we do so as sinners. And believing in the final judgment keeps us humble, right? We say, but for the grace of God, I might be where you are right now. And that's how we always confront sin, because of the fear of Christ.

Christ. So in a weird way, believing in the final judgment insulates us from becoming judgmental of other people. If you believe in the final judgment, you're not going to be a judgmental person. Not if you really understand the implications of it. And then along with that, we have the love of Christ, the positive charge. Where do we find the kind of love that would compel us to reach across dividing walls of hostility and embrace people who have hurt us or wronged us or who are radically different from us? Well, we find it in a God who did that very thing for us, right? When we had built all of the dividing walls of hostility, separated ourselves from God, and he overcame those walls, he sought us out. He proactively initiated reconciliation with us. So our ability to love others well comes from the way God loves us. That's a core principle in Scripture. The way we love others is rooted in how we are loved by God. If you want to become a better lover of others, learn to rest in and marinate in and contemplate the love of Christ for you.

So together, fear and love make us capable of extraordinary things. And perhaps the best example of this in the Bible anyway is the story of Onesimus. And you may not be familiar with this story because we often skip this little book in the Bible. But Onesimus was a slave who stole some money from his master Philemon, and then he ran away. So he steals his money, and then he runs. And he meets Paul in Rome, and Paul shares the gospel with Onesimus, and Onesimus becomes a Christian, becomes really, I think, very useful to Paul. They start to do ministry together. And then as he has come to faith, and as he's growing in faith, and as Paul is kind of mentoring him and discipling him, they kind of, they make this unthinkable decision. Onesimus goes back to his former master to make restitution for the thievery and to seek reconciliation. Now, if somebody came to me and said, I was a slave, but I escaped and I stole some of my master's money, I would be like, yes! [21 : 09] Well done! Stick it to him! He deserves it! But the fear of Christ, perfect judgment, right? Thievery is wrong. It doesn't matter who you stole from. It doesn't matter how justified you may be.

And the love of Christ, Christ made possible reconciliation with people who had betrayed him, who were his enemies, right? Who killed him. And so the fear of Christ and the love of Christ working together, Onesimus decides to go back to make restitution for the money that was stolen and to seek reconciliation. In his letter to Philemon, Paul says, maybe the reason for this whole thing, maybe the reason that Onesimus left was so that he might be able to return to you, not as a slave, but as a brother. A transformed relationship. And then Paul says, whatever he stole from you, put it on my account. I'll pay it all back if it means that you all can be brothers.

And a story like this, you wouldn't hear a story like this very often today. A story like this only makes sense in light of the gospel because we see echoes of the fear and the love of Christ reverberating throughout this story, reverberating throughout these relationships.

So let me ask you this, where are the broken relationships in your life? I referenced that at the beginning. Maybe it's with a mom or a dad. Maybe a sibling. Maybe it's a former friend. Maybe it's a former co-worker or boss. Maybe an ex. Maybe somebody in this room. The question to leave you with is simply this, what might it look like for the fear and the love of Christ to echo and reverberate throughout those relationships? What might become possible? Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for this, and reconciliation, like everything in your kingdom, is a profound mystery. It's something that ultimately depends on your Holy Spirit.

[23 : 32] And we pray that as you are a God who is able to do far more abundantly than we can ask or even imagine. As with us, things are impossible, but with you, nothing is impossible. I pray, Lord, that you would do the impossible in us. Soften hearts. Open us up to what you might be

leading us to do in these relationships that we are thinking of. And we pray this, Lord, not only that we might find peace with one another, but that we might enact your peace in the world, that we might live in line with your vision that one day we will all be one great united family centered on the throne.

And we pray this, Lord, ultimately for our good and your glory. In your Son's name, amen. Now, friends, I'm going to invite you to stand. And given the fact that this is a kind of shortened service because we have our members meeting, we are going to respond to God's Word by confessing our faith using the Nicene Creed. Brothers and sisters, what do we believe? We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, the Maker of heaven and earth, of all that is visible and invisible. We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father. Through him all things were made.

For us and for our salvation, he came down from heaven, was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and was made man. For our sake, he was crucified under Pontius Pilate. He suffered death and was buried. On the third day, he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end. We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets. We believe in one holy Catholic and apostolic church.

We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Amen. Amen.