

Spiritual power

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Date: 24 September 2017

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[0:00] God has kept these for us. The Corinthians were quite a heartache to Paul. I know that the first letter to the Corinthians has got all this stuff about the gifts that they had and tongues and prophecy and so on.

! You might think that that's put forward as a great example to follow, and Paul does commend them for their giftedness, but he also had huge heartaches. They were a huge headache to him. And it gives us an insight into the life of the New Testament churches. They weren't all neat, tidy, exemplary.

They were, some of them, rough and ready and mixed up, and perhaps so mixed up that we would actually find it quite difficult to cope with them.

Paul, in 2 Corinthians, realizes that in the church in Corinth, other teachers have come in and have said to the church, Oh, that Paul, well, you don't want to take any notice of him. He's, all sorts of deficiencies. He's not good with money. He tells you he's going to do something and he doesn't do it.

[1:42] He's not really up to scratch. There's a much better Christianity than the stuff that Paul gave you. And you can imagine how heart-wrenching this would be for Paul because he gave them the true gospel.

And he can see them being taken in by this alternative, this thing that's supposed to be much better, and these teachers that are supposed to be much better than Paul.

And because Paul isn't there, he has to write. I think maybe these new teachers would have said, you know, Paul isn't very good looking.

If you're going to do an advertising campaign, have you noticed how American politicians are always good looking? Well, with some exceptions.

But it does seem to be, you know, if good looking, look healthy, look a bit of grey hair to give a little bit of dignity.

[2:55] And Paul would have failed on everything like that. They say, you know, when you actually come and you speak, your speech, you know, you do ums and ahs, you don't quite get things right.

I don't know what they said. It's unimpressive as a speaker. And Paul has to write to them to say, you know, don't be taken in by the superficial things that you see.

Because I really bring to you the real gospel. And there's qualities which you ought to recognize in me and in my message, says Paul.

And if you don't recognize them, you're going to be, you're going to lose everything. So that's why he says the sort of things he does in chapters 11 and 12 and more.

That might give you a little background. As here he is in mid-flow saying to those Corinthians, you know, I am the real thing.

[4:03] I've brought you the real message of Jesus. Don't take anything else. These other apostles, these sort of super wonderful apostles, they're the wrong stuff. Chapter 11.

I hope you will put up with a little of my foolishness. But you are already doing that. I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him.

But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ.

For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the one we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough.

But I don't think I'm the least inferior to those super apostles. I may not be a trained speaker, but I do have knowledge. And we have made this perfectly clear to you in every way.

[5:09] Was it a sin for me to lower myself in order to elevate you by preaching the gospel to you free of charge? I robbed other churches by receiving support from them so as to serve you.

And when I was with you and you needed something, I was not a burden to anyone. The brothers who came from Macedonia supplied what I needed. I've kept myself from being a burden to you in any way, and will continue to do so.

As surely as the truth of Christ is in me, nobody in the regions of Achaia will stop this boasting of mine. Why? Because I do not love you?

God knows I do. And I will keep on doing what I'm doing in order to cut the ground from under those who want an opportunity to be considered equal with us in the things they boast about.

For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light.

[6:14] It's not surprising then if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness, their end will be what their actions deserve. I repeat, let no one take me for a fool.

But if you do, then receive me just as you would a fool, so that I may do a little boasting. In this self-confident boasting, I am not talking as the Lord will.

I'm talking as a fool. Since many are boasting in the way the world does, I too will boast. You gladly put up with fools, since you are so wise.

In fact, you even put up with anyone who enslaves you, or exploits you, or takes advantage for you, or pushes himself forward, or slaps you in the face.

To my shame, I admit we were too weak for that. What anyone else dares to boast about, I'm speaking as a fool, I also dare to boast about.

[7:10] Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Abraham's descendants? So am I. Are they servants of Christ?

I'm out of my mind to talk like this. I am more. I have, and you wait for him to say, I've looked better, and I've got a better physique, and I've been more, and this is what he actually said, I've worked harder.

I've been in prison more frequently. I've been flogged more severely. I've been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews, the 40 lashes minus one.

Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked. I spent a night and a day in the open sea. I've been constantly on the move.

I've been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles, in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea, and in danger from false brothers.

[8:16] I have labored and toiled, and I've often gone without sleep. I have known hunger and thirst, and I've often gone without food. I have been cold and naked. And besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches, who is weak and I do not feel weak, who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn.

If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, who is to be praised forever, knows that I am not lying.

In Damascus, the governor under King Aretas had the city of the Damascenes guarded in order to arrest me. But I was lowered in a basket from a window in the wall and slipped through his hands.

If I must go on boasting, although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord. I know a man who, 14 years ago, was caught up to the third heaven. Now, whether it was in the body or out of the body, I don't know. God knows. And I know that this man, whether in the body, apart from the body, I don't know, but God knows, was caught up to paradise.

[9:38] And he heard inexpressible things. Things that a man is not permitted to tell. I'll boast about a man like that. I won't boast about myself, except about my weakness.

Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain so that no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say.

To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me.

Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, my grace is sufficient for you and my power is made perfect in weakness.

And therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses so that Christ's power may rest on me. And that is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties.

[11:00] For when I am weak, then I am strong. I've made a fool of myself, but you drove me to it. I ought to have been commended by you, for I am not in the least inferior to these super apostles, even though I am nothing.

The things that mark an apostle, signs, wonders, miracles, were done among you with great perseverance. How were you inferior to the other churches, except I was never a burden to you? Forgive me, this wrong. Now I'm ready to visit you for the third time, and I will not be a burden to you, because what I want is not your possessions, but you.

After all, children should not have to save up for their parents, but parents for their children. So I will very gladly spend for you everything I have and expend myself as well.

And if I love you more, will you love me less? Be that as it may, I've not been a burden to you, crafty fellow that I am.

[12:11] I caught you by trickery. Did I exploit you through any of the men I sent you? I urged Titus to go to you, and I sent our brother with him.

Titus did not exploit you, did he? Did we not act in the same spirit and follow the same course? Have you been thinking all along that we've been defending ourselves to you?

We've been speaking in the sight of God as those in Christ, and everything we do, dear friends, is for your strengthening. For I'm afraid that when I come, I may not find you as I want you to be, and you may not find me as you want me to be.

I fear that there may be quarreling and jealousy and outbursts of anger and factions, slander, gossip, arrogance, and disorder.

I'm afraid that when I come again, my God will humble me before you, and I will be grieved over many who have sinned earlier and have not repented of the impurity, sexual sin, and debauchery in which they indulged.

[13:23] This will be my third visit to you. And so he goes on. You get a bit of a sense of, in this letter, perhaps more than any of the other letters, how deeply he cared for the people that he had worked with and how much he longed for them to hold on to the gospel and therefore, in that sense, to hold on to Paul.

We'll come think about that. I've only got one point to make. We'll come think about that in a moment. and we will sing, oh, the deep, deep love of Jesus. So, thank you for the deep, deep love of Jesus.

Thank you. It is only by grace that we enter and only by grace that we stand. Help us, just to ponder your word together for these few minutes just now, in the name of Jesus, Amen.

I want to draw your attention, please have it in front of you, 2 Corinthians chapter 12 verses 7 to 10. The reason that I'm drawing this to our attention is that I think this is that I think this is a key principle in the life of Paul.

A very deep principle, deep underlying lots of other things that you might see at the top of his life.

[15:19] and I want us and I want us as a church to know this principle, to have this principle ingrained in us.

Particularly at this time, we've been pondering and thinking about things like what will happen when our building gets bigger, sorry, when our numbers get too big for the building, that's what I meant.

And we've been sort of thinking we're praying for God to increase, we're praying for God to bless. If God answers those prayers and we have more people, what do we do with them?

Well, there's various things that we could think of doing. We could increase the seating, we could go to another building, we could do like Christ Church Hayward Seath, rent a school, we could plant churches, we could with, I think it's a right to think about those things because we're envisaging if God gives us capacity, strength, numbers.

But I also want to flag up that there's a great danger in strength. There's a danger in strength that we have largely been kept from for many, many years.

[17:10] When we're not strong, we know we need to pray. When we're not strong, we know that a week of prayer, such as we've had, is not a gesture or a box to tick, but we know that a week of prayer is we need to do business with God.

I don't exactly remember that when we first had a week of prayer, I don't exactly remember the, I never remember these things of how they came up, but I do remember that in some of those early weeks of prayer, in the gates room, there was sometimes me by myself, sometimes there was me and Enid, I can't remember much beyond that, me and Enid, I can remember there was Rod and Joan, I can remember being in tears one week of prayer, prayer, I can remember going into the gates room, which was then horrible, with mouldy carpet, I slightly exaggerate, but not a lot, and a partition that was made out of hard board that didn't quite fit and had a horrible heater in there, and I remember going in there one time, thinking, this is, I come back from holiday, we had a week of prayer, and I thought, what's that point?

But we prayed, in weakness, and asked God, you know, those seven years of not knowing whether we would have the building, what would happen, asking God to show us what to do, and we were in weakness, and we prayed, and I'm saying, if we are beginning to envisage, we've got numbers, we've got capacity, we've got money in the bank, we've got people, I see this danger that we will forget what it is to cry out to God, because that's the only thing we can do.

So I put on there, if we have the strength to help other people and other churches, how's God going to have the glory? How will it be that we don't make the connection and say, that was us, we had the money, we had the manpower, we had the gifts, oh, you could easily take those stages on, in such a way that God, I think, would be rather disgusted.

What have they done with those gifts that I gave them? They've stupidly imagined that they did it all themselves. Now, you might not be so stupid as to think that, but I think I would be.

[20:21] It's human nature, really, isn't it? So I think we need, as soon as we possibly can, to learn the principle that Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 12, verses 7 to 10.

Human beings boast in power, in strength, in achievement.

The Bible might call that the flesh. It's what you can do without God. And if I were to put it this way, I think this makes sense.

human beings like to have power in power. So power when there's nothing else to be said, it's just power.

It's part of human pride, isn't it? It's part of human sin to feel I can control this, I can make this happen. It's power in power.

[21:31] Now, the Christian gospel is not powerless, less. On the contrary, it is powerful, but it is not power in power.

It is power in weakness. And that's exactly what Paul says. If you think of the apostle Paul, and you think of him being under threat in this sense as he writes this letter, what a remarkable man he was. You think of his vast achievements. He almost, well, think of the things, if you were inclined to write his CV and you wanted to take that angle on it, you'd say, well, he wrote quite a bit of the Bible. I mean, that's not nothing, is it? his mind was so sharp and so quick and so comprehensive that he could see the connections between the Old Testament and the Gospel that other people struggled to connect.

He could see that, and he could write it down and explain it. If you think of his achievements, his gifts, his experiences, he worked miracles, didn't work miracles all the time, but God did use him to work miracles, and you think, he could really set himself up as a, I was reading, I don't know where I read it, somewhere on Facebook or something about Benny Hinn's, anybody else read this?

[23:16] Nephew, Benny Hinn's nephew. Benny Hinn is a health and wealth, prosperity preacher in the United States of America.

He has his own personal jet, he has a million dollar ranch, he has an income which would make our eyes water, he also has very weird hair, I never trust anybody with hair, he looks a little bit like, I don't know, like a squirrel, people.

But he's, loads of people think he is a great, great teacher, he thinks he's a great, great teacher and his nephew was saying, I've been brought up in this and we were told never contradict uncle because God's with him, God will always heal him, God will always bless him.

And at some point it came to this nephew, actually there's quite a number of things in which my uncle does not fit the apostolic pattern.

I'll try and find you the reference. But Paul could set himself up as a Benny Hinn, you know, the equivalent of his own personal jet and his entourage and people around him to comfort him, tell him how great he is and all that sort of stuff.

[24:45] But what he actually does in these chapters, you know, it's all set up for him, just tell us how great you are, Paul. He says, I'm not going to tell you that because that doesn't give you the authentic characteristic of gospel ministry.

It doesn't give you that. And I suppose you could say the reason it doesn't is that the authentic real saviour didn't have a jet.

He wasn't born in a palace. He didn't have all the latest whatever they would have had in the iPad, hairdo.

He was born in a stable. When he went anywhere, he went on his own two feet and people mocked him and when he died, they spat on him and crucified him.

That's the sort of saviour we have. And his servants have the same print on them. And when Paul says, I'm going to tell you what makes my ministry authentic, authentic, which is what he's doing in chapter 11 around about, shall we say, verse 22, 23.

[26:12] He says, well, I've got all the, you know, tick all the boxes. I'm a Hebrew of the Hebrews. I'm an Israelite. I'm genuinely descended from Abraham. I'm a servant of Christ.

And then he says, let me just tell you what makes this authentic, because I've worked harder than them. and I've been in prison more than them.

And I've been beaten more than them. That's what makes my ministry authentic, says Paul. And if you want to hear about the grandeur of my courage and the way that I've, you know, I've been so brilliant, my feet scarcely touch the ground.

He says, let me tell you about how I escaped from Damascus when I was under threat there. Verse 32. I'll tell you about that one. Yeah, the king had the city of the Damascenes guarded in order to arrest me.

And you know what happened? I hardly believe this wonderful way God just came down and made sure, not a hair on my head, well, actually what happened was they found a basket and a bit of old rope and they told me to get in the basket and they load me out of the window and that's how I escaped.

[27:38] And he says, the thing that is authentic is not my power in power. The thing that's authentic is my power in weakness.

And that's exactly what he says in verse 7. Paul says, yes, I have had some amazing experiences. I'm not going to go on about them.

I'm not going to make you bow before me and say, wow, Paul, you're so great. I'm just going to say they have happened. And I would have got puffed up by that, says Paul.

But God made sure that, let's put it this way, he could trust me with that power because he also gave me a thorn in the flesh.

He also gave me something. It opposed me. It was like a messenger of Satan. Tormented me. Unpleasant. What was it?

[28:43] I don't know. Was it people who were getting at him? Possibly. Was it some medical problem like with his eyes, which he refers to? Maybe it was that, we don't know. But it was something and he said to the Lord, please take this away.

And he said it three times. So the three meaning he really, really did ask. And the Lord said no. And why did the Lord say no?

Because the Lord gave this to him so that he would be weak. so that the Lord's power could be in him.

Not power in power, but power in weakness. And we have this in verse nine of the Lord Jesus saying to Paul, what keeps you going?

what is the secret of the blessing, the usefulness of your ministry? And bear in mind Jesus didn't keep Paul always on the go.

[29:58] Sometimes he was locked up, couldn't go anywhere. But Jesus says this is the secret of it. My grace is sufficient for you.

my grace is sufficient. That's what you need, that's what you'll get, and that's sufficient.

And he explains it and says, for my power is made perfect in weakness. And Paul says, so when I write my CV, I don't tell you all the things I've achieved and the thousands of converts I've had and the wonderful spiritual experiences I've had.

I want people to know that my ministry has been marked by these things. Insults, hardships, persecutions, difficulties.

He says, that's the secret of the power of God. The grace of the Lord Jesus is sufficient and his power is made perfect in weakness.

[31:28] Let's look at 2 Corinthians 4, 7, which I noted down there. Same sort of thought expressed differently.

He says, we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all surpassing power is from God and not from us.

the treasure that he's talking about is the treasure of the gospel of Jesus Christ and he says, we have the treasure but the people in whom it is encapsulated are like jars of clay.

They are limited, feeble, easily cracked, not particularly brilliant to look at to show that the power is from God.

And I think that's really all I have to say. that if God does choose to use us in the future, please don't let us forget that it's by grace.

[33:01] Please don't let us think that it is our power. The formula for him using people is not that they think that they are powerful, but that they know that they are weak.

The way the Lord's power operates is it is borrowed power in perceived weakness.

power is it is the Lord giving his power to us. It's not our own power, it's his power because we know we are not sufficient for these things.

And that was my thought. Oh dear, sorry. Sorry. Let's not bother. my power, my grace is sufficient for you.

My power is made perfect in weakness. Let's turn turn