

Tough Love

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Date: 13 March 2016

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[0 : 00] Well, welcome, everybody. If you're new, my name is Aaron. And it's wonderful to have you here in this really rainy, sort of gross evening in Vancouver.

We're in 2 Corinthians 12 and 13. This is the penultimate sermon in the 2 Corinthians series. And you've heard it read very well by Kathy. It does feel like it sort of darts about, doesn't it? And it's hard to sort of get a handle on exactly what Paul is talking about here. But he has this beautiful thread that runs through it. So we'll get to that. But we need a bit of an introduction to kind of orientate us to what's happening here. So you remember from last week that Paul was very open about what was happening in his life.

And he talked about this thorn in his side, this sickness or whatever it was. And it caused him an enormous amount of trouble. And he didn't mention it. He didn't write about it and say, look at me, everything's just awful.

My life is so hard, feel sorry for me. No, it was all within the context of chapter 12, verse 9, which is probably the high point of the book, which says this, my grace is sufficient for you.

[1 : 07] My power is made perfect in weakness. Wonderful, wonderful verse. And so the thorn in the side thing is sort of not the hero of the passage. It's an example of that.

It's an example of my grace is sufficient for you. My power is made perfect in weakness. See, because he prayed, he prayed to God three times for this thorn to be removed. And God didn't give him the gift of healing.

He gave him something a whole lot better. God gave him dependence on him. My power is made perfect in weakness. So Paul says a very similar thing in another famous verse that we've looked at.

We carry the glory of God in these jars of clay. You remember this. We carry the glory of God in these jars of clay. So the jars of clay, it's us. It's our lives, these cracked, fragile containers. And these cracks sort of, these are weaknesses. These are like, we try and hide them from each other.

[2 : 11] We try and hide these cracks from each other. And we like to pretend they don't exist. And we try and close the cracks. And God in his wisdom does something amazing. He shoves a crowbar in those cracks and he opens them up further.

And why does he do that? So the glory of God can be seen more. And I think this is what's happening in our passage today. Paul shows us what the power of God in our weakness looks like in relationships with other people.

Okay, that's a big sentence. I'll say it again in a sort of different way. Paul is showing us what it looks like to experience the power of God in the midst of human weakness as it relates to human relationships.

And the power of God, in our passage, looks like three things. It looks like love, it looks like fear, and it looks like truth. And those are the three points of the sermon.

Love, fear, and truth. So let's have a crack at it, shall we? Firstly, love. God's power and our weakness. I'll say the same sentence at the beginning of each section, okay?

[3 : 20] God's power and our weakness looks like love, in particular sacrificial love. So he articulates this in verse 15 and 14. He says this, I will most gladly spend and be spent for yourselves.

Children are not obliged to save up for their parents, but parents for their children. You remember I talked about a couple of weeks ago that the church wanted Paul to be like a client, and they would be his patron.

And that's incredibly unhealthy kind of relationship. And Paul reframes the relationship, and he says, no, no, no. It's like a parent to a child. I'm the parent, you're the child. He says, you don't pay me.

It's weird, right? No. Because I pay a cost. I pay a cost to serve you. So Paul is a parent. He spends himself, he exhausts himself for them.

If you're a parent, you'll know that there is a great cost to being a parent. I was curious about how large that cost was. So I did a Google, and on average in North America, it costs \$300,000 to raise a child to the age of 18.

[4 : 34] And I read it in several different places. And if that's true, I'm financially in trouble. I mean, there's a great physical cost.

Parents know that. I feel like I've aged like 20 years in the last five. I joke up here, if I ever make a mistake, I say something stupid. It very rarely happens. But if I do, I will say something like, don't mind me, I haven't slept through the night in five years.

Like I'll say that as a joke. It's a joke, right? It's not a joke. Like I honestly haven't slept through the night in five years. I don't really have any hobbies anymore.

I have quite a long list here. But I won't say them. You want the best for your children. And you make sacrifices to make that happen.

And for Paul's sacrifices, there's two major ones he kind of talks about here. The first one is not taking money from the church for payments for his ministry.

[5 : 41] And he had the right to be paid. He talks about that earlier. He can be paid. But he decided that it just wouldn't be beneficial for them spiritually if they gave him money because they have this really funky idea about money there.

So he's self-funded. He gets a bit of money from the poor Macedonian church. But basically, there's a big cost for him. Because there's not a whole lot of money lying around for this ministry, he has to live quite rough.

When the money doesn't stretch, he has to work with his hands to make up the difference. And in that culture, that was a humiliating thing. And how the power of God is seen in this, it's remarkable. He says, I do this gladly. Do it gladly. I do this gladly for you. There's no sort of, I scratch your back, you scratch my back. There's no reluctance. He's all in for their spiritual benefit, and he joyfully does it.

So Paul ministers at great cost to himself. We've talked about one cost. Another cost he talks about is the accusations he has to deal with. Imagine that. Imagine really helping somebody out, and you do it, and you have to pay to help somebody out, and then they accuse you of something awful.

[6 : 49] That's what happens here. This is what this kind of verse, this is a bit hard to get your head around, verse 16 is about. I'll read it to you. But granting that I myself did not burden you, I was crafty, you say, and got the better of you by deceit.

Did I take advantage of you through any of those whom I sent you? See, Paul doesn't take money from them, and they're like, oh, he's got a secret plan to get money out of us somehow.

And they sort of develop this kind of elaborate idea that he's maybe not taking money from them so that they'll put more money in the collection, and he's going to steal the collection for the poor or something.

It's a weird sort of paranoid idea. And Paul's response is verse 17 and 18, and he says, Did I take advantage of you? Did Titus take advantage of you? Did I not act in the same spirit?

Did we not take the same steps? There's a sense that Paul is saying, What? What? What? Really? You really think this is what's going on?

[7 : 48] And it must have been awful for him to love these people, him pay the significant cost in doing it, and face these sort of accusations.

But it was another cost of doing ministry for him. Now, before I finish this first point, I think we should land this concept in our own life. So what does this apply to our own lives?

Well, let me ask you here. Are you spending yourself sacrificially for people, people outside your immediate family? Are you spending yourself for people?

I mean, there are limits to this kind of stuff, but if you want to experience the power of Christ in your life, you will need to stretch yourself. And that's going to look different for different people. It's going to look like sacrificial giving financially or of time.

It might look like radical hospitality. I don't know. But it's costly. I mean, if I could summarize what Paul says, I think what he's saying here is like, I missed out, Corinthian church, I missed out on a ton of stuff for you guys, but that's how the power of God was made perfect in my life.

[9 : 04] And that's how you saw the power of God in your life. Okay, that's point one. We'll come back to a few of those ideas later, but that's love. Love, fear, truth. Now let's talk about fear. God's power in our weakness looks like fear.

Now when I say fear, I don't mean being scared. I mean fear as in concern. He says this twice, verse 20 and 21. He goes, So our daughter B, when she was born, we had a couple of people tell us this, that they said, one of the things you'll experience in raising a child with a disability is this, is that your highs will be higher and your lows will be lower than raising a typical child.

So she will bring us tons of joy, like amazing amount of joy, as we see her succeed, as we see her work incredibly hard to accomplish things that come easily to others.

And we will celebrate those successes and they'll be wonderful. But we'll have lots of heartache.

We will know heartache. As we continue to walk with her in the future, as she experiences being picked on, perhaps excluded, as she sort of starts to realize these limitations in her life.

So we will experience these high highs and these very low lows because our hearts are so tied to her welfare. And that tie makes Amy and I very vulnerable.

[10 : 53] We're exposed. Paul loves this church in Corinth. He was there when this church was born. His heart is welded to its health and that puts him in a place of weakness because he's exposed.

I'll say it like this. When we take God's view of sin and life, that shouldn't make us grumpy and authoritarian and strident. It shouldn't make us powerful.

What it does is it makes us vulnerable because you really care. You really care about people's spiritual welfare. You let it really affect you. See, the easier life is the life that is enclosed, is a life that is cut off, where you don't really care.

This is not Paul's life. He's so concerned about this church that he's founded. And he's concerned that they're doing things which are hurting the body of Christ.

He wants to go there and find them relationally healthy. But he suspects that they are a gossiping, conceited bunch. And he lists eight. He lists eight things that he suspects are happening there.

[11 : 57] Let me just talk about five really, really quickly. There's quarreling. That word quarreling, it's a great word, quarreling. That means, I'll talk about what they mean in the Greek. That means fragmenting the body, fragmenting the group, the community, over something unimportant.

Anger is another one. That means bringing, it's the kind of anger, it's like bringing heat to a conversation or to a situation that doesn't need to be that heated. It's anger that's self-seeking. It's anger that's self-promoting. Gossip. Gossip. Literally means to hiss, hiss. Whispering, whispering awful things about people.

Lastly, disorder. I thought this was a very interesting one, disorder. Disorder is, it means chaos through flattery. Isn't that interesting? Chaos through flattery.

So I had a mate who worked as an assistant minister in a large church in the UK. And you would not know this church. It's not a famous church, but it's a big church in the UK.

[13 : 02] After a few months, the rector of the church said to my mate, he says, hey, I just want you to know that I'm watching you and you are my, you'll take over the church one day.

You'll be my natural heir. You'll be my natural successor. Right. So my friend was quite puffed up by that. He'd only been there a few months. Problem was, the rector had been telling all the other assistant ministers the same thing.

So, so the rector was, he was trying to garner loyalty from these guys. There was about like five assistant ministers.

He was trying to garner loyalty from them. But what he did is he created chaos and he created this incredibly poisonous working environment. Because all the assistant ministers thought they were taking over one day.

And so they're all looking at each other thinking like, I'm not really going to listen to this guy because he's going to be working for me one day. You know. And he's sitting there thinking, look at that bozo up there. Like he's, what do I do?

[14 : 05] I'm not going to help him preach because anyway, as soon as I'm boss, I'm going to kick him out of the church. You know. Chaos through flattery. So that's Paul's first list.

He has a second list which specifically relates to sexual sins there. And so he wants to go and find this church morally healthy but he suspects there are many people engaged in sexual sin that haven't repented.

And he mentions three things. Impurity, which means uncleanness. It's like the opposite of holiness. He talks about sexual immorality which is the Greek word *porneia* which is like where we get the word pornography from.

It means fornication. It could be sex with the prostitutes. Today it could be pornography. It talks about sensuality which is giving yourself over, going across boundaries deliberately that you know are a bit dodgy.

So Paul just, Paul loves these guys, folks. He loves this church. And his heart is with him. And he's with them in their highs and their lows. And he has to call stuff out which I'll get to in a moment.

[15:10] But I think it's a wonderful example. Here's the great example for us. Let's love each other like Paul loves these folks.

Let's spend ourselves on each other. Let's seek the best for each other. Let's look out for each other's souls, those here, those in our communities.

And when you do that, you will know great joys. You see people get baptized or come to church for the first time or want to have a conversation about Jesus. But you will know fear as well.

You will know fears and concerns that unbelievers don't know. And these fears and concerns relate to sort of repentance and forgiveness.

I am, I want my kids to follow Jesus for the rest of their lives. There's that concern. I want my kids' friends to discover Jesus.

[16:05] I want my neighbours to discover Jesus and find Jesus. I want my friends who are Christians right now not to walk away from the faith. The unbelievers don't know these fears, don't know these concerns.

Let me say a couple more things before we finish this point which I think are important. So let's be a community that's concerned about each other. We should fear that there are others that are going to miss out on repentance and forgiveness.

I don't know if you guys have heard of Francis Schaeffer. He was an amazing, one of the most important Christian sort of theologian, philosopher, apologist of the 20th century. And he was a real academic.

He was speaking somewhere making a case for Christ in sort of a lecture style. He spoke for a long time. And he's quite an academic guy. And then somebody asked him from the audience, well what happens to all the people that don't know Jesus?

He didn't answer. He just sat down and started weeping. The second thing I'll say is just as you sort of slide your eyes, I feel like I just want to do this. As you slide your eyes over these two lists that Paul mentions here, is God speaking to you?

[17:13] Maybe I'll just read them out for you again. Quarrelling. Jealousy. Anger. Hostility. Slander.

Gossip. Conceit. Disorder. Impurity. Sexual immorality. Sensuality. These are weaknesses, aren't they?

The way that we experience the resurrection power of God in these areas is what? It's repentance. In fact, that's what I've just said there.

That's the deepest shape or the archetype of this concept of God's power in our weakness. Because what we're doing is we're agreeing with God. We're saying, I am wrong. Can't be weaker than that.

When we repent, we're saying, I cannot save myself. That's the ultimate place of weakness. And what power looks like in that situation, the Lord's power in this is you're forgiven and you are restored.

[18:23] Isn't that wonderful? So, in summary here. Paul is following the way of the cross. Remember our sections are love, fear, truth.

Paul is following the way of the cross. He joyfully, sacrificially loves this church, but it's not an unclouded joy because with great love, there should come great concern.

Okay, thirdly, God's power and weakness looks like truth-telling. Here's what I mean. Just to remind you of a couple of verses here.

This one, actually. Verse 2 of chapter 13. So, Paul has just said, hey, I'm going to come and visit you soon. Just a reminder, I'm coming to visit in chapter 13, verse 1. Then in verse 2, he says, I warn those who sinned before and all others and I warn them while I'm absent as I did when present on my second visit that if I come again, not spare them.

So, Paul's going to come. He's going to discipline members of the church who are unrepentant. He says, I'm going to come, I'm going to tell the truth and I'm going to act on that truth. Now, I say that's a position of weakness.

[19 : 27] Why? Because who wants to be that guy? Who wants to be the guy that has to do that? That's really, really hard. Today, our culture too is, I mean, you are going to face such opposition there.

Today, our culture is so resistant to truth-telling that we've sort of thrown out the idea of truth altogether. You know, the postmodern thing of like, there's no truth. And if you think there is a single truth, well, you're a fundamentalist.

And that's about the worst postmodern insult there is. So, Paul is heading into the Corinth. He's going to warn them. He's going to judge them. He's going to discipline them. And there is a cost to doing that.

Last week, Sadie came home from school and the school had a special week, a special anti-bullying kind of week and a coalmine in his day called Pink Day. And 99% of what she was taught was wonderful.

It was fantastic stuff. But there's a few things that, around the area of sexuality and gender, which Amy and I kind of, we didn't like.

[20 : 31] We didn't think it was age-appropriate. Bumped up against some of our values in terms of what we think the Bible teaches about this stuff. And actually, you know, most of us thought it was bad science. So we made an appointment to see the teacher and the principal and we shared our concerns.

And, I mean, they were lovely Vancouverites, so they were polite and they listened. And we walked out of the meeting and Amy said, you know what's just happened, right? So what's that? And she goes, we were just fools for Jesus, weren't we?

And we realized the cost of having that meeting. And the cost is this. And another parent told us this. He said, well, you guys are that family in the school now, aren't you?

You know, you're the weird family. Folks, there is a cost to telling truth and acting on it. And you should expect that in our community here and in our relationship outside the community, we need to be prepared to be people that tell the truth.

We need to be truth-tellers. We need to do that in a loving way and there's going to be a cost. But we need to be prepared to tell each other the truth as well. We need to be prepared to call each other out on things. And we do that even though it's incredibly uncomfortable.

[21 : 52] But the stakes are high, friends. So we do it. Now, let me tie this whole thing together and finish up quickly. So back in 2 Corinthians 12 verse 9, I said this at the start, there's this summary statement.

I think it's the high point of the book. Paul sort of introduces the whole topic of weakness and he's praying for the thorn to be removed from his side and God says to him, my grace is sufficient for you for my power is made perfect in weakness.

Now, as a reminder, this is not some crazy new idea that Paul has come up with. It's not a new theology that he's sort of introducing to them. No, this is the storyline of the cross.

As one scholar says, on the cross, Christ wins through losing. He triumphs through defeat. He achieves power through weakness. Comes to wealth through giving it all away.

So, let's, people, friends, let's love sacrificially. And let's be engaged and concerned about one another's spiritual health.

[22 : 55] And let's be people when needed. Do the thing of speaking truth to one another. Even when it's really difficult. And if we do that, we will know the power of Christ and it will go forward in our lives.

Amen.