

1 Corinthians 1:26-31

Epiphany 5, February 5, 2023

Pastor Sam Rodebaugh

For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; ²⁸ God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, ²⁹ so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. ³⁰ And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, ³¹ so that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

OD Wilson. Jon Pall Sigmarsson. Doyle Kenady. Johnny Perry. Jesse Marune. Mike Jenkins. All of these men of varying ages and nationalities and backgrounds have more than a few things in common. For one thing, they were all among the strongest men in the world in their own times. They all competed in weightlifting and bodybuilding and strong man competitions and were all highly ranked globally. Another commonality is that all of them, tragically, died at young ages, many in their twenties or early thirties. And they *all* died from heart complications or heart attacks.

It is true that exercise is good for you, and that regular exercise is one of the best practices for both good physical and mental health. But it is also true that *extreme* weight training and competition does elevate one's risks for heart damage and rhythm disorders. It is generally best to follow that old adage: "Everything in moderation." Because it is possible to be too strong.

And that's not just true in terms of physical strength, that's also true in *many* areas of life. There's another saying, "Absolute power corrupts absolutely." That means that a person's sense of morality lessens as his or her power increases. And we see it all the time with politicians, with billionaires, with celebrities, with athletes—the more supposed power a person has, seemingly, the temptations to feel above the law, or to be faithless in your marriage, or to enforce your will upon other people—it all seems to increase. Again, it is possible to be too strong.

And that's also true when considering spiritual matters. In our text today, Paul is addressing a congregation in Corinth that felt rather strong in itself. It was a congregation that seems to have been suffering from boastfulness regarding their own strength of *learning*, their own strength of *love*, their own strength of *being right*. And so through much of this letter, Paul tears away the façade of strength to show that human strength means nothing. True strength, however, comes only from God, and it's given to those who are weak. Today, we'll be considering the theme:

Finding Inner Weakness

- I. By Myself: Strength Becomes Weakness
- II. With Christ: Weakness Becomes Strength

Inner strength is heralded by the world as one of the great qualities a person can have. If you're battling sickness, if you desire to advance in your career, if you are facing any sort of obstacle in life—inner strength is the key to overcome! If you can find that strength within yourself to persevere, the possibilities for your life are greatly expanded. Or, that's the world's message, anyway. And yet, in the verses right before our text, Paul explains that the most self-determined individual with all their inner strength is nothing before the Lord: "***Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? . . . For the foolishness***

of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.” (1 Corinthians 1:20ff) And that should tell you exactly what *God* thinks about man’s so-called strength, whether that be inner or outer. So rather than striving to find inner strength, today we will be **Finding Inner Weakness**.

So, I want each of you to take a moment to consider: What *is* your greatest weakness? What is that area of life that you seem to struggle with the most? And I don’t want you to be thinking in terms of a job interview, you know where you actually talk about a strength and try to pretend that it’s a weakness, like, “Sometimes I’m *too* motivated,” or, “Sometimes I care *too* much.” What are your *weaknesses*? Do you struggle with patience? Do you find yourself losing your cool much too quickly with your spouse, with your children? Do you recognize this within yourself and determine to not respond so sharply or angrily all the time, and yet you find yourself losing patience anyway? Or, perhaps, do you struggle with resentment? Someone wronged you, and you just find it very difficult to ever get over it? You want to, but you can’t. Or, maybe you even find that you resent yourself?

It is true, we all have a multitude of weaknesses, and we know our own weak points much better than anyone else does. Except, the fact that we *know* those things about ourselves leads me to believe that really none of those things are our *greatest* weaknesses. Rather, I would propose that our *weakest* points, our *greatest* vulnerabilities are actually those areas of life that we might consider strengths. So, maybe you should treat this as one of those job interviews where you claim your greatest weakness is that “you’re *too* motivated.” Because that type of approach isn’t far from the truth.

Consider the Christian church at Corinth to whom Paul is writing. They were sinners, and they knew their own weaknesses. But they also had an idea about what their strengths were and were very proud of their supposed strong suits. One example is addressed in chapter 8 of this letter. Certain members of the church were very proud of their strength of learning and understanding of God’s Word. (Certainly, a strength we’d all like to cultivate within ourselves.) In their understanding, this particular group knew that idols are not really gods and therefore are actually nothing.

At that time, it was extremely common for animals to be brought to the temples of idols to be sacrificed to them, part of that sacrifice then being sold to the local meat markets. And the debate was raging within the church at Corinth: should we be buying this meat sacrificed to idols? And the *wise* within the group explained, idols aren’t real, and nothing is happening when these heathen priests sacrifice animals to a statue. So, sure, of course we can eat it, it’s just ordinary meat! But not everyone was in agreement on the matter. So, some of the congregation had a very puffed-up attitude regarding their own wisdom and logic that they began making a big display of purchasing and eating the meat sacrificed to idols. The result was that many others were left distraught and scandalized, even going against their conscience and eating meat they felt they shouldn’t. So here we see an example of a supposed strength of learning among the group, that actually turned into a weakness that they didn’t recognize, as they used it to tear down the church.

Or another example can be found in chapter 5. There was a situation within the congregation where a young man was living in an incestuous relationship with his father’s wife. The congregation there considered this an opportunity to show the strength of their love, the strength of their open-mindedness, and they boasted about the whole thing. “Look how open-minded we are, that we recognize this as love and approve of it!” (Sound familiar at all in our day?) The problem clearly was

that what they regarded as a great strength of the group was actually actively putting some of the members into great spiritual peril! They didn't recognize that their supposed strength of love had actually become a blind spot and a weakness.

Do you think we could spot the same tendency within ourselves? We might have some real strengths of character, but **By Ourselves: Strength can easily become Weakness.** For example, maybe you find one of your strengths to be your confidence. But, how easily can that strength become weakness when our confidence becomes arrogance? Maybe you find one of your strengths to be your ability to tell it like it is. But, can't that easily become a weakness when it turns into simply being tactless and cruel? Or, maybe you're the opposite and really think *through* what you want to say before you say it, always striving to be as tactful as possible. But can't that easily give way to being deceitful? Not saying what you know you ought to say, simply because you're trying to not hurt anyone's feelings?

Perhaps the best example of this that I can think of in Scripture comes from the Apostle who's writing this letter. Before the Lord confronted him and dropped Paul to his knees, Paul was very certain of his strengths. He wrote to the Philippians: ***"If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless."*** (Philippians 3:4-6) Before his conversion, he believed that he was so strong in his service to the Lord, that even if you compared him to the religious elite, Paul stood head and shoulders above the crowd. And many others would have agreed. And yet, blinded by his supposed strength, he could not recognize just how weak and helpless he was before the Lord, *until* he was brought to his knees and blinded with the *Lord's* strength.

By Ourselves: Strength Becomes Weakness. And this is a real danger, because while it's easy to recognize our weaknesses, it's not always so easy to recognize our strengths that have become weaknesses. And while our weaknesses drive us to plead to the Lord for forgiveness and mercy, very rarely do we do the same for our supposed strengths! In fact, our strengths are more likely to cause us to feel like *worthy* candidates for God's love. But those same strengths are, in fact, often our greatest weaknesses.

Yes, we are *weak*. There's no way around it. We could not hope to deserve God's love! We could not hope to deserve God's praise! We are weaklings! And yet, here's the point of the text: God *chooses* the weak. *God* chooses to give love and praise to those who are weak, people just like you and me. Throughout the Bible, you find this frequent pattern of God choosing the weak to fulfill His purposes. Like Moses—a murderer, not at all an impressive speaker, had no confidence in his own leadership skills—and yet, God chose him to lead his people out of Egypt. When the Lord sent Samuel to anoint a new king from the sons of Jesse, *David* was chosen by God—David, who wasn't even considered strong enough to be included by his own father. Jesus' disciples were not among society's elite; some were even held as reprehensible to society, yet Christ chose them to carry His Word to the world.

This is Paul's point regarding the Corinthian congregation as well: ***"For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world,***

even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are.” If they were to simply look around the pews, they’d recognize that there weren’t any impressive dignitaries, any revered Pharisees, any highly regarded philosophers. They were ordinary people, weaklings by human reckoning. And we could do the same: if we look around our pews, we don’t have any celebrities, no Wall Street traders, no powerful politicians. We’re weaklings too. If you look around at our sister synods around the world, all of them are in some of the most impoverished countries on earth. *Why* is that?

The reason is not what Karl Marx would have you believe, that, “Religion is the opiate of the masses”—that is to say that religion is swallowed up by the poor because they have nothing else to cling to. The reason is also *not* that God has a vendetta against the wise or the wealthy or the powerful or the famous. No, *rather*, God delights in being a God of grace. God *delights* in loving people who do not deserve it. God *delights* to choose ***“what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.”*** God delights in *weaklings*. And He delights to *choose* weaklings.

It might seem counterintuitive to our reasoning. After all, if you were ever on the playground as a kid and got to pick your team, you started with the oldest and best players and worked your way down to the weaklings. Couldn’t God accomplish more with the best and brightest of society at His disposal? Well, let’s remember this: God already accomplished everything He needed to through His Son. And Jesus, who held all strength and yet chose weakness and chose the cross, likewise now also chooses you, *even though* you are weak. He chooses to forgive you, *even though* you constantly fail. And now, ***“You are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption.”*** That is to say that all that we lack due to our weakness, Christ has given to you in full. He’s done it all. That’s why I say, **With Christ: Weakness Becomes Strength.**

I know when I was younger, I used to be frequently troubled before attending the Lord’s Supper. I was afraid that because I was so weak due to my sin, that I couldn’t possibly deserve to receive Christ’s body and blood. I would find myself praying that God would help me to beat sin and temptation so that just one time I could attend the Lord’s Table and not feel like a total phony. And I was *partially* right, but I was also *greatly* mistaken. I was right in understanding that I couldn’t possibly deserve to attend Christ’s supper. But I was terribly wrong, wasn’t I, in thinking that there was the possibility of ever deserving to stand there on the basis of my own strength? If I had ever thought I that had achieved that goal, that would be another example of being *too* strong. Rather, it is a delight to know that God does not choose you and love you and forgive you and invite you to this Table *because* of your strength. No! Knowing that you lack the strength of will to defeat sin, knowing that you lack the strength of goodness to please God—God delights to use His strength to take care of it all for you. Knowing your weakness and knowing you need it forgiven, He invites you to this meal, with the assurance that His body and His blood is *“for you, for the forgiveness of your sins.”*

And so, while I said at the outset that it is possible to be *too* strong, it is *not* possible to be too weak. When we can recognize that we have nothing within ourselves to deserve God’s favor, **Finding that Inner Weakness**, and yet also have God’s Word on the matter that He forgives us and loves us in spite of it—the only thing we can do is boast in our Savior as He is the only strength we need. Thanks be to God, in Jesus’ name. Amen. ***“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”*** (Philippians 4:7) Amen.