

Southport Presbyterian Church
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But It's Not Good Enough
2 Corinthians 12:7-10

“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, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” (2 Corinthians 12:7-10, NIV)

Just about everyone here has probably heard the following words spoken, perhaps by a demanding coach, teacher, parent or employer. “But it’s not good enough!” We have all encountered perfectionists who, no matter how well we or others have done, tell us it’s not good enough. Our culture has this streak of perfection running through it that demands perfection in performance and safety, but interestingly not in morals. We want flawless work, reports, papers, games, quarters, innings, seasons, report cards, etc. How many have had parents or had friends with parents who said when you come home with all A’s and one B, “But what about that B? Your report card isn’t good enough. You need to get straight A’s!” This perfectionistic attitude has also crept into the church at times, which I will talk about later.

Concerning the issue of perfectionism, I believe it is both necessary and crucial for all Christians to keep in mind what Paul wrote in **2 Corinthians 12:9**: **“But he [God] said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ (NIV)** This verse is found as part of Paul’s defense of His apostleship and part of his sharing of an affliction of some sort that Paul wanted God to remove from him. There are many ideas as to what this may be. This “thorn in the flesh,” this “messenger of Satan” that tormented him. Whatever it was--a health issue or some other issue--Paul must have felt he’d be a better functioning apostle without it. Three times he pleaded for God to remove this, and every time God said, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” And because of this assurance from God, Paul goes on to say about all these weaknesses in his life: **“Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. 10 That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.” (2 Corinthians 12: 9b-10, NIV)** As we look at this passage, we see several important challenges to our culture of perfectionism.

The first thing we see is that God’s power is made perfect not in our own strength or perfection or excellence but in our weakness. God’s power is made perfect in weakness Paul says. God uses broken people. He doesn’t wait to use us until we have all the training we feel we should have. Nor does He wait to use us until we are completely healed of any and all afflictions that bother us or hinder us. Nor does He wait to use us until we are perfect—because we won’t

be until we reach Heaven. Rather God takes us as we are and uses us to be His instruments in the world.

When we look at Paul, we see he didn't have everything together in his life. He didn't have it all. We know from 2 Corinthians 11:6 that he was not a trained speaker. His appearance was not impressive either, according to **2 Corinthians 10:10**. He also had flaws in his Christian growth. Based on **2 Corinthians 12:7**, it appears that he may have had a problem with humility.

Paul was not perfect. His life was broken, too. He had weaknesses and flaws just like we do. But God...but God used Paul. He took Paul, who because of his appearance, would not stand out in a crowd and had him preach before large crowds. He took Paul who was not a trained speaker and had him speak before the intellectuals in his day on Mars Hill, in Athens, Greece. He had Paul start churches throughout the Mediterranean. He had Paul write letters to the churches; and God used him as an example of Christian character development through Paul's sharing what God had done in him, especially with the issue of humility. And in Acts we see that God had Paul speak before the rulers of his day—probably the Roman Emperor Nero himself. We read what God says about Paul in **Acts 9:15**: **“This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel.”** (Acts 9:15, NIV) The very weaknesses of Paul were no handicap to God. For God uses broken people.

I believe that when we focus on and emphasize perfection, we border on idolatry. The focus becomes what we do. It becomes our ability, our strength, that gets the glory, the credit, not God.

When we come before God with our brokenness, our weaknesses and our confession that we can't do it, He blesses it and allows His power to shine through just as He did in the life of Paul. God then is the one who receives the praise, the honor and the glory, not us!

Bruce Larson, in his book, *The Presence*, shares that “years ago during a prolonged steel strike in Pittsburgh, a layman named Dave Griffith felt God was trying to bring about reconciliation. He felt directed to try to call on both the union heads and the steel company executives and ask, ‘What is it God would want you to do?’ Now Dave had a serious, almost crippling stutter. Nevertheless, he went, and strangely enough, before long the strike was settled. Some time later one of the steel company executives told Bruce Larson ‘why the warring factions had listened to Dave in the first place.’ He said, ‘Nobody with a stutter like that would wade into that ticklish situation on his own power. God had to be in it.’” (Bruce Larson, *The Presence*, pp. 31-32)

Dave's weakness showed it was God at work, not Dave himself. God's power was made perfect in his weakness.

Second, these words in **2 Corinthians 12:9** acknowledge that human beings are flawed, broken and have weaknesses. We are not perfect despite what we and others may say or think.

This passage in **2 Corinthians 12** is part of a lengthy defense that Paul gives of his apostleship. Apparently some in Corinth criticized and questioned Paul's apostleship because he

didn't measure up or meet the criteria of what they felt an apostle should be. They apparently had their own standards for an apostle and Paul didn't fit it. He was not the perfect example of an apostle.

The issue of perfectionism has crept into the church today. Somehow we believe that we can be or do things perfectly. The word that is used in Christian circles is not perfection but "excellence." It has crept into the Body of Christ from the secular world by some Christian writers and pastors. The first time I read about excellence was in a book in the 1980s called *The Pursuit of Excellence* by Edward Dayton.

I do not use the word excellence to describe what a church or Christian organization should do because the only times I have ever heard or seen the term used was on tests or papers that were perfect. I believe the church is not called to perfectionism or excellence, but to do our best for the honor and glory of God. We can not be or do things perfectly because we are flawed, broken human beings. Only God and Jesus are perfect.

In addition, perfectionism and excellence can create all sorts of problems in the church or any Christian organization when we are relying on our own efforts, expertise, and ideas rather than on God's power being made perfect or manifest in our weakness or brokenness.

Daniel Schantz wrote these insightful words concerning the dangers of perfectionism or excellence. I suggest that you read this entire article on line. He really takes the church to task regarding using excellence: "The term excellence is often spoken by church leaders in condescending tones....We must have only the best.' This can be a slap in the face to members who don't have the capacity or means to be excellent—the 'good,' the 'fair,' the 'poor.'

"... The gospel was targeted to the poor, not just to the exceptional." (Daniel Schantz, "Recovering from Excellence," Nov. 4, 2007)

Perfectionism can also prevent people from praising or serving God because they feel they are not good enough. For example, I have seen people in churches refuse to sing hymns even on the most glorious days of praise such as Christmas and Easter because they feel they can't sing or someone told them their voice is so bad they shouldn't sing. It is a matter of the heart, not a good voice.

Personally, I have made mistakes in preaching over the years—mispronouncing words, forgetting a point. One of the most embarrassing mistakes was at a college chapel service where in front of the college president, I made the following mistake. I was sharing about how in a time in my life I had taken my eyes off of Jesus and gazed at the frightening situation around me instead of looking at Him, and how God had shown me what I had done. I said, "So I turned all my eyes on Jesus." I caught my mistake and quickly added, "Don't worry. I'm not a creature from outer space." People laughed and we moved on.

But early on God showed me I'd make mistakes in preaching. That was okay. His power would be made perfect in that mistake, my weakness. He showed me that if I continually feared making a mistake, I'd be too scared to preach and freeze up and be anything but natural.

Many times, perfectionism and excellence backfire in the Body of Christ, and we end with broken relationships because of demanding and perfectionistic people.

Perfectionism causes stress both in the perfectionist as well as those who live and work with one. While some coaches, teachers and parents may think saying, “It’s not good enough” will motivate kids who’ve done their best, it is actually very destructive. It can be guilt producing. It can cause anxiety that lasts into adulthood. It can make kids question their selfworth. They feel they are only loved and accepted if they are perfect.

Daniel Schantz writes: “Perfectionism is a disorder. At best, perfectionism is a bad habit, and, worse, it can be a form of salvation-by-works that leads to a breakdown.

“I’ve never met a perfectionist who was any more perfect than the rest of us, though some of them thought they were. Usually their idea of perfection involves doing things their way. The whole point of the gospel is that we can’t be perfect, without a lot of grace and forgiveness.” (Daniel Schantz, “Recovering from Excellence,” Nov. 4, 2007)

Concerning the unhealthiness of perfectionism, one Christian writes: “When do standards become unrealistic, so that life takes on a frantic, driven quality? How do we determine whether we value ourselves primarily for what we accomplish rather than for who we are?” (Denis Haack, reviewing *Perfecting Ourselves to Death: The Pursuit of Excellence and the Perils of Perfectionism* by Richard Winter)

We also need to learn contentment. Much of what drives perfectionism is an inability to be content with who we are, what we have achieved, what we have been given in life.

Paul wisely tells us: **“I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances.”** (**Philippians 4:11, NIV**) And what he lists as these circumstances are not perfect. The Bible also says **“godliness with contentment is great gain.”** (**1 Timothy 6:6, NIV**)

Finally, when we allow God’s power to be made perfect in our weakness, we understand what grace is. His grace is sufficient for us. We learn of the gift of grace—of God’s unconditional love for us that we can’t do a thing to earn God’s love.

Romans 5:8 says: **“But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”** (*NIV*)

Ephesians 2:8 says: **“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God.”** (*NIV*)

Hear this verse by Jesus that challenges all perfectionists: **“For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”** (**Matthew 9:13b, NIV**) Or as one Christian translates this verse: “For I have come to call sinners, not those who think they are already good enough.”

Concerning perfectionism, Christian author David Seamands writes: “At its most basic, perfectionism is the antithesis of grace.” [We focus on:]

- Self-reliance – we try to be our own saviors and sustainers
- Individualism – we forget that Jesus said, “apart from me you can do nothing”

Grace, however is:

- Grace is undeserved
- Grace is unearnable
- Grace is unrepayable
- “The greatest manifestation of grace is the Cross, and the Cross means that when God saw us at our worst, He loved us the most.”

“...We are most certainly called to respond to grace with obedience and service and sacrifice. But we are not to do these things in order to earn God’s grace, win His approval, or repay Him by trying to even up the credit-debit balance sheet...We do them not in order to win His love, but out of gratitude for His love. Not in order to earn His grace, but out of thankfulness for it.”

It is the difference between being a servant of a master—perfectionism—or the son of a master—grace.

“The servant is accepted and appreciated on the basis of what he does, the child on the basis of who he is.

“The servant starts the day anxious and worried, wondering if his work will really please the master. The child rests in the secure love of his family.

“The servant is accepted because of his workmanship, the son because of a relationship.

“The servant is accepted because of his productivity and performance, the child belongs because of his position as a person.

“At the end of the day, the servant has peace of mind only if he is sure he has proven his worth by his work. The next morning his anxiety begins again. The child can be secure all day, and know that tomorrow won’t change his status.

“When a servant fails, his whole position is at stake; he might lose his job. When a child fails, he will be grieved because he has hurt his parents, and he will be corrected and disciplined. But he is not afraid of being thrown out. His basic confidence is in belonging and being loved, and his performance does not change the stability of his position.” (David Seamands, “Growing Up In Christ, Leaving Behind the Things that Hold Us Back, Week 6: Perfectionism”)

God does not treat us like we are servants of a master but rather he treats us as the children—the sons and daughters of the Master! For that is what we really are!

Vance Havner in his book, *The Still Water*, writes: “God uses broken things. It takes broken soil to produce a crop, broken clouds to give rain, broken grain to give bread, broken

bread to give strength. It is the broken alabaster box that gives perfume... it is Peter, weeping bitterly [broken because he denied Jesus], who returns to greater power than ever." (Vance Havner, *The Still Water*) For God's power is made perfect in Peter's weakness.

Brothers and sisters, if we want to see revival in our lives, our families, our neighborhoods, our church, or other churches or any ministry, it will happen only when we drop perfectionism from our lives and instead do our best for the honor and glory of God, knowing it never will be perfect but that's okay because God's power will show through our flaws, our brokenness, our weakness.

Mark Batterson in *Wild Goose Chase* writes: "I don't want to do things I am capable of doing. Why? Because then I can take credit for them. I want to see God do things in me and through me that I am absolutely incapable of, so I can't possibly take credit for them." (Mark Batterson, *Wild Goose Chase*, p. 35)

The message many hear from the world is "but it's not good enough." But God says in **2 Corinthians 12:9: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."** (NIV) Our God is the God who uses broken, imperfect people.

Amen.