

## Grace Equal to Every Need

Jan. 16, 2011

### 2 Corinthians 12:6-10

<sup>6</sup>But if I wish to boast, I will not be a fool, for I will be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think better of me than what is seen in me or heard from me, <sup>7</sup>even considering the exceptional character of the revelations. Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated. <sup>8</sup>Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me, <sup>9</sup>but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. <sup>10</sup>Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.

### 1 Corinthians 1:1-9

Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes, <sup>2</sup>To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours:

<sup>3</sup>Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>4</sup>I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, <sup>5</sup>for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind— <sup>6</sup>just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you— <sup>7</sup>so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>8</sup>He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>9</sup>God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

I used to know a little boy named Jordan. Jordan was a little spitfire, full of mischief and trouble.

At 8 years old, he was small for his age, still little enough for me to pick up and give a big hug. Still small enough for me to hold onto when he was up to no good.

Jordan and I took a while to come to an understanding.

He had a habit of hitting other kids in the face without any reason whatsoever. He also stole anything he wanted, so I often had to check his pockets and sometimes his shoes!

He only pretended to do what I asked him to do. The minute I turned my back, he would get into trouble pretty much every time.

Because he was smaller than other kids, I guess he had a need to prove that he wasn't weak or puny, that he didn't have to listen or be obedient or follow the rules because he was so tough---a macho macho little guy with a mind of his own.

He had a reputation to uphold. His older brothers set bad examples for him and also encouraged him to be the baddest little bad dude he could be.

In a time and a place where being weak could be dangerous for him, he put up the toughest, strongest face he could.

And I think sometimes we do the same thing.

We have to project a certain image if we want to get the best job or the next promotion or not get sold something we can't afford or don't need.

We don't want to get taken advantage of or passed over or lose out on that job, so we put on a strong face, a tough face, sometimes kind of a bragging face

And we don't let anyone see that we're nervous or scared or unsure of ourselves, that maybe we're not the best or the brightest. We hide behind a false image of ourselves.

Sometimes we do all this in the name of "Fake it till you make it" and that's not necessarily all bad, as long as it helps us move along in the right direction.

But more often, we just keep on faking it. We fake that we're strong, independent, self-motivated, disciplined, that we don't need anyone's help, that we're okay when really, we're not.

We want people to think we are tough, strong men and women. If we're young, we want people to think we're more mature than we are. If we're old, we want people to think we're younger and still strong.

Even if we're falling apart inside, we put on a tough face and go out into the world.

Sometimes even in front of our families---even with our spouses --- we put on that strong face so that we won't worry them or scare them.

We are afraid that people will know we're afraid. We're afraid that our weaknesses will become public knowledge and that then we will be taken advantage of or that we will lose out on that promotion or that sale or whatever it is that we are hoping for.

We believe in survival of the fittest, and we define fittest as strongest, smartest, most powerful

Not weak and in need of help. If we are weak, if we need someone to help us, maybe it will be worse than not getting ahead. Maybe it will mean that we won't even survive!

Sometimes, at some level, we don't even admit that we need God. We get so busy living out the adage that "God helps those who help themselves" that we forget to let God help us at all.

We forget to ask God for help. We stop remembering to pray, "Help me, help me, help me!"

I think maybe the people of the Corinthian church were the same way. They also lived in a society that valued strength and intelligence and independence.

There's a hint of this in our passage from First Corinthians. In these first few verses of this letter, the apostle Paul introduces some of the issues that he will address later in the letter.

One thing he reminds them of is that God has given them gifts of speech and knowledge and every other spiritual gift.

He is reminding them that those gifts are from God, that speech and knowledge are not just their own greatness coming out, but that God has given them those gifts to be used for a reason.

They are gifts that are given by the grace of God.

Paul, in his letters, nearly always prays that the people reading them will receive the grace and peace of God given in Christ Jesus.

God's grace, in Paul's writings, is given to all of us. God is generous and faithful and loving ---all of this is God's grace given to us, embodied in the person of Jesus Christ.

Paul is very clear that without God's grace we can do nothing, that we cannot even hope to be the least bit holy or good.

This morning, in the passage from Second Corinthians, we heard Paul's words that God's grace is enough to help him get past all obstacles, even physical problems caused by the devil, that even when God does not heal our pains and our weaknesses, that

God's grace is enough for us!

By the grace of God we can still do what we are called to do,

By the grace of God we can still live worthwhile, meaningful, hope-filled lives, lives that have power despite our weaknesses.

By the grace of God, and not our own strength, we are called to be saints, called to be holy, called to be the church.

This was good news for the people who were the church in Corinth.

They lived in a society full of temptation, just like us, and we learn from Paul's letters that they did not always resist temptation any better than we sometimes do.

But even if they, and we, do not always act very holy, we are still called by God to be saints and live holy lives.

We will still come to the day of Christ without blame, because by the grace of God, we are forgiven, over and over again, not just seventy times seven, but as many times as we ask. God, in grace, shows us mercy and gives us forgiveness.

And all of our spiritual weaknesses and our physical problems don't matter much in the light of that truth.

All of our weaknesses, both moral and physical, don't get in the way of the grace of God. God's grace reaches us through all of the wrong-headedness, all of the thoughts that we are self-sufficient, all of the desire to be independent and strong, all of the pain and suffering we go through

God's grace is always there.

Lately it seems that there is much more bad news in our lives than there is good news. Watching the news on tv we see stories about shootings, wars, floods, terrible storms, murders, foreclosures, and on and on. Even in our own lives we know people who are dying or ill or struggling in many ways.

This week I made a decision to stop being so focused on bad news and start looking for incidents of joy and the goodness of humanity and good news in general.

And this is what I found to focus on instead.

The heroic actions of many people at the scene of the Tucson shooting. The Arizona legislature enacting a bill overnight to keep protestors away from the funerals of the shooting victims.

People stepping in to comfort a family who suffered a tragic loss. Scientific advances related to autism.

Closer to home we also have joys to focus on.

Liz found out she is healthy. Dennin is growing bigger and cuter every week. Kevin and Suzanne are expecting a baby. Alice and Haydee and Lenna have recovered from illness.

God's grace, given to us in these reasons to celebrate and give thanks. God's grace, given to us in the midst of sorrow and suffering.

God told Paul that God's power is made perfect in weakness. The Corinthians do not understand that yet, either in his first or second letters to them.

God is telling him, and us, that when we are weak, God is strong.

Because when we know we are weak, we turn to God for help.

As long as we are pretending, even to ourselves, that we are strong, we can handle it, we can do things on our own, we are do not rely on God. We deny our relationship with God and our need of God in a very primary way.

We do not recognize God's grace. We do not give God his place in our lives as our Lord.

By refusing to accept that we need God's grace, we do not let our relationship with God grow. We do not deepen our life with Christ.

But when we admit our complete dependence on God for everything we are, everything we do, everything we need, then that relationship becomes closer and more complete.

We become more holy because we are closer to the heart of God.

When we are weak, God's power becomes complete.

We allow God's power to take over where ours fails.

Relying on our own strength, we get to a point where that strength fails. When we rely on God's strength, it never fails. It continues on forever.

When we are weak, God's strength can come through us.

When we allow that to happen, we can do whatever it is that God calls us to do, whatever we need to do.

Paul has prayed for the grace of God to be with the people of Corinth. I believe that prayer is eternal and is his prayer for all of us today as well.

Grace alone has brought us together in this place.

Grace alone is what has made us who we are, both individually and together.

Grace alone sustains us and grace alone moves us out into the future that God desires for us.

And whether we recognize God's grace or not, it is there for us, giving us reason to rejoice in the midst of our problems.

Remember Jordan? By God's grace Jordan eventually learned to trust me, to accept my love, to follow my instructions. By God's grace he no longer felt the need to hit other children in the face or to steal whatever he could pick up.

By God's grace he is a hard-working young man, now 16, who is making the most of the strength and knowledge that he has.

But Jordan is not the only one who has changed.

By allowing God's grace to work through me, I am not the same person as I was before I met him. I could not have persevered in working with Jordan without grace.

I could not have found the good inside of that little spitfire of a boy without the grace of God to open my eyes.

Grace gave me the words to say to him and the eyes to see the good in him. Grace gave me the love for him that still fills my heart.

Grace allowed me to see Jordan with the eyes of Christ and to love Jordan with the heart of God.

This is the strength of God's grace----that Christ works within us to make us to be his body, the perfect holy body of Christ. Our weakness allows this work to be done, coming in through our cracks and broken places to fill them up with the grace sufficient for all of our needs.

Admit your weakness and your need of God, and allow God's grace to work in and through you to change both you and the world around you.

May God's grace surround you, fill you, and transform your life! Amen