

# **"II CORINTHIANS, WALK THRU THE BIBLE."**

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**First Christian Reformed Church, Lynden, WA**

**June 7, 2026, 6:00 pm**

**Text for Sermon: II Corinthians 1:1-7; 3:17-18; 4:5-7; 5:17-21; 12:7-10**

## **Introduction.**

Think for a moment of what is your image or perception of a great leader? What characteristics or qualities would you look for in a great leader?

Now think for a moment of what is your image or perception of a great Christian leader? What characteristics or qualities would you look for in a great Christian leader? Did adding the word Christian change your answer?

Is there a difference between the characteristics and qualities of a great president or prime minister or CEO and a great spiritual leader or pastor or elder?

By the world's standards a great leader is a strong personality, confident, successful, charismatic, articulate, speaks with authority, decisive, popular. They don't display signs of weakness or evidence of failures or flaws. Our culture tells us to play to our strengths, cover your weaknesses.

None of these qualities are necessarily wrong in themselves. They can be gifts from God. The problem comes when they become the primary measure of greatness. Outside appearances can be deceiving, shallow.

The church in Corinth was being divided by opinions about leaders and they were being taken in by strong preferences over personalities and images of success. They were caught up in the spirit of the age.

Just as the church in America is attracted to celebrity pastors, the Christians in Corinth had a worldly notion of what a leader should be, impressive, forceful, with a strong personality, eloquent, confident, strong. They admired success.

The church in Corinth had been infiltrated with what Paul called super apostles.

This was creating a public image problem for Paul. He was being shown up by an up and coming crowd of super apostles. These guys were real professionals, impressive, trained in rhetoric, masters of public speaking. They were dynamic, charismatic, with made for TV personalities. They were the celebrity pastors and conference speakers of the day, well dressed, tanned, they flew first class, they commanded big honorariums and sweet book deals. They had letters of recommendation. They boasted and bragged and made Paul look bad.

They used Paul's physical suffering, humility, and lack of worldly "success" as proof that he was an inadequate or illegitimate apostle. Various commentators have found clues to suggest Paul may have been short, bald, maybe spoke with a studder, and showed the wear and tear of having been persecuted. Not an imposing or impressive specimen of a human being.

Paul was fickle, vacillating in his decisions and commitments, he lacked the proper letters of recommendation. He was a poor speaker and a weakling.

**II Corinthians 10:10** For they say, "His bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account."

**II Corinthians 11:6** Unskilled in speaking.

**I Corinthians 2:1-5** And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. 2 For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. 3 And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, 4 and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, 5 so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

They criticized his unwillingness to accept pay for his labor among them. They mocked him for his weaknesses and especially for his defense of his weaknesses.

Paul was caught in an untenable position of having to defend himself when that went against his spirit of humility. But the Corinthian Christians were being played, they were impressed by appearances and not being discerning about the real character of these charlatans, these false apostles.

Paul had a closer relationship and deeper love for the church in Corinth than any other church.

He had personally planted this church on his second missionary journey. He stayed there a year and a half. He left it in the hand of Apollos. Later when reports of trouble came of sexual immorality, he wrote a letter of warning.

A year later while ministering in Ephesus members of Chloe's household reported divisions and Corinthian believers sent Paul a letter asking several questions, all of which Paul addressed in his second letter to them, our I Corinthians.

Between 1 and 2 Corinthians Paul made a brief emergency trip to Corinth. This visit was extremely difficult because some members openly challenged Paul's authority. After that painful visit Paul wrote a strongly worded letter calling for repentance (called by Paul the severe letter).

Later while Paul was in Macedonia, Titus came to him and reported that many Corinthians had repented and renewed their affection for Paul (2 Cor. 7:5–7). But there was reports of false apostles. So Paul was prompted write his fourth letter to them, our II Corinthians defending his apostolic ministry and warning about false apostles. A year later Paul would make a third visit to Corinth. It was during that visit that Paul wrote the letter to the Romans.

Paul poured his heart and soul into that Church. He had given them birth, they were as a son to him. He was brokenhearted over their division, their sin, their fickleness, their being so easily lead astray. As any parent would feel over a child.

This timeline explains why II Corinthians is such an emotional letter. It is the culmination of several years of pastoral labor, correction,

disappointment, suffering, repentance, reconciliation, and renewed affection between Paul and one of the most troubled churches he ever served.

II Corinthians is very different from I Corinthians. All of Paul's letters are in some ways personal, but II Corinthians is by far the most personal. This letter is the most biographical and least doctrinal of Paul's epistles. There is very little of a theological or moral nature here. It tells us more about Paul as a person and as a minister than any of the others. For this reason it is one of the least structured, bouncing from one thing to the next, and from one emotion to another.

Chapters 1-7, a defense of Paul apostleship.

Chapters 8-9, an appeal to give to the collection for the poor saints in Macedonia.

Chapters 10-13, a continued defense of his apostleship and ministry.

Paul exposes the false super apostles in an unconventional way. He doesn't take their bait and play their game. He does the opposite. Sort of like saying, "You accuse me of being weak, but you don't know the half of it."

"Instead of competing with them on their terms, Paul used their accusations to defend his unique ministry. Paul countered that a *true apostle imitates the crucified Christ*. He famously declared that he would "boast in his weaknesses," asserting that true power is found in humility and selfless service, rather than in wealth, charisma, or power."

Paul exposes his weaknesses and suffering.

**II Corinthians 1:8-9** For we do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of our trouble which came to us in Asia: that we were burdened beyond measure, above strength, so that we despaired even of life. 9 Yes, we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves but in God who raises the dead.

**II Corinthians 11:23-30** Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more

imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. 24 Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. 25 Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; 26 on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; 27 in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. 28 And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. 29 Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant? 30 If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.

When Paul finally gives in to blowing his own horn, he turns it against himself. You want to know what I brag about? My suffering, weakness, failure, persecution.

Paul lists at least 28 hardships, any few of which or even perhaps any one of which would have led us to early retirement.

He experienced more imprisonments than all the super apostles put together. He spent two years in prison in Caesarea waiting to be sent to trial in Rome. Five times he had his back ripped to shreds with the 40 lashes less one. Three times beaten with rods, once stoned and left for dead. Shipwrecked, sleepless, hungry, cold, naked.

And when he recovered he went to the next city to preach some more. His letters were written in blood. This book that we take for granted, has come to us at incredible cost, sacrifice, life.

Paul traveled thousands of miles, mostly on foot, often in pain, breaking new ground, forging into new uncharted territory. And in all of it his only boast, “When I am weak, then I am strong.”

**II Corinthians 3:5** Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God.

**II Corinthians 4:5–7** For what we proclaim is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake. ... 7 But

we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.

**II Corinthians 13:4** [Christ] was crucified in weakness, yet he lives by God's power. Likewise, we are weak in him, yet by God's power we will live with him to serve you.

Paul defends his apostolic ministry through what he has suffered. To Paul his daily experience of suffering and death are from God and used by God to reveal the glory and power of God.

Paul's suffering is his credentials, his resume. He called the believers his credentials, proof of his ministry and apostleship.

The greatest display of God's presence, power, and glory in this fallen world is on the cross.

Paul is weak, weak in the way Christ was weak. Paul's endurance and Christ-like behavior, made possible by the grace of God, displays the true characteristics of greatness.

God always uses what is weak, foolish, flawed, weak to advance His purposes and reveal His glory. All the patriarchs were flawed sinners. Moses couldn't speak. The apostles were unschooled, unimportant, unimpressive.

In his earlier letter to the Corinthians, Paul laid out this vision for God getting glory from the local church in this way: "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong" (1 Cor. 1:27).

**II Corinthians 12:7-10** So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. 8 Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. 9 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 of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 10 For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults,

hardships, persecutions, and calamities. *For when I am weak, then I am strong.*

“When I am weak, then I am strong.” This is the crescendo of Paul’s final letter to the church at Corinth. God turns upside-down our intuitive expectations of how the world works.

Paul confronts our worldly outlook with a theology of the cross, of dying to ourself, of serving others, of suffering for the sake of Jesus. This is the other worldly logic of the Gospel. This is the true path to lasting joy and peace.

Christ's power in weakness is the central theme of the entire letter. Paul's “thorn in the flesh” teaches dependence on grace. True Christian strength comes through union with Christ, not self-sufficiency. The Christian life is lived not by our strength but by Christ's sufficient grace.

Paul uses the paradox of Christ’s weakness as evidence of God’s presence and power at work in Paul’s life. God is more glorified by using weak vessels for His glory.

My grace is sufficient.

My – God’s grace, from heaven. Not like the world.

Grace – unmerited, undeserved, exchanged for our sin, our unrighteousness.

Is – present tense, now, always.

Sufficient – enough, all you need, and more than you can ask or imagine.

Super abounding. It is as inexhaustible as the ocean. He who did not spare His own Son, what more will He not give to us?

This is the only logical posture for a jar of clay.

**II Corinthians 4:7** We have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.

*When I am weak, then I am strong.*