

"The Difference between Potent and Impotent Is Mostly the 'I'"

Text: 2 Corinthians 12:1-10

God grant to each of you the grace to recognize all the many gifts that he himself has given to you – the myriad of blessings that are yours this very moment – chief of which is saving faith in your Savior Jesus Christ, together with the eternal life that is already also therefore yours. Amen.

Dear Fellow Christians:

Do you know what a contrarian is? It's a person who takes up and defends a contrary view on pretty much everything he can, especially when those positions are opposed by the majority. The more unpopular a position is to the majority, the more a contrarian likes it.

Tempting, isn't it? Our society is getting so much wrong these days that it's tempting just to adopt the opposite view and to thereby know that you will be right way more often than you are wrong. It's getting almost to the point that if a university professor is *for* something, I am probably *against* it. If he is *against* something, I am *for* it.

While this is obviously an exaggeration, it is not an exaggeration to say that at least as often as not we can use the world as a counter-indicator, a reverse barometer. If *they* think one way, then God probably wants us to think in opposite terms. This is one reason we return again and again to a study of God's Word. Many of the truths taught to us by our God in our Bibles are counter-intuitive; that is, God's truths very often not only run counter to that which society accepts as true, they are contrary to what *we would expect to be true*. If that weren't the case, we wouldn't need to stick so close to our Bibles, would we? We could just let the most recent poll or our own common sense determine what we do and don't believe. We could ask our reasonable friends and neighbors what they believe and make that our truth.

Clearly it doesn't work that way, which is why again this morning we trust God's Word alone to serve as our guide to understanding truth. In fact the text that will guide us this morning provides the perfect example of just how contrarian God's truth often is, for here we will again be exposed to divine truth that runs absolutely contrary to that which the world considers not only true but *obviously* true. That text is found recorded in Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians, the 12th Chapter:

ESV 2 Corinthians 12:1-10 *I must go on boasting. Though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. ² I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven--whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God*

knows. ³ And I know that this man was caught up into paradise-- whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows-- ⁴ and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter. ⁵ On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses. ⁶ Though if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me. ⁷ 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.

These are the words of our God – his very words! Confident that with his very words forming the basis of our meditation the Lord will keep his promise to richly bless us, so we pray: **"Sanctify us by Your truth, O Lord. Your word is truth!"** Amen.

Did you catch the obvious contrarian message in our text? Pretty hard to miss, isn't it? While the world and common sense both tell us that we are strong when we are strong, God here tells us that we are actually strong when we are weak. While that seems to make no sense whatsoever, since God's Word tells us it is true, our job is not to question whether or not such an enigmatic statement is true. Our job is to learn how and why it *is* true. Our theme for this morning points us in the right direction: *The Difference between Potent and Impotent Is Mostly the 'I.'*"

To begin to get a handle on this seemingly contradictory truth, go back to our gospel lesson for this morning. The section of Mark 6 that we read told of Jesus' return to his home country – the area where he grew up. There we read about one of only two places (that I am aware of) where the Bible records that Jesus "marveled." The other was recorded in Luke 7 when Jesus *marveled* at the faith of the Centurion. Here Jesus marveled for the opposite reason. Here he marveled at the stubborn *lack* of faith of those in his own home region, so much so that he could perform almost no miracles among them. The key here comes in understanding *why* the people of Galilee (probably the cities of Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Nazareth in particular) immediately doubted that Jesus could be anyone truly special. The reason for their immediate skepticism and doubt was that Jesus was familiar to them. He was common, known, and above all else he was unimposing according to the world's way of reckoning. Because he had no uncommon physical strength or stature, they

dismissed him as ordinary and rejected him even as a leader, let alone the Promised *Savior*.

Christians also tend to confuse physical, mental, or emotional strength for spiritual strength; just as we also tend to misread spiritual danger signals. Apathy, for example, is often regarded as a sign of spiritual strength. In other words, if I don't feel like I need to go to church, read the Word of God, attend Bible classes and the like, that means that I am already strong and don't need those things. Point out the problem to apathetic Christians and the response is *always* something like: "I'm fine. Don't worry about it." The *delusion* behind such words is false notion that the apathetic individual actually has deep spiritual reserves – inner strength that will carry him through.

The first message of our text for this morning is simply: *On your own, you are not as strong as you think you are. In fact the biggest problem here is you, and your inflated opinion of your own personal strength.*

The Apostle Paul was obviously one of the strongest Christians in the history of the Church. Yet Paul was also thoroughly human and therefore also a lousy sinner. He too had at one point in his life fallen victim to the world's ideas of how things get done on this earth. Paul no doubt believed that the gospel message he preached to the world would have a much greater impact and enjoy much greater success if only God would remove from his life the "**thorn in the flesh**" that God had allowed to torment him. His logic makes sense to us, but not to God.

What exactly was this "**thorn in the flesh**"? We aren't told – which in fact teaches us that it really didn't matter what it was. Paul recognized it as the measure employed by God to keep him humble and to teach him, moment by moment, a supremely valuable lesson.

Oh that our Lord would not only give each one of us our own "humbler," but also that he would give us the spiritual insight to recognize and thank him for what it is!

Paul needed such a reminder not only because of the great things that had been shown *to* him, but also because of the great things accomplished *through* him. When Paul in our text refers to "**the surpassing greatness of the revelations**" he is most likely referring to the special visions of heaven that had been given to him, as well as the direct revelation he received from Jesus himself after his conversion. These visions obviously set him apart as something special. God the Holy Spirit used the preaching of Paul to convert thousands. For all of this Paul recognized the need for something from the Lord's hand to humble him. Whatever it was, Paul came to refer to his special humbler as his "**thorn in the flesh.**"

Note the measure of Paul. He did not ask for the thorn to be removed so that he would not have to suffer from it any longer. He asked so that his proclamation of the gospel might be delivered with more strength and power. Again, God's message to Paul was clear – "*Your strength does not accomplish my will. I accomplish my will through you.*" To make that point clear to all in Paul's day, Paul's thorn was left to humble him, and to remind him of the words of his God: "**for my power is made perfect in weakness.**"

Do not pass these words over lightly, for they are precious jewels from our God. Study them and meditate on them until you understand them. When God says, "**My grace is sufficient for you,**" he is here telling Paul (and each one of us through Paul) that we do not need and therefore should not expect anything from our God beyond his grace, his undeserved love. This is not because God is stingy with his gifts; it is because there is no greater, longer lasting, more valuable gift to be given. Physical strength will fail. God's grace will not. The most stubborn determination will come to an end. God's grace will not. Even the most unrelenting stamina will finally play out. God's grace will not.

While this would have been comfort enough for Paul, God continued with these truly powerful words: "**For my power is made perfect in weakness.**" A better translation would be: "**For my power is brought to completion in connection with weakness.**" The word translated in our text as "**made perfect**" comes from the same root as the word used by Christ on the cross at the moment of his death when he said, "**It is finished!**" The "**strength**" or power of God is already perfect. It does not need man to make it perfect. Yet the *goal* of that power of God in man is *brought to completion* only when man is stripped of the last of his own strength and pride. Only then is he a fitting instrument for the Lord's service.

Paul goes on: "**Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.**" A light came on for Paul when the Lord refused his third plea to have his thorn removed. He learned that he can only be strong in the Lord when he is weak in himself. Only then, he says in our text, will that "**power of Christ rest upon me.**" (Literally: "**the power of Christ is spread over me like a tent.**") When I am the weakest, Paul says, that is when the power of Christ is the strongest in me and through me. "**For when I am weak,**" he concludes, "**then I am strong.**"

Now while it is most certainly true that we are actually much weaker than we think, in acknowledging this fact we then become stronger than we will ever realize, for it is then that the *power of Christ* lives and works in and through us.

Scripture Readings

You want to know when and where this truth is most clearly seen? When a Christian lies helpless on a sickbed – seemingly at the mercy of the doctors and the medication he is given. While the apathetic, hanging-by-a-thread Christian most often does not feel the need for the power of God's Word in his life, he often craves that same power in times of crisis. The irony is that we are actually the strongest at those times when we are flat on our backs and must cast ourselves fully and helplessly upon the Lord. It is then that you are the strongest, not as the world reckons strength, but as God sees it. When you despair of the mirage of your own power and turn to God for your strength, that is when you are the strongest. It is then, in your weakness, that you are the most powerful, for then the power of Christ rests upon you, and works in you, in fullest measure.

What then is that power of God? What exactly is it good for? How does it manifest itself? It is the pure, simple joy and peace which comes in knowing that every single sin has found full and complete forgiveness in the death of our Lord Jesus Christ. Sin lies at the very core of every single problem here on earth. Jesus Christ offers the full, perfect, complete solution to that greatest of all problems. His simple solution is that he took our sin upon himself, and credited his own perfection to our account. God the Father has accepted Jesus' payment as sufficient to pay for every single sin – the whole world over. Not one sin has been left without a payment. Jesus did that for every one of us. You too have been rescued, ransomed, cleansed.

Yet such great gifts are never the true possession of the strong and proud man who imagines that he can solve his own sin problem, even in part. To even attempt to pay for our own sins with our own good works is to reject Jesus Christ, and to choose a path that can lead only to eternal punishment in hell. That is when the gospel ceases to be potent and is instead made impotent. It's mostly when we insist on including the "I" in our estimation of how things get done.

How weak and pathetic in God's eyes is the proud mortal who imagines that he stands tall in his own strength. Yet how truly powerful is the child of God who has learned to despair of his own power and ability. How potent is the message of salvation when the "I" is removed – when man realizes that our strength *in all things* truly comes from God alone. When human beings learn to despair of their own strength, and trust instead in the power of their God, then great things are accomplished, problems are solved, Godly decisions are made. It is also then that the credit is directed where it always and only belongs – to God, never to man.

Find true strength in your God. Trust in his power, his word, his grace. That's when you are strong – in the eyes of your God and therefore also in truth. Such strength is indeed limitless beyond our comprehension because it is not yours, it is God's. Amen.

ESV **Ezekiel 2:1-5** And he said to me, "Son of man, stand on your feet, and I will speak with you." ² And as he spoke to me, the Spirit entered into me and set me on my feet, and I heard him speaking to me. ³ And he said to me, "Son of man, I send you to the people of Israel, to nations of rebels, who have rebelled against me. They and their fathers have transgressed against me to this very day. ⁴ The descendants also are impudent and stubborn: I send you to them, and you shall say to them, 'Thus says the Lord GOD.' ⁵ And whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house) they will know that a prophet has been among them.

ESV **Mark 6:1-13** He went away from there and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. ² And on the Sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astonished, saying, "Where did this man get these things? What is the wisdom given to him? How are such mighty works done by his hands?" ³ Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? And are not his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him. ⁴ And Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honor, except in his hometown and among his relatives and in his own household." ⁵ And he could do no mighty work there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and healed them. ⁶ ¶ And he marveled because of their unbelief. And he went about among the villages teaching. ⁷ ¶ And he called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. ⁸ He charged them to take nothing for their journey except a staff--no bread, no bag, no money in their belts-- ⁹ but to wear sandals and not put on two tunics. ¹⁰ And he said to them, "Whenever you enter a house, stay there until you depart from there. ¹¹ And if any place will not receive you and they will not listen to you, when you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them." ¹² So they went out and proclaimed that people should repent. ¹³ And they cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and healed them.

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Sixth Sunday after Pentecost – July 5, 2015

The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

The Opening Hymn – 424 (Red Hymnal)

"My God My Father Make Me Strong"

The Order of Service – Supplement page 12ff. (Brown Hymnal)

The Scripture Lessons: (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

The Old Testament Lesson: (Ezekiel 2:1-5) We read these words this morning noting especially the stubborn rejection that God's prophets have routinely faced when bringing the Word of God to sinners. We witness the same rejection in our decadent society today. Yet we also recognize that there is but one source of power that can break through the barrier of unbelief – God's Word – and that God continued to send his prophets, as he sends also us today. Though man may continue to reject the Word, we cannot fail to bring that Word into their lives.

Psalm 91 (Supplement page 33) (Brown Hymnal) (Read Responsively)

The Gospel Lesson: (Mark 6:1-13) The stubbornness of unbelief is demonstrated nowhere more clearly than when the Jews rejected both the words and the miracles of the Son of God himself. Jesus was known to them from childhood on, and they used that familiarity to justify their unbelief. Surely this will rise up to condemn them on the last day. Yet again we note that Jesus continued to teach, despite the opposition and rejection that he encountered. Jesus, again, is our perfect example.

The Confession of Faith -

The Apostolic Creed – page 15 (Brown Hymnal)

The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 528 (Verses 1-6) (Red Hymnal)

"If God Himself Be For Me"

The Sermon – Text: 2 Corinthians 12:1-10 (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

"The Difference between Potent and Impotent Is Mostly the 'I'"

The Offertory – (Supplement page 16 insert)

The Post-Sermon Hymn - 551 (Red Hymnal)

"Be Still My Soul"

The Offering

The Prayer followed by the Lord's Prayer

The Benediction

The Closing Hymn -577 (Red Hymnal)

"God Bless Our Native Land"

Silent Prayer

Welcome! - We warmly welcome any visitors who might be with us this morning and invite you to join us every Sunday at this time. St. Paul is a congregation in fellowship with the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC) – a conservative Lutheran synod with churches and missions throughout the United States, as well as Canada, India, and Africa. We are glad you are here. Thank you for letting us share the Word of God with you. Please record your visit in our Guest Book, and come again!

Attendance - Last Sunday (39) Average (52)

This Week at St. Paul:

Today	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service
	-11:00 a.m.	– Coffee/Fellowship Time
Next Sunday	-10:00 a.m.	– Sunday Worship w/communion
	-11:15 a.m.	– Coffee/Fellowship Time

CLC News – Michael Schierenbeck is considering the call to Faith of Markesan. Collette Krause has returned the call to Trinity School of Watertown. That congregation has now called 2015 graduate Leah Ude.

VBS – Vacation Bible School dates are July 30-31 (a Thursday and Friday). Please mark the dates on your calendar and note especially the change from previous years to a Thursday-Friday schedule.

Church Picnic – Also please note on your calendar the date for our annual Church Picnic, which has been scheduled for Sunday, August 30.

Our Nation – There is very little in our lives that is good that we do not also take for granted. Our nation is no exception. For hundreds of years we have enjoyed unprecedented freedom and prosperity, yet those blessings are now arguably more in peril than at any other point in our nation's history. The cause ought to be obvious, as God has little reason to bless any nation that both rejects him and immerses itself in immorality and decadence. As Christians, our citizenship is in heaven. Yet Christians also have an obligation to be good citizens here on earth. We can show our love for God and country no more clearly than by freely sharing sin and grace with all who will hear. Mankind, and our Republic, have no other hope.