



POWER IN WEAKNESS | THE AUTHENTIC LEADER

September 14, 2025

Last week we began a new sermon series focused on the Apostle Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. This is, without a doubt, the most personal, the most painful, and the most passionate of all of Paul's letters. Here Paul does not hide his feelings or even his wounds, but he openly shares his heart with a level of transparency and vulnerability that might surprise us coming from an apostle. And through it all, he reveals the central theme, which is this: God's power is made perfect not in human strength but in human weakness. And for that reason, I've suggested that 2 Corinthians is the letter for our time.

The Church today is facing a credibility crisis. The Church and its leaders are no longer considered credible, and last Sunday I offered five interrelated factors that are contributing to this credibility crisis of the Church. The first is a general loss of trust in institutions and their leaders, and the church is no exception. The second factor is church scandals — whether you're talking about financial misconduct, moral failures, or sexual abuse. The third factor is partisan politics. Christians are increasingly seen as embracing partisan politics on both the left and the right, and the divisions within our political world are not only becoming more fractious but more dangerous. The fourth factor is celebrity culture. Some Christians have succumbed to the excesses of celebrity culture by placing a higher value on charisma than character. The fifth factor is simply cultural irrelevance. More people, especially those of younger generations, perceive Christians as being callously unconcerned about the questions and doubts that many people have today, saying they've turned a blind eye and heart to them.

But that's what makes 2 Corinthians the letter for our times, because though you may not have realized it before, the Apostle Paul faced a credibility crisis of his own, specifically as it related to the church in Corinth, which he founded — a church located on that narrow little isthmus that separated the north of Greece (Macedonia) from the south of Greece (Achaia).

Of course Paul's situation was different. He lived in a very different world. And yet the way in which he responded to this credibility crisis is deeply instructive for us. In contrast to all the ways in which many misguided Christian leaders have contributed to that problem (which has led to pervasive cynicism toward church leaders), the Apostle Paul insists on the importance of authenticity in leadership, integrity in ministry, sincerity in one's commitment to Christ, humility in service, and then finally generosity of spirit, especially toward those with whom we might disagree.

So in the specific section that is before us today, Paul addresses a number of false criticisms that had been leveled against him, and this really is amazing, because here Paul doesn't get defensive. He defends his ministry, but he doesn't get defensive. And he doesn't boast in his power or position, but rather he insists on sacrifice and service. Through the entire letter, therefore, he gives us a vision of the Church's leadership, a

vision of the Church's message, and a vision of the Church's mission, all of which are shaped by the cross of Jesus. And therefore he gives us a picture of what it means to be a fully formed follower of Jesus Christ.

So what I'd like us to do during our time together today is see what we can learn by focusing on two things in this passage. Let's see what we can learn about: 1) *the false criticisms of Paul*, and 2) *the faithful promises of God*.

¹ ¹²For our boast is this, the testimony of our conscience, that we behaved in the world with simplicity and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God, and supremely so toward you. ¹³For we are not writing to you anything other than what you read and understand and I hope you will fully understand—¹⁴just as you did partially understand us—that on the day of our Lord Jesus you will boast of us as we will boast of you.

¹⁵Because I was sure of this, I wanted to come to you first, so that you might have a second experience of grace. ¹⁶I wanted to visit you on my way to Macedonia, and to come back to you from Macedonia and have you send me on my way to Judea. ¹⁷Was I vacillating when I wanted to do this? Do I make my plans according to the flesh, ready to say “Yes, yes” and “No, no” at the same time? ¹⁸As surely as God is faithful, our word to you has not been Yes and No. ¹⁹For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you, Silvanus and Timothy and I, was not Yes and No, but in him it is always Yes. ²⁰For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory. ²¹And it is God who establishes us with you in Christ, and has anointed us, ²²and who has also put his seal on us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee.

²³But I call God to witness against me—it was to spare you that I refrained from coming again to Corinth. ²⁴Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, for you stand firm in your faith.

² ¹For I made up my mind not to make another painful visit to you. ²For if I cause you pain, who is there to make me glad but the one whom I have pained? ³And I wrote as I did, so that when I came I might not suffer pain from those who should have made me rejoice, for I felt sure of all of you, that my joy would be the joy of you all. ⁴For I wrote to you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you.

2 Corinthians 1:12-2:4

Background

I'd like to begin by telling a funny little anecdote that is meant to illustrate a point. Let me give you a little spoiler though, because I don't want to make anybody nervous. This story is actually about a golden retriever, but you wouldn't think that upon hearing it at first.

Let's imagine that you're sitting outside, drinking a cup of coffee, and then you notice a man in a suit with sunglasses pacing nervously back and forth in front of a Lincoln

Navigator with dark tinted windows. You can't help but overhear his conversation on his cell phone, and this is what you hear: "Well, it happened again. We've got a big problem, and it's not gonna go away.... Well, what can I say? He got himself into trouble, and I can't help him this time.... No, I can't leave him in the Navigator. He stinks.... No, this is, this is a two-person job. I can't do this on my own. And you need to come quick."

So at this point you think, well, this guy must be the mob, and he's trying to dispose of a body. But then you hear him say, "And don't forget the special shampoo. And bring lots of towels." And then he opens the car door to the Navigator, and out bounces this golden retriever. And with one whiff, you can tell that this dog has been sprayed by a skunk... and apparently not for the first time.

I tell that little vignette because it illustrates the challenge of trying to solve a little mystery when you only hear one side of a conversation. And that is precisely the problem that we encounter when we come to 2 Corinthians. I had a seminary professor who told me that you have to remember when you're reading the letters of Paul — and especially when you're reading 2 Corinthians — that you're reading somebody else's mail, and you only have access to one half of the correspondence. So let me explain a little bit of the background and the context.

Paul's relationship with the church in Corinth spanned about seven years. Over that seven-year period, Paul paid three trips to Corinth and wrote four letters. But we only have letters two and four, which we know as 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians. So here's the sequence of events. Visit number one was Paul's initial visit to Corinth. He spent a year and a half there when he founded the church before sailing across the Aegean Sea to Ephesus, located on the western coast of what we now know as modern day Turkey. Then he makes a second unplanned emergency visit to deal with some kind of disciplinary or moral issue, and he refers to this as a "painful visit" in our passage today, 2 Corinthians 1. Because while Paul was away in Ephesus, new teachers had slipped into Corinth and were trying to discredit Paul in the eyes of the people in the city there. So eventually Paul returns for a third and final visit — so three visits and four letters.

The first letter that Paul wrote he refers to as "the previous letter" in 1 Corinthians 5 because it preceded the second letter, which we know as 1 Corinthians. After he left Corinth after that painful visit, he wrote a third letter which he refers to as a "sorrowful letter" because it caused sorrow because he was writing to them in order to address the issues that had popped up while he was there. And then finally he writes a fourth letter in preparation for his third and final visit to Corinth. That fourth letter is what we know as 2 Corinthians. So with that background in place — three visits, four letters; the first and the third are lost, the second and the fourth are 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians — now we can address the false criticisms that were leveled against Paul.

The False Criticisms of Paul

Well, actually, there are too many false criticisms to name here, so we'll have to deal with them as they come throughout the rest of the letter. But what we need to know

now is that though they were in the minority, there was a group of detractors who were trying to turn people against Paul. And what we can see here is that they were falsely accusing him of being: 1) *unimpressive*, 2) *unreliable*, and 3) *unloving*.

Unimpressive

First, they accused him of being unimpressive. After Paul left Corinth for Ephesus, this group of people slipped into Corinth and presented themselves as being super-apostles. If Paul was an apostle, they were “super-apostles,” and compared to themselves, Paul was rather unimpressive. They boasted in their so-called letters of recommendation, in their theological credentials, in their elevated, lofty, dramatic spiritual experiences, and they took great pride in their speaking ability. They were people of eloquence. They said that they had mastered the art of Greek rhetoric. By comparison, Paul didn’t carry any letters of recommendation, and they considered him to be a bit of an amateur. They thought he was a terrible public speaker. He might have been able to write bold, tough letters, but in person, they said, he was weak and timid. So they had a glossy image of themselves, and for that reason, they thought that they were the real deal, whereas Paul was nothing more than an imposter.

Now, what I find interesting about this is that the more things change, the more they stay the same. The church today is still susceptible to the glossy image. People still are drawn to leaders who set themselves up as being something super, something special, something extra. It seems we still value charisma over character. We flock to people who seem to be more focused on their image and their influence than anything else. And then — what a shocker; surprise, surprise — we discover that it was really all show and no substance.

But what I want you to see is how Paul responds to this accusation that he was unimpressive, beginning in verse 12. He says, you want me to boast? You want me to show off? Okay, I’ll boast in this: I’ll boast in the fact that I have wracked my conscience, and my conscience will bear me witness that Timothy, Silas, and I and all of our other companions, in all of our dealings with you, in all of our interactions, acted with godly simplicity and sincerity. I’ll boast in that: We acted with simplicity and sincerity.

What is sincerity? I like to picture it as a clean, clear mountain lake, and you can see straight to the bottom because it’s so clean and clear. To be sincere before God means what you see is what you get. There’s no hidden agenda. There are no ulterior motives. In verse 14, he goes on to say, look, if you want to boast, let’s boast in the Lord. None of us would be able to stand before him if it weren’t for the work of grace in our lives. All the credit goes to him. And so on the final day, when we stand before the Lord, we can boast in you and you can boast in us, but not because of anything we’ve done; it’s all entirely the work of God.

Unreliable

So Paul addresses this accusation that he was unimpressive, but secondly they accuse him of being unreliable because he changed his travel plans. We could refer to his travel plans as plan A and plan B. When Paul makes this second unplanned emergency visit to Corinth, he informs them that because of the situation, he’s going to change his plans. He’s going to adopt plan B, which means that he’s going

to come back and visit them two more times rather than just once. He says in verse 16, I wanted to visit you on my way to Macedonia and again on my way back from Macedonia so that you might have a second experience of grace.

But after that second painful visit went so poorly because of these detractors who had turned the people against him, Paul resumes his original plan A. When he is back in Ephesus, he thinks this over and he decides, well look, if that most recent trip didn't go so well, another one right on its heels probably won't be much help. So let's just give it time. Let's let things cool off a little bit. And so instead of immediately going back to Corinth, he writes that third letter, that "sorrowful letter," to deal with the issues at hand. And even though it was hard to write, and even though it caused them some sorrow, it did the trick, because the people came around. They addressed the issues that had popped up, and they recommitted and renewed their love and commitment to Paul.

The only problem is that Paul's critics seized on this. "Well, first he had plan A, and then plan B, and then he went back to Plan A." They seized on this and accused Paul of being unreliable. They said that he was vacillating — that he made his plans in a worldly way rather than relying on godly wisdom, and therefore he couldn't be trusted. This is all just a form of deception. Paul was using his position to manipulate and control.

Now I think that as it turns out, this little episode provides us with a lesson about how to handle relationships within churches, because this happens in churches all over the world, down through the centuries, all the way to the first century. It's so easy for confusion to emerge when there's misunderstanding and miscommunication, and so Paul reveals the dangers: the dangers of making assumptions, jumping to conclusions, ascribing motives to other people, forming unkind opinions of other people based on hearsay or gossip rather than the facts.

Accordingly Paul very carefully walks the Corinthians through what actually happened. In verse 23 he says, "As God is my witness, the reason why I refrained from coming to Corinth right away was to spare you pain, not to inflict it upon you." Yes, Paul had some hard things to say in the letter that he wrote, and yes, he didn't come back right away, but this wasn't some manipulative attempt to lord it over them as if he was just throwing his weight around. Instead, he makes clear that there's only one Lord. He's not lording it over anybody. Jesus is Lord, and Paul says, "Silas, Timothy and I, my companions, all we are is servants. And we're servants who are not only working with you, but we're working for you. And what is our ultimate goal? It's simply your joy. That's what we're working for. That's what we're striving toward."

Unloving

So Paul addresses this criticism that he was unreliable, but the final criticism was perhaps the worst, which was that they accused Paul of being unloving. The critics purposely try to turn people against Paul by saying, "Look, the reason why he didn't come back to you, the reason why he wrote that painful letter, is because he doesn't love you. He doesn't care about you. He only cares about himself." But Paul responds by saying that nothing could be further from the truth. He was so committed to them that he says in verse 2 of chapter 2 that their pain is his pain. If they're in pain, he

feels it too. And if they're in pain, the only thing that would make him glad is if their relationship was reconciled.

So no, Paul wasn't on some power trip. He says in verse 4 that he wrote out of much affliction with anguish of heart and with many tears. Just picture Paul back in Ephesus, stooping over that paper by candlelight with the anguish in his heart and the tears dripping down his cheeks, landing on the letter itself. He says the reason why he wrote was not to cause pain but rather to assure them of his love.

What I think is most instructive here is that it's important to see that Paul is not merely explaining and defending his actions; rather, he's providing us with a portrait of what a fully formed follower of Jesus looks like. These are the kinds of authentic Christian leaders that our church and our world needs today. Paul isn't trying to dominate but to serve. He's not trying to control but to comfort. Far from concealing his motives or his intentions, he demonstrates remarkable openness and transparency. And even though his friends in Corinth have seriously, seriously let him down, he doesn't condemn them for what happened. Instead, he weeps over them.

So Paul is modeling for the Corinthians and for us what true servant leadership looks like. The early church father Augustine was once asked, what are the three most important principles of the Christian life? What do we really need to know? What do we need to zero in on? And I love his answer, because he says in response, "If you asked a famous orator, 'What are the three most important principles to public speaking?' that orator would say, 'Well, the most important principle, number one, is delivery. The second most important principle is delivery. And the third most important principle is delivery.'" And Augustine said, "If you want to know what are the three most important principles of the Christian life: Number one, the most important is humility. Number two, the second most important is humility. And the third most important principle is — you named it — humility."

John Stott, the British pastor, writing on the importance of authentic Christian leadership says:

The authority by which the Christian leader leads is not power but love, not force but example, not coercion but reasoned persuasion. Leaders have power, but power is safe only in the hands of those who humble themselves to serve.

And perhaps the most striking evidence of Paul's humility is that even when he explains his motives and his actions, as irreproachable as they may be, he doesn't take any credit for it. Instead he suggests in verse 12 that they spring not from within himself but from the grace of God. See, if we were to ask, "Well, how do we become the kind of authentic Christian leaders the world needs?" the answer is that authentic Christian leadership is not something that we achieve for ourselves; rather, it's something that we receive as a gift of God's grace.

The Faithful Promises of God

That's why Paul, in this passage, points us back again and again and again to the faithful promises of God. It's not about him. He doesn't focus on himself. He pushes us

back to the faithful promises of God. The critics accused him of vacillating, of saying yes out of one side of his mouth and then no out of the other. But Paul says, “Our word to you has not been yes and no. No, in Jesus, it has always been yes. In Jesus, our answer has always been yes.” In other words he’s saying, who cares about my travel plans? All that really matters is the gospel of Jesus.

So this is the key to being a consistent Christian leader. All of your thinking, all of your acting, all of your feeling, all of your willing, all of your speaking, all of your loving has to flow out of the gospel, because the faithful promises of God transform: 1) *our past*, 2) *our present*, and 3) *our future*.

Our Past

First of all, the faithful promises of God transform our past. Paul says, in Jesus, it is always yes. He goes on to say in verse 20 that all the promises of God find their yes in him. Now, as we’ll see later in 2 Corinthians, these new teachers that have slipped in have emphasized the superiority of the old covenant, the Old Testament. Paul, of course, values all the promises that were made in the Old Testament. God’s people had relied upon them and trusted in them for thousands of years. But what Paul wants us to understand is that now everything has changed, because all of those ancient promises have now been fulfilled in and through Jesus.

And so in that one little verse stating that in Jesus all the promises of God have been fulfilled, Paul provides us with the interpretive key that unlocks all of Scripture. See, what kind of a book is the Bible? The Bible is not a book of moral instruction; it’s a book of salvation. The Bible is not a book of moral instruction, which means that the Bible is not about you and what you need to do for God. Rather, it’s a book of salvation, which means that the Bible is all about God and what he has done for you in and through the person of Jesus.

At our kickoff this past Wednesday night for our School of Discipleship, Helen Holbrook instructed us on how to read and teach the Bible, and she zeroed in on Luke 24. The risen Jesus appears to two disciples who are making their way from Jerusalem to Emmaus. They explain that they had hoped that Jesus was the Messiah, the one who was going to redeem Israel, but now they’re so dejected, they’re so depressed because Jesus is dead, and a dead Messiah is no Messiah at all. But they don’t recognize Jesus. And so Jesus calls them foolish, and he asks them, “Why are you so slow of heart to believe?” He goes on to explain that it was necessary for the Messiah to suffer before entering into his glory. Then Jesus himself — beginning with Moses and all the prophets, meaning the entirety of the Old Testament Scriptures — interprets to them all the things in the Scriptures concerning himself. In other words, Jesus lays out for them that the entirety of the Bible is ultimately all about him. All the promises of God find their yes in him. Later they recall, “Oh, didn’t our hearts burn within us when he opened up the Scriptures to us?”

Wouldn’t you have loved to have been on that seven-mile walk from Emmaus to Jerusalem as Jesus unfolded the entirety of the Old Testament and revealed how it’s all about him? I mean, what must he have said? How did he fulfill all the promises? Well, he probably told them that Jesus is the one that God promised Adam and Eve would one day destroy our ancient enemy. He’s the one that would crush that ancient

serpent's head, though he would be bruised; he'd be wounded in the process. Jesus is the descendant promised to Abraham and Sarah — the one through whom God would bless all the families, all the nations of the earth. Jesus is the prophet that God promised Moses would come after him, who would be even greater than him because he would establish a better covenant based on even better promises. And Jesus is the heir that God promised to David, who would sit on his throne forever, who would receive a kingdom that would never end. You see? Because Jesus fulfills God's promises, it transforms the way in which we consider the past.

Our Present

But that's not all. The faithful promises of God also transform our present. Paul explains that our standing before God now is not based on who we are or what we've done or failed to do, but our standing before God is based on who Jesus is and what He's done for us by pure grace. He says, we don't establish ourselves; no, "It is God who establishes us with you in Christ" (verse 21). Now the word Christ in Greek is the same word as Messiah in Hebrew. It means anointed one. Paul goes on to say, Jesus, the anointed one, anoints us. He anoints us with his very own Spirit and puts his seal upon us, and that's our confidence in the present.

Now, what does that mean? What does it mean to have a seal — for God to put his seal on us? Well, in the ancient world, when people would send letters around the Mediterranean, they would often seal those letters with molten wax that would bear the imprint of a stamp or perhaps a signet ring. And what was the purpose of that seal? Well, it provided proof of ownership. You knew who it was really coming from. You knew that it hadn't been tampered with on its way to the recipient. And so when God says that he has put his seal on us, it's providing us with proof of ownership. He's saying, "You belong to me. No one, no thing can ever snatch you out of my hand."

That is our confidence. But you see, it's not because of who we are or what we've done. It's not because of what we've achieved. It's because of who Jesus is and what he's done for us — what we receive from his hand. Because if you're united to Jesus, then everything that is true of him becomes true of you. And that's why we have to see that Jesus fulfills the Scripture not only by fulfilling those promises, but ultimately all the storyline is pointing to him.

If you read the Old Testament without Jesus, you know what it's like? Paul Barnett, the Bible commentator, said it would be like reading a mystery novel with the final chapter ripped out. The novel is filled with all these clues that have been scattered throughout the story, but without that final chapter, you can't put the clues together. There's no explanation. You don't know how it all fits. But when you realize that Jesus is the finale to the story, now everything falls into place. See, everything in the Scripture, all the storylines, are ultimately pointing to him.

The Bible's not about you; it's about him. Which means that Jesus doesn't just fulfill the promise made to Adam; Jesus is the true and better Adam who passes the test in an even tougher garden. He didn't go his own way. No, he said, "Not my will, but yours be done" so that his obedience might become ours. Jesus doesn't just fulfill the promise made to Abraham; he's the true and better Abraham who also hears the call of God and

leaves his country — leaves everything that's familiar and secure — and enters into the unknown so that his faith might become ours.

Jesus doesn't just fulfill the promise made to Moses; he's the true and better Moses who stands in the gap and who intercedes on behalf of his people, even though they don't deserve it, so that his prayer might become ours. And Jesus doesn't just fulfill the promise made to David; he's the true and better David who enters into the fray, who becomes the champion, who fights on behalf of his people — not against Goliath, but against the ultimate giants of sin, evil, and death. And like a little boy with nothing more than a sling and five stones, he wins through the apparent weakness of his cross, because God's power is made perfect in weakness so that his victory might become ours.

You see, our standing before God now is secure because we don't establish ourselves. He has established us in Christ because of what Christ has done for us by grace. And so if, in your Christian life, in your Christian experience today, you look at yourself and you say, "I'm so weak. I'm so inadequate." Good. Good! Because it's not about you; it's about him.

Our Future

But the fact that God is faithful to his promises not only transforms the past and the present; it also transforms our future. In verse 22 Paul tells us that God has given us his Holy Spirit and put his seal on us, but more than that, he assures us that we belong to God now and always because he has guaranteed our future. He says that he has given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee. Now that word "guarantee" is the same word for downpayment. If you were to purchase an apartment or a home, you'd be expected to put some money down. You'd put a downpayment of 10%, 20% of the total purchase price. And even though you don't have the money for the whole thing, it's yours — the house, the apartment is yours. You can move in now.

The point is that the downpayment is not just the first installment; it's also the guarantee. It's the pledge that more is coming. More is on the way. And you see, when God gives us his Spirit, it's the guarantee. It's the pledge that more is on the way. The moment you put your faith in Jesus, you have Jesus and all of his benefits. Already, through him, you have everything you need. You lack for nothing. And yet the best part is that what you're experiencing now through the Spirit is just a fraction. It's just 10%, 20% of what God has in store for you. In other words, this is just the beginning, and the best is yet to come. That is what we celebrate here at this table.

The Bible is not a book of moral instruction; it's a book of salvation. It's not about you; it's about Jesus. If you think the Bible is just a list of rules — of dos and don'ts so that you can avoid negative consequences and win points with God — your heart is never going to burn within you. No, you'll never experience the transformation that Jesus can bring. You'll never become an authentic Christian leader until you realize that in Jesus, the answer is always yes. All the promises of God are fulfilled in him.

Let me pray for us.

Father, we thank you for the Apostle Paul. We thank you that he was not afraid. He was not ashamed to share his weakness, his vulnerability, his pain, even his criticisms with us. And we thank you for the way in which he responded with such grace, pointing people not to himself but back to you, back to the gospel of grace. And we thank you, Father, for the ways in which you have faithfully fulfilled all of your promises, and for the ways in which those faithful promises transform our past, our present, and our future. Help us to live in light of these truths. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.