



POWER IN WEAKNESS | THE GRACE-DRIVEN LIFE

October 26, 2025

In J.D. Salinger's classic novel "The Catcher in the Rye," the main character Holden Caulfield reflects on his thoughts about religion. He explains that he likes Jesus, but he has absolutely no time or patience for the disciples. Holden concludes that the disciples are phonies — his favorite adjective to describe the adults in his life. So at one point he says,

I can't always pray when I feel like it. In the first place, I'm sort of an atheist. I like Jesus and all, but I don't care too much for most of the other stuff in the Bible. Take the Disciples, for instance. They annoy the hell out of me, if you want to know the truth. They were all right after Jesus was dead and all, but while He was alive, they were about as much use to Him as a hole in the head. All they did was keep letting Him down. I like almost anybody in the Bible better than the Disciples.

Like Holden Caulfield, many people today have a positive view of Jesus, but they think that Christians are phonies and that we're about as much use to Jesus as a hole in the head.

We're in the midst of a series focused on the Apostle Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. This is without a doubt, the most personal, the most passionate, and the most painful of all of Paul's letters, and that's clear in the passage that comes before us today. But this letter is especially relevant for us because of the current credibility crisis of the Church. Many people no longer view the Church or its leaders as worthy of trust for a number of different reasons. So let me offer three of the most prevalent ways in which Christians are often perceived which damages our credibility.

Number one is hypocrisy. Many people believe that Christians are guilty of being hypocritical, and by that we're not simply talking about people who have shortcomings or fail to reach a certain standard, because that's always true of all of us. But rather, people say, "Christians are hypocrites because they're just wearing a mask. They're just playing a role. They're pretending to be something that they're not. There's a disconnect between their outer self and their inner self."

Hypocrisy is closely related to a second common perception, which is that Christians are guilty of moral compromise. Not only are they hypocritical, but they're also willing to sacrifice some of their distinctive beliefs and practices perhaps just to fit in rather than living in a way that is true to their deepest values.

A third common perception of Christians is that they harbor judgmental attitudes. They act in ways that are cold and closed off rather than warm and loving. And not only that, but Christians are quick to condemn people for their words or their actions, their beliefs or their lifestyles. And what makes it worse is that they're often secretly guilty of doing the exact same thing.

So hypocrisy, moral compromise, and judgmental attitudes. That's quite a list. And in light of that, it's no wonder why people don't want to have anything to do with the Church. But what I would suggest is that that is what makes 2 Corinthians the letter for our times. Because as we've seen over the last several weeks, the Apostle Paul dealt with a credibility crisis of his own, specifically as it related to the church that he founded in the Greek city of Corinth.

After Paul left, there were a number of people who slipped into the city, and they were trying to discredit Paul and turn the church against him. Based on the beginning of 2 Corinthians 7, we can assume that Paul's critics, his opponents, were accusing him of wronging them in some way, of corrupting them in some way, of exploiting them in some way. And as a result of this criticism, Paul is forced to do the one thing that he never wanted to do, and that was to talk about himself. He's compelled to defend himself and his ministry, but even so, he does so in a way that deflects the attention away from himself and puts it squarely on Jesus. As a result, he shows us how the church and its leaders can rebuild trust and regain credibility, even in a deeply skeptical world.

So in the passage that's before us today, Paul addresses how we should live our lives in response to God's grace. And through it he provides us with the antidote to hypocrisy, the antidote to moral compromise, and the antidote to judgmental attitudes. He calls us to serve with: 1) *a steady hand*, 2) *an equal yoke*, and 3) *an open heart*. We'll look at each of those in turn.

¹Working together with him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain. ²For he says,

“In a favorable time I listened to you,
and in a day of salvation I have helped you.”

Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation. ³We put no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, ⁴but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, ⁵beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; ⁶by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love; ⁷by truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; ⁸through honor and dishonor, through slander and praise. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; ⁹as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; ¹⁰as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything.

¹¹We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians; our heart is wide open. ¹²You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted in your own affections. ¹³In return (I speak as to children) widen your hearts also.

¹⁴Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness?

¹⁵What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with

an unbeliever? ¹⁶What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said,

“I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them,
and I will be their God,
and they shall be my people.

2 Corinthians 6:1-16

Last week we considered what many view as the heart and the center of 2 Corinthians: the latter half of chapter 5. Chapter 5 ends with a famous statement in verse 21. “For our sake, God made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” This is the heart of the gospel, and there’s a number of different ways we could put this. We could say that Jesus, the truly innocent one, was treated as guilty so that we, the truly guilty ones, might be treated as innocent. Or Jesus became sin with our sin so that we might become righteous with his righteousness.

See, the basic idea is that once you put your faith in Jesus, faith so unites you to the person of Jesus that everything that is true of him now becomes true of you. So if Jesus lived a perfect life, if he died on the cross for sin, and if he has been raised to new life and you’re united to him, then you’ve lived his life, you’ve already died to sin, and you’ve already been raised to new life in him. If anyone is in Christ, there’s a new creation. That’s the message of the gospel, and it shows us that the gospel is a message of grace rather than a message of merit.

But this can lead to a serious misunderstanding. See, some people might say, “Well, this is a great deal. If God accepts me not on the basis of who I am or what I’ve done but on the basis of who Jesus is and what he’s done for me, then I can live my life however I want!” The poet W.H. Auden once said, “Well, I like to sin. God likes to forgive. This is perfect. The world is perfectly arranged.”

Now, on the one hand, if you’ve never been tempted by that thought, it suggests that perhaps you haven’t actually heard the gospel. The gospel is radical because it is so free. But on the other hand, if you think that the gospel gives you license to live your life however you want, then you haven’t experienced it at all, because God’s grace always leads to a changed life. Once God puts you in right relationship with himself, he makes you part of his putting right plan for the whole world. You can never stay right where you are.

And that’s what Paul’s talking about in verse 1. “Working together with him,” working together with God, “then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain.” Don’t let God’s grace go to waste. Don’t receive it in vain. Don’t treat it as nothing, but make the most of it by joining God in his work. See, God doesn’t rescue you so that you can simply enjoy a new status, the status of being saved. No, God doesn’t rescue you so that you can enjoy a new status; he rescues you so that you can join him in new service.

Now it's important to note that Paul, in verse 2, quotes Isaiah 49. And this is the chapter where God promises that he will send his servant to not only rescue the world, to not only fulfill his covenant promises, but to be his covenant. In Isaiah 49:8, God says through the prophet Isaiah, I "give you as a covenant." And Jesus, of course, is the promised servant who not only fulfills the covenant but who is the covenant. And if we're united to Jesus, and if everything that's true of him becomes true of us, then that means that once we find our life in him, in a secondary and derivative way we not only receive God's covenant promises, but we're called to embody his covenant. We're called to embody his covenant faithfulness. We're called to help enact and to implement God's plan for the whole world. And that requires a steady hand, especially in the midst of hardship and affliction and suffering.

A Steady Hand

A steady hand is the antidote to hypocrisy. See, many people rightly criticize Christians for being hypocritical. They say, "Oh, Christians, you can't trust them. 'Cause they say one thing and then they do another. They live in ways that contradict the very message that they espouse." And of course, we could all point to examples of sex scandals or abuses of power or lack of transparency. But Paul shows us a different way. In verse 3, he says, "We put no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry." In contrast to those who only seem to care about image or influence, Paul is concerned with integrity.

Now interestingly he says in verse 4, "we commend ourselves." Usually when someone says, "we commend ourselves to you," what do you expect them to do? You expect them to lay out their credentials. But when Paul commends himself, he doesn't list out his credentials; he lists out his suffering. He says, "we commend ourselves in every way: by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger." How do you know if we're the real deal? Look at the lives we live. Look at the hardship. Look at the affliction. Look at the suffering we endure.

But not only that. When he commends himself, Paul doesn't insist on title or position or power. No, he insists on the virtues that are instilled by the gospel itself. How does he lead? By purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love. By truthful speech and the power of God. What weapons does he use? Only the weapons of righteousness for both the right hand and the left. Through honor and dishonor, through slander and praise.

I wonder how you would define success? How would you define success in your life, or how would you define success in our collective ministry together here at Central? There's certainly people out there in the world who would tell you that if you put your trust in God or if you trust God enough, well then he's obligated to bless you and to make your life go well. And therefore health and wealth, prosperity and achievement, those are the signs of God's favor.

But Paul here suggests, well, if somebody is telling you that, chances are they're selling you something. And as it turns out, that's exactly what Paul's opponents in Corinth were doing. They were taking great pride in their success and their power. But

Paul says it's all hypocrisy. Rather than presenting a false facade of power or strength, Paul is quite transparent about his weakness and his suffering.

You see, if we're Christians, that means we're called to follow Jesus, and we follow Jesus along the way of the cross. Of course, Jesus eventually wins the victory. But to follow Jesus means to follow him along the way of the cross. Jesus never said it would be easy. And Paul shows us here for sure that the Christian life is not for the faint of heart. He goes on to offer a number of paradoxes. If we're going to follow Jesus along the way to the cross, and Jesus ultimately wins the victory, well then what does that mean for us? Verse 8 says,

⁸...We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; ⁹as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; ¹⁰as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything.

The sign of authenticity in the Christian life is not presenting an image of strength and success but rather a willingness to suffer, even for the cause of the gospel.

At one of our recent Resound Project Leadership Gatherings, one of the pastors present made the point that perhaps the key for the Church to be able to rebuild trust and to regain credibility in a skeptical world is for Christian leaders to suffer well in public. And that phrase stood out to me. We're called to suffer well in public. And that's what Paul does in Corinth. That's what we're all called to do. We're called to lead from a place of shared weakness and vulnerability rather than hiding behind a facade.

An Equal Yoke

So first, the antidote to hypocrisy is a steady hand, especially in the midst of hardship and affliction. But second, the antidote to moral compromise is what Paul calls here an equal yoke. What is Paul talking about? Well, let's back up a little bit. Part of the reason why so many people are turned off to Christianity or they're turned off to the Church is because they see Christians as being no different from the world around them. Christians are just as prone to chase after power and politics or fame and fortune. And it's that lack of distinctiveness that erodes trust. Despite what they might say, Christians seem to be no different from anyone else.

But Paul reminds us that the heart of God's covenant promise is to make his home with us. So if you jump to the end of the passage that we read this morning, in verse 16 Paul quotes the Old Testament where God is speaking. And God says, "I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people." See now that God has dealt with the problem of sin through Jesus, now that he has reconciled us in relationship to himself, we now become the place where God dwells, and that's why he calls us the temple of God. We now are the temple of the living God. The living God now comes and dwells within us. And if we are the temple of God, then we can have nothing to do with the ways of the world.

And in the verse immediately following (verse 17), which we didn't read, Paul will quote Isaiah 52:11, and there God calls us to be separate, to be distinct. You see, if we are the temple of God, we're called to be holy. And what does it mean to be holy? It means to be entirely devoted, fully devoted to God. The problem is that most of us find it uncomfortable to have radically different beliefs and to live in radically different ways compared to the people around us. It creates tension, and nobody likes to live in that tension.

But the reality is that we're called to be radically engaged in our world and yet radically distinct at one in the same time. That's what creates the conflict: the tension between us and the culture around us. And because we don't like that conflict, we try to reduce the tension. And there are at least two primary ways we can do that.

One option is that we can disengage — we can withdraw from the world entirely — but then we're failing to engage the world around us. The other option to try to reduce the tension is to give up our distinctive beliefs and practices, to assimilate to the world around us. If we just try to blend in like a chameleon, then the tension is gone. But then we fail to live a distinctive life. And we're called to be radically distinct and radically engaged at one and the same time. The problem is that when we try to just fit in, then we don't have anything unique to offer the world around us. It's just as Jesus said. It's like salt that has lost its taste, or it's like hiding a light under a basket. There's no point to saltless salt, and there's no point to hidden light.

So Paul sums up this call to be radically distinct and yet radically engaged by saying, "Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers." Now, this is a curious phrase, and we'll spend a little time piecing it together. Obviously here Paul is adopting some kind of agrarian image. It's actually based on Deuteronomy 22:10 where God instructs his people, "You shall not plow with an ox and a donkey together." But I think this goes beyond basic farming. I think it's meant to tell us something more.

For starters, in context Paul is telling us here that Christians should have nothing to do with the paganism that's all around us, whether we're talking about pre-Christian paganism in the first century or post-Christian paganism in the 21st century. And he goes on to offer a series of contrasts of things that should have nothing to do with one another: righteousness and lawlessness, light and dark, Christ and Satan, believers and unbelievers, the temple of God and idols. So what you can see with this image of "do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers" is that there's both a broad application and a specific one.

Broadly, what Paul is saying is that you shouldn't allow the world around you to drag you down or to squeeze you into its mold. If we're the temple of God then we can't have anything to do with idolatry — the idolatrous practices of the world around us which fail to acknowledge God for who he is. So there's that broad application, but then more specifically, Paul's talking about marriage. He's talking about Christian marriage, and he's saying that Christians are only at liberty to marry fellow Christians. Now this can be confusing, and it might seem overly restrictive to some. So let's think this through.

What is Paul saying and what is he not saying? Paul is not saying that Christians should completely separate themselves entirely from those who hold different religious beliefs, or specifically who practice different sexual lifestyles. That is not at all what Paul's saying, because if that were true, then that would require going out of the whole world altogether. And so that's not what he's saying according to 1 Corinthians 5.

He's also not saying that we shouldn't be friends with people who believe very different things about the world or who live very different ways. For example, in 1 Corinthians 10, he says that if you're invited into the home of an unbeliever, of course you should say yes. We're called to be friends with people who believe different things.

And he's not saying that we should not invite people who do not yet believe to come to church with us. He makes it very clear in 1 Corinthians 14 that people who do not yet believe will attend our worship services. We should assume it, and we should welcome them. And that's why at the beginning of every worship service here at Central, I say that this is a church for the convinced as well as the unconvinced. We want to welcome people regardless of their background or beliefs. And Paul suggests in 1 Corinthians 14 that it may just be that someone might hear or experience something in the course of our worship that resonates with them. So Paul, like Jesus before him, strongly encourages us to be in the world but not of it, because how else will people ever come to see that God really is at work in our midst?

So specifically then, when it comes to marriage, Paul has a few other things to say in 1 Corinthians 7. He asks, if there's a couple — let's say there are two people in a marriage — and one ends up becoming a Christian, what should they do? He says they should stay together. They shouldn't separate; they should stay married. But then in the very same chapter in verse 39, he says that if someone initiates a new marriage, you should only marry "in the Lord." Once again, he's making the same point that he is making here in 2 Corinthians 6: that a Christian is only at liberty to marry a fellow Christian. We should marry "in the Lord."

But why might that be the case? Well, think with me. Think very carefully with me. Paul is saying that we should only marry in the Lord, but he's not at all suggesting that the reason why a Christian is only at liberty to marry a fellow Christian is because Christians are in some way superior to other people or superior to people who believe different things. No. Remember, the message of the gospel is a message of grace. Christians are sinners saved by grace, meaning that we're saved through the work of Jesus. We're put in right relationship with God not because of our virtuous character or our moral behavior but because of who Jesus is and what he's done for us. Therefore, the gospel leads us to assume that people who are not Christians may be morally superior to us. They might live more moral lives, they might have more virtuous character than us, because that's not the basis of our faith.

So Paul is not in any way suggesting that Christians are in some ways superior, nor is Paul suggesting that Christians can't be friends with people who adhere to different belief systems. Of course we should. Otherwise it would be impossible to love our neighbors or to seek the good of all, which is what the New Testament calls us to do. Nor is Paul claiming that people who do not share the same faith cannot love one

another. Everyone's capable of love. There's no reason why two people with very different visions of the world can't love one another well.

So why does Paul insist that we must be equally yoked? That we should only marry in the Lord? Well, here's the answer. If you're a Christian, your commitment to Jesus is not merely one more thing that you do, but it's meant to form the very basis of your identity. Your relationship to Jesus can't just be one more extracurricular activity, like taking up hiking or visiting art museums. Rather, it's the center around which everything else revolves. It's not necessary for two people to share the same hobbies or the same interests or even the same politics. But the defining goal of a Christian's life is to center one's life on Jesus; to love God with all of one's heart, mind, soul, and strength; and to live one's life in line with his purposes. And therefore, our commitment to Jesus has to form the mainspring of our life, the lens through which we view everything, and the motive behind all of our actions.

See, the point is that Paul's trying to spare us some heartache. Because if another person does not share your faith, well then there's a degree to which they don't understand it. And if they don't understand it in the same way that you do, then it also means that they don't quite understand you and the part of you that is most important — the very basis of your identity: your relationship to Jesus. So he calls us to be equally yoked.

Now I have no doubt, especially with a congregation as young as ours, that that might raise lots of questions for you. So let me encourage you, if you have any questions about anything I just said, feel free to reach out to me. I would be delighted to speak with you more about that.

But the main point is that the Church has been discredited by both hypocrisy as well as moral compromise — and moral compromise especially in the arena of sexual ethics. But the credibility of the church grows when we live lives of integrity rather than just blending in with the world around us. And this is what the world needs. It's only by being different from the world that we have something unique to offer. David Martin Lloyd Jones once said that the glory of the gospel is that when the church is absolutely different from the world, it invariably attracts it. The more different we are, the more we've got something to offer. And that very well may be what draws people in.

An Open Heart

So the antidote to hypocrisy is a steady hand. The antidote to moral compromise is an equal yoke, remaining true to our identity in Jesus. And third, the antidote to judgmental attitudes is an open heart. Here's what I mean by that.

We all know that Christians are often guilty of being judgmental, of being closed off, of being unloving — oftentimes more concerned with rules than relationship, which creates distance, especially for people who feel like they're on the margins. But Paul models another way for us. Even though his opponents tried to turn the church in Corinth against him, and even though the Corinthians believed all these false things that had been said about him and withheld their affection from him, Paul refuses to retaliate.

Instead, Paul reiterates his love for them. He sees himself as their spiritual father, the one who led them to faith. And so beginning in verse 11, he says:

¹¹We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians; our heart is wide open. ¹²You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted in your own affections. ¹³In return (I speak as to children) widen your hearts also.

You can feel the pathos of Paul's appeal here. He's not hiding his heart. He's not hiding his pain. Rather he's being completely open, transparent, vulnerable, affectionate, forgiving. He's an open book, and there's no judgment. All he wants is for that openness and affection to be reciprocated so that they might be reconciled. Because reconciliation with God leads to reconciliation with one another. And so he says in chapter 6, verse 13, "widen your hearts." And he comes back to it in chapter 7, verse 2, "make room in your hearts for us also."

So let me just ask you: How can Paul respond in this way? Where do you think he got the idea to respond in this way? Does this not remind you of someone? You see, despite the ways in which we have let Jesus down, turned on him, or believed false things about him, Jesus remains open, transparent, vulnerable, affectionate, forgiving. He's an open book. His heart is wide open to us, and all he wants is for that openness and that affection to be reciprocated. He wants us to be reconciled. And reconciliation with him leads to reconciliation with one another.

There is no hypocrisy with Jesus. Jesus didn't hide behind a mask. He didn't pretend to be something that he wasn't. No, what you see is what you get. Even in the midst of hardship, even when he was under pressure, he remained true. And there's no moral compromise with Jesus. No, Jesus lived a life of integrity even though it cost him. And there's no judgmental attitude with Jesus. No, he was open. He was affectionate. He was forgiving. "Neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more." "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

So let's not receive God's grace in vain. Let's put it to good use. As we receive his grace, we extend it back out into the world. And that's how we rebuild trust. That's how we regain credibility as Christians, as a church, even in a deeply skeptical world.

Let me pray for us.

Father, we thank you that Paul was willing to share this deeply personal and passionate and painful letter with us so that we might learn from his model. We pray that you would provide us with the antidote to hypocrisy, moral compromise, and judgmental attitudes. By your grace, help us to become people marked by a steady hand, an equal yoke, and an open heart. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.