

SERMON: Power and Perfection  
TEXT: 2 Corinthians 12:2-10

It was awards night at the high school just a few weeks before my son graduated. To be honest, it was a rather boring event, watching the many of the same people cross the stage numerous times for one accolade after another. I kept thinking there had to be a more efficient way of doing this. But as the program neared its merciful end, it came time for the awards for perfect attendance. I was astonished when they announced that one student had never missed a single day of school since kindergarten. Thirteen years without a sick day! No chickenpox, no pink eye, no strep throat or stomach flu, no sprained ankle or grandparent's funeral or orthodontist appointment. Nothing had kept this student from going to school. He was probably one of those who went to school sick and infected everybody else and spoiled their perfect attendance record! Anyway, as they announced his name everyone looked around the auditorium to lay eyes on this miracle child. We looked to one side and then another, and then behind us. Maybe he was coming down from the balcony or something. But no one appeared. No one approached the stage. The kid who had not missed a day of school in thirteen years was not in attendance to receive his perfect attendance award! I did my best to stifle my laughter for the remainder of the program, then let loose as soon as it was over and guffawed out loud all the way home and for days afterward every time I shared the

story. I still laugh about it now whenever I think of it. It is the best and funniest example of irony I have ever heard.

Nobody's perfect, right? Sometimes we get carried away and start to think that we're perfect, and that's usually when we get into trouble.

If you're at all familiar with the letters in the New Testament written by the apostle Paul, you have probably noticed that he tends to brag about himself from time to time. Occasionally, he seems to be giving his resume, listing his qualifications so that his readers will trust that what he writes about Jesus is true.

For instance, in his letter to the Philippians he wrote, "If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless." To be fair, he goes on to say that these gains from his past he now regards as loss because of Christ. But elsewhere, he urges his readers to follow his example, to be like him, and to heed his instructions.

But here, in the passage we read from Second Corinthians, Paul boasts of his weaknesses. He is facing rival missionaries who claim to be “super apostles” because of their personal spiritual experiences full of visions and revelations. The Corinthians are being taken in by these false prophets and having second thoughts about Paul’s authority and credibility. Paul defends himself in a curious and risky way with these words which are a part of what has been called, the *fool’s speech*.

Instead of lifting up his religious accomplishments and competing with his rivals on his spiritual credentials, Paul “subordinates everything,” as one scholar wrote, “including his own *revelations*, to the one revelation of Jesus Christ.” (Garrett Green, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 3, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor)

The person that Paul refers to as having been caught up into the third heaven is Paul himself, but he does not claim it as his own religious experience. While such “inward experiences deepen his faith,” in the words of another scholar, “they do not constitute a basis for his authority over the church. That authority rests not upon what he has experienced in an inward, private way, but on the manner in which he is living the gospel in their midst....” (John T. McFadden, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 3, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor)

I had a couple professors in seminary – they were husband and wife, in fact. Highly acclaimed scholars, they knew the Bible inside and out. One was an expert on Paul’s writings and he was old enough that students thought he might be Paul himself. This professor could probably recite the entire book of Romans backwards, without hesitation. He and his wife had devoted their lives to studying and teaching the Bible. But they were not very nice people. They were often mean and insulting. They seemed to have very little patience with students or compassion for our struggles. All that knowledge didn’t translate into action and didn’t mean as much because of it. They lost credibility in my eyes.

Paul describes his out of body experience to the third heaven as if it happened to someone else, so as not to boast. He doesn’t hide it very well, though, does he? “But if I wish to boast,” he writes, “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, 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.”

Sometimes we need to be knocked off our self-made pedestals. We get too big for our britches. We need to come down off our high horse. We need a little reality check. Just the other day I was visiting with friends and one of them asked if we had seen on TV the show called Little Big Shots. She described her awe at the phenomenal piano performance by a little girl who was just six years old. It was one of those experiences where you can't find an adjective big enough to describe it. I didn't see it, but I understood the awestruck feeling. But I also began to wonder out loud what happens to these children when they grow to be teenagers, then adults. When you're phenomenal at six years old, where do you go from there? And what happens to your psyche when you discover areas in which you are not phenomenal, where you're just average, or where you fail?

Do we all have a thorn to keep us from being too elated? Is it God who knocks us off our pedestal or causes us to fall from our high horse? Does God inflict weakness or failure upon us to remind us that we are *not* God? Or is it a messenger of Satan as Paul claims?

If it is from Satan, the joke's on him, because Paul reports that when he appealed to the Lord to remove the thorn, God replied, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness."

In one of my classes at the Worship and Music Conference in Montreat, we were shown some fascinating ancient religious art. Even the tiniest details could be full of theological meaning. One of the paintings had a mousetrap in it, but the meaning of this detail was lost on many of us. Apparently it has been said that *the cross is Satan's mousetrap*. You see, Satan thought he had won when Jesus was crucified. But like a mouse who views the cheese as a victory, Satan is quickly vanquished when the tomb bursts open and the mousetrap slams shut. The cross is the ultimate example of God's power made perfect in weakness.

So, does God give us our thorns? No. But anything that is meant for evil, God can transform for the good. Out of tragedy, God can bring triumph. When we are beaten down, the Spirit can build us up. In the darkness of despair, Christ shines the light of hope. In our weakness and failure, God's POWER AND PERFECTION break through.

When we remember Christ and how he brings us together around the table of the Lord's Supper, a simple cube of bread dipped in juice can renew our faith and give us strength to continue the difficult journey of this life. All are invited to receive God's sufficient and sustaining grace. May we be filled to overflowing with God's powerful and perfect love. AMEN.