Lownes Free Church Sunday Morning – September 30, 2018

The Apostle Paul’s ***Second*** letter to the ***Corinthians***

how the Cross changes everything

Text: 2 Corinthians 12:1-13 “The ‘Bottom Line’ of the Gospel”

The Background: The true cost of spiritual power and authority.

The Corinthians clearly had missed a key implication of the gospel, namely, that its beauty is in its condescension. God, the Creator, the Sovereign, the All-Powerful--that God humbled Himself to enter His Creation and save creatures who had defied Him (Phil. 2:5-8). In fact, it was these same rebels who crucified Him. How could that have been lost on them? Just like it often is lost on us. If we are not about putting our sin and pride to death (Romans 8:9-14), then we are succumbing to its power, allowing it to have its own way and making room for others to do so. That is the way of the world, and the Corinthians had bought into it, to Paul’s surprise and fear.

Empowerment: The Cross shows God’s power perfected in weakness.

Paul is here at his most vulnerable and most passionate. He tells two stories of his experience with Jesus: the first, an amazing vision, the second, the “price” he paid to have it (lest having it carried him away in pride). And what is the result? Paul delights in his humility and weakness because he sees that this is the only way God ever brings grace to fallen humanity. We do not add our “strength” and “gifts” to God. Psa. 50:12-15. We bring only our weakness. God can fill our emptiness because the Cross changes everything.

The Narrative: (Reading 2 Corinthians is like hearing one side of a phone conversation. But we don’t really have to guess much, since Paul is both explicit and passionate. That said, we’ll be paraphrasing each section to sort out the argument and the not-so-hidden assumptions the Corinthians were making about Paul and his actions.)

(1) I’ll go on babbling like a fool. But for good measure, I want to let you in on a very private experience of mine. For God’s own reasons, He honored me with a vision of heaven’s splendor, literally beyond description. If it sounds like boasting, remember that the real boast is about weakness, not strength, humility, not human pride.

(7) But God, although wanting to gift me, and at the same time knowing human nature, has made pride in this impossible. How? By giving me a counterweight, a physical disability. And although it is a gift from God, Satan uses it to tempt me, which humbles me even more! Even though I asked God three times to take away this burden, He said “No.” Why? So I would understand the nature of grace more fully and beyond that, be satisfied with it. I see now that His grace is perfected in my weakness. So now I boast in all of my weaknesses and even the abuses against me, for in this way God’s power is made clear and so He gets the glory. I am strong in Him.

(11) There, I’ve done it! I’ve been a fool. But you drove me to it, seriously, now, because you should have recognized my apostolic authority through the work and even miracles done through me. The only thing that separated you from the other churches in Greece was that I didn’t take any money from you. I guess I should ask forgiveness!

The Challenge: Am I willing to receive God’s power in weakness?

Memory Verse: Psalm 116:12, 13

What elements in Paul’s vision increased the opportunity for pride? How did the physical disability preserve humility in him?

How can this “thorn in the flesh” be both God’s doing and a “messenger of Satan”? How might the Cross help us understand this?

Why is weakness the only real path for God’s power and grace? How does Paul use the idea of foolishness to communicate the idea? In what ways do our own weaknesses exalt God’s strength?