



# Walking the Way of the Cross with Paul

## SESSION 5

*Power made perfect in weakness*

### Introduction

There are few things more difficult to discuss in a religious context than power. Clerics and religious leaders with too much power and too little accountability have caused untold harm, while religious organizations with weak leadership fall prey to the hidden power of cliques and aggressive individuals. Trying to add to or subtract from the power of any person or group in any setting is difficult, but there are special dangers in a religious context, in which the name and authority of God can be invoked to maintain or undermine power structures.

The apostle Paul has had an odd relationship with power in modern times. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many Protestant scholars thought that Paul was the victim of power plays by other apostles and that his legacy was weakened by those who considered his theology dangerous. More recently, however, some scholars have suspected that Paul himself was intent on gaining or maintaining power over “his” churches in the face of competitors. How, then, did Paul relate to power? That is our question this session.

### The Power of God—and Paul?

Paul mentions power fairly often, mainly the power of God, especially as displayed in the resurrection of Jesus, but as seen in miracles too. He also speaks of the power that accompanies his preaching.<sup>1</sup> Occasionally, though,

he talks about power within Christian communities. For a classic example please read 1 Corinthians 4:18–20. This passage sounds like a “power struggle,” a contest between rival leaders for organizational power.

Earlier in 1 Corinthians, Paul recalled his original preaching in Corinth: “My speech and my proclamation were not

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with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God” (1 Cor. 2:4). Paul claims that his ministry relied on the power of God, and he believes that he can test this power against the power of his “arrogant” rivals in Corinth. It sounds like a threat: “Watch yourselves, because I just might come down there, and if I do, God will have my back.”

Paul seems to support his own claims to power and authority with the divine power that accompanied his preaching. Confusing human power in an organization with the power of God is very dangerous, and if we feel uncomfortable seeing Paul do this, we have every right to. How the Corinthians responded to this we can’t really know. But it is interesting to observe that there is a high concentration of references to power in Paul’s letters to them.

If Paul seems jealous of his power, though, how does that square with his gospel of the cross? We saw in session 2 that for Paul, the reality of the crucified Messiah implies that power, even divine power, now means something other than what we ordinarily think it does. In that case, though, why does Paul engage in what looks like a pretty ordinary struggle over power?

The answer may be simple: Paul had no more claim to perfection or even consistency than anybody else. However much we might like to idealize the early church and its leaders, they too shared in human frailty and inconsistency. Like most of us, Paul could articulate his ideals clearly, but living up to them might be a different matter. Part of the reason Paul seems to be of two minds about power may be that Spirit and flesh continued to struggle within him as they do within everyone.

That doesn't mean that Paul didn't hold himself to high standards or wrestle with his own failings. In Philippians 3 he speaks of sharing Christ's sufferings in order to attain his resurrection, but he recognizes his shortcomings: "Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own" (Phil. 3:12).

Yet Paul did hold himself up as an example to follow. After acknowledging that he has not reached the goal, he continues, "Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind; and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you. . . . Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us" (Phil. 3:15–17). This can be taken more than one way. Paul seems to say that even in his imperfection, he basically has it right and should be followed. On one hand, he acknowledges that not everyone will agree with him, but he is willing to let God sort that out. On the other, he may imply that when God "reveals" things to those who differ from him, they will learn that Paul was right. Even the language of example and imitation is taken by some interpreters to be a move for control over his readers and hearers, keeping them safely in his corner.<sup>2</sup>

My position is that Paul was sincere in his conviction that Christ's cross made the normal human approaches to power obsolete in God's new creation. Yet it is plain that his sincerity was not always obvious to everyone,

especially in Corinth, and that he himself wrestled with this issue, and perhaps grew as a result. It is in 2 Corinthians that we find the most important evidence of this.

## "Not That We Lord It over Your Faith"

What we know as 2 Corinthians has a complex history behind it. It reflects Paul's attempts to visit Corinth, engage the Christians there in his fund-raising for the believers in Jerusalem, while fending off attacks by people whom he sarcastically calls "super-apostles." These rivals apparently cast doubt on Paul's apostleship because of a perceived *lack* of power: he didn't do enough miracles, wasn't a dynamic enough speaker, and apparently made too few demands on the Corinthians for money. They themselves were assertive and perhaps flamboyant.<sup>3</sup> Several changes in topic and tone suggest to many scholars that 2 Corinthians contains at least two letters edited together after Paul's death (perhaps out of sequence).

Without direct access to the circumstances behind 2 Corinthians, we cannot be certain exactly what happened when, or who was involved. What is clear is that Paul feels under attack and responds with a kind of agonized concern not only for his own position but for the Corinthians, not wanting to lose them as friends, as spiritual offspring, or as part of his network of congregations.

I believe Paul genuinely wanted the Corinthians to rely on their new, unmediated relationship with God in Christ (see session 4), to relate freely to God without a powerful apostle intervening. Yet he also believed that he was right about the way to live and minister in accordance with the gospel message. This was his dilemma: how could he get people to be free if they didn't want to be? How could he enforce a belief system that did not rely on force? Paul rejected displays of power as inappropriate for an apostle of the crucified Christ; yet somehow he had to develop a powerful defense against his opponents.<sup>4</sup>

Paul insists that he does not want to "lord it over" the Corinthians, that he wants to be their slave and not their master (2 Cor. 1.23; 4:5); yet he feels a "divine jealousy" for them (11:2). With regard to one individual who has

caused him problems, Paul urges the Corinthians to move beyond punishment to forgiveness; but he does not regret having stung them into the act of punishment (2:5–11; 7:8–12). At one point he writes with sarcasm and threats (10:1–2; 12:19–13:2); at another he says his heart is open wide to them and calls for the same openness on their part (6:11–13; 7:2–4). This inconsistency (something else Paul was accused of, see e.g., 2 Cor. 1:12–13, 17–20) reminds us that the way of the cross is not a path isolated from human relationships, with all their difficulties and mixed motives. The cross, if Paul is any indicator, does not lead us away from life's hurts, misunderstandings, and ambiguities, but straight into their midst. We cannot be "crucified to the world" (Gal.

Paul; the pain, whatever it was, continued on. And yet there *was* an answer: "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:7–9).

How is that an answer, though? How is power "made perfect in weakness"? First, "made perfect" is misleading. The Greek verb *teleō* has more to do with completeness or reaching a goal than with becoming flawless. Power *gets where it is supposed to go* in weakness. But what kind of power does that? The answer is in the next sentence: "so that the power of Christ may dwell in me." It is *Christ's* power, the power of the crucified Messiah, that reaches its goal in weakness. Paul's decision to know only "Jesus Christ, and him crucified"

became very real at this point in his life. He did not discover that power became complete in weakness as a general principle but that Christ's power became complete in Paul's weakness.

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## Paul finds the power of God not in the triumphs of the successful and socially favored but in the misery of the oppressed.

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6:14) unless we leave ourselves open and vulnerable to the pain and the misdeeds that occur there. Some of those misdeeds may be our own, and it is only by confronting the reality of our own "flesh" that we can offer it to Christ for crucifixion and so be made ready for the transforming work of the Spirit (Gal. 5:16–24).

### Power in Weakness

In 1 Corinthians, Paul said he resolved to know nothing but "Jesus Christ, and him crucified" when he first came to Corinth (1 Cor. 2:2). How does such a cross-centered ministry deal with problems of power and authority? How does "God's weakness" that is "stronger than human strength" (1 Cor. 1:25) come to bear on the tangled situation behind 2 Corinthians?

Paul's paradoxical understanding of power actually reaches even greater depths here than in 1 Corinthians. At the climax of his defense against accusations of lacking supernatural power and experiences, he reports on a vision from years before (2 Cor. 12:1–5) and then reports not a miracle but a prayer that went unanswered. He speaks of a "thorn in the flesh" (presumably the Corinthians knew what he meant; we don't, and there's no point guessing), which he begged the Lord three times to remove—and the Lord didn't. No miracle for

"My grace is sufficient for you," the Lord told him—the Lord Jesus, crucified and risen. *His* grace, flowing from love that knew suffering at its greatest depth, would be enough for Paul, even if the "thorn" never left him. Grace that defeated death *through* death could enable Paul to understand his very weakness as bearing within itself the power of resurrection life—the power of God. God's power reached its completion, the goal of all that God had done, in the weakness and defeat of the cross of Christ. The power that raised him from the dead was let loose in the world only by his crucifixion. "Christ is risen from the dead," as an Eastern Orthodox Easter hymn says, "trampling down death by death."<sup>5</sup>

The grace of the Messiah turned satanic torment into unlooked-for contentment. Pain remained pain, weakness remained weakness; and yet Paul says, "I am content with weaknesses . . . for whenever I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:10). Paul freely admits his weakness, but claims it as the center of his power. Therefore he will take the role of slave rather than master, will forgive rather than avenge, and will put himself in positions of weakness in which he knows the presence of divine power and love. This has become Paul's bedrock analysis of the meaning of power. If we catch him struggling to stay true to it at times, that does not lessen the challenge and the hope that it offers to us.

## Treasure in Clay Jars

Paul sums up his understanding of power in the gospel ministry in one of the most famous images in the Bible: “But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us” (2 Cor. 4:7). The clay jar, the “earthen vessel,” represents the fragility of the apostle, his powerlessness and his willingness to be conformed to the crucified Messiah. Externally he is nothing; “his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible” (10:10; compare with 4:16–18). It is what is inside the jar that is significant: the shining beauty of “the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (4:6). The very nothingness of the container announces that the treasure inside is God’s and not Paul’s own.

At several points in 2 Corinthians, Paul offers lists of what he endures as an apostle. The point of these is not to portray himself as a martyr but to insist that true Christian ministry is not distinguished by material or even spiritual glory and grandeur. Rather than being led astray by ostentation, Paul wants the Corinthians to seek the work of God in places marked by the Messiah’s cross and the divine power it releases. So, just after speaking of treasure in clay jars, he says that the apostle is “afflicted in every way, but not crushed” (2 Cor. 4:8–10). Later, in describing the “ministry of reconciliation” (5:18–10), he speaks of “afflictions, . . . beatings, imprisonments” and of “having nothing, and yet possessing everything” (6:3–10). In the lengthy “fool’s boast,” he elaborates on these adversities in more detail (11:16–33).

These are not random sufferings, the ordinary misfortunes of life, but (like Jesus’ crucifixion) they result from persecution. Paul finds the power of God not in the triumphs of the successful and socially favored but in the misery of the oppressed. Divine power does not parallel worldly power but runs opposite to it. It can be seen, not in social and political dominance, but in the people and things that the dominant oppose and try to crush.

Paul may be no more successful than we are at living out his ideals, but the ideals themselves are striking, and he does not waver from them. “Convinced that one has died for all” (2 Cor. 5:14), he is also convinced that Christian life and ministry follow that same pattern, including its relationship to power. When we look at the places in our own lives where we are powerful and the places where we are weak, Paul invites us to reevaluate their significance. He suggests that weakness is not an obstacle to God’s will being fulfilled through us. It may be the very “vessel” of God’s choosing. We carry on with what God has called us to be and to do, not just in spite of shortcomings and injustices but in the midst of them, marked by them, hindered by them, but finding in them the presence and the power of the crucified Messiah.

We may never be an American idol, but we can always be “the temple of the living God” (2 Cor. 6:16).

## About the Writer

*David Rensberger is a writer and retreat leader based in Decatur, Georgia, who continues to teach occasional New Testament courses at the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta and Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur. He has written books and articles on the Gospel and Letters of John and on Christian spirituality.*

## Endnotes

1. Some representative passages: Rom. 1:4, 16, 20; 1 Cor. 1:18–25; Phil. 3:10, 21; 1 Thess. 1:4–5.
2. A strong proponent of this interpretation is Elizabeth Castelli, *Imitating Paul: A Discourse of Power* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991). A different view is taken by Victor A. Copan, *Saint Paul as Spiritual Director: An Analysis of the Imitation of Paul with Implications and Applications to the Practice of Spiritual Direction* (Crownhill, Milton Keynes: Pater-noster Press, 2007).
3. See, for example, 2 Cor. 2:17–3:6; 4:1–5; 10:1–11; 11:5–15; 12:11–18.
4. 2 Corinthians 1:24 (TNIV).
5. George Appleton, ed., *The Oxford Book of Prayer* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 204.