

GOSPEL STRONG: The Power of Truth: God's Grace 2 Corinthians 12-13ⁱ

WELCOME:

Well, good morning, Trinity! It is good to see you this morning. I want to say a special welcome to those of you that are our guests. We're thrilled you're here. Thank you for being a part of worship this morning.

We would love the opportunity to connect with you. You can let us know about your time with us today in a couple of different ways. You can text the keyword, TBCMP, which stands for Trinity Baptist Church Mt. Pleasant, to the number 94-000. And the way that works is when you send that keyword to that number, you'll be sent a link back. That link takes you to a short form. You can fill that out click submit. It then notifies us, and we get to follow up with you this week.

Or you can stop by Guest Connect located in the main lobby just outside the worship center. In fact, even if you text in, swing by there. We have a team of people that would love to meet you and give you a small gift to say thanks for being with us today. Again, we are thrilled to have you with us.

COMMUNITY UPDATE:

I want to take just a moment here at the beginning of my message to say a big THANK YOU for praying for the students and adults involved in Thursday's incident at CiCi's. I am pleased to tell you that it seems as though the students that were injured are all doing okay. Specifically, the two girls from our church are doing well. There is still a long road of recovery ahead for them, but we are grateful for The Lord's protection and watch care over this whole situation. While tragic, it could have been way different. And I want to ask you to continue to pray for these families in the coming weeks. But you know, to see The Church spring into action was a beautiful thing. And that's what belonging to church is all about. So, thank you for continuing to lift these students, adults, and Chapel Hill school district up in prayer.

SERIES INTRODUCTION:

Well, today we are wrapping up our teaching series through the book of 2 Corinthians. We have called this series, "Gospel Strong," as we have turned to Paul's writing to discover how we can have a strength that is greater than human strength. And it is my prayer that as we wrap up this study you have

found something to be helpful for you and your spiritual growth. I know it has been a blessing for me to study each week.

And it is fitting to come to this point in this study today. Paul will share some final words and challenge for the Corinthians. It is fitting as this morning will also serve as my last message as Lead Pastor here at Trinity. And as Paul shares his final words, I want to encourage you, Trinity, to remain faithful to the task at hand.

So, I want to invite you to take your Bibles and turn with me to 2 Corinthians chapter 12. We are going to cover chapters 12 and 13 here this morning in a message that I've entitled, "God's Grace." We are going to see 3 specific ways in which God's grace works in us.

OPENING ILLUSTRATION: Paradoxes

You know, God's grace is often a paradox. You know what a paradox is, right? A paradox is a statement that seems contradictory or absurd but may reveal a deeper truth.ⁱⁱ Let me give you a couple of examples of what I am talking about. Have you ever heard the saying, "Less is more?" Or "The more you know, the more you know you don't know." Another paradox is, "You have to spend money to make money." One final one, "I can resist anything except temptation."ⁱⁱⁱ Those are examples of paradoxes. They seem contradictory but they reveal a deeper truth.

God's Word is full of paradoxes. "In order to gain your life, you have to lose it; in order to be exalted, you have to humble yourself; if you give up everything, you get everything." These are examples of Biblical paradoxes.^{iv}

Well, when it comes to the subject of God's grace and how grace works in us, it is a Biblical paradox. I've often heard grace defined as "God's unmerited favor." That is paradoxical because we understand that nothing is given, everything is earned. But that's not the case when it comes to God's grace. God shows favor on us, not because of anything we have done to earn it. In our sin we have done the opposite to earn God's favor. But He gives us His grace.

Paul understood God's grace and the paradoxical nature it presented. And we are going to see that in our study here this morning. We are going to see God's grace for our weakness, God's grace for our growth, and God's grace for our future. That is the outline that we are going to follow here this morning.

BACKGROUND:

Now, before we jump in, I want to give a little background information. If you were here last week, you know that we only got through verse 15 of chapter 11. And there are 33 verses in that chapter. And we are going to pick up in chapter 12, verse 7 today. So, what about the verses that we didn't cover?

Well, the remainder of chapter 11 Paul continues defending his ministry. He continues to give reasons that the Corinthians should still hold to his teaching. And in verse 1 of chapter 12, Paul says that he must continue in that endeavor. So, leading up to where we are going to begin today, know that Paul does an incredible job of sharing his credentials and experiences which landed him in the position of apostle.

MESSAGE:

So, he picks up from there in chapter 12, verse 7. And Paul is going to talk about the first paradox of grace. He says, God's grace is...

1) For our weakness.

Look with me at verses 7 through 10 of 2 Corinthians 12. After talking about his credentials, Paul said, *"So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a **thorn** was given me in the flesh, a **messenger of Satan** to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. ⁸Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. ⁹But he said to me, **"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."** Therefore **I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.** ¹⁰For the sake of Christ, then, I am **content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.**"* To keep Paul grounded and humbled, God allowed a thorn in Paul's flesh. I want to mention a couple of things here.

First, the word translated, "thorn," is better translated, "stake."^v It conveys the idea of something sharp and painful that causes continuous distress.^{vi} When we read this, we tend to think a little splinter in our finger. Yeah, that is very annoying. But what Paul is describing here is beyond a splinter, it's a massive stake. Think tent peg being driven into his flesh.

The second thing worthy of note is how Paul describes the thorn in his flesh. He says it was, quote, "**a messenger of Satan,**" that harassed him. It is written

in such a way that the interpretation here is that God allowed this continuous distress.

And that language causes me to think of Job. Remember when Satan wanted to test Job's loyalty to God that he had to ask God for permission? God then allowed Satan to test Job, but even then, put parameters around it. The same is true here of Paul. God allowed something to harass Paul so that he would say grounded, humble.

And what's more, we read in verse 8 that Paul pleaded three times for God to take it away from him. The significance of pleading with God three times points to the desperation Paul had. He wanted it to be gone. But God did not remove it. And like Paul, God's grace is sufficient for us in similar situations. It affords us the opportunity to learn to accept what is inescapable and listen for what God is saying to us in the midst of it.

Beloved, it is hard for us to follow God's calling on our lives. I know many of you feel a sense of discomfort in all that The Lord is doing in this church. Many of you are like me and you don't understand God's timing in things. But if I can urge you in anything, know that God's grace is sufficient. And instead of looking at the circumstance, listen to what God is saying in the midst of it.

Now, when it comes to this text, the natural question is, "What was Paul's thorn in the flesh?" There have been lots of speculation on that. Some think it was a particular person, or a disease, or some other issue.^{vii} I'll share with you what I think it was. Again, this is just my thought. So, take this for what it's worth.

I think Paul struggled with his eyesight. We can infer that from a few things. One is that the areas that Paul visited to start churches were areas known to have insects that carried certain diseases that ultimately affected one's eyesight.

The second reason I think it had to do with his eyesight is because of what he wrote to the Galatians. In chapter 4, verse 15, he specifically said, *"For I testify to you that, if possible, you would have gouged out your eyes and given them to me."* Then again at the end of Galatians, chapter 6, verse 11, he wrote, *"¹¹See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand."* I think all that points to difficulty with eyesight. But then again, I'm not sure that poor eyesight equates to a massive stake in the flesh. It's just an idea.

But the point isn't what Paul's thorn was; it's that God's grace is seen in our weakness. In fact, Paul said that God told him that, "God's power is made perfect in weakness." And that when Paul was weak, then he was really strong.

Here is the paradoxical statement. **God does His best work when we are at our weakest.** That is true of us individually and true of us as a church. When we are at our weakest moment, when we come to the realization that there is no solution to an issue within me, that is when we become dependent upon The Lord and that gives Him the room to do His best work.

God's grace is for our weakness. The second thing Paul says is that God's grace is...

2) For our growth.

God's grace is for moments of weakness, but His grace is seen when **God uses challenges to grow us spiritually.** That's what I think Paul is getting at beginning in verse 19. Paul says, *"¹⁹Have you been thinking all along that we have been defending ourselves to you? It is in the sight of God that we have been speaking in Christ, and **all for your upbuilding, beloved.**"* Skip down to chapter 13, verse 5. *⁵Examine yourselves, to see whether you are **in the faith.** Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test! ⁶I hope you will find out that we have not failed the test. ⁷But we pray to God that you may not do wrong—not that we may appear to have met the test, but that you may do what is right, though we may seem to have failed. ⁸For we cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth. ⁹For **we are glad when we are weak and you are strong.** Your restoration is what we pray for."* A couple of things that I think are important to point out.

First, Paul says that whatever he endured was for the Corinthians upbuilding. The word translated, "upbuilding," in the original language is a word that means, "spiritual advancement."^{viii} That is spiritual growth. Paul was grateful for any spiritual advancement that was made, even if that meant challenges for him. And even his challenges were growth opportunities for his own spiritual advancement.

You know, Paul could have looked at his circumstance and given up. He could have been so overwhelmed by the weakness he was experiencing. We often say things like, "If my circumstances were different then I could do so much

more for The Lord." But God sees things differently. And so did Paul. He saw challenges as opportunities for growth. That's the grace paradox. God provides His grace when we face difficulties so that we can spiritually advance in our faith.

In verse 5, Paul asks the Corinthians to examine themselves, to test themselves. And for what purpose? He says, *"⁵Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the **faith.**"* I want you to circle or underline that word, "faith." That word is not referring to trust in Christ. In other words, Paul is not doubting their salvation here. He knows they are saved. He led them to The Lord. So, what does Paul mean? Well, he is asking the Corinthians to examine and test to see whether or not their conduct and thinking aligns with their belief.^{ix}

This is the challenge I think we all face, especially preachers. Follow my thinking here. I have the awesome task of teaching the Scriptures each and every week. And I have taught Scriptures that teach the sovereignty of God. But the question is, do I truly believe the sovereignty of God? Do I truly believe, in a moment of crisis, that God holds all things in His hand and no one can thwart the working of God? Or do I believe that God still needs me to accomplish certain things?

Let me give you another example. Do I truly believe Jesus when He says that He will build His Church? Or do I think it depends on me or anyone else for that matter? What about when Jesus says, "Do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink?" And then He says, "Look at the birds of the air... your Heavenly Father takes care of them. Are you not more valuable than the birds of the air?"

If I examine my heart, and line it up with that teaching, then I have to be honest and say that I don't believe it and often lack faith. Because I do worry about tomorrow. I do think that I certain things depend on me. I do struggle to trust God's sovereign plan. Are you following me?

But do you know what happens when I'm in a situation where I have no choice but to believe? Like when a medical diagnosis scares me to death. Or when finances seem so overwhelming there's no way out. Well, it's in those situations that God shows up. And it is in those circumstances that I'm forced to believe. And it is in those moments that God grows my faith. And if we are honest, without those moments, there is no spiritual growth, no spiritual advancement.

I don't know about you, but I am grateful for God's grace. His grace is for our weakness, and His grace is for our growth. The third and final thing that I want to point out this morning is that God's grace is...

3) For our future.

Look with me at how Paul closes this letter to the Corinthians. Verses 11 through 13 of chapter 13. ***11**Finally, brothers, **rejoice**. Aim for **restoration**, **comfort one another**, **agree with one another**, **live in peace**; and the God of love and peace **will be with you**. **12**Greet one another with a holy kiss. **13**All the saints greet you.*

Paul's urging here in his final words to them in this letter are like popcorn exhortations. Do you know what I mean? I can remember when I was a student in Student Ministry at church and we would all pray together in what our youth minister called popcorn prayers. We would each take turns and pray a simple sentence. That was popcorn prayers. Well, here Paul gives short, simple, and powerful exhortations. And he couches it in the context of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. And the exhortations were important for the future of the Church in Corinth. And I want to look at them as I borrow for Paul to challenge you for the future of this great church.

Paul first urges the Corinthians to rejoice. This word means a sense of inner joy and delight.^x It is in response to the goodness of God;^{xi} His grace. Trinity Baptist Church, rejoice. Have joy. God is at work in this place. His grace abounds. There is much reason to be full of joy. Rejoice.

Paul then challenges the Corinthians to aim for restoration. The word translated "restoration," literally means to "fit together, compact, to perfect and equip."^{xii} God has brought together each of you. You are Trinity. And God is going to continue to use you to bring people to faith. Work hard to fit together, to work together, for the sake of the gospel.

The third exhortation Paul offers is to, "comfort one another." It literally means to encourage one another.^{xiii} As you walk into the future, do so encouraging one another. Be each other's greatest cheerleader.

Fourthly, agree with one another. The literal translation of this is to be of the same mind.^{xiv} To be understanding of one another. And be unified around the

same vision, to become a gospel-centered community redeeming brokenness through hope in Jesus Christ.

The fifth exhortation Paul gives and is the same that I give you. Live in peace. That is to live in harmony.^{xv} Unity.

And look at what Paul says is the outcome of a church that does those very things. The end of verse 11. *the God of love and peace **will be with you***. God is with you, Trinity. And that's God's grace. **By God's grace, He is with you and will be with you into the future**. That is a promise that you can count on.

A couple more final things and then I'm done. Paul says, in verse 12, to greet one another with a holy kiss. Now, I don't know about the kiss thing. I'm not down for that. Don't give me a kiss period. I don't care if it's holy or not.

But I want you to see the word greet. That word that means to welcome.^{xvi} One of the things that has come to define you, Trinity, is that you are welcoming. You welcome the hurting. You welcome the broken. You welcome the down and out. You welcome the searching and struggling. You welcome the ones that think they are just fine but later realize they are hurting, too. You welcome the little ones. You welcome the hard. And by so doing, you welcome The Lord Jesus. That is the working of God's grace.

And then I leave you with words of Paul that have become our words as Trinity. For the past couple of years, we have closed our services with 2 Corinthians 13:14. May, *"the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all."* I love you WAY more than you will ever know.

CONCLUSION:

Maybe you are here this morning, and you have not been born again unto a relationship with Jesus Christ. If that is you, or if you have questions about what that means, we want to visit with you today and share with you the hope found in Jesus Christ. At the end of this service, the elders will be here and ready to visit with you about how you can have a personal relationship with Jesus.

Maybe you have a prayer concern, and you would like to visit with and pray with someone, we are here for that, too. I'm going to pray, our worship team will lead us in a song of response and then we will close our services today. **PRAY**

ENDNOTES:

ⁱ Works consulted in preparation for this message: David E. Garland, *The New American Commentary: 2 Corinthians*, B&H Publishing: Nashville, 1999; Scott J. Hafemann, *The NIV Application Commentary: 2 Corinthians*, Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 2000; John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: 2 Corinthians*, Moody Publishers: Chicago, 2003; Eric Mason, *Christ-Centered Exposition: Exalting Jesus In 2 Corinthians*, Holman: Nashville, 2024; Skip Heitzig, "2 Corinthians 12-13," message taught at Calvary Albuquerque, April 12, 2023, accessed online: <https://connectwithskip.com/teachings/#/series/327/sermon/4770>.

ⁱⁱ Google Generative AI based on the search, "examples of paradox."

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Mason, page 238.

^v Strong's Concordance, 4647, skolops.

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} See Garland, pages 519-522 for good discussion on this topic.

^{viii} Strong's Concordance, 3619, oikodomé.

^{ix} Garland, page 546.

^x Strong's Concordance, 5463, chairó.

^{xi} Ibid.

^{xii} Strong's Concordance, 2675, katartizó.

^{xiii} Strong's Concordance, 3870, parakaleó.

^{xiv} Strong's Concordance, 5426, phroneó.

^{xv} Strong's Concordance, 1514, eiréneuó.

^{xvi} Strong's Concordance, 782, aspazomai.