

The Strength of Weakness - 1 Corinthians 1:27

Today we're going to finish the message on making weaknesses work for you. The fact is everyone has weaknesses: emotional, physical, intellectual, relational, financial. We all have weaknesses. What we usually do with our weaknesses is deny them, hide them, pretend they don't exist, ignore them, excuse them or blame other people for them. God comes along wants to use our weaknesses. We say, "No, God! Don't use them, take them away!" God says, "My ways are not your ways. My ways are higher than your ways I'm smarter than you. I can use your weaknesses." You say, "But God, why don't you use my strengths?" God will use your strengths, but God also will use your weaknesses.

Remember how we defined a weakness. We're not talking about something you can change. We're not talking about a sin, a character defect, a fault – overeating, being contentious, being late. That's stuff you can do something about. When we talked about God wanting to use your weaknesses, we're talking about limitations in your life you either inherited or cannot change. There're some things in your life that you want to say, "Why God? Why do I have this? I didn't choose my heredity. I didn't choose my body. I didn't choose my natural makeup. I didn't choose a predisposition toward depression, or worry. I didn't choose a lot of things, yet they limit me and cause pain." But God has a use for your weaknesses. Not just your strengths but your weaknesses.

1 Corinthians 1:27 says, "*God chose things the world considers foolish in order to shame those who think they are wise. And he chose things that are powerless to shame those who are powerful.*" God purposely chooses to use things the world sees as irrational or weak to show that we can't count on those things or take pride in them. God chooses things in our lives that put worldly wisdom and power to shame.

There are three things God takes us through in using our weakness. Two we went over last week and the third will be our focus today. Let me briefly review:

First, God uses me when, **1. I Am Open About My Weaknesses.** That's the starting point. We all have shortcomings and faults and areas we're weak in. I stop pretending I've got it all together, because I don't. No one does. I need to stop hoping my they'll go away if I ignore them. They won't. Stop making excuses. Stop blaming people. Stop denying and just admit I have weaknesses – physical, spiritual ... all areas.

Second God uses me when, **2. I Am Thankful About My Weaknesses.** Why would anyone be grateful for weaknesses? We talked about four reasons. Paul says "*I've cheerfully made up my mind to be proud of my weaknesses because they mean a deeper experience of the power of Christ in my life.*" When I have weaknesses it Requires God's help: it motivates me to look for God's help. It also Limits My Pride, because I know I can't do it all on my own. Also, it Builds Our Connection because no one gets all the pieces of the puzzle. God allows us to have weaknesses so we see the value of other people. You lack some things; I lack others so we need each other. We compensate for one another. And it Inspires Ministry. In fact, it can inspire your greatest ministry, the way you may make the biggest impact on earth is when God takes your weakness and turns it into a strength. God will take your deep hurt and turn it into your life message. Who can better help someone struggling with something than someone who's had the same problem and God got them through? The things you're embarrassed about, that hurt, if you let God work on it and heal you, will be used to help people.

But none of this can happen unless you're willing to take step three. If you want God to use the weakness in your life.

3. I Contribute in Ministry Through My Weakness. I share through my weaknesses - let down my guard and take action. That's means being vulnerable. Would you agree that letting down your guard with people can be a risky thing? It's highly risky. You don't know how they're going to respond. There's a book called, Why Am I Afraid To Tell You Who I Am? I can tell you the answer - I'm afraid to let you know who I really am because if you don't like it, I'm up the creek because, **I'm all I've got!** If I let you know my faults, hurts and weaknesses and you reject me, I'm dead in the water.

James Cook was the captain who discovered Hawaii, the Fiji islands and other South Pacific islands. On his last trip on one island, they treated him like a god; put him on a pedestal, because they'd never seen anyone like him. When he left and headed out to sea, they ran into a storm. Cook was afraid the boat would capsize. So they turned around and came back to shore. When they did, the natives killed Cook and his crew. He'd fallen off their pedestal. He wasn't a god. No god would be afraid of a storm. They realized he was a mere mortal. He disappointed them so they killed him.

His mistake wasn't in not being a god - he never was or could be. His mistake was letting people think he was anything more than he was in the first place. I doubt any of you are going to get killed for sharing your weaknesses, but it can be a risky proposition, especially if you've been hiding your weaknesses up until now. So why live a lifestyle where you're up front about the emotional, physical, intellectual and spiritual weaknesses in your life and purposely commit to minister through your weaknesses? Well here's four reasons:

1. It Promotes Mental and Emotional Health. Maintaining an image requires an enormous amount of energy. When you try to live a life that shows everybody "I've got it all together" when you know you don't and everybody else knows it too, it creates stress and anxiety in your life. Maybe you're feeling stressed because you're trying to be something you're not, pretending you've got it all together. There's nothing as liberating emotionally as just being real, being honest. In fact, it's the only healthy way to live.

James 5:16 says, "*Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.*" You probably do a pretty good job of confessing your faults to God. But it says to confess to each other, "**so you may be healed.**"

Revealing is the beginning of healing. Some of the things that hurt in your life are never going to be taken care of until you share them with another person. As a pastor, people tell me stuff regularly that they'd never tell anyone else. I could blackmail a huge number of people! People come to me and say, "I've never shared this with anybody else..." Whenever somebody tells me that, I know that, in that moment, they may be able to experience a moment of liberation in their life from being able to admit it to somebody else. The act of sharing means a door is opening, if only a little.

There are habits you can't get rid of no matter how books you read or seminars you go to; things you don't like in your life that won't change until you're honest about it with some other human being. God wired us that way: to help each other. We're all stuck on this planet together.

But sharing these things is a dangerous thing to do in this world. We need someplace to do it where we can be safe and that place should be the church. After all, the church is meant to be a hangout for sinners; a safe place for imperfect people to gather and grow. We should put up a sign: "No perfect people need apply." This church is only for people who have all kinds of faults. It's for human beings. This is a place for people who want to change, who want to grow. If you don't want to grow, go find some other place because that's what a church is all about. If you want to pretend you've got it all together, you're missing the point of being in church!

Then, **2. It Empowers Your Spiritual Life.** The Bible says in the book of James, "*God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.*" Grace is the fact that God gives you what you need not what you deserve. If we got what we deserve, none of us would be here right now. He gives us what we need. That's grace. Grace gives the power to change. You need grace every single day. You're going to need it this week. You're going to need grace to handle the problems you're going to face; to handle the people you'll face; to handle the pressures.

How do you get grace? *God ...gives grace to the humble.* By humbling yourself. You do that by being honest about your weaknesses. That's what humility is. Humility isn't denying your strengths. Humility is being honest about your weaknesses. You have some tremendous strengths in your life. No doubt of it. You also have some tremendous weaknesses. I'm sure of that because it's true of everyone.

Some people have a false idea of what humility is – they think humility is putting yourself down. But, Jesus Christ didn't die for junk – the cross shows how valuable you are. Jesus says we're worth dying for. The very fact that Christ died for you shows how much you matter to God, how much God values you. Humility is simply being honest about your weaknesses. And the more honest you are, the more grace is possible. The more grace, the more power you have to change and grow.

Which brings us to, **3. It Will Encourage Growth in Our Church.** It encourages growth in two ways: The first type of growth is personal growth. If you aren't willing to explore your weaknesses, how can you grow? Your weaknesses are just where you most need to grow! And, the thing is, your personal growth also means growth for the church because, as a part of the body, you are adding to the maturity and the abilities of the whole body.

The second type of growth is the growth of the church, in spirit, fellowship and numbers. The best way to build relationships is to be open with people; to quit pretending you've got it all together. People love people who are open and down to earth and, in any case, it's hard to get to know someone who's pretending to be someone they're not! People who act like they've got it together, come off as arrogant or unapproachable. If you want people to be open to you, you have to be open with them.

When you go out and share your strengths it tends to create competition or envy. But when you share weakness it tends to create community. Vulnerability is the key to fellowship. Would you like to be closer to your husband or wife? Would you like to have a more intimate relationship with your kids or best friends? Would you like to have more solid relationships? The key is being vulnerable. We can't act like we are strong and the people we are trying to serve are weak. It's not true - we're all weak in our own ways - and it's not caring. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 9:22, *"When I am with those who are weak, I share their weakness, for I want to bring the weak to Christ. Yes, I try to find common ground with everyone, doing everything I can to save some."*

Are there things in your relationships that you're pretending aren't there? What are you pretending not to notice that you know is wrong? People are emotionally distant until they break down barriers and admit their weaknesses.

Have you done that? Have you ever shared your greatest fear with your spouse? I'm not talking about "I'm afraid of spiders." I'm saying, "My dad left my mom and I'm afraid that will happen to me." - Those kinds of fears. "Sometimes it's so hard, I think I'm going to lose my mind." Or "I'm afraid that I might lose my job and won't find another one and won't be able to provide for my family."

If you want to be close to someone there's only one path to genuine intimacy - through vulnerability. But in vulnerability you can experience conflict, chaos and fear so people back away, sweep it under the rug and pretend it's not there. When you do that, you lose out on intimacy and good relationships.

On the other hand, if you hang in there, stay with it and get to the other side, you'll be closer than you've ever been before. There's no intimacy without vulnerability. That's why some people never have many good relationships at church. They'll never let anyone get that close to them.

4. It Strengthens Christian Leadership. Leaders in the world are supposed to act like they're invulnerable. To legitimately lead believers you need to become vulnerable. Every one of us is called to be leader. Every one of you are leaders in different areas, different domains. We're going to talk about this in detail in three weeks with a message series called "Principles of Leadership." You have leadership roles in your community, your neighborhood, your block, your family. You may take a leadership role with children, with aged parents, sometimes at work or at school.

Leadership can be summed up in one word - influence. It's not position or title. It's influence. If I were to take you to a grade school at recess, within five minutes you could pick out which kids were the main leaders. They're the ones who are influencing most everyone. But all of us influence some people and some situations.

If you feel like, "I don't want to waste my life. I want to do things that mean something. I want to leave the world a better place because I was here," you'll have to be a leader. To be a good leader; to influence people in the right way, you'll need credibility - an essential requirement for leadership.

When you go to a bank and borrow money do they just hand it over to you? No. They do a credit check. They want to know are you credible?

Every moment of your life, people around you are doing life-credit checks on you. Your kids, your family, your friends, your neighbors, the people you work with, if you're in business, your customers, before they listen to what you say are going to think, "Does their life back up what they say? Are they credible?"

Listen carefully - as a believer you get credibility of the right kind by being vulnerable. Not by being perfect but by being honest about your limitations. If you have to be perfect to be a Christian leader, how many leaders are we going to have? **None!** You don't have to be perfect but you do have to be honest about your weaknesses. When you're honest about your weaknesses they say, "This person's not wearing a mask. He's the real article, the genuine item." It's integrity, credibility - being vulnerable.

You have to decide in life whether you're going to impress people or influence people. You can impress people from a distance, but you can only influence people up close. From a distance you look pretty classy. You could be a celebrity from a distance but when you get up close they see your pimples and liver spots and cellulite and the other failings, faults and failures in your life. Some of the big time impressive pastors you see on TV and such, I know them personally and they're not as impressive as they seem at a distance. The ones that are really good, though, don't have to be. Close up their sincerity takes over and they're influential because they're real, with all their imperfections. You don't have to be perfect - you have to be real. God wants that because God wants influencers to change the world.

God calls us to influence the world, not be influenced by it. When the people had turned away from God and Jeremiah was saying to God that people were mad at him because of what God had him say and do, God said to

Jeremiah, *"If you speak good words rather than worthless ones, you will be my spokesman. You must influence them; do not let them influence you! They will fight against you like an attacking army, but I will make you as secure as a fortified wall of bronze. They will not conquer you, for I am with you to protect and rescue you."* God is with us.

Why are we talking about this? Why have we spent two weeks on this? Because we want to build a church that's a place where you don't have to have it all together and people can be honest and open about their struggles. The tragic thing is most churches are the last place you'd want to honestly share your weaknesses. "If I let them know what's going on in my life someone's going to judge me, use it against me or put me down. If I tell anyone in the church it will be gossip, gossip, gossip." But if there's any place that ought to be able to help you when you hurt, it should be God's family.

We have to make this church that kind of place. No one should have to worry that what they reveal about themselves will be talked about or passed around. No one should have to feel that they can't be here because they disagree with someone or had a dispute with someone or because of a weakness they've had. We need to lead by our testimony – by the ministry we can do through the weaknesses we have and by making ourselves vulnerable - sharing of ourselves so that others can see that it's safe for them to be vulnerable too.

If I had time today, I would take you through a complete survey of the Bible to show you that God always uses weak people. God's first choice is always turning weakness into a strength. Here's just a few examples to encourage you:

Moses – Moses' weakness was his anger. He got angry one day and killed an Egyptian and got kicked out of Egypt. He got angry one day and struck a rock that God told him to speak to and that kept him out of the Promised Land. He got angry and threw the Ten Commandments down and broke them. He had to go back and get them again. Anger was Moses' weakness and yet, in the whole Bible, there are only two people called meek which literally means "anger under control" – Jesus and Moses. God took his greatest weakness and turned it into his greatest strength. He became an incredibly patient man. He put up with a million babies for forty years in the wilderness.

David the King. David stole a man's wife, committed adultery with her and then had the man killed. Now THAT'S certainly a failure. Yet David's greatest area of failure, God turned it around and built strength in his life. He became a man so pure that God called him a man after his own heart.

Abraham, in the Bible, is called the Father of faith. He's a spiritual giant. He has enormous faith. Yet when you study Abraham's life, his greatest weakness was his lack of faith. He was a doubter, always worrying. One time the enemy came and he told his wife, "Tell them you're my sister so they won't kill me to take you." I'm sure his wife was thinking, "There's a man of faith!! He'd save his neck by giving his wife away." God took the man's greatest weakness and turned it into a strength.

Gideon was a young man when an enemy nation had taken over Israel. God said, "I want to knock out the Midianite army, the enemy." There were 135,000 of them occupying Israel. God went to the smallest of the twelve tribes of Israel, found the poorest family and picked the youngest kid in the family – Gideon. He said, "You're going to be the deliverer. The mighty man of valor." You know where Gideon was at that time? He was hiding in a cave. "Me?" he says. God took the weakest coward and made him the bravest deliverer.

Peter. Jesus came to Peter and said, "You're my rock. You're going to be called Rock from now on. You're stable." Peter was anything but. He was Mr. Impulsive. Mr. Foot-in-Mouth. Mr. Do-Something-Impulsively-Now-And-Regret-it-Later. "I'll never deny You!" then minutes later he's denying him three times! When they came to arrest Jesus, Peter pulls out his sword and knocks off a guy's ear! Jesus said, "Don't do that!" and sticks it back on. Peter was Mr. Impulsive. Yet his weakness was turned into a strength as he became the stabilizing and connecting force in the early church.

All of God's giants have been weak men and women. God wants to take the weakness in your life and turn it into strength. But, remember what we said last week – there may be a thorn to remind you that God's in charge.

The greatest example of God turning weakness into strength is what Jesus did on the cross. *"Although he was crucified in weakness, he now lives by the power of God. We, too, are weak, just as Christ was, but... we will be alive with him and will have God's power."*

There's nothing more powerful and that's the example to cling to, the ultimate example of turning weakness into strength, the incredible power of vulnerability to win out over social, political and cultural powers.

Celebrate your weaknesses – it's in your weaknesses that God will change the world! So be it! Amen! Let's pray!