

# Immanuel Lutheran Mail Ministry



**2 Corinthians 12:1-10** *I must go on boasting. Though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. 2 I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven-- whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. 3 And I know that this man was caught up into paradise-- whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows-- 4 and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter. 5 On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses-- 6 though if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I would be speaking the truth; but I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me. 7 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. 8 Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. 9 But 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. 10 For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*

In his letter to young pastor Timothy, the Apostle Paul describes what should be the aim of our Christian lives when he says that we should pray for those in authority so ***“that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.”*** (1 Tim. 2:2) And perhaps you can think of a few Christians who fit that bill. Sadly, the reality for most is that our lives are anything but peaceful and quiet, nor are they particularly dignified. Rather, our sinful human nature likes to be loud and arrogant, drawing attention to ourselves and our accomplishments.

And it’s becoming all the more difficult to lead a life of quiet humility in 2021. In our current day, with more and more ordinary people becoming famous online influencers, many young people now grow up trying to be the next internet celebrity any way they can. But it’s not just a danger for young people. Anyone who’s ever played a sport or tried out for a play or who simply goes to work a job every day knows that desire of wanting to be recognized, wanting to stand out from the crowd, wanting some sort of glory to be heaped upon themselves.

Yes, that’s the ego talking. That monster within each of us that wants to devour us with self-absorbed vanity that not only blinds us from the needs of others, it also serves to block out Jesus Christ our Savior. I think John the Baptist put it best when he said, ***“[Christ] must increase; I must decrease.”*** (John 3:30) That phrase will serve as our sermon theme today as we seek to do the same.

## ***“Christ must increase; I must decrease.”***

- I. Stamp out self-righteousness
- II. Welcome weakness
- III. Boast in Christ

Right off the bat, it doesn’t sound like Paul is listening to our sermon theme, because he starts off our text with a lot of boasting! Clearly, it’s important for us to know the context so we know why he’s speaking this way. He’s in the middle of an argument during this discourse. He had begun this line of

boasting in the previous chapter, and it was for good reason. You see, there were false teachers at Corinth who called themselves “Super Apostles,” who were trying to lead the churches in the area away from the Apostle Paul and therefore away from Christ. Their big evidence for their superiority was pointing to all their prosperity and strength and smooth speech. In stark contrast to them stood the Apostle Paul—not wealthy, somewhat sickly, often persecuted. Looking at the two options, with whom would it appear that God was with? Who would the Corinthians rather follow? According to the Super Apostles, the answer was obvious.

So, Paul begins the previous chapter, saying, ***“I wish you would bear with me in a little foolishness. Do bear with me!”*** (2 Corinthians 11:1) He doesn’t want to participate in this superiority contest, but he has to. Losing the Corinthian congregation to these false teachers would mean losing their souls as well. So, he goes on in that chapter bragging a lot. He says, ***“Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they offspring of Abraham? So am I. Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one.”*** (2 Corinthians 11:22-23)

And that’s where we find him when we jump into chapter 12 and our sermon text. He’s defending his apostleship against these accusers, saying, ***“I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. And I know that this man was caught up into paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows—and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter.”***

The man he’s talking about is himself. He’s recounting an experience he had, but he speaks in this round-about way because he doesn’t want any attention placed on himself and therefore taken away from God. Instead, his focus remains on the grace of God which allowed this experience to happen. Then he concludes all this boasting in verse 6: ***“If I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I would be speaking the truth; but I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees or hears from me.”*** That last phrase is the key. Paul does not want anyone to think of any sort of greatness in Paul *other than* the message that he brings which they hear from his lips—forgiveness in Christ Jesus.

It would be great for us to learn from the Apostle here, striving to pull the attention away from ourselves, stamping out self-righteousness so that the focus of everything we do is on Christ. But our pride loves to pull the attention away from Christ and onto ourselves. Like when we do some good work, do something nice and loving for another individual, but we have a hard time not letting at least a few people know we did it. Or when we strive to present our lives as being pretty perfect, without many struggles to speak of. We could go on and on with examples, all of them pointing to one truth—though we confess we are saved by grace, we like to act as if our own goodness has something to do with it. Again, **Christ must increase; I must decrease.** The first step in that is stamping out our self-righteousness.

Now, that’s not as easy as simply flipping a switch to turn off that portion of our brain. It would actually prove quite impossible for us to do this alone, which is why God offers a gift to combat this sinful mentality. Any clue what that gift might be? It’s actually **weakness**. We can thank the Lord that he gives us weakness!

That might seem like a strange thing to thank God for, but it really is a gift. And Paul expresses why that’s the case starting in verse 7, ***“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.”** God has a way of knowing how to humble us when we need it, and He did so with Paul. But while this was inconvenient for Paul, the Apostle points out that it was actually for his good. Whenever God sees fit to humble *us*, to give *us* weaknesses or trials or pain, it’s for *our* good. It serves as an antitoxin to battle our own sinful nature, our own self-righteousness.

By the way, we all have our own strengths, those talents which God gifts to each one of us which we can use to build up the body of Christ. But we are able to take those strengths and turn them into weaknesses, pretty easily. For instance, maybe you’re one of those people that doesn’t like to sugarcoat anything, you tell it like it is. And that can be an admirable trait. But it can also be a very thin line between that and being needlessly cruel and rude to others. Or perhaps you’re a person that tends to be very tactful, thinking carefully about everything before you say it. Another admirable trait. But it’s easy to cross the line from that to merely being deceitful and evading the truth when it needs to be told. Maybe you’re one with firm convictions, a strong backbone so-to-speak, but that can easily turn into pigheadedness. Similarly, confidence, which is something to strive for, can easily become arrogance. All of these are simple ways in which we’re able to take our strengths and turn them into weakness.

Well, God is one who also gives us weaknesses, and by *His* grace, He turns them into our strength. Paul describes that in verse 9. **“But 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.”** Through our weakness, God grants us His power. And what is that power of God? What is this strength good for? It’s the pure, simple joy and peace that comes in knowing that every single sin has found full and complete forgiveness in the death of Jesus Christ our Savior.

Yes, God takes our weaknesses and can make us strong through them. You know when this truth is seen most clearly? When a Christian lies helpless on a sickbed, at death’s doorstep, and can do nothing but cast themselves fully and hopefully upon the Lord. It’s at that time when you are the strongest! Maybe not in the eyes of the world, but before God you are. We saw this very recently with our departed sister-in-Christ Emily Kuehne. For a long time, her physical health had drained from her, and yet she maintained that quiet confidence in her Savior. In the eyes of the world perhaps, she looked very weak, not much left in her. But in the eyes of God, she was a saint of God coming home from battle, rejoicing with her champion, Jesus Christ. When she was weak, then she was strong.

So, as we seek to decrease so that Christ might increase, we see the need to stamp out our self-righteousness which wants to take credit away from God, and we welcome the weakness which God sends to help us do that. And then there’s only one thing left to do, and that is **Boast in Christ.**

Now, if you spend any sort of time on social media, you know, Facebook, Instagram, anything like that, you know the type of pictures that most people share. Pictures of the family, of the house, of vacation, and they’re usually pretty neat and tidy and well put together. Most people don’t take pictures of the mess and post that, because we don’t like people seeing our dirty laundry. When interacting with fellow Christians though, you should air it all out. Unveil your weaknesses and confess your sins to one another. For through our weaknesses, we are able to boast all the more in the Savior who is able to deliver us from them.

That’s how Paul concludes, saying, **“Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with**

***weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.***

The Reformer Martin Luther once wrote to a friend with the directive to “sin boldly.” Which sounds like a very strange thing for a pastor to say, but he wasn’t encouraging his friend to *sin*, rather he was encouraging him to not sweep his sin under the rug. He didn’t want him to attempt to hide his sin. The full quote goes like this, *“Be a sinner and sin boldly, but let your trust in Christ be stronger, and rejoice in Christ who is the victor over sin, death, and the world.”*

If we preach ourselves, raising ourselves up as these great examples, or if we want people to see us and admire us—well, we’re really just trying to steal the glory away from Christ. In ourselves, there’s nothing more than a sinner totally unworthy of God’s love. And yet God says to each of us, ***“My grace is sufficient for you.”***

It happens often in job interviews, the interviewer will ask a number of questions about the applicant, and one of those questions will inevitably be, “What’s your greatest weakness?” And, well, most people looking for a job don’t want to come right out and spell out their flaws or else they might not get the job. So many people will really talk about some of their strengths and make them sound like weaknesses. They’ll say things like, “I care too much. Sometimes, I’m too motivated. Sometimes, I work too hard, I don’t take out enough time for myself.” Things that could hardly be considered weaknesses at all to the employer, but that’s the whole point. They want to present themselves before their would-be employer as without flaw.

But when it comes to how we stand before the Lord and how He views us, it has nothing to do with our strengths or with our weaknesses. So, we can drop the act. We are totally insufficient, yet God’s grace is sufficient. Grace, that wonderful word that means, “Undeserved love.” When God says His love is undeserved, it means that we have nothing to do with the fact that God loves us. In fact, those things that we can claim are the reasons why God should not love us!

And yet love us He does. The power of Christ rests upon us—that ***“power of God unto salvation,”*** (Romans 1:16)—the power to love and save lost sinners, that has been given to us. May we boast about that. Speaking openly to our fellow Christians and even to unbelievers about our weaknesses, confessing our sins to one another, and therefore openly proclaiming the God who has loved us with an everlasting love and who has forgiven us all sin. We don’t want people to *think* we are going to heaven because we’re great people; we want them to *know* we’re going to heaven because we have a great Savior, the Son of God who loved *me* and gave Himself for *me*. Having this proper perspective, finally, we can boast in the words of the hymn that we’ll sing in a few minutes.

*Till then—nor is my boasting vain—  
Till then I boast a Savior slain;  
And oh, may this my glory be,  
That Christ is not ashamed of me!*

Thanks and praise be, not to ourselves—we must decrease—but to Christ alone. He is the one who has given us the victory. Amen.

***“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”***  
(Philippians 4:7) Amen.

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