

- Welcome back folks. March is here and we are headed toward spring. Can I get an Amen on that?
 - Anyway, last week I made a statement that could be or might be considered a little controversial, especially for those of us who have attended church for many years, and it had to do with the use of our testimony. Specifically, our testimony as a method of leading someone to Christ.
 - And I used as my ‘proof of concept’, Paul, how he personally never used his personal testimony as a Salvation tool. As a matter of fact, I haven’t personally found where a testimony is ever used a tool or method of leading someone to salvation in the Bible.
 - Which is interesting, because honestly, if anyone was going to use their personal testimony in that fashion, I would say Paul would be a pretty good candidate, wouldn’t you? But he doesn’t. Instead, just as we studied last week in the story of the Philippian Jailor, Paul took people to the Word of God when trying to lead someone to Christ.
 - And from there, if God was dealing with that individual, it was then that God Himself would convict them through the pages of scripture. And based on my research, that appears to be the recurring theme all throughout the Bible, at least in places where matters of salvation are concerned.
 - And as I just stated, this doesn’t just apply to Paul. As far as I can tell, no other person in the scriptures uses their testimony as a method of Salvation either. Now, just so I don’t appear to be setting up shop on one passage of scripture, let me take you to another place in the Bible where salvation is the topic, and use it as a proof text of what I am trying to convey.
- Turn with me if you will, to Acts 8:25-40:

Acts 8:25 So, when they had solemnly testified and spoken the word of the Lord, they started back to Jerusalem and were preaching the gospel to many villages of the Samaritans.

Acts 8:26 But an angel of the Lord spoke to Philip saying, “Get up and go south to the road that descends from Jerusalem to Gaza.” (This is a desert *road*.)

Acts 8:27 So he got up and went; and there was an Ethiopian eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure; and he had come to Jerusalem to worship,

Acts 8:28 and he was returning and sitting in his chariot and was reading the prophet Isaiah.

Acts 8:29 Then the Spirit said to Philip, “Go up and join this chariot.”

Acts 8:30 Philip ran up and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and said, “Do you understand what you are reading?”

Acts 8:31 And he said, “Well, how could I, unless someone guides me?” And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

Acts 8:32 Now the passage of Scripture which he was reading was this:

“HE WAS LED AS A SHEEP TO SLAUGHTER;

**AND AS A LAMB BEFORE ITS SHEARER IS SILENT,
SO HE DOES NOT OPEN HIS MOUTH.**

Acts 8:33 “IN HUMILIATION HIS JUDGMENT WAS TAKEN AWAY;
WHO WILL RELATE HIS GENERATION?
FOR HIS LIFE IS REMOVED FROM THE EARTH.”

Acts 8:34 The eunuch answered Philip and said, “Please *tell me*, of whom does the prophet say this? Of himself or of someone else?”

Acts 8:35 Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him. (KEY!!)

Acts 8:36 As they went along the road they came to some water; and the eunuch said, “Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?”

Acts 8:37 [And Philip said, “If you believe with all your heart, you may.” And he answered and said, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.”]

Acts 8:38 And he ordered the chariot to stop; and they both went down into the water, Philip as well as the eunuch, and he baptized him.

Acts 8:39 When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; and the eunuch no longer saw him but went on his way rejoicing.

Acts 8:40 But Philip found himself at Azotus, and as he passed through, he kept preaching the gospel to all the cities until he came to Caesarea.

- And so, not only does Paul not use his personal testimony as a tool to lead someone into salvation, which was highlighted by what we read in Acts 16:25-29 with the story of the Philippian jailor. Based on the testimony of 2 Corinthians 12, he goes out of his way to do the opposite of using his testimony. And not only that, but God Himself takes great measures to ensure Paul will not be the center of His work either.
 - And how does God ensure that? Well, let’s read it one more time. 2 Corinthians 12:7-10:

2 Cor. 12:7 Because of the extraordinary *greatness* of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me—to keep me from exalting myself!

2 Cor. 12:8 Concerning this I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might leave me.

2 Cor. 12:9 And He has said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.” Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.

2 Cor. 12:10 Therefore I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in distresses, in persecutions, in difficulties, on behalf of Christ; for when I am weak, then I am strong.

- So, God (to ensure Paul would never think too highly of himself) sends a messenger of

Satan to torment him. And does that for one reason and one reason alone. To keep him grounded. To keep him from exalting himself. Pretty dramatic, don't you think?

- But having said that, what about our testimony? Am I saying we should never mention it? Nope, that's not what I am saying. Sharing your testimony has its place and purpose. It's really akin to what Abraham did when he built an altar to the Lord after God called him out of the Ur of the Chaldeans and told him to go unto a land in which He would show him.
- Once Abraham realized the blessing God had bestowed on him, he built an altar as a marker and reminder to all those who would see it. An altar to God testifying to all that God had done. And when we share our testimony, the purpose should be the same; to point people back to God.
 - Meaning, when we share our testimony, our lives should be a living Alter to God. Letting the world know who God is. How mighty and great He is. Now, someone might say, well, isn't that the same thing? I mean, if I share with people what God has done in my life, isn't that the same thing as sharing my testimony for the purposes of leading someone to Christ?
 - No, it's not. The altar Abraham built was built out of thankfulness and gratitude and, honestly, praise. It was a physical manifestation of praise unto the Lord, and by all accounts it was a form of worship.
- In other words, the altar itself had nothing to do with Abraham and everything to do with God. And proof of this concept can be found using one of the rules of Hermeneutics. Rules that we learned this past Wednesday when I took you through the second week curriculum on "How to Study your Bible as if You were Preparing to Teach it".
- The rule was that of Logic. It was rule #5:
 - The rule of LOGIC: Interpretation is merely logical reasoning.
 - It said when interpreting Scripture, the use of reason is everywhere to be assumed. Does the interpretation make sense? The Bible was given to us in the form of human language and therefore appeals to human reason. It invites investigation and it is to be interpreted as we would any other volume, applying the laws of language and grammatical analysis.
 - When we apply logic in determining the purpose of the altar that Abraham built, as the rule noted, we are using reasoning, which begins by asking yourself a simple question; why did Abraham feel the need to build the altar in the first place?
 - By applying logic and reasoning, it becomes really easy to ascertain the correct answer. Follow me here. What was the purpose of the altar? For, A – People to say, "Look, there's the altar Abraham built. What a great reminder of all that God has done for him", or B – People would say, "Look, there is an altar built to God as a reminder of who God is and of His faithfulness".
 - If the altar worked, it would convey the correct message. In other words, was the altar about Abraham or God? I'm going with B, because logically not everyone knew who Abraham was. Which means, the altar had to be a sign of God's goodness and greatness and provision, which meant it had zero to do with Abraham and everything to do with God.

- Which also lines up perfectly with the testimony of scripture. The scripture always makes God the focus, not us. So, when we use our testimony (even with good intention, I might add), when we use our testimony, and we use a lot of pronouns in the conversation, words like me and I, God is no longer the point of the conversation. You are.
- And so, when we give someone our testimony, we must remember our words should point people back to the cross. It should never be about the outcome of what God did, but rather, who God is.
- And maybe that's what you do. But for the most part, when most of us share our testimony with someone, it's generally all about us, what God did for us. And yes, God is a part of it, but He is really not the point or central focus. Generally, He as a secondary player in our story.
- Now, you may say, well, I don't necessarily agree with what you just said, and that's okay. I would just tell you to listen closely the next time someone gives their testimony, or for that matter, listen to yourself and ask yourself the question, who is the center of the discussion, you or God? If it's God, then you're okay. If it's you and God is secondary in the narrative, then you know you've got it wrong.
 - Moving on, Paul goes out of his way to divert the spotlight away from him. And, so he doesn't forget, God helps him out with that by sending a messenger of Satan to torment him. And why?
 - Well, Paul tells us in verses 8-10. It is so that he can tap into the power of the Holy Spirit, using a method by the way, that we would never use to tap into anything. A method called weakness. Listen to it one more time.

2 Cor. 12:8 Concerning this I pleaded with the Lord three times that it might leave me.

2 Cor. 12:9 And He has said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.

2 Cor. 12:10 Therefore I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in distresses, in persecutions, in difficulties, in behalf of Christ; for when I am weak, then I am strong.

- Once again guys, this is the testimony of scripture, and I want you to hear this. If you don't get anything out of what I am teaching today, hear this. If believers want to truly tap into or access the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives, it is done through weakness, of which humility and brokenness are synonyms.
 - And those are opposite of pride, and that includes any kind of pride. Pride is the issue, because it always elevates the individual, and when we increase, God automatically decreases. There is simply no way around it. And this is such a hard concept for us (as humans) to grasp and to implement into our daily lives.
 - And why? Because of sin. Sin that is so prevalent in each of our lives. With pride being at the top of the list. There is nothing our flesh delights in more than pride, which begins with our need to feel good about ourselves, to elevate ourselves.

- But as I said last week, unfortunately, pride is the Kryptonite in the life of the believer, and it takes extreme self-awareness to control it, control what we say, and more than that, how we say it. It requires the individual believer to stop and pause, and to think about what they are getting ready to say.
- Essentially, it requires us to examine our heart, our motive, and then of course our tongue. The Bible even warns us about this very thing. The Prophet Jeremiah spoke about the heart in Jeremiah 17:9-10:

Jeremiah 17:9 “The heart is more deceitful than all else
And is desperately sick;
Who can understand it?

- Then we hear this about the tongue in James 3:5-6, which provides an outlet for what’s in our heart:

James 3:5 So also the tongue is a small part *of the body*, and *yet* it boasts of great things. See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire!

James 3:6 And the tongue is a fire, the *very* world of unrighteousness; the tongue is set among our body’s parts as that which defiles the whole body and sets on fire the course of *our* life, and is set on fire by hell.

James 3:7 For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by the human race.

James 3:8 But no one *among* mankind can tame the tongue; *it is* a restless evil, full of deadly poison.

James 3:9 With it we bless *our* Lord and Father, and with it we curse people, who have been made in the likeness of God;

James 3:10 from the same mouth come *both* blessing and cursing. My brothers *and sisters*, these things should not be this way.

James 3:11 Does a spring send out from the same opening *both* fresh and bitter *water*?

James 3:12 Can a fig tree, my brothers *and sisters*, bear olives, or a vine *bear* figs? Nor *can* saltwater produce fresh.

- So, for the believer, our greatest battle takes place inside, and as I said, it requires self-awareness at a high level to win the pride battle. Which only happens when we see ourselves the way God sees us.
 - Let me say it another way, the way He saw us prior to the redeeming work of Jesus in our lives. And what was that? We were nothing more than filthy rags in the sight of a Holy and Righteous God. So, when we talk about tapping into the power of God in our lives through weakness, that power is made manifest through the process of ‘reflection’.
 - Meaning, when we study God’s Word, it breaks us down and causes us to reflect on

our lives. It humbles us by causing us to take a close examination of who we are, and look introspectively, which then causes us to ask ourselves a question. Am I doing what God has called me to do, which is to shine light in a dark and dying world?

- Simply put, the power of weakness is made manifest through self-reflection. Moving on.
- Let's finish Chapter 12, where Paul continues on with his defense of who he was, which was an Apostle of Jesus Christ. And, as he does that he also continues on with a sarcastic tone. Follow me if you will, 2 Corinthians 12:11-21:

2 Cor. 12:11 I have become foolish; you yourselves compelled me. Actually I should have been commended by you, since I was in no respect inferior to the most eminent apostles, even though I am a nobody.

2 Cor. 12:12 The distinguishing marks of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs, wonders, and miracles.

2 Cor. 12:13 For in what respect were you treated as inferior to the rest of the churches, except that I myself did not become a burden to you? Forgive me this wrong!

2 Cor. 12:14 Here for this third time I am ready to come to you, and I will not be a burden to you; for I do not seek what is yours, but you; for children are not responsible to save up for *their* parents, but parents for *their* children.

2 Cor. 12:15 I will most gladly spend and be expended for your souls. If I love you more, am I to be loved less?

2 Cor. 12:16 But be that as it may, I did not burden you myself; nevertheless, devious person that I am, I took you in by deceit.

2 Cor. 12:17 *Certainly* I have not taken advantage of you through any of those whom I have sent to you, have I?

2 Cor. 12:18 I urged Titus *to go*, and I sent the brother with him. Titus did not take any advantage of you, did he? Did we not conduct ourselves in the same spirit *and walk* in the same steps?

2 Cor. 12:19 All this time you have been thinking that we are defending ourselves to you. *Actually*, it is in the sight of God that we have been speaking in Christ; and all for building you up, beloved.

2 Cor. 12:20 For I am afraid that perhaps when I come I may find you to be not what I wish, and may be found by you to be not what you wish; that perhaps *there will be* strife, jealousy, angry tempers, selfishness, slanders, gossip, arrogance, disturbances;

2 Cor. 12:21 *I am afraid* that when I come again my God may humiliate me before you, and I may mourn over many of those who have sinned in the past and not repented of the impurity, sexual immorality, and indecent behavior which they have practiced.

- Paul begins by once again reminding his readers of his own qualifications as an Apostle.

And he does so in a somewhat different way. In verse 11, he says he has become foolish; you yourselves compelled me. Then he says, “Actually I should have been commended by you, since I was in no respect inferior to the most eminent apostles, even though I am nobody.”

- What he is saying is, I am participating in the foolishness of comparing myself to these most eminent apostles. The most eminent apostles being these false prophets who have slipped into the church. These men who have somehow elevated themselves in the eyes of this church.
- And they have done this through outward signs of strength, which (as we’ve learned) is opposite of weakness, and weakness, brokenness, and humility are the true signs of a called man of God. So, Paul continues with a sarcastic tone by saying the Church at Corinth forced him to participate in the foolishness of these false prophets. Meaning, he didn’t want to do it.
 - At this point, Paul says this church should be confirming and commending him, but instead they are forcing him to defend himself to this critical minority inside this fellowship. Then he says, “I am doing this (defending myself), even though he was nobody”.
 - And there it is again folks. Paul speaking about himself in humility. He says he was nobody. Which is interesting because if there ever was somebody in the Bible, Paul would be it. Yet, that is not how he views himself.
- Just an FYI for all believers listening today. Paul’s description of himself should be how we describe ourselves. He was nobody and we are nobody. Humility is the key, because it’s the counterbalance to pride. Next, in verses 12-13, Paul mentions what he calls the ‘distinguishing marks’ of a true Apostle. Which were what? Signs, wonders, and miracles.
 - I won’t dwell on this too much, other than to say God created Apostles for a specific purpose and reason, and they possessed certain gifts, gifts that were unique to them. This has been a highly debated topic throughout history. Let me correct that statement. This has been a highly debated topic over the last 50 years.
 - From my studies and research, it didn’t seem to be a debate until after the turn of the 20th century, or, let me say, it didn’t seem to be as much of a debate as it is today. The gifts of the Apostles served as a unique gift to them for the purposes of authenticity.
 - Remember, at this point in church history, Jesus Christ, and the Gospel of Jesus Christ, was a new concept. The Jews had been taught that one day the Messiah would come, and He would free their people. But when Jesus arrived, He wasn’t what they expected. They wanted more. A powerful man who would slay their enemies with just a stroke of His sword.
 - But instead, God sent a meek humble man, who spoke in ways that only His sheep would be able to understand. Only His sheep could hear His voice, and once he died and rose again, the Gospel message was inaugurated on the day of Pentecost, with men disciples while in the upper room experienced the ushering in of the Holy Spirit through tongues of fire.
 - Those men were empowered by God with special gifts for a specific reason, which was to authenticate the New Covenant of Jesus Christ. And Paul (even though he wasn’t a part of that upper room experience), received the same

power directly from God Himself on the road to Damascus.

- Those gifts were specific to the Apostles, and in my opinion based on my research, and let me say, also my experience inside the Charismatic Church, those gifts died with the Apostles. Now, you may be sitting here today and saying, well, I don't believe that. That's okay. Every believer must work out these matters for themselves.
- All I can tell you is this. I tried to get right up in the middle of these miracles of God, inside churches who said the miracles were still alive and well, to no avail. I never experienced it and I never saw it, and after over a year and a half of trying, it didn't happen.
- And let me say, when you study what Paul says right here in 2 Corinthians 12, where he clearly says:

2 Cor. 12:12 The distinguishing marks of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs, wonders, and miracles.

- One more time: The distinguishing marks of a true Apostle were performed among you with all perseverance. If you read those words in context, Paul says these signs, wonders, and miracles were distinguishing marks of a true Apostle. I don't know about you, but it appears these supernatural giftings were specific to the Apostles.
 - Anyway, Paul's point is, even though they performed these things among this church, which proved who they were, he and the other Apostles still had to prove themselves. And then he says something else. Something that serves as further proof of his Apostleship in Verses 14-19.
 - He mentions how he, nor the other Apostles, have never been a burden to them. In this context, burden relates to money. In other words, He's saying we never took a dime from you for anything we've done.
- Now, I find this interesting, And I'll tell you why. Over these past several chapters, Paul has been combating everything these false teachers have been saying. Specifically, what they have been saying about themselves as it relates to comparing themselves to Paul and the other disciples.
 - For example, when They used Paul's appearance and speaking ability as some sort of proof that he wasn't an Apostle. The sense of Paul's writings is that of them trying to prove who they are by and through their strengths.
 - And so, when they boast in their strength, Paul counters them by offsetting what they say by boasting in his weakness. So, it's a tit-for-tat situation. Meaning, when they make a point, Paul makes a counterpoint.
 - I find it interesting how Paul continues to mention how he hasn't been a burden to them by taking money from them for himself. And this tells me something. It tells me that these men (these false prophets) may be taking money from this church. Now let me say, the scripture doesn't say this, but if you use another rule of interpreting scripture in Hermeneutics, the rule of inference, you can infer this to be the case.
 - Meaning, Paul has consistently been combating what these men continue to

throw out as proof of their Apostleship. And Paul counters them by saying, true Apostles don't operate in those ways.

- So, what could be concluded is that these false prophets have been taking money from this church, whereas Paul and the other Apostles have not.
- Now, I could set up shop here for days (I won't), but guys let me just say, money collected through the Saints (through tithing), should be used to fulfill the work of ministry. We are called to be good stewards for the money people give, and for the past 10-plus years, this church has made that its mission and will continue to make it our mission.
 - Money has changed the church over the last *50 years*, and I believe it has perpetuated a lot of men entering into ministry, men who were not called into Pastoral Ministry. Paul took up money when he visited a church, but not for himself. He took it to the poorer churches so he could help facilitate their basic needs.
 - That's exactly what scripture tells us. Now, once again, you don't have to listen to me, but all I am saying is take away the big salaries and see how many men are still called into ministry. You would be surprised.
- Now, last week I said we were going to finish Chapter 12 and move into 13, but apparently, I should have kept my mouth shut because we aren't going to make it. We will finish it next week by briefly touching on the last few verses.
 - And so, in anticipation of Chapter 13, I would like you to read the entire 14 verses that are left in our study of 2 Corinthians and see if you and I come up with some of the same hypothesis as it relates to those verses.