

“Super Weak”

Jeremiah 9:23-24 • 2 Corinthians 11:16-33

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX
Rev. Dr. Charles S. Blackshear • February 13, 2022

Mark Twain supposedly said: “History doesn’t repeat itself but it *does* rhyme.” That is certainly true throughout the history of the Christian church. It seems like we keep facing the same problems over and over again. In Seattle, Washington in 1996, a young man named Mark Driscoll helped start what would become one of the largest churches in North America, Mars Hill Church. Mark didn’t have any experience planting churches. In fact, he jokingly said years later that he’d never been a pastor before, in fact he’d never been a member of a church before, so it seemed like the best thing to do was start one.

At its peak in 2014, Mars Hill Church had over 6,000 members and nearly 13,000 people attending worship across their 15 locations. In 2015 the church closed. A big reason why is that Mark Driscoll seems to be a narcissist. He would often speak, either in sermons or at conferences around the country, about how great he was. He would regularly tell people that his church was bigger or better than any other church in the country.

Of course this kind of boasting or bragging is not new. Lots of people have started movements claiming to be the only true, biblical church. It’s also not limited to churches. Politicians regularly go on TV to tell us how great a job they are doing, even if it’s completely untrue. The Roman Emperor Augustus Caesar even did the same thing. He essentially wrote his own obituary and then had it carved into monuments that were placed around the Roman Empire for everyone to see. We don’t know if the format originated with Augustus or was something that was already in use, but scholars have noted that the so-called “super-apostles” that Paul is fighting against in Corinth probably were using similar language to tell everyone why they were so great. And so here in chapter 11 of 2 Corinthians, Paul is trying to get the Corinthians to see the foolishness of what they are saying. But he also seems to be using the format of what Augustus said about himself but

with opposite meanings. Augustus detailed how he had built an army and conquered various places and how he had been honored multiple times by the Roman Senate.

Paul’s detractors were probably using this same kind of language to tell the Corinthians how important they were. They were authentic Hebrews, genuine Israelites. They seem to have told them how they had been paid large honorariums in other places to speak. Many pastors do the same thing today. Their biography lists all the churches they have served and all the conferences where they have spoken. They subtly are saying that they are better, smarter, more godly.

To counter these false apostles, Paul resorts to sarcasm and mockery. He does it as a form of boasting about himself, which he can’t stand doing. Over and over he says that he’s speaking like a fool or a madman when he does it. He even says that boasting about human accomplishments is unChristlike and foolish but he’s doing whatever he has to do to get the Corinthians to see the error of their thinking. Paul is illustrating their foolishness by being foolish himself.

He begins by saying that since they seem to bear with foolishness so readily that he will talk to them that way. Verse 19 says, “For you gladly bear with fools, being wise yourselves!” He goes on to say that what they are bearing with is people who are taking advantage of them or even making slaves of them in their thinking about God. Paul then sarcastically says, “I’m embarrassed to say that we were too weak for that. We are too weak to take advantage of you!”

Paul then goes into his foolish boasting, comparing himself to what the false apostles say about themselves. He says, “Are they Hebrews? So am I.” This is their ethnic identity and Paul is every bit as much ethnically Jewish as they are, maybe more so. He was trained by the top Rabbi in the world at the time. “Are they Israelites? So am I.” This refers to his religious identity. “Are

they offspring of Abraham? So am I.” Paul wants to make sure the Corinthians know that he is part of God’s covenant people.

Then comes the twist. Paul makes a big pivot here. As he’s listing all of his accomplishments and qualifications, he includes very surprising things on this resumé. He says, “Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one.” That’s like saying, “I’m the most humble person around. I can beat anyone in a humbleness contest.” But he is quick to say, “I’m talking like a madman,” because that kind of arrogance is not the way of Jesus. As he goes on, though, the things he’s boasting about are really surprising. He says, “I’ve had more imprisonments and more beatings than any of them.” Paul recounts that he was beaten five different times in synagogues. Forty lashes less one refers to the custom of only flogging someone 39 times. The law permitted 40, but if they miscounted and the person doing the flogging went over, he could then be whipped. So they limited it to 39 just to be safe. He says he’s been shipwrecked three times, once remaining in the water all night and part of the next day.

Paul writes about all the dangers he has faced. Some of the dangers were from the places he went and the dangers of travel, but many of them were dangers from people – not only foreigners but from his own people as well. But he says the worst danger was from “false brothers.” People who were deliberately trying to mislead believers. That’s what caused him the most stress, the most sleepless nights. He was loved the people in his churches so much and was worried about them being led away from true faith in Christ. That’s one of our biggest dangers today as well. There are lots of voices trying to lead you away from the truth.

The only hope we have is to know the truth about Jesus and stay committed to it no matter what. And the truth is that we need Jesus. You and I are weak. We don’t like to hear that. The world tells us we need to be strong, pull ourselves up by our bootstraps, make things happen. But God’s Kingdom is not like the world. God says it’s when we recognize our weakness and even boast in our weakness that His strength is visible to the world. When we depend on our own strength we feel we don’t really need God. But when you understand the reality of your weakness, you can stop carrying the burden of trying to be enough, to do enough. You can lean on Christ, who *is* enough. That’s what faith is all about.

In a few minutes we will have our annual meeting. It’s a time when we can be tempted to talk about our strengths, about how much *we’ve* accomplished and how much *we* plan to accomplish. I want to encourage us to think about all the things Paul endured in his weakness so that people would get to hear about Jesus. As a church, as followers of Jesus, what are you willing to endure so that people in our community get the same opportunity. Like Paul, do we love our neighbors enough to sacrifice our own comfort, to look silly or weak, to give up comfort and time and resources so that our neighbors and coworkers and friends can know Christ and then make Christ known?

But I also want to encourage us to focus on how much we need Jesus to show up in order for us to carry out the mission he’s given us of making disciples. Because we can’t do it on our own. So as we look to the future, let’s look to a God-sized future – not what we can accomplish but what *HE* can when we are super weak. Think about that.

Amen.