

## **My grace is sufficient for you**

2 Corinthians 12:9-10

A sermon for the Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

You probably thought we are suddenly back in the season of Lent because we just sang "Come to Calvary's holy mountain." Note the somber words in the second verse: "wounded, impotent, and blind," The whole tone of the hymn is Lenten, although it's not in that part of the hymnbook.

Then we have this text from 2 Corinthians 12:9: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore Paul concludes in verse 10: "Therefore I will rejoice in my weaknesses that the power of Christ may rest upon me."

How does the Christian life work? There are so many ideas in popular theology about what the Christian life is supposed to look like. There must be some way that it works. Some time ago a church used the slogan: "Faith works." There are two possible meanings of that claim. One is that it makes for a good life, a successful life. The other is: You better do it! Those are common understandings of what the Christian life is about.

When we look at the membership lists for Mormon temples, we find there are all sorts of Scandinavian names: Olson, Johnson, Peterson. Why is that? What led those people to join the Mormons? As the immigrants came to this country, they encountered the Mormons, who are very much for family values. So what's the difference? After all, the good life is about daily life working as it should.

We see the same thing about Sunday school in some communities. There are always people don't want to go to church themselves, but they want to send their kids to Sunday school for a few years so they learn about values and the difference between good and evil. They want their kids to be civilized. Just as kids have to be taught to brush their teeth, so they have to be taught right from wrong. Life is really about being a good person in a successful way.

Back in the early Twentieth Century a British intellectual, Richard Tawney, wrote a book titled, *The Spirit of Protestantism and the Rise of Capitalism*. His argument was that capitalism is the result of the hard-working, clean-living Puritan way of discipline. We are elected by God, but we must prove it by keeping the law. When you keep the law, that means keeping all the Ten Commandments, particularly keeping the Sabbath. Those who do don't fall into all sorts of other trouble and they prosper. And their prosperity is proof that they have been elected and chosen by God. It works! Faith works!

Some years ago there was an article in *The Lutheran* about a pastor who, when his congregation gathered for worship, immediately dismissed them with the charge: "Go out

and do good works for an hour and then come back and tell us what you did." The message was: The Christian life is about doing good things, like working in the soup kitchen or helping to resettle refugees. This is not to criticize those kinds of activities; it's simply to show the common idea that the Christian life has to work, and it has to produce results.

The other way in which people talk about faith working is: "You gotta work" – except, of course, on the Sabbath.

In the US many retail businesses are open on Sundays. But it didn't used to be this way. Many years ago anybody who worked on Sundays, except in hospitals and other emergency situations, was considered scandalous.

Long ago there was a pastor, a very strict Lutheran pastor, who happened to be great left-handed pitcher. It was such a dilemma because they needed him for games on Sundays. What they did was pass a rule that you couldn't work until noon on Sundays, but after that you could. Then he could pitch for Sunday afternoon games.

In some church communities in a previous generation the women did all the cooking for Sundays on Saturday, because it was considered bad even to cook on Sundays.

The word "discipleship" and "discipline" come from the same root. Discipline means you're going to lead a strict, rigorous life where you follow certain rules. It might be tough, but that's what it's about.

In the early 1800's, at the beginning of the industrial revolution, there was a group called the Luddites, named after a weaver, Ned Ludd. The Luddites had nothing to do with religion; they were English workers who destroyed machinery in the cotton and woolen textile industries, machinery that was taking their jobs. "Luddites" has become a term to describe people who oppose new technology.

Today that opposition to the modern world exists most notably among the Amish and the Mennonites. The idea is: Don't become involved in the world. Take up your cross. Live the strict, simple life.

Over against that Luddite movement in the 1800's, there was a reaction led by people like Nietzsche, the German-Swiss philosopher, who said: "Those Christians are nay-sayers. They are saying 'No' to the world. And we don't want to be like them. We don't want the slave way of thinking and doing" (which is what he called the Christian way), "but the way of superman. We want to take hold of the world. We have to be positive and strong." He pointed to the great models of ancient Greece, Apollo and Dionysus, who called people to seize the day.

In 1890 the British poet Swinburne wrote the famous line critical of Christianity: "Thou hast conquered, O pale Galilean! The world has grown weak from thy breath." Swinburne was

claiming that there's something about Christianity that is destroying everything. It's world-denying. He implied that it's masochism, it's sickness.

Over against all this is this famous section in 2 Cor 12:9-10: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Paul was really under attack. And when he's under attack, as you can see in Galatians 2:19-20, Philippians 3:7-12, and also here, he really comes out with it. He's not just thinking in a general way, he's defending what the gospel is really about.

What the attack on him was: You aren't showing success! He was not "successful," and here's the example he uses: He had a "thorn in the flesh"; we don't know what it was. But three times he prayed, begging: "Lord take it away." And nothing happened. The answer was: No. "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

The text goes to say in 2 Cor 12:9-10: "I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, 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 question is not: Do you keep the law? Do you keep the Sabbath? It's the wrong question. The question is not: Does faith work, either in the sense of helping you be successful, or in the sense of "You gotta do it."

The question is: Does the cross work? That's what it's about. That's what we can see in this section, as well as all these places, whether it's Galatians 2:19-20, or Philippians 3:7-12, or 2 Corinthians 12:9-10, these places where Paul is under attack and he says: What it's about is what God does. And he's done it through the cross. And that means it's only by faith. That means it's hidden. That means it's all done. That means there's nothing more that we have to do. That means if we say it's the cross plus something else, then we're subtracting from the cross.

That makes it sound as if nothing matters. That's not right either. What matters is the focus on the cross and how that makes everything different.

In typical Pauline fashion he writes: "When I am weak, then I am strong." And, as John 15:19 states: "We are in the world but not of the world." That means we hear a different drummer. Whereas the culture says if something is important, it produces visible results, we step to a different beat, a different song.

In fact, the results are far greater and far deeper, and that is what he has done. The bottom line is the cross alone works. And of course it does. Amen