

Strength Through Weakness
vii. Paradox and Power
2 Corinthians 6:1-13

The Apostle Paul counters his Corinthian opponents' love of power with the power of love. He contrasts their preoccupation with style and personality with gospel and character. Having pleaded for reconciliation he urges the Corinthians "not to receive God's grace in vain" (v12). His plea is not to take God's goodness for granted. As C.K. Barret put it, "The Corinthians had indeed been reconciled to God, but it was for them to receive the reconciliation more effectively".

As a missionary Paul saw hardships and conflict as part of the territory. He took it squarely on the chin without flinching or complaint. He was no masochist. He did not see suffering itself as a mark of spirituality. However, linked to mission and the cause of Christ it is redemptive. He had no romantic notions about suffering. He had suffered too much for that!

Paul was quite content to write from a position of vulnerability and apparent weakness rather than a platform of persuasive power. Power did not lie in himself. It lay in the gospel. His role was that of an ambassador of Christ, his badge of office his prisoner's chains. The Roman emperor Augustus boasted about all the ambassadors who came to him from the far horizons of the empire and beyond. An all powerful God, however, did not wait for humanity to make their appeals to him but sends out ambassadors on his behalf to reach humanity.

A further paradox presented by Paul is his spiritual resume. He is not unduly concerned how others judged or evaluated him. The one opinion that mattered was God's. Public opinion of him might be "dishonour, bad report, imposter and unknown". However, God saw Paul as "esteemed, of good report, genuine and known" (vv8,9). Moreover, his spiritual arsenal is in the *Holy Spirit*, in *sincere* love, in *truthful* speech and in *divine* power (v7a) in stark contrast to that of his antagonists at Corinth. This armoury of the Holy Spirit is deployed with weapons of righteousness in the right and in the left (v7b). A Roman soldier wielding an offensive sword in his right hand and a defensive shield in his left. Paul was more than adequately equipped to meet the challenges of spiritual battle, his hardships notwithstanding.

Authentic character resists the inclination to flee the arena of conflict. John Stolt, the great preacher and Christian statesman, in a revealing comment to his biography speaks eloquently in this regard.

"Well the first temptation (to which I'm more exposed I think) is to run away: not to give in but to – what is the word? – to leave. I sometimes say my favourite text is from Psalm 55. "O for the wings of a dove, that I may flee away and be at rest. So I've found this constant controversy, this constant battling for the truth very wearying."

John Stolt simply echoes Paul. As one observer put it, "Never lead and you'll never be criticized. Never preach and you'll never bore anyone!" Amy Carmichael speaks from personal experience when she poetically posed the question:

No Wound, no scar?
Yet, as the Master shall the servant be,
And pierced are the feet that follow Me;
But thine are whole: can he have followed far
Who has no wound nor scar?

Paul concludes by asking for a fair exchange of affection. He pleads with the Corinthians to open wide their hearts as he has opened wide his own. the withdrawal of affection of someone close can be a devastating experience. Psychologists have shown that the human need for intimacy is so great that babies who are fed and changed but receive no affection from their caregivers can become withdrawn, remote and even autistic. As important as human affection is, the need for God's grace and mercy is greater still.