

WEAK AND STRONG

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Henry Ford once stated, “Whether you think you can, or you think you can’t, you’re right.”

Ford was mostly correct. We all talk silently to ourselves in our heads, but we aren’t always conscious of what we’re saying or how it’s affecting us. Many times, that conversation is a complaint or a scolding about our weaknesses, our inadequacies, our inabilities, our insecurities. We think, “I just can’t.”

Yet, we are the people of Christ, the children of God—the redeemed, delivered, transformed. This apparent conflict is enough to sink us into depression, or cause us to quit.

And, you might think, if anyone else knew my struggles (and my failures), I would be humiliated, embarrassed! So I put on the smiling face and pretend all is well, until I can stand my hypocrisy no more. Then, I slink away quietly, Stage Left.

I doubt there is one person here today who has not drunk this bitter potion, though few have admitted it.

Fortunately, the Bible does acknowledge this battle. The greatest followers of God have known it, too. You are not alone. And there is help for you today. It comes in three stages.

Stage One: Admit

The first of the twelve steps of recovery groups is to admit that you have a problem, which you are powerless to change. Why is this the first step? Because anything that precedes this is just cover-up. And because we cannot get beyond this step until we have taken it. It is the absolutely essential first step.

Many of you are here today because you sought a change in your life that you could not produce on your own. All of us may produce some changes in our thinking or behavior, but the most elemental things we cannot change. The best we can say about such things is, “We have met the enemy, and the enemy is us.”

Have you admitted your weakness? “What weakness?” you say. Weakness, for our contemplation today, may be defined as a lack of moral strength or courage, a lack of consistency in decisions and behavior, or an inclination to self-serving, self-protecting sins.

Have you admitted your weakness? Paul, the apostle, did.

Romans 7

¹⁴ So the trouble is not with the law, for it is spiritual and good. The trouble is with me, for I am all too human, a slave to sin. ¹⁵ I don't really understand myself, for I want to do what is right, but I don't do it. Instead, I do what I hate. ¹⁶ But if I know that what I am doing is wrong, this shows that I agree that the law is good. ¹⁷ So I am not the one doing wrong; it is sin living in me that does it.

¹⁸ And I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. I want to do what is right, but I can't. ¹⁹ I want to do what is good, but I don't. I don't want to do what is wrong, but I do it anyway. ²⁰ But if I do what I don't want to do, I am not really the one doing wrong; it is sin living in me that does it.

²¹ I have discovered this principle of life—that when I want to do what is right, I inevitably do what is wrong. ²² I love God's law with all my heart. ²³ But there is another power within me that is at war with my mind. This power makes me a slave to the sin that is still within me.

²⁴ Oh, what a miserable person I am! Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin and death? ²⁵ Thank God! The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord. So you see how it is: In my mind I really want to obey God's law, but because of my sinful nature I am a slave to sin.

Paul wrote this in a public letter to the church! Yet, Paul was used by God in amazing ways—bringing the Gospel to the unchurched, bringing healing to sick people, and deliverance to captives. This was because the Holy Spirit had come into his heart. However, it was not because he had improved himself or become the master of his behavior. He continued to battle his own demons, in the midst of fruitful ministry. Listen to his testimony:

2 Corinthians 12

⁷ So to keep me from becoming proud, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger from Satan to torment me and keep me from becoming proud.

⁸ Three different times I begged the Lord to take it away. ⁹ Each time he said, "My grace is all you need. My power works best in weakness." So now I am glad to boast about my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ can work through me. ¹⁰ That's why I take pleasure in my weaknesses, and in the insults, hardships, persecutions, and troubles that I suffer for Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

You need not hide your weakness; Paul didn't. The kind of admission I am speaking of today is not the kind that is squeezed through gritted teeth and clenched lips, but the kind that Paul demonstrated. In other words, you haven't thoroughly admitted your weakness until you can boast about it, because you see how the strength of Christ is revealed and magnified through it.

Only then can you begin to live in the Spirit and taste the victory God has for you. Jesus said:

Matthew 26 (Mark 14:38)

⁴¹ *Keep watch and pray, so that you will not give in to temptation. For the spirit is willing, but the body is weak!*

Jesus was addressing a spiritual dichotomy: by nature, your spirit and your flesh are in conflict with each other.

Galatians 5

¹⁶ *But I say, live by the Spirit and you will not carry out the desires of the flesh.* ¹⁷ *For the flesh has desires that are opposed to the Spirit, and the Spirit has desires that are opposed to the flesh, for these are in opposition to each other, so that you cannot do what you want.* ¹⁸ *But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the (compulsion of) law.*

This answers to the ancient words of the prophet, Zechariah:

Zechariah 6

⁶ *"This is the word the LORD spoke to Zerubbabel: You won't [succeed] by might or by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of Armies.*

If you rely on your own strength, you will only discover how very poor it is. But if you rely on the Spirit of God, you will discover His inestimable strength.

We cannot change the elemental things of our earthly lives because *they are us*. For whatever reasons, from whatever influences, by whatever happenstance, we are who we are today.

There is hope for change—radical, total change—in Jesus Christ. It can happen in your lifetime, it can happen overnight, but only incompletely. It's not that your lifetime is not long enough—God can do it in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye—but He only changes certain things in this lifetime; the rest He changes in the next.

So we have great confidence in God, but we must also have great patience, for we will endure many conflicts (if we are honest) *within ourselves* in our journey to the next life.

Psalms 73

²⁶ *My health may fail, and my spirit may grow weak, but God remains the strength of my heart; He is mine forever.*

This is a matter of the heart—not the mind or the body. If you have made Jesus welcome, the Spirit of Christ has taken up residence in your heart. He influences your mind and your body, but He has control of your heart, which is His home. Your mind He will renew along the way, and your body He will restrain until He exchanges it for a new and glorious body in the resurrection.

2 Corinthians 4

⁷ But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us.

Equally important, we are not alone on this journey. There is comfort and encouragement for you in the Body of Christ (the Church).

Such encouragement begins in the pages of God's Word, the Bible, which I want to highlight for you today.

Isaiah 40

²⁸ Have you never heard? Have you never understood? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of all the earth. He never grows weak or weary. No one can measure the depths of his understanding. ²⁹ He gives power to the weak and strength to the powerless.

³⁰ Even youths will become weak and tired, and young men will fall in exhaustion. ³¹ But those who trust in the Lord will find new strength. They will soar high on wings like eagles. They will run and not grow weary. They will walk and not faint.

If we encourage one another with these words, we will feel the lift. As we wait together before the Lord, we will be renewed.

Stage Two: Believe

What must we believe? That Jesus Christ is who He said He was and that He does what He said He would do. We must trust that He is stronger than our weaknesses. God is not looking for superstars. He gets His work done through ordinary people who obey Him—ordinary people who are weak, prone to wander, and inclined to sin... but also believe that God is more than able to use us.

The exercise of our faith takes place in the midst of our weakness, not apart from it.

Hebrews 11

³² How much more do I need to say? It would take too long to recount the stories of the faith of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and all the prophets. ³³ By faith these people overthrew kingdoms, ruled with justice, and received what God had promised them. They shut the mouths of lions, ³⁴ quenched the flames of fire, and escaped death by the edge of the sword. Their weakness was turned to strength. They became strong in battle and put whole armies to flight.

Their weakness was turned to strength, but only temporarily, to meet a need. Let me illustrate what I mean, from the Book of Judges. Samson was a man whom God had prepared through a

dedicated lifestyle to lead the people of Israel, but Samson was also a man of ordinary passions.

Judges 16

⁴ Some time later Samson fell in love with a woman named Delilah, who lived in the valley of Sorek. ⁵ The rulers of the Philistines went to her and said, "Entice Samson to tell you what makes him so strong and how he can be overpowered and tied up securely. Then each of us will give you 1,100 pieces of silver."

⁶ So Delilah said to Samson, "Please tell me what makes you so strong and what it would take to tie you up securely."

⁷ Samson replied, "If I were tied up with seven new bowstrings that have not yet been dried, I would become as weak as anyone else."

⁸ So the Philistine rulers brought Delilah seven new bowstrings, and she tied Samson up with them. ⁹ She had hidden some men in one of the inner rooms of her house, and she cried out, "Samson! The Philistines have come to capture you!" But Samson snapped the bowstrings as a piece of string snaps when it is burned by a fire. So the secret of his strength was not discovered.

¹⁰ Afterward Delilah said to him, "You've been making fun of me and telling me lies! Now please tell me how you can be tied up securely."

¹¹ Samson replied, "If I were tied up with brand-new ropes that had never been used, I would become as weak as anyone else."

¹² So Delilah took new ropes and tied him up with them. The men were hiding in the inner room as before, and again Delilah cried out, "Samson! The Philistines have come to capture you!" But again Samson snapped the ropes from his arms as if they were thread.

¹³ Then Delilah said, "You've been making fun of me and telling me lies! Now tell me how you can be tied up securely."

Samson replied, "If you were to weave the seven braids of my hair into the fabric on your loom and tighten it with the loom shuttle, I would become as weak as anyone else."

So while he slept, Delilah wove the seven braids of his hair into the fabric. ¹⁴ Then she tightened it with the loom shuttle. Again she cried out, "Samson! The Philistines have come to capture you!" But Samson woke up, pulled back the loom shuttle, and yanked his hair away from the loom and the fabric.

¹⁵ Then Delilah pouted, "How can you tell me, 'I love you,' when you don't share your secrets with me? You've made fun of me three times now, and you still haven't told me what makes you so strong!" ¹⁶ She tormented him with her nagging day after day until he was sick to death of it.

¹⁷ Finally, Samson shared his secret with her. "My hair has never been cut," he confessed, "for I was dedicated to God as a Nazirite from birth. If my head were shaved, my strength would leave me, and I would become as weak as anyone else."

¹⁸ Delilah realized he had finally told her the truth, so she sent for the Philistine rulers. "Come back one more time," she said, "for he has finally told me his secret." So the Philistine rulers returned with the money in their hands. ¹⁹ Delilah lulled Samson to sleep with his head in her lap,

and then she called in a man to shave off the seven locks of his hair. In this way she began to bring him down, and his strength left him.

²⁰ *Then she cried out, "Samson! The Philistines have come to capture you!"*

When he woke up, he thought, "I will do as before and shake myself free." But he didn't realize the Lord had left him.

²¹ *So the Philistines captured him and gouged out his eyes. They took him to Gaza, where he was bound with bronze chains and forced to grind grain in the prison.*

²² *But before long, his hair began to grow back.*

Now, there's a cliffhanger!

The point is that strength may be gained temporarily by trusting and obeying God, or strength may be lost temporarily by denying and disobeying God. But unless you desert God, He will always renew your strength when you trust Him and obey His Word.

You may overcome weaknesses, but they will not be *eliminated* by so doing. Once an alcoholic, always an alcoholic. Once a sinner, always a sinner. If you recover by trusting in Christ, you will need to keep trusting Christ to maintain your recovery.

I realize that some people are made uncomfortable by this saying, "...always a sinner." It is popular to adopt the theory that the new birth turns us completely from a sinner to a saint. It simply cannot be supported from a thorough look at the Scriptures.

If that were so, Paul would not have identified himself as the "worst of all sinners" (present tense, 1 Timothy 1:15).

If that were so, there would be no internal conflict between the flesh and the spirit, such as Paul described.

If that were so, the possibility of turning one's back on Christ would not exist.

God saves sinners. You must be one to qualify.

We need a theology that adequately explains and engages life's hardness. Like Abraham, the father of the faith, we should hold in tension, the "deadness of our own body" (Romans 4:19-21), that is, the sin in our flesh, while we look beyond it to the power of God's promises, and follow the lead of the Spirit of Christ. Anything less will be seen as hollow, as if we were saying, "If I refuse to see it, it's not there." That's Christian Science malarkey.

When I look at myself, I see my weaknesses—some of them from childhood—and I see my inconsistencies—laziness, fearfulness, to name a few—and I see the record of my sins. If there is

a difference between me and you, it is only that I am openly declaring my weakness, while you are openly covering yours.

But if I depend on myself, live according to my weaknesses, I will not please God. So, instead, I look to God and His Word, I depend on the Holy Spirit, and follow His lead. He always knows what pleases the Father, and He gives me the necessary courage and strength and resolve to do those things.

I may be thinking, “She just gave me \$10 too much in change! Woohoo!” but I will say, “Excuse me, I think you gave me too much,” and return it.

I may be thinking, “They’re going to think me foolish,” but in the next moment I will say, “May I pray for you right now?”

I may be thinking, “I have no power to do this,” while at the same time saying, “In the strong name of Jesus Christ, I bring you healing and strength.”

This is not showmanship (or schizophrenia); this is choosing to walk in the Spirit.

Stage Three: Cooperate

Victorious Christian living is not freedom *from* sin or trouble or difficulty. Instead, it is freedom *when* sin or trouble or difficulty come. It is freedom to make a good choice, or failing that, freedom to repent and return to God. Victory means not losing your way home, not forgetting who your Father is, and having the courage to return and move forward.

This is not Hollywood; this is *real* life! If you want fairy tales, go to the movies.

You will have to pray, “Take control, Lord. Have Your way in me right now”—frequently.

The fruit of the Spirit is “self-control” (Galatians 5:23). That’s the fruit *of the Spirit*. That is not you taking control of yourself; it is the Spirit of God controlling your self.

Now, you cannot sin and serve God at the same time, in the same moment. However, you may *feel* weak and ineffective, while serving God. He does not need your strength; He only needs your faithfulness.

When your weakness is showing... your mind is paralyzed by fear, or your body is trembling, or you feel faint... Just do it afraid!

After 38 years of preaching and teaching, my hands still go cold most of the time before I speak. Though I am confident I have heard from the Lord, my mind is interrupted by doubtful,

distracting thoughts. When I am speaking particularly anointed words, my body may tremble almost uncontrollably, much to my embarrassment.

So what? I do it afraid! I have to cooperate with the Holy Spirit. I have to obey His lead. I don't know what the outcome will be, or how long it may take to reach the outcome, because it's *His* plan. I just trust and obey.

Jesus loves me, this I know
For the Bible tells me so
Little ones to Him belong
They are weak, but He is strong.
(Sing the chorus with me...)
Yes, Jesus loves me
Yes, Jesus loves me
Yes, Jesus loves me
The Bible tells me so.

Are you ready to admit that you are weak, and that your weakness runs deeper than you wish or imagine? John Calvin said, "We do not know the hundredth part of the sin that clings to our souls."

Do you believe that Jesus Christ is the strength of *your* life, and is not foiled by your weakness? He is able to work through your imperfection.

Will you purpose to cooperate with the Holy Spirit, trust His promptings, and follow His lead? Let this be your song: "*I can do everything through Christ, who gives me strength*" (Philippians 4:13).

Freedom and victory are within your grasp.