



# Christ Lutheran Church

605 South Fifth Street • Norfolk, NE 68701

**Share God's Word, share His love, and do it now!**

Pastor Chip Winter, Director of Ministries

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## ***“Rejoicing in Weakness” – 2 Corinthians 12:1-10***

*7<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost – July 8, 2018*

**Pastor Chip Winter**

Grace to you and Peace, from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, Amen. The text for our sermon is the Epistle appointed for the day and already read for us from 2 Corinthians in the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter.

My dear family in Christ, many of us have, at one time or another, gone through a performance evaluation. A part of that review may have been questions answered by our peers concerning how easy we are to work with, and how dependable. A part of that review may have been for us to answer **“What have you accomplished over the past quarter?”** or **“What are your goals for the coming year?”**

But the parts of a performance evaluation or an interview for a new position that we may dread most are the parts asking us to list our strengths and weaknesses. Strengths, maybe not so much: **“hard worker,” “team player,”** and **“conscientious”** are hard to argue against and fairly general. But the weaknesses? They can be another matter, entirely. We know they are there, but we don't like to admit that we aren't up to par, that we don't measure up to what we want to be, that we are well, deficient and weak.

In this land celebrating independence and autonomy, weakness is certainly not to be desired and strength is admired. The physically strong get work done, they win athletic competition. The mentally strong overcome adversity and excel in academics.

In this land celebrating independence and autonomy, we have just observed the Fourth of July, celebrating our nation, the freedoms we have and the military which protects those freedoms. It's a military that's the greatest, the strongest in the world. Who would shoot off fireworks because they believe they live in an inferior nation? Strength is good. Deficiencies need to be addressed and weakness removed. Everybody knows that!

But St. Paul boasts in his weakness in this text. He shares that with us because weakness allows us, the believers, to see Christ Jesus' power at work in and through His people.

We know through his writings that St. Paul is proud of his accomplishments and abilities. There was no problem in a quarterly review for him! He had a way with words. He was exceptionally intelligent. He had preached to thousands of people – bigger in his day than Billy Graham, Oswald Hoffman, and a dozen other preachers, combined. He'd been given a special revelation and calling on the road to Damascus, seeing the risen Christ with his own eyes. In the earlier verses of our text he writes of another great revelation: like St. John, St. Paul was taken up into heaven to see its wonders.

But instead of boasting about what a great evangelist he was, St. Paul writes that he rejoices instead in his weaknesses. He even gives us one example of a shortcoming, an ailment or a failure of some kind that he's simply unable to do anything about. He calls it a “**thorn**” in his flesh.

You know how irritating it is to have something stuck in your teeth that you cannot remove and you're nowhere near dental floss. You know how annoying a splinter in your skin can be –

distracting, bothersome, even sometimes infected. Often you have to resort to a tweezers and a needle to remove them.

But I don't think that's what St. Paul is writing about. It's more serious than that, though we don't know exactly what it was. Some speculate it could have been **(1)** opposition to his message/ministry, or **(2)** a temptation to which he was particularly susceptible, or **(3)** a physical ailment such as an eye problem, a skin problem or a deformity. Whatever it was, we know that St. Paul considered it a serious enough impediment to his ministry that he prayed three times for God to remove it.

But while St. Paul saw this "thorn" as a distraction he'd be better off without, our Father in Heaven saw it differently. God knows that if there is nothing wrong in our lives, we will forget that we need Him. If we never struggle, we begin to operate under the assumption we can make it just fine on our own. If there are no problems, who needs a problem solver?

Such conclusions, however, ignore reality. There is a thorn in the flesh which we all have in common. There is a problem no matter how we address it we can never do anything about. There is sin deeply imbedded in our lives. No amount of digging with a needle or a tweezers will remove it. No amount of floss can budget it. No amount of self-discipline can eliminate it. Nope, we're stuck with it because of who, what and where we are: weak, sinful people living in a fallen world in which we are continually led astray both by the lord of lies and our own flesh.

Sin is the ultimate weakness. We strive to hold it down, but we're never able to master it. It keeps coming back again, and again. Like Paul our sinful pride tries to make us believe that we are better and stronger than we really are. What sins have you tried to overcome, only to fail over and over? Lust? Laziness? Envy? Pettiness? We know our God cannot tolerate these things and that the consequence of remaining in these sins is eternal...but we are unable to do anything about them.

And this is not lost on the world around us. You can imagine the accusations concerning our lives as they are scrutinized: **“You Christians say one thing, but then you do the opposite. You condemn violence, saying one should turn the other cheek, but then you blow up in anger when you’re wronged. You turn a blind eye to those in need, even though you have plenty. Your language is as filthy as anyone else’s. You hold up Jesus as your great example, but you fail to follow His example. You Christians are just a bunch of hypocrites!”**

The accusation is spot on. We know what we should do, how we should act and how we should speak. But then we utterly fail to do what Jesus calls us to do. We know, in our heart of hearts, what St. Paul described to the Romans is our weakness, too. **“For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out”** (Romans 7:18).

But our loving Father in heaven did not leave us to face this weakness, this thorn in the flesh, on our own. In His mercy He sent His Son to put on our weak human form so that He might make the payment demanded for sin. God – eternal, invincible, immortal and untouchable by Death – chose to humble Himself, making Himself vulnerable. Jesus, become man, became weak enough to die.

But St. Paul helps us to see that even in His weakness, God is stronger than man’s strength. By humbling Himself to death on a cross, Jesus accomplished what no mere mortal could ever do. Using His perfect, unblemished blood as the atonement, Jesus paid for the sins of the world. The thorns on His head, the spikes through His flesh – affixing Him to the cross – won our forgiveness of sins. Yes, truly by becoming weak, Jesus conquered Satan and sin for all time. And on Easter, Jesus showed His true power by defeating death for each of us, once and for all eternity!

Now, through faith, Christ Jesus' power not only rests upon us but it is ours. Beginning in Baptism's washing the Holy Spirit now dwells in us and empowers us to live as God's children. We share His love – imperfectly, to be sure, and at times hypocritically – but share, we do, because He continues to work in us despite our weakness. “For when I am weak, then I am strong” Paul wrote. Christ Jesus works through our faults: we realize, again and again, that we cannot win the crown of righteousness on our own. And we are brought to that thankful realization that indeed, we have that righteousness as His gift, through faith in His passion, death and resurrection. And through His Spirit we can give to God what no thief can take, what no tyrant can steal – ourselves for Him to work through: seeking the lost, serving our fellowman and sharing God's redemption.

One day, unless Christ Jesus returns in the meanwhile, we will face to ultimate sign of our frailty, deficiency and weakness; death will come knocking. And while the world around us sees death as weakness, for us it takes on a new meaning in the shadow of the cross and the empty tomb. Christ Jesus has defeated death forever. And one day we will know completely the wonder that God's power is made perfect – perfect – in weakness, as we see the Lord face to face in paradise. Amen.