

2 Corinthians 12:7-10
Second Sunday after the Epiphany
God's Church Revealed
Blessed!

Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran Church
Winchester, VA
Pastor Paul Krueger
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Grace, mercy, and peace be yours from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were.

“All you need is love (rum bum buh duh dun); all you need is love (bahrum bum buh duh dun); all you need is love, love; love is all you need!” Many of you, hopefully, recognize those as the lyrics of a song by the Beatles. It's a song called *All You Need Is Love*, and in case you don't know, it is a song about love and how it is all that you need.

I'm not sure what all exactly Misters Lennon and McCartney had in mind when they wrote that song, what kind of love, from whom, to whom, etc., but I thought of that song as I looked at our lessons for this week and saw the common theme that God's love is all that we need.

In our gospel text this morning (Luke 6:17-26), we heard the beginning of one of Jesus' sermons where He gives us a list of blessings and woes. When we look at that section of Scripture a few questions come up. Is Jesus talking about earthly circumstances or is He talking about spiritual circumstances? And who are we in this picture, the ones whom He says are blessed or the ones to whom He cautions woe? As best as I can tell, the answer to each of those questions is “yes.”

Let's take the first blessing for example. In Luke 6:20 we're told that Jesus said, **Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.** Then, in verse 24, we find the corresponding passage: **But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort.**

If we take it as Jesus referring to earthly circumstances it makes good sense. Among the disciples who were gathered in front of Him that day there were likely many who were not all that wealthy and who may very well have identified as poor. The wonderful news that Jesus had for them was that even in their poverty they were still blessed. They were blessed because God had sent Jesus to bring to them a kind of riches that no one else in this world could offer. He had come to bring them the riches of God's kingdom—forgiveness, salvation, and everlasting life.

If you are someone who is poor, Jesus has the same, incredible news for you. You may be poor, but you are still blessed. You are blessed because you have a treasure that thieves cannot break in and steal away and that time and decay cannot destroy. You have God's love, and the salvation which, in His love, He won for you on the cross. And that, my friends, is all you need to truly be blessed.

On the flip side, Jesus cautions us against the danger of riches. **Woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort.** The second half of that verse holds the key to understanding it. Jesus isn't saying that everyone who is wealthy is cursed, but that the danger of anguish and destruction is real for anyone who looks to their riches as their source for comfort. Sayings like, “Money can buy happiness” or “whoever dies with the most toys, wins,” are not valid. True happiness comes only through contentment in what our Savior provides for

us. True victory comes in the salvation He makes ours through faith in His gospel promises. No matter how much or how little earthly wealth any of us have, he or she is truly blessed who finds comfort in spiritual riches—in God’s love—rather than in the wealth of this world.

In a similar sermon which we hear in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus says, **Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.** Those two words, *in spirit*, bring a whole new level of meaning to that verse. **Poor in spirit** directs us to the sad state of our spiritual existence that we find revealed in the mirror of God’s law. When it comes to spirituality, you and I aren’t just poor; we’re bankrupt. There isn’t a single thing that you or I have contrived or done on our own that we can offer to God that would merit anything from Him in return. And yet you are blessed, because ours is the kingdom of God.

But how is that possible? How could spiritually or morally bankrupt sinners be heirs of the kingdom of God? All you need is love. Granted an extremely intense, wholly selfless, unconditional kind of love the likes of which you and I can’t even fully comprehend but, yes, all we needed was love. And God so loved you and me and the world that He sent His only Son to live as our substitute and die in our place so that believing in Him, we will not perish in spiritual poverty, but rather enjoy the riches of everlasting life.

We are blessed. Now, I know that’s a word that gets thrown around a lot these days but you and I are blessed in the truest sense of the word in that we have received and benefitted from something that we had no part in procuring, which we in no way deserved, and which in every way surpasses any and every other good thing imaginable. We have been made heirs of eternal life in heaven through the redemption that comes by Christ Jesus.

God takes on human flesh and dies for the sins of the world. Sinners who have rebelled against God are proclaimed His children and given an everlasting inheritance in heaven. The poor are made rich, and the rich made poor. Those who are oppressed are vindicated and their oppressors are torn down. The world of God’s grace is a world in which things get “flipped, turned upside-down.” And we have a beautiful example of that in our epistle lesson this morning, 2 Corinthians 12:7-10.

The Apostle Paul had just finished telling the Corinthians about a glorious vision he had been given of heaven when he continues with the passage we heard earlier: **Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. ⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. ⁹ But He said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. ¹⁰ That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.**

We don’t know what this “thorn in the flesh” that Paul received was. Nor will we know in this life. And that’s okay—favorable in fact—I believe, because it allows us to consider ourselves in his position and to imagine our own personal “thorns” in the same consideration. Whatever it was, Paul says that it was something that was “given to him.” But who was it given to him by? Was it something that came from the devil or was it something that came from God?

He refers to it as a “messenger of Satan.” So it appears that, at least in the beginning, Paul considered this “thorn” to be the work of Satan as he tried to hinder Paul’s ministry and get in the way of Paul living his life to the glory of God and carrying out the work that God had

assigned for him to do. So Paul prayed, as you and I so often do when faced with pain or suffering or some other struggle or ordeal, that God would thwart the devil's plans by taking it away.

Not just once, or twice, but on three separate occasions Paul took this matter to God in prayer pleading with Him for His merciful help. That persistence in prayer is exactly what God expects from us as His children. While God may have seemingly been delaying in answering Paul's prayer, Paul didn't give up hope. He didn't conclude, "God doesn't care about me," or that, "God has no interest in giving me what I'm asking for," he continued trusting that God had his best interests in mind and continued looking to God for relief from his predicament. It's an example which we do well to take notice of, that we don't give in to despair or self-pity when God isn't working on our time-table but rather we trust that He knows best and continue to call upon Him for help in every trouble.

We also do well to take note of how God did answer Paul's prayer. He would thwart Satan's plans for this "thorn" not by taking it away, but by revealing to Paul its true purpose. The pain which he was enduring was not meant to impede his ministry, but to bolster it. It was a reminder both to Paul and the people he would minister to, that his success came not through his own power or strength or health but from God. God reassured Paul saying, **My grace is sufficient for you.** In other words, "My love, Paul, is all that you need."

By placing his trust in God's love and continuing to suffer with his thorn, Paul kept the spotlight shining on Jesus rather than on himself. **My power**, the Lord had said to him, **is made perfect in weakness.** As people looked at and listened to the weakened, perhaps even frail, thorn-in-the-flesh-beset Paul, they would be led to conclude: There must be a greater power behind this man to enable him to do all the things he is doing. That power, of course, was God. Paul's real prayer, then, that nothing get in the way of his ministry, was answered. The thorn was not a hindrance, as he had supposed, but a help. Therefore, he says, **I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.**¹

When we suffer in this world, it is likely always true that there are two agendas at play. The Enemy's plan is for you despair in that suffering, to lose faith in God's promises and give in to sorrow and depression. God's plan is for that struggle to draw you closer to Him and to increase your trust in His love. God's plan is for others to witness the seemingly upside-down attitude that you have in the face of your problems which gives us an opportunity to witness to them. "How can you possibly stay cheerful when you're dealing with this?" they might ask, or "What in the world would lead you to say, 'I'm thankful' for the kind of things you are going through right now?"

And then we can tell them, "I'm able to stay cheerful and I can be thankful because I am blessed. I'm blessed because I have my Savior's love and His love is all I need. He loves me so much that He lived and died to wash away my sins. He loves me so much that He has given me a place in a world that knows no pain or sorrow. And He loves me so much that He gives me things like this to remind me that He alone is my strength."

Let's keep praying for an attitude that boasts in our weaknesses because our God's great qualities are revealed clearly in our poor qualities. I am a poor, bankrupt sinner; my God is

¹ The People's Bible: 2 Corinthians, page 228.

gracious and His riches free and endless. I am a susceptible, weak, often pained and unhealthy human being with fragile emotions, vulnerabilities, and all sorts of other limitations to boot, but my God has no such limitations and in His limitless power and love He has promised to remove all those things from me as well.

We typically like to boast when we feel like we have something worth boasting about. We do have something to boast about, but it's not ourselves; it's our Savior. So boast of Jesus. Let the world know that you are not the reason for anything about you that anyone would perceive as great. Let them know the hope you have for a life without the weaknesses that our existence here knows so well. Let them know that Christ's power rests on you. His power is made perfect in our weaknesses. His love is all you need. You are blessed!

Amen.