

Embracing Weakness

A sermon by Rev. Joel Christian Glenn

7 April, 2024

Children's Talk: The Pattern of Pride

A cycle is something that repeats itself over and over again. The cycle of a day is the sun rise, climbs to the middle of the sky, starts to go down, sets completely, and then rises again in the morning. The cycle of the seasons is spring to summer to fall to winter and back to spring. The school year goes in cycles: you have ten weeks of school, and then a couple weeks off, then ten more weeks of school. Thinking in cycles is useful because it helps us predict and prepare for what is coming next. If you know night always comes at the end of the day, you can get everything done while it is light out and then sleep when it is dark. If you know winter always comes after summer, you can spend summer making sure there is enough food and warm clothing to get through winter. If you know a holiday is coming it gives you something to look forward to when you are working hard at school. So cycles are helpful.

But they can also be frustrating: they are frustrating when the same bad things happen over and over again. This is what happened to the Children of Israel. No matter how many times they learned their lesson, they kept turning away from the Lord:

They turned quickly from the way in which their fathers walked, in obeying the commandments of Jehovah; they did not do so. And when Jehovah raised up judges for them, Jehovah was with the judge and delivered them out of the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge; for Jehovah was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who oppressed them and harassed them. And it came to pass, when the judge was dead, that they reverted and behaved more corruptly than their fathers, by following other gods, to serve them and bow down to them. They did not cease from their own doings nor from their stubborn way. (Judges 2:17-19)

So the people would disobey; an enemy would defeat them; they would turn to the Lord for help; a judge would save them; the judge would die and they would go back

to disobeying. This is a frustrating cycle to read about! Why couldn't they just remember what kept happening and listen to the Lord?!

But actually, we do the same thing: we disobey the Lord; it starts to make us unhappy and hurt; we turn back to the Lord and He helps; and then after a while we forget about the Lord's help and start doing things our own way again. Like I said, this is really frustrating, isn't it? But remember that cycles can be useful. A cycle helps you prepare for when something bad is coming. I already know that all of you are going to make mistakes. You know that too. So how can we get ready? How can knowing that we will make mistakes help us prepare for them? How does it help us when we make mistakes?

One way it helps us is by keeping us from being proud. When we see other people make mistakes it is easy to think we are better than them, like we are a good person and they are a bad person. But remember, our mistakes are coming too! Just because you are here in the cycle doesn't mean you are perfect! Stay humble; and when you do make that next mistake, remember that it doesn't mean you are a failure; the good times are coming too, if you look to the Lord.

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Being weak is not considered a virtue, for fairly obvious reasons. Calling someone “weak” is more of an insult than anything else in almost any context. You might be familiar with the song, “Jesus Loves Me,” in which is the line, “little ones to Him belong, they are weak but He is strong!” A few times now I have heard the pre-primary children complain that that is really an unfair an even mean thing for the Lord to say about children. As adults we might have rationally reconciled ourselves to the concept: God is omnipotent and so everything is weak compared to Him. This sentiment is true, but by thinking of it this way we kind of allow ourselves to keep thinking we are strong in ourselves, just not compared to the Lord. But the Lord does not just call us weak in comparison to Himself; by definition human beings are weak. And the Lord knows it:

As a father pities his children,
So Jehovah pities those who fear Him.
For He knows our frame;
He remembers that we are dust.
As for man, his days are like grass;
As a flower of the field, so he flourishes.
For the wind passes over it, and it is gone,
And its place remembers it no more. (Psalm 103:13-16)

That bleak image of what it means to be human is not pleasant. It’s downright terrifying. Let’s just sit with that for a moment. Let that sink in. Many of us spend a good portion of our lives hiding from our weaknesses, and in turn hiding our weaknesses from everyone else.

You may have heard of and experienced the idea of imposter syndrome: it’s the feeling that many adults have that they are not actually any good at what they do and the underlying fear that anyone might find out. But hiding from our own weakness goes even deeper. Since we are raised to believe that strength is good,

anything that hints of weakness must be bad. For men in particular hiding all emotion and refusing to ask for help are taken as signs of strength. How many men are silently dying inside because they are afraid to look weak? I'm sure there are men in this room who have spent decades being strong, never once asking for help, and always on the verge of failure; as if a single instance of showing weakness is a crack in the armour that could at any moment become shattered. How many women are in constant anxiety because they fear that they will fall short of what it means to be a good woman? Who are stressed out about both being a strong role model and mother as well as needing to prove themselves in the work place?

In this cycle we are only as good as our most recent mistake. As long as we are perfect, it works, but every mistake reveals the lie that we present to the world. So we waffle back and forth, feeling like we've got it all together when we succeed but always knowing that we are only one mistake away from having our inner weakness exposed to the world. To combat this feeling any time we feel weak we try to build ourselves up, to convince ourselves that we actually are strong, that we actually are good enough, that we actually can do it all on our own, that we actually don't need anyone's help. The irony is that by hiding our weakness from the world and ourselves, we cut ourselves off from the one true source of power, the Lord. We are like the people in the Book of Revelation who say, "I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing"—and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked" (Revelation 2:17). There is relief, and even strength, in acknowledging how weak and helpless we truly are. Of and by myself, I am weak; I am helpless; I can't do it; I'm not perfect; I'm not good enough; I am deeply flawed. It is a common saying that the first step in fixing a problem is admitting that you have one. Without that admission we will never get anywhere. It

takes an immense amount of courage, but it is worthwhile, instead of hiding from weakness, to simply and openly accept it.

But the Lord does not, (and this is crucial, please don't leave this part out! If you stop paying attention now you will have missed the whole point of this sermon), the Lord does not want us to stay here. It is merely the first step in turning to something greater. It is true that on our own we are helpless. And, we are never on our own. As Jesus says,

As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. (John 15:4-5)

Before we admit our own weaknesses, we cannot abide in the Lord. We cannot turn to Him, looking for help. But when we do admit our weaknesses it opens the door to abiding in Him, in His strength and His power. A great example of this we can see in the modern world is in the first two of the twelve steps used by alcoholics anonymous. This is a program designed to help people overcome alcoholism. As with facing any addiction, this process takes immense strength of character and determination. And yet the very first step is, "We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable." That powerlessness can look weak; and yet it is the perfect setup for the second step: "We came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity." Just as an alcoholic admits his own weakness so that he can rely on a higher power, in confronting evil we also admit our own weakness so that we can rely on the Lord. The teachings of the New Church explain that we often only come to this point when we actually despair over how weak and powerless we truly are. This passage is speaking of people who think they can accomplish everything on their own:

But when the feelings of distress and grief enter into them because they have no power at all that is their own to do anything, and those feelings reach the point of despair, their firm persuasion is broken down and their state altered. In this case they can be brought to a conviction that they have no power that is their own to do anything, and that all power, prudence, intelligence and wisdom originate in the Lord. (*Secrets of Heaven* §2694)

On the other side of our own weakness is the Lord's omnipotent power.

This leaves us with a paradox: on our own, we can do nothing; with the Lord, all things are possible. How do we bring these ideas together as one? How do we practically live a life in which we declare our own powerlessness and yet exercise the Lord's power, allowing Him to work through us? When we only acknowledge our own weakness, we fall into inactivity and self-loathing. When we only acknowledge the power we receive from the Lord we fall back into thinking that it is our own and become prideful. The teachings of the New Church bring these ideas together and explain to both admit our weakness and exercise power as if it were our own:

Still, none of us can purify ourselves from evils by our own power and our own force. On the other hand, neither can we purify ourselves without having power and force as if they were our own. If we did not have apparent power, none of us could fight against the flesh and its cravings, although we have all been ordered to do so. (*True Christian Religion* §438)

When I make a choice to resist an evil, to change my behaviour, to accomplish some spiritual goal, it will always feel like I am the source of any success. But if I try to claim that success as my own I will go right back to needing to be perfect, to needing to be strong on my own. Having admitted my weakness to myself, and having stopped trying to hide it from the world, I can step into the Lord's power. I can step forward into action, knowing that I don't need to be strong on my own in order to succeed, trusting that as long as I am abiding in the Lord, He is the one who will accomplish all things through me.

Without the Lord, we can do nothing. With God, all things are possible. The one truth does not cancel out the other. The fact that I am weak does not mean that I

am beyond the Lord's help. The fact that the Lord gives me all power does not mean that I can become proud. I am weak; *and* the greatest force in the universe is on my side.

He gives power to the weak,
And to those who have no might He increases strength.
Even the youths shall faint and be weary,
And the young men shall utterly fall,
But those who wait on Jehovah
Shall renew their strength;
They shall mount up with wings like eagles,
They shall run and not be weary,
They shall walk and not faint. (Isaiah 40:29-31)