The Role of Weakness in Spiritual Formation



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Reflections by Christy Hill, Ph.D.

Who wants to feel weak? Who enjoys bumping up against one's own inadequacies? Why would I desire to get in touch with the many times (a day) I don't live up to my own standards, let alone God's? Isn't the Christian life supposed to make me feel better?

The Apostle Paul may have resisted feeling weak, at first, too. He was a very successful Jew—even of the tribe of Benjamin, a Pharisee, a zealous persecutor of heresy. If you go by strict religious standards, his resume was impressive. But after his conversion to Christ, those things no longer mattered. In fact, he considered them rubbish.[i] But I wonder how long it took him to gain this perspective.

He gives us a glimpse of his journey toward recognizing the value of weakness in his life, modeling a mature Christian perspective of the ongoing struggle we have with the flesh and its

falleness. He wrestled with God over this topic. Three times he prayed for God to relieve him of a thorn in his flesh, a messenger of Satan. We don't know what this messenger of Satan was, but we do know it "tormented" him and made him feel weak.[ii] But God, who has infinite power and wisdom, ordained that weakness could actually be something good for His children. He said to Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."[iii]

So what is the value of weakness for spiritual formation? Could it be that we, like Paul, have a tendency to put confidence in ourselves to live the Christian life? Could it be that I have a deeply ingrained success mentality that desires to use Christianity and the spiritual disciplines to help me feel better about myself, without deepening my relationship and dependence on my Savior? So instead of allowing us to live in the delusion that we are better off on our own (autonomy) and that we really need to get our act together in order to be loved by God (work's righteousness), God breaks us of these ingrained beliefs by giving us the gift of weakness and inadequacy. So then when I bump up against my weakness, I can be reminded of my need for a Savior, even as a mature Christian. I can continue to fall in love with my Rescuer, when I realize that His blood covers my sin. I can turn to Him in dependence, not as a last resort, but as a welcomed reminder of my true state of dependence. It would be cruel of God to allow us to live in the lies of autonomy and work's righteousness, which is our natural tendency.

Maturity starts to look a little bit different than the "victorious Christian living" model that feeds our success mentality. Growth in sanctification means recognizing and internalizing the truth of who I am in Christ and relating to God in deeper, more intimate ways. If a thorn in the flesh helps me to recognize my continual need for a Savior and to turn often to God throughout my day, then it accomplishes a noble purpose. And we can say with Paul, "I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. 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."[iv]

I have to admit, I'm not there yet. But I do have to ask the question: Does our doctrine of sanctification address and have room for the daily experience of weakness, inadequacy and failure? Do we teach those we disciple and have influence over the value of recognizing our moments of weakness that come to us throughout the day and allowing it to remind us to turn to God and not depend on self? Do I model a life that is comfortable with my own messiness, so that others may see that God's love is not based on our performance, but on His desire to love us? It is going to take a lot of weakness, failure and inadequacy to undo the false beliefs that we are better off on our own (autonomy) and we have to work hard to gain God's favor (work's righteousness). The message of the Gospel still speaks to us in the ongoing journey of spiritual formation as we embrace weakness and let it do God's noble purposes.

End Notes

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[i] Philippians 3:4b-11 (all Scripture quotations from NIV).

[ii] 2 Corinthians 12:7, 10.

[iii] 2 Corinthians 12:9a.

[iv] 2 Corinthians 12:9b-10.

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