

Title: What can I do to be a better Christian?" 2Cor 12:1-10

I'm always fascinated by all the advice books. The newest business paradigm. The latest theory on making money. The latest program for losing weight. Best seller books which teach us how to tap into our inner power to control our world or to teach us the power of positive thinking. We hear famous people testifying about the great things they're able to accomplish and their willingness to teach you how to make lots of money... I know their secret... The secret to success, especially financial success. You make lots of money by selling books on "How to make lots of money."

The world is filled with "how-to" plans, promising to fix problems, maximize your life potential, increase your self-esteem. It is a world of competitive ideologies. My way is better than your way. My plan is better than your plan. And it is not even limited to the business world. There are "how to" books about the Christian life. How to be a better Christian How to be a better Christian husband. How to be a better Christian wife. How to realize your potential as a Christian. How to gain the blessings of God. As a Christian, how am I to respond to this? As a Christian do I have something that others don't, one might even say, "As a Christian, do I have a gift that I need to develop that I can use to serve others?" Do I have some method to reach happiness which I can offer to others? Do I have some method of dealing with problems which I can offer to others? Is there really a "how to be a better Christian" book? To be sure the best book on Christianity is one we already have... The bible. But for those who seek "how to" books... that's not quite what they are looking for. In fact, the problem is that people who search for "how to" books for being a Christian are looking at the wrong thing. They are seeking to base their "confidence and security" on "what THEY can do." In fact, the real question to ask, the deeper question to ask is not "what do 'I' do to be a better Christian" but rather, "where does my happiness, my security, my confidence come from?"

As Christians our happiness, our success comes from God. Our confidence comes from God. This brings us to our Bible text for the week 2Cor 5-10 St. Paul says

*I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses. Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say.*

St. Paul was a rabbi, a teacher. He was the perfect Jew He was the perfect Christian. If there was anyone who did things right, it was him. If there was anyone who could write the book on “how to be a perfect Christian” It was Paul. Nonetheless... Paul said... it was not his competence which brought him success. rather he says

*To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."*

And Paul finishes by saying “Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, “ “For when I am weak, then I am strong.” “For when I am weak, then I am strong.” What does he mean by that?

Paul is writing to the Corinthians because a group of false apostles are questioning his authority as an apostle. They are saying “our method of salvation is better.” “What method do you give?” Paul’s response is something to the effect of: “I have things to boast about which give me credentials as apostle far surpassing yours! but I will not boast about them. I will not use them to prove my point.” Why did he not want to boast?

He refrained from boasting because he did not want his witness to focus on himself. Rather he wanted his focus to be on God? In fact, in this way, the thorn in his side, while a burden, made him better. It would have been very easy for Paul to become conceited, thinking he was spiritually superior to other Christians. He might even had started thinking that his “way” was a necessary path for other Christians to follow. He might even have started selling his own book on “how to become a mature Christian in ten easy steps.” But instead, God BLESSED him with a thorn in his side. What it was we don’t know. but nonetheless its purpose was to make plain to all - a spiritual weakness in Paul.

And how was this a blessing? The thorn in his side could have been a tremendous blow to his self confidence. But rather he rejoiced in it. For because of it, he could point to God and say to all those he was preaching to “All the good things which I have brought to you is from God.” Because of his weakness Paul could only point to God as the source of power. He could truly say, “This I could not accomplish on my own, but it is God, who through me, accomplishes these things. The saving work of faith was NOT

to be because of any power which Paul had. People were NOT to come to faith by Paul's persuasiveness. People were NOT to come to faith through the wisdom of Paul's words. People were to come to faith not BECAUSE of Paul, but DESPITE Paul. God's grace would be sufficient. Neither did God wish Paul to think that it was because of Paul's great writing, his oratory skills or his knowledge that God CONTINUED to use Paul as an instrument of His Grace. By providing him with this weakness God was able to show Paul that it was by grace that Paul was used and more importantly it was by grace that he was saved. Paul's work on earth and his salvation were both gifts to Paul, from God. It is for this reason when Paul spoke, he boasted about God. His focus was on God. His confidence came from God. His confidence and faith came from God. They were a gift from God.

So, I ask you where does your confidence come from? Where is your focus? When you are talking among friends, what do you find to be your favorite subject? What do you praise the most? What do you boast about? Is it self-sufficiency? Is it the things you have or the things you can do? Is it the people you know? Theologically speaking this "focus on self" has a special name. It is called "pride." Scripture encourages us rather, to focus somewhere else. It teaches where our confidence should rest upon. It teaches us where our real successes come from. It is about these successes which we can boast. Scripture encourages us rather to focus on God. To talk about God, with your friends. To praise God with your friends. To boast about God. When our focus is on God, then our boasting is good.

In fact, as Christians, we are called to boast. So, what is the test for good boasting? For good boasting one has to ask the question "who is being given the glory?" "Who is the focus of the bragging?" In good boasting, the focus is on God. We remember that God loved us so much that he sent his only son to redeem us. That is our boast. If we focus on ourselves it is only to admit our weakness, We boast of our weaknesses in order that the enormity of God's love might be shown to others. Even though we PROPERLY see ourselves as nothing more than animated dust, we are not left in despair or with a poor self esteem. In fact, self-esteem, both good and bad, are inconsequential, because they both focus on one's self. It doesn't matter what WE think of ourselves. Rather, what matters is what God thinks of us. And our boast is: God thinks a lot of us. He loves us a lot. He wants all things to work out for our good. Because of our weakness, if something great is done it is proof that the Holy Spirit is at work within us. Because of

our weakness, we are reminded that God has chosen us and for that reason we can be comforted.

There is one last point I want to make. While God works through us despite our weaknesses, we do not go around saying that the work we do is useless. In fact, though we are weak, many times God does great work THROUGH our weakness. For God has decreed that his Gospel, His message of salvation is to come to man, via man. Our work is infinitely important. Our work has eternal consequences. The message we share with someone may be that pivotal point where they turn from Hell to a relationship with God. This is our boast! Yet, while we boast this, we boast that it is by the power of the Holy Spirit that all things are accomplished. When we talk about the successes that we have had in our lives we give glory to God. We boast of our weaknesses, just like Paul, in order that the power of God may shine through. We do not desire the praise of others. We do not brag before others in order to lift ourselves higher. We do not do these things because our focus is NOT on ourselves, but on God. Rather we brag about what our father can do in order to give glory to the Father. Our boast is not a method to share with others “a way to happiness”. Rather, our boast is that JOY stems from a true relationship with God on whom we trust for everything. JOY stems from a loving relationship as sons and daughters of God. Our boast is that our focus, our confidence, our trust, our faith is in Jesus Christ. Our boast is that, as redeemed people of God, God will work in our lives, not only as he helps us mature, but in the work we do serving others in his name. We live with peace knowing that God’s grace is sufficient for us not only for eternal life but for all the weaknesses, trials and tribulations in our lives here and now. The book “How to be a better a Christian?” has only three lines. God’s grace brings the good in our lives. God’s grace cures the bad in our lives. God’s grace is sufficient in all that we do. Trust God.