

Sermon for Sunday, March 13, 1977, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Senior Pastor
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, Missouri 63105

"HOW TO BE A STRONG WEAKLING"

II Corinthians 12:1-10

Text: "...but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'" --II Corinthians 12:9a

Are you able to admit your weaknesses? Are you free to admit your failures to the person closest to you? Can you confess your inabilities and shortcomings to others? Most of us can't. Somehow the culture in which we have been raised does not permit it. We are supposed to be brave and strong. We are told that we should be able to meet every crisis and handle any problem. Sometimes we have feelings and emotions that we are ashamed of, but we can't admit these to anyone--sometimes we can't even admit them to ourselves.

Psychology teaches us that about five things can happen to us when we are threatened by something we don't want to admit. One thing we can do is to repress. We refuse to admit something to the conscious mind by pushing it down into the unconsciousness where we hope it will be lost. A second thing we can do is to rationalize. By this device we consciously create plausible reasons for acting or thinking as we do and justify our actions. Both repression and rationalization are protective devices and they may succeed for a time. However, the powerful feelings they hide cannot be held in check completely. From the murky depths of the unconsciousness they will cause us pain and discomfort. A third device we use to hide our feelings from ourselves and others is called reaction formation. For example, if a mother really dislikes her child and is ashamed of that feeling a reaction formation takes place. As a result she will become over-solicitous of the child and its welfare. An abnormal pattern is established. A fourth way we deal with what we consider to be failures and weaknesses is called projection. By this technique, our bad feelings, our weaknesses, are projected on to other people. We frequently tend to criticize most intensely the things in other people of which we ourselves are guilty--and we sometimes do this without any real justification. A fifth way we hide our fears or insecurities from ourselves is a device called regression. When we are overwhelmed by feelings we consider to be bad or shameful or wrong, we protect ourselves from them by retreating to some immature stage of psychological development.

Now, the point I would like to call to your attention about all of these responses to weaknesses is this: all of them are bad. As a matter of fact, most mental illness can be traced to a response to life that has taken one of these forms. Most of the personality maladjustments that all of us suffer from to some extent can be traced to an inadequate or inappropriate response to what we consider to be a weakness. For example, studies only recently released about our men taken prisoner by the Chinese and North Korean communists reveal an amazing fact. The men who could not admit their need of God, who could not face up to the fact of their own weaknesses, were the ones who broke. The soldier who had hope only in himself became completely vulnerable to the enemy and ultimately could be counted on to do what he was told and speak the words they put into his mouth.

Some of you may remember the book by Dr. Ernest Gordon who became Dean of the Chapel at Princeton, entitled Through the Valley of the Kwai. You will remember that he himself was a prisoner of war of the Japanese. He said that when some of the prisoners were marched into camp, it was quite evident that they were marked for death. He writes, "Their faces were expressionless. The inner spark had been quenched. They had come here to die. Many had no recognizable disease that the doctors could treat in any way. They had lost their hold on life. They were waiting for death."

Yes, failures and weaknesses and needs that we refuse to admit to the conscious mind can do dreadful things to us. Do you remember the story in scripture (St. Luke 5) where four men brought a sick friend to Jesus? They couldn't get through the crowd; they went up on a roof and after lifting away some of the tiles, they let their friend down on a stretcher to the feet of Jesus. Who can guess what fears and anxieties, what repressed feelings, this man must have experienced. But Jesus knew about psychosomatic problems 19 centuries before the word was even invented! He cut right through everything and got right to the heart of that man's problems. "Son," he said, "Be of good courage, your sins are forgiven." And the healing powers of Jesus pierced right into the basic and primary need in that man's life! It was in that context that Jesus could then say to him, "Arise, take up your bed and walk."

I would like to suggest this morning some steps that we can take in dealing with our weaknesses. And deal with them we must! To fail to deal with them is to begin the process of trouble in our lives. Here is step one: learn to recognize the source of your problem. For example, suppose I have a hard day when everything goes wrong. When I leave the office, I'm upset and experiencing a lot of anxieties. By the time I get home my tensions have built and I am looking for an excuse to ventilate my emotions. Suppose a child has left a bike in the driveway. That gives me the chance to explode and I enter the house ranting in anger. But was it really the bike that caused my emotional tirade? No, that really wasn't my problem at all. I was simply using it to express anxieties and tensions and frustrations that originated somewhere else. Or suppose again that a wife has the washing machine break down when she has all the clothes to do, she accidentally sets the oven too high and the dinner burns, and junior breaks a window when she told him not to bounce the ball against the house. When her husband walks in the door she begins to berate him for his failures and says, "You never do anything nice for me." But is he her real problem?

One of the most serious situations I deal with in working with people who are experiencing broken relationships is that too often we are not dealing with the real problems. Our emotional needs are being expressed in inadequate ways and unreal ways. But suppose I start trying to deal with the question of my real needs. Suppose I start asking myself, "Why am I feeling this way? What has caused me to be upset?" Then, you see, I am beginning to understand and to bring to my conscious mind the source of my emotions and my needs. For example, suppose early in the day I get a phone call from an unhappy parishoner who berates me for some failure he or she perceives on my part. I don't like to be criticized and emotionally do not accept the criticism. So I push it out of my mind. I repress it. But the anxiety the criticism produced is still there. Now I am tense and feeling anxious but I am not consciously aware of why. Soon I am snapping at the secretaries and generally feeling hostile. My hostility makes me feel guilty and my guilt intensifies my anxiety. The only way to break that cycle is to begin to think back through the day--what has made me anxious--what is the cause of my bad feelings? Only when I can bring back to my conscious mind what has happened can I deal effectively with my emotions.

So, step one is to begin to recognize the real source of my problems. Here is step two. Dare to be honest about your needs. Most of us run into trouble right here. We don't like to admit needs. It makes us appear weak or unmanly. But you know, the Bible says an interesting thing. Over in the book of James the author is talking about health and healing and then he makes this strange statement, "Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed" (James 5:16). Isn't that amazing? Confess that you may be healed. Do you dare to do that? Do you dare to say to your wife or your husband, "Hey, I'm really hurting today. I need some love and some attention." See how it works! Suppose the wife

I mentioned earlier whose washing machine broke, who burned the dinner and whose son broke a window greets her husband with accusations that he doesn't love her or care about her. Naturally, he responds defensively. But suppose instead she has tried to recognize the real source of her need and when he arrives she is honest with him. Suppose instead she says, "I'm feeling sorry for myself and feeling inadequate because nothing is going right." She has admitted a need--she has been honest about herself--she has confessed. But that need is something her husband can respond to! Now he can reach out to her and give her the love, the reassurance, the comfort she really needs.

Isn't it amazing how dishonest we are with each other? Think back over the arguments or disagreements you have had with your spouse or your children or your friends recently. How much of it was caused by the fact that your actions were created by some emotion whose source you had not recognized? The next time you want to pick a quarrel, make some ugly statement, or accuse someone of something, ask yourself, "What need am I expressing? What emotional need do I have?" Then dare to be honest about your real need.

Here is step three. Invite God into your need. Over in the book of Philippians, St. Paul makes an incredible statement. This is what he says: "I know how to be abased and I know how to abound; in any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and want" (4:12). Now how in the world could Paul handle that wide range of emotions that goes with being abased and abounding; with being hungry and having plenty? In the very next verse he gives us the answer for he says, "I can do all things in him who strengthens me." Yes, he could handle his needs, his emotions, because he let God into them.

You see, there is a very important principle at work here. Nobody can fully and completely meet my needs. Even though I recognize the source of my needs and even though I admit my needs to those closest to me, ultimately only God can satisfy my deepest needs. Are you letting God into your emotions and needs? It helps me to know why I am experiencing certain emotions and it helps to be honest with someone about my real needs. But in the end unless I let God into that need and that emotion I can never handle it on my own. Do you remember how our scripture reading for this morning ended? St. Paul wrote, "For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions and calamities: for when I am weak, then I am strong."

Here is step four: begin to respond to others as though they had your needs. Of course you immediately recognize the Biblical context of this. Jesus put it this way, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." When we do this an amazing thing happens. The power of Christ begins to rest upon me. God's power is made perfect--it is put to work--in my weakness. There is a fundamental spiritual principle at work here. As I reach out to touch lives where my own life is hurting, I discover that healing is coming into my own need at precisely that same point. You try that in your life and see if it doesn't work for you. God's power will be at work precisely where St. Paul said it would--in your weakness, in your need.

Do you remember the advertisements years ago in many magazines by Charles Atlas? He was advertising a body building course and I suppose there are not many of us over 35 who didn't dream of taking that course some day and having a body like

Charles Atlas! The advertisement showed a skinny weakling at the beach with his date. A bully comes along and kicks sand on him and takes his girl. But, miracle of miracles, after taking the body building course, he comes back and whips the bully and gets his girl back. Well, I can't promise anything about the girl, but I can promise you this: I can promise that if you try to understand the source of your needs, if you dare to be honest about them with those closest to you, if you let God into those needs, and if you begin to let God's power work in your life by responding to others as though they had your needs, you will be a strong spiritual weakling. As St. Paul put it, "(God's) power is made perfect in weakness... I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me." As he put it, "for when I am weak, then I am strong."

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