

When I Am Weak: Why we must embrace our brokenness and never be good Christians

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This is perhaps my favorite statement of the Gospel that I've ever written. The best sermons should preach to yourself. The Luther quote at the end still rocks me. I've been working on this to make it "book friendly," and I wanted to share it with the IM audience again. If you're a "good Christian," go do something else. If you are a mess, this is my gift to you. From 2004 I think.

The voice on the other end of the phone told a story that has become so familiar to me; I could have almost finished it from the third sentence. A respected and admired Christian leader, carrying the secret burden of depression, had finally broken under the crushing load of holding it all together. As prayer networks in our area begin to make calls and send e-mails, the same questions are asked again and again. "How could this happen? How could someone who spoke so confidently of God, someone whose life gave such evidence of Jesus' presence, come to the point of a complete breakdown? How can someone who has the answers for everyone one moment, have no answers for themselves the next?"

Indeed. Why are we, after all that confident talk of "new life," "new creation," "the power of God," "healing," "wisdom," "miracles," "the power of prayer," ... why are we so weak? Why do so many "good Christian people," turn out to be just like everyone else? Divorced. Depressed. Broken. Messed up. Full of pain and secrets. Addicted, needy and phony. I thought we were different.

It's remarkable, considering the tone of so many Christian sermons and messages, that any church has honest people show up at all. I can't imagine that any religion in the history of humanity has made as many clearly false claims and promises as evangelical Christians in their quest to say that Jesus makes us better people right now. With their constant promises of joy, power, contentment, healing, prosperity, purpose, better relationships, successful parenting and freedom from every kind of oppression and affliction, I wonder why more Christians aren't either being sued by the rest of humanity for lying or hauled off to a psych ward to be examined for serious delusions.

Evangelicals love a testimony of how screwed up I USED to be. They aren't interested in how screwed up I am NOW. But the fact is, that we are screwed up. Then. Now. All the time in between and, it's a safe bet to assume, the rest of the time we're alive. But we will pay \$400 to go hear a "Bible teacher" tell us how we are only a few verses, prayers and cds away from being a lot better. And we will set quietly, or applaud loudly, when the story is retold. I'm really better now. I'm a good Christian. I'm not a mess anymore. I'm different from other people.

Please. Call this off. It's making me sick. I mean that. It's affecting me. I'm seeing, in my life and the lives of others, a commitment to lying about our condition that is absolutely pathological. Evangelicals called Bill Clinton a big-time liar about sex? Come on. How many nodding "good Christians" have so much garbage sitting in the middle of their lives that the odor makes it impossible to breathe without gagging? How many of us are addicted to food, porn and shopping? How many of us are depressed, angry, unforgiving and just plain mean? How many of us are a walking, talking course on basic hypocrisy, because we just can't look at ourselves in the mirror and admit what we a collection of brokenness we've become WHILE we called ourselves "good Christians" who want to "witness" to others. I'm choking just writing this.

You people with your Bibles. Look something up for me? Isn't almost everyone in that book screwed up? I mean, don't the screwed up people- like Abraham, Jacob, Moses, David, Hosea- outnumber the "good Christians" by about ten to one? And isn't it true that the more we get to look at a Biblical character close up, the more likely it will be that we'll see a whole nasty collection of things that Christians say they no longer have to deal with because, praise God! I'm fixed? Not just a few temper tantrums or ordinary lies, but stuff like violence. Sex addictions. Abuse. Racism. Depression. It's all there, yet we still flop our Bibles open on the pulpit and talk about "Ten Ways To Have Joy That Never Goes Away!" Where is the laugh track?

What was that I heard? "Well...we're getting better. That's sanctification. I've been delivered!" I suppose some of us are getting better. For instance, my temper is better than it used to be. Of course, the reason my temper is better, is that in the process of cleaning up the mess I've made of my family with my temper, I've discovered about twenty other major character flaws that were growing, unchecked, in my personality. I've inventoried the havoc I've caused in this short life of mine, and it turns out "temper problem" is way too simple to describe the mess that is me. Sanctification? Yes, I no longer have the arrogant ignorance to believe that I'm always right about everything, and I'm too embarrassed by the general chaos of my life to mount an angry fit every time something doesn't go my way. Getting better? Quite true. I'm getting better at knowing what a wretched wreck I really amount to, and it's shut me up and sat me down.

I love this passage of scripture. I don't know why know one believes it, but I love it.

7 But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. 8 We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; 9 persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; 10 always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. 11 For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. ([2 Corinthians 4:7-11](#))

Let me attempt a slight retelling of the text, more in line with the Christianity of our time.

But we have this treasure in saved, healed, delivered and supernaturally changed vessels, to show that God has given to us, right now, His surpassing power over ever situation. We are no longer afflicted, perplexed, in conflict or defeated. No, we are alive with the power of Jesus, and the resurrection power of Jesus has changed us now...TODAY! In every way! God wants you to see

just what a Jesus-controlled person is all about, so the power of Jesus is on display in the life I am living, and those who don't have this life, are miserable and dying.

Contextual concerns aside, let's read Paul's words as a basic "reality board" to the Christian life.

We're dying. Life is full of pain and perplexity. We have Christ, and so, in the future, his life will manifest in us in resurrection and glory. In the present, that life manifests in us in this very odd, contradictory experience. We are dying, afflicted, broken, hurting, confused...yet we hold on to Jesus in all these things, and continue to love him and believe in him. The power of God is in us, not in making us above the human, but allowing us to be merely human, yet part of a new creation in Jesus.

What does this mean?

It means your depression isn't fixed. It means you are still overweight. It means you still want to look at porn. It means you are still frightened of dying, reluctant to tell the truth and purposely evasive when it comes to responsibility. It means you can lie, cheat, steal, even do terrible things, when you are "in the flesh," which, in one sense, you always are. If you are a Christian, it means you are frequently, perhaps constantly miserable, and it means you are involved in a fight for Christ to have more influence in your life than your broken, screwed up, messed up humanity. In fact, the greatest miracle is that with all the miserable messes in your life, you still want to have Jesus as King, because it's a lot of trouble, folks. It isn't a picnic.

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 of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 10 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. ([2 Corinthians 12:9-10](#))

Here is even more undeniable, unarguable language. Weaknesses are with me for the whole journey. Paul was particularly thinking of persecutions, but how much more does this passage apply to human frailty, brokenness and hurt? How essential is it for us to be broken, if Christ is going to be our strength? When I am weak I am strong. Not, "When I am cured," or "When I am successful," or "When I am a good Christian," but when I am weak. Weakness- the human experience of weakness- is God's blueprint for exalting and magnifying his Son. When broken people, miserably failing people, continue to belong to, believe in and worship Jesus, God is happy.

Now, the upper gallery is full of people who are getting upset, certain that this essay is one of those pieces where I am in the mood to tell everyone to go sin themselves up, and forget about sanctification. Sorry to disappoint.

The problem is a simple one of semantics. Or perhaps a better way to say it is imagination. How do we imagine the life of faith? What does living faith look like? Does it look like the "good Christian," "whole person," "victorious life" version of the Christian life?

Faith, alive in our weakness, looks like a war. An impossible war, against a far superior adversary: our own sinful, fallen nature. Faith fights this battle. Piper loves this verse from Romans, and I do, too. But I need to explain why, because it can sound like the “victorious” life is not Jesus’ life in the Gospel, but me “winning at life” or some other nonsense.

13 For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put (are putting) to death the deeds of the body, you will live. ([Romans 8:13](#))

The complexity resides right here: Faith is discontentment with what I am, and satisfaction with all God is for me in Jesus. The reason that description works so well for me is that it tells us the mark of saving faith is not just resting passively in the promises of the Gospel (though that is exactly what justification does), but this ongoing war with the reality of my condition. Unless I am reading [Romans 8](#) wrongly, my fight is never finished, because my sinful, messed-up human experience isn’t finished until death and resurrection. That fight- acceptance and battle- is the normal life of the believer. I fight. Jesus will finish the work. I will groan, and do battle, climb the mountain of Holiness with wounds and brokenness and holy battle scars, but I will climb it, since Christ is in me. The Gospel assures victory, but to say I stand in a present victory as I “kill” sin is a serious wrong turn.

What does this fight look like? It is a bloody mess, I’m telling you. There is a lot of failure in it. It is not an easy way to the heavenly city. It is a battle where we are brought down again, and again and again. Brought down by what we are, and what we continually discover ourselves to be. And we only are “victorious” in the victory of Jesus, a victory that is ours by faith, not by sight. In fact, that fight is probably described just as accurately by the closing words of [Romans 7](#) as by the “victorious” words of [Romans 8](#).

23 but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. 24 Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? 25 Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin. ([Romans 7:23-25](#))

I fall down. I get up...and believe. Over and over again. That’s as good as it gets in this world. This life of faith is a battle full of weakness and brokenness. The only soldiers in this battle are wounded ones. There are moments of total candor- I am a “wretched man” living in a “body” of death. Denying this, spinning this, ignoring this or distorting this reality is nothing but trouble in the true Christian experience. The sin we are killing in [Romans 8](#) is, in a sense, ourselves. Not some demon or serpent external to us. Our battle is with ourselves, and embracing this fact is the compass and foundation of the Gospel’s power in our lives.

What lands us in churches where we are turned into the cheering section for personal victory over everything is denying that faith is an ongoing battle that does not end until Jesus ends it. Those who stand up and claim victory may be inviting us to celebrate a true place in their experience at the time, but it isn’t the whole person, the whole story, or all that accurate. They are still a mess. Count on it. This battle- and the victories in it- are fought by very un-victorious Christians.

I will be accused of a serious lack of good news, I'm sure, so listen. At the moment I am winning, Jesus is with me. At the moment I am losing, Jesus is with me and guarantees that I will get up and fight on. At the moment I am confused, wounded and despairing, Jesus is with me. I never, ever lose the brokenness. I fight, and sometimes I prevail, but more and more of my screwed up, messed up life erupts. Each battle has the potential to be the last, but because I belong to one whose resurrection guarantees that I will arrive safely home in a new body and a new creation, I miraculously, amazingly, find myself continuing to believe, continuing to move forward, till Jesus picks us up and takes us home.

Now, let's come to something very important here. This constant emphasis on the "victorious life" or "good Christian life" is absolutely the anti-Christ when it comes to the Gospel. If I am _____ (fill in the blank with victorious life terminology) then I am oriented to be grateful for what Jesus did THEN, but I need him less and less in the NOW. I want to make sure he meets me at the gate on the way into heaven, but right now, I'm signing autographs. I'm a good Christian. This imagining of the Christian journey will kill us.

We need our brokenness. We need to admit it and know it is the real, true stuff of our earthly journey in a fallen world. It's the cross on which Jesus meets us. It is the incarnation he takes up for us. It's what his hands touch when he holds us. Do you remember this story? It's often been told, but oh how true it is as a GOSPEL story (not a law story.) It is a Gospel story about Jesus and how I experience him in this "twisted" life.

In his book *Mortal Lessons* (Touchstone Books, 1987) physician Richard Selzer describes a scene in a hospital room after he had performed surgery on a young woman's face:

I stand by the bed where the young woman lays . . . her face, postoperative . . . her mouth twisted in palsy . . . clownish. A tiny twig of the facial nerve, one of the muscles of her mouth, has been severed. She will be that way from now on. I had followed with religious fervor the curve of her flesh, I promise you that. Nevertheless, to remove the tumor in her cheek, I had cut this little nerve. Her young husband is in the room. He stands on the opposite side of the bed, and together they seem to be in a world all their own in the evening lamplight . . . isolated from me . . . private.

Who are they? I ask myself . . . he and this wry mouth I have made, who gaze at and touch each other so generously. The young woman speaks. "Will my mouth always be like this?" she asks. "Yes," I say, "it will. It is because the nerve was cut." She nods and is silent. But the young man smiles. "I like it," he says, "it's kind of cute." All at once I know who he is. I understand, and I lower my gaze. One is not bold in an encounter with the divine. Unmindful, he bends to kiss her crooked mouth, and I am so close I can see how he twists his own lips to accommodate to hers. . . to show her that their kiss still works

This is who Jesus has always been. And if you think you are getting to be a great kisser or are looking desirable, I feel sorry for you. He wraps himself around our hurts, our brokenness and our ugly, ever-present sin. Those of you, who want to draw big, dark lines between my humanity and my sin, go right ahead, but I'm not joining you. It's all ME. And I need Jesus so much to love me like I really am: brokenness, memories, wounds, sins, addictions, lies, death, fear . . . all of it. Take all it, Lord Jesus. If I don't present this broken, messed up person to Jesus, my faith is

dishonest, and my understanding of it will become a way of continuing the ruse and pretense of being “good.”

Now I want to talk about why this is important. We must begin to accept who we are, and bring a halt to the sad and repeated phenomenon of lives that are crumbling into pieces because the only Christian experience they know about is one that is a lie. We are infected with something that isn't the Gospel, but a version of a religious life; an entirely untruthful version that drives genuine believers into the pit of despair and depression because, contrary to the truth, God is “against” them, rather than for them.

The verse says, “When I am weak, then I am strong- in Jesus.” It does not say “When I am strong, then I am strong, and you'll know because Jesus will get all the credit.” Let me use two examples, and I hope neither will be offensive to those who might read and feel they recognize the persons described.

Many years ago, I knew a man who was a vibrant and very public Christian witness. He was involved in the “lay renewal” movement in the SBC, which involved a lot of giving testimonies of “what God was doing in your life.” (A phrase I could do without.) He was well-known for being a better speaker than most preachers, and he was an impressive and persuasive lay speaker. His enthusiasm for Christ was convincing.

He was also known to be a serial adulterer. Over and over, he strayed from his marriage vows, and scandalized his church and its witness in the community. When confronted, his response was predictable. He would visit the Church of Total Victory Now, and return claiming to have been delivered of the “demons of lust” that had caused him to sin. Life would go on. As far as I know, the cycle continued, unabated, for all the time I knew about him.

I understand that the church today needs- desperately- to hear experiential testimonies of the power of the Gospel. I understand that it is not good news to say we are broken and are going to stay that way. I know there will be little enthusiasm for saying sanctification consists, in large measure, in seeing our sin, and acknowledging what it is and how deep and extensive it has marred us. I doubt that the triumphalists will agree with me that the fight of faith is not a victory party, but a bloody war on a battlefield that resembles Omaha Beach more than a Beach party.

I write this piece particularly concerned for leaders, parents, pastors and teachers. I am moved and distressed that so many of them, most of all, are unable to admit their humanity, and their brokenness. In silence, they carry the secret, and then stand in the place of public leadership and present a Gospel that is true, but a Christian experience that is far from true.

Then, from time to time, they fall. Into adultery, like the pastor of one of our state's largest churches. A wonderful man, who kept a mistress for years rather than admit a problem millions of us share, faulty, imperfect marriages. Where is he now, I wonder? And where are so many others I've known and heard of who fell under the same weight? Their lives are lost to the cause of the Kingdom because they are just like the rest of us?

By the way, I'm not rejecting Biblical standards for leadership. I am suggesting we need a Biblical view of humanity when we read those passages. Otherwise we are going to turn statements like "rules his household well" into a disqualification to every human being on the planet.

I hear of those who are depressed. Where do they turn for help? How do they admit their hurt? It seems so "unChristian" to admit depression, yet it is a reality for millions and millions of human beings. Porn addiction. Food addiction. Rage addiction. Obsessive needs for control. Chronic lying and dishonesty. How many pastors and Christian leaders live with these human frailties and flaws, and never seek help because they can't admit what we all know is true about all of us? They speak of salvation, love and Jesus, but inside they feel like the damned.

Multiply this by the hundreds of millions of broken Christians. They are merely human, but their church says they must be more than human to be good Christians. They cannot speak of or even acknowledge their troubled lives. Their marriages are wounded. Their children are hurting. They are filled with fear and the sins of the flesh. They are depressed and addicted, yet they can only approach the church with the lie that all is well, and if it becomes apparent that all is not well, they avoid the church.

I do not blame the church for this situation. It is always human nature to avoid the mirror and prefer the self-portrait. I blame all of us who know better. We know this is not the message of the Gospels, the Bible or of Jesus. But we- every one of us- are afraid to live otherwise. What if someone knew we were not a good Christian? Ah...what if...what if....

I close with a something I have said many times before. The Prodigal son, there on his knees, his father's touch upon him, was not a "good" or "victorious" Christian. He was broken. A failure. He wasn't even good at being honest. He wanted religion more than grace. His father baptized him in mercy, and resurrected him in grace. His brokenness was wrapped up in the robe and the embrace of God.

Why do we want to be better than that boy? Why do we make the older brother the goal of Christian experience? Why do we want to add our own addition to the parable, where the prodigal straightens out and becomes a successful youth speaker, writing books and doing youth revivals?

Lutheran writer Herman Sasse, in a meditation on Luther's last words, "We are beggars. This is true," puts it perfectly:

Luther asserted the very opposite: "Christ dwells only with sinners." For the sinner and for the sinner alone is His table set. There we receive His true body and His true blood "for the forgiveness of sins" and this holds true even if forgiveness has already been received in Absolution. That here Scripture is completely on the side of Luther needs no further demonstration. Every page of the New Testament is indeed testimony of the Christ whose proper office it is "to save sinners", "to seek and to save the lost". And the entire saving work of Jesus, from the days when He was in Galilee and, to the amazement and alarm of the Pharisees, ate with tax collectors and sinners; to the moment when he, in contradiction with the principles of

every rational morality, promised paradise to the thief on the cross, yes, His entire life on earth, from the cradle to the Cross, is one, unique grand demonstration of a wonder beyond all reason: The miracle of divine forgiveness, of the justification of the sinner. **“Christ dwells only in sinners.”**

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