

## THE BON AIR PULPIT

James D. Pardue, Pastor

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Scripture: 11Corinthians 12:7-10

Sermon: **It Seems Backward-but it Works**

It takes me about two months to give birth to a sermon. I just have long labor pains. For a long time I knew I was going to speak on this passage of scripture today and I began to have trouble in the middle of the week because of the events that began to unfold in Colorado and the revelations that this was happening across America. Though I will not speak on that this morning, I will end on that this morning so we will move towards it.

All of you understand about resumes. A resume is a cottage industry in America and has as its purpose to tell you about someone so that when they come you will at least listen to them because you know something about them. Even ministers have resumes. I have one. I am going to be starting tonight speaking at another church for four nights. They wrote me and asked two kinds of bad things. First they asked me to send a picture and that is bad. The second thing is they asked me to send a resume. I know the purpose of resumes is that when all of those people in that church this morning read my resume, they are all going to go home at lunch today and say he has got to be one of the most exciting men that we can possibly get and we all want to be present at the service tonight. My resume of course is very simple. I was born in Louisiana. I am married to Judy. Those two ought to be enough to make everybody want to flood the church tonight. Three kids, eight grand kids and I, pastor of Bon Air Church. My resume is kind of limited.

The passage of scripture I am reading today is about resumes. Paul had gone to Corinth. He had spoken and then there came some people in and they began to speak. They began to downgrade Paul. Resumes don't have any sense unless people kind of respond to them. What they responded to was somebody has to be photogenic. Paul, you recall, had a disease of the eyes. He said I look bad. Greeks were the ones who first started the Olympics and they looked upon strong, big men and Paul came weak.

They looked upon this kind of class A personalities, strong, and Paul was not that way. They had the trappings of power and Paul did not have any of that. They began to make fun of Paul and Paul has given his resume. Resumes are pretty good with people but God isn't very impressed with resumes. There is not much you and I can say that is going to be impressive to Him. Paul is going to give an unusual resume but in it is a real key to Christian living and I hope that as you hear his resume, that it will begin to help you to recognize the great truth of this passage of scripture. He is going to give an experience that happened to him in our scripture and out of that he is going to draw what I think has to be one of the most important truths of the Bible. Listen to what he said. *"I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up into the third heaven. The third heaven to him would be the very presence of God. I don't know whether I was in the body or out of the body, only God knows that and I know that this man was caught up into paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell and I would like to boast about that man but I won't boast about him except about his weakness. Even if I would boast I wouldn't be foolish because I would be speaking the truth. But I am not going to say anything because I don't want you to think more of me than is warranted of what I would do or say. To keep me from becoming conceited because of this great revelation, there was given to me a thorn in the*

*flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away but He said to me, my grace is sufficient for you, my power is made perfect in your weakness. Then this great truth. Therefore, I will boast all the more gladly about my weakness so that God's power may rest on me.* Then this passage of scripture in the next chapter, verse four. *"To be sure Christ was crucified in weakness, yet He lives in God's power. Likewise we are weak in Him, yet by God's power we will live with Him to serve you."*

When our children were small I taught them a common prayer. God is great, God is good, let us thank Him for our food. When most people think about God, they think about His greatness. When scholars began to try to describe that, they take a little prefix that is spelled omni and they put three words in front of it to try to tell you how great God is. They use for example the word present. They put that little word, omni, in front of it and it means God is every where. It is amazing to think for a moment that there is not anywhere that God is not. They take the word science. Science is the word knowledge and they put omni in front of it and it means God knows everything. Just think for a moment. There is not anything God does not know. They take the word potent and they put omni in front of it and what that says about the greatness of God is that God is all powerful. When Jesus tried to sum up the greatness of God, He said it this way. Everything is possible with God. God is so powerful and so great, there is not anything that God can't do. The amazing thing is that when God came to save the world, when He came to do His greatest work, He did not come in great power. Jesus was born in a manger. He was utterly dependent upon His mother and daddy to feed Him and to change Him. His mother and father were two of the poorest people on the face of the earth. For thirty years, you did not hear anything from Him. One day there came his cousin named John the Baptizer and John said the "Savior is going to come" and I wanted you to hear the way John

described Him. Listen to him. *The ax is already at the root of the tree, every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. I baptize you with water to repentance but after me there is going to come one who is more powerful than me whose sandals I am not fit to bear. He will baptize you with the holy Spirit and with fire. His fork is already in His hand, He will clear the threshing floor, He will gather His wheat into barns, He will burn up the shaft with unquenchable fire.* Look at all the word pictures. Ax, wind, fire. Then you recall Jesus came. He began to teach, He began to do miracles to help people and He began to encourage people to have faith in God and John is over here in prison. He sent word back to Jesus and he said "Are you the one?" There is no wind, there is no fire. Are you the one who is coming or are we to look for somebody else." Then when he died, Paul said He died in weakness. He let people take Him out and put nails in His hands and He died on a cross. If you and I were going to do it, confess it, you wouldn't do it that way. What we would do is have computer enhanced imagery. I mean when He spoke, big thunder in the background. Clashes of thunder and lightening from the sky. When He spoke the whole ground would quake. You and I would go back to the greatness of Him who is here. The question I wanted to ask you is, if God is so great, if He is doing His greatest work in saving us, why did He come in weakness? The answer to that question helps to reveal one of the most important truths in the Bible. The important truth is that He came to show us how we are to live. It is that we are to live in a sense of weakness and brokenness before God and that if you and I do not live with brokenness and dependence upon Him, we will never have strength to meet the challenges of life. When Paul wanted to boast, what he

wanted to boast about, was not how strong he was but how weak he was. I want to remind you again of the story. He said I was taken all the way to heaven, I heard things that a man ought not even to speak in this world. When I came back, what I had was a sense of pride. Look what happened to me. I went all the way to heaven. I heard all the stuff that God talks about. He said I wanted to go out and tell everybody what a wonderful man of God I was. God said you are getting proud. I tell you what I am going to do. I am going to make you physically weak. All of your life you will walk around with pain. This is what I want to teach you. I want to teach you that your strength is not these majestic things that you see occasionally but your strength is to walk before me in weakness. All of my life I have heard people debate what the thorn was. That is not the question. The question is not what was the thorn, the question is why was the thorn?. The why is to teach him humility. I have used this passage of scripture many times to talk about unanswered prayer. Paul said I prayed three times and God said no. Then he said but even if I won't remove the thorn, what I will do is, I will give you grace to bear it. *"My grace is sufficient for you."* I have used that but I forgot to read the rest of the passage. What it said is so that in your weakness, you will learn my power. The key to powerful Christian living must go through weakness. The more we confess what we do not have, the more He gives us what we need. Let me draw you a chart. Here is God, here is as far away from God as you can get. Let me show you how we make progress toward Him. As far away as you can get, this is what you hear. I can take care of myself. Some of you weak sisters, you may need a God, but I don't. You may have problems, but I don't. I can take care of myself.

One of the reasons that sometimes men have problems coming to Christ, men are suppose to be macho. The reason the men like the commercial that sometimes is on television is, the commercial is this. "Don't let them see you sweat." Men like that, because men like to walk around and say "I can do anything. You may have a problem, but not me. Give me a task to do and I will move heaven, earth and wall street. I'll get it done." That expresses itself in how people don't worship. I keep reminding people we didn't set the calendar, God did. What God said was one day out of seven you are to take time off and gather together and worship Me. The reason He said one out of seven is that if you are not careful you are going to slip back into this feeling that some how you can take care of yourself. Some of us think that what God was bound to admit was one day out of thirty, one day out of sixty for really we are strong people. We can take care of ourselves. I even have people say to me, I don't go to church on Sunday, but I am with my family. He didn't tell you to be with your family except to bring your family to church. He said you are to come before Me to remind yourself of how unlike Me you are and how much you need Me. Some people say some of you weak ones, you may need to go that often, I don't need to, I can take care of myself. That is this end. Now what happens is after awhile, those of us who become smart about ourselves, realize that is not so. We can't take care of ourselves.

There is a wonderful story going around about a preacher in Texas. We do not have them up this far but in the gulf coast of Louisiana and particularly in Texas, they are troubled with armadillos. Armadillos are a hard back that kind of looks like a big rat and it can tear up a yard. This preacher had gone out and planted seed, fertilized and everything was going good. He came out the next day and it was torn up. He told his wife. I am warning you. I am going down to the store, get some bird shot and when I see that animal, I am

going to shoot him. He looked out the back, saw this hump back thing. He went and got his bird shot, shot, hit it and he knew it. It bounced this way and that way. Just to make sure, he shot and hit it again. It bounced this way and that way. He walked out to see the dead armadillo and it was his son's leather football. The chairman of the Deacons presented it to him on a plaque Sunday morning. It is now in his church office. Most people finally come to enough sense to realize that while you think you can take care of yourself, the issues of life and the problems of life make you realize you are going to blow up footballs and think you are shooting armadillos. You really need some help.

The Bible says what happens when you come to Jesus Christ, you realize that the I is an I crossed out. Jesus said if anybody is going to follow Me, they must deny themselves, take up their cross and follow me. The only way you can be a Christian, is with a good dose of confession and a good dose of humility. Then on my chart, you begin to move toward Him. The problem is that even though we know the lesson, we don't always live the lesson. Sometimes it is bad in church. The word deacon is dichomi. Di is through, chomi is dust. A deacon is a person who walks through the dust, a humble servant to other people. Sometimes in church, deacons become power brokers. They will do what I say. Pastors have trouble with it. You see, the kindest, sweetest people in the world come to church. Most of the time preachers stand at the door and kind, sweet, people look at pastors in the eye and say that is the most wonderful sermon I have ever heard. Now they really don't mean that but what do you say. I remember a lady who came to the church and came up to me and said "you are the third best preacher I have ever heard." I later learned she had only had three preachers. That is the reason in the Bible it says don't let a young Christian be a pastor and then it says in parenthesis because he will be carried away by pride. In church and in every

place we just forget and we begin to think we can take care of ourselves.

A young preacher went to the pulpit and he walked with all his aplomb and dignity and he spoke and then realized nothing had happened. He walked out broken and dejected. He went to an older preacher and said I knew that sermon and I knew how to deliver it and nobody got any thing out of it. What went wrong? The older preacher said if you had gone in, as you came out, then people would have heard what you said. I can tell you how close you are to God. On my chart from here to here, I can tell you how close you are. Tell me your own sense of dependence and brokenness before Him and I will tell you how close you are. The further you are away, the more you think you can take care of yourself. The closer you get to Him, the more broken you are before Him. There are people who have been great in Christian history who have tried to tell us the same thing. The man who started the Salvation Army, General Booth, was asked one day how do you do so many great things for God? William Booth said there came a day when William Booth died and Christ began to live through me. That is my secret. There was a man in England named George Mueller. George Mueller began to take in orphan children and for awhile he took care of over five thousand. He never publicized, he never talked about a need, he just talked to God about it. People were amazed at what this man of God could do. They came to George Mueller one day and said tell us your secret. He said there came a time in my life where I had to die to my plans and my ambitions and he said Christ began to live through me. That is my secret. You want to know the secret to Christian living. I will tell you what it is. It goes from brokenness to where I admit that I can not to where I come in humility confessing my need

before God and then His power begins to flow in my life. When I stop living my life through me and I start living my life only through Him, then I will have learned the secret. If what you do, people walk away and say, you did a great job, you just missed it. If then you can walk away and say, what a great God, then you have accomplished. Here is Paul's resume. I am weak, I am broken, I am nothing. But he said I will boast in my weakness because then God's power can rest on me.

The sermon I did not deliver: All of us have been deeply troubled about this week. What we have found is that it is not a Colorado problem, it is a national problem. Not many miles from here the same thing could have happened. What has fascinated me again this week, has been the commentary on it. When everybody has said, what can we do? The answer is, if you think we can get together in our wisdom and in our strength and ingenuity and think we are going to solve it, then the answer is, we can't do much.

When I said that in the first service, several school teachers came to me afterwards and said "pastor, that is just the tip of the iceberg. You don't know how many kids have difficulties and problems that nobody ever knows about. Sometime I feel like we are sweeping the tide out with the broom." I want to tell you what I think. Unless you and I learn that as a nation our problems are greater than our smart, we are never going to solve them. The only answer is again a Godly people falling on their face before God and say God the richest people in the world have kids that are blowing up schools. God, what is wrong? If God can't heal it, you and I do not have the smart to know how to fix it.

I was a young preacher when somebody called me in my office and said have you been listening to the television and I said no, I haven't. They said the president has just

been shot and killed. America began to ask the question. How can the strongest man in the world, going through one of the great cities in America, loose his life. People began to ask the same question. What can we do? I still have an article from the paper that said when it was all over, people said why didn't America fall apart when John Kennedy was killed? This is what they came to the conclusion about. It was because so many people, millions of people, went to their church and fell on their face before God and said "God, save America." That is the reason America did not fall apart when John Kennedy died. Why, when you hear of all the problems in America and this is just one. Have we solved the crime problem? Have we solved the drug problem? Have we solved the family problem? The answer is no. It is getting worse. When are we going to learn what Paul is trying to tell us. Unless we live in brokenness and confession before God, there is no power to meet the needs of our nation. If you think we as Christians can keep on strutting around saying we are in charge, then God have mercy on all of us. This is the key. I will boast not in my religious experiences, not in my wisdom, not in my pedigree, not in my degrees, I will boast in my weakness because then God's power can rest upon me. I wanted to ask you. When have you just stretched out before God and said God in my job, in my family, in my life, in this nation, in this world, there are no answers. I come broken, humble before you. I come in my weakness and I ask your power to rest upon me.