

## Strength in Weakness

David Powlison, the former director of Christian Counseling and Education Foundation, was invited to give the closing comments at the Westminster Graduation Ceremony on May 23, 2019. He was unable to attend personally because he is dying from cancer, but CCEF's Dean of Faculty, Mike Emlet read the following on David's behalf:

I grieve not to be with you this afternoon. I very much looked forward to walking with you, worshiping with you, listening to our God with you, and cheering you on as you set forth into the next season of your life. After being diagnosed with stage IV pancreatic cancer in November, I returned to work half-time at CCEF, serving a future that I am not likely to be part of. Part of why I have so looked forward to this graduation day is because it is something fully in the present tense of my experience. And I grieve. I truly grieve not to be present with you. But my health has become fragile and I recently entered hospice care.

I want to share words of encouragement with you. I first graduated from Westminster thirty-nine years ago! I still remember the specific details of one sermon that I heard in seminary chapel. Dick Gaffin was speaking from Romans 8:26 about how the Holy Spirit helps us in our weakness. He made a point I've never forgotten — that “weakness” is singular. It does not say “weaknesses” as if there were a finite list of sins A-B-C, and sufferings X-Y-Z in your life. “Weakness” singular is a comprehensive description of our human condition. We are perishable. We are mortal. We face a multitude of afflictions in our lives. And we are sinful, bent from the heart towards pride, self-righteousness, fear of man, and a multitude of desires and fears that beset us. The mercies of God meet us in this comprehensive condition of weakness.

Something I long admired about Pope John Paul II is that he was unafraid to be publicly weak. He was willing to be in front of people when it was evident that he was failing. I deeply respected that. It's so countercultural to people who want to say, “We are STRONG!” and “You can do it!” On the contrary, we are fundamentally weak. That weakness is a most unusual door into all the ways God enables us to be strong.

One of my favorite novels is *Cry, the Beloved Country* by Alan Paton. I've always admired one of the characters. Msimangu is an Anglican pastor living in South Africa under apartheid. He is very generous to a grieving older pastor, Steven Kumalo. When Kumalo expresses deep, tearful gratitude for how generous Msimangu has been, he responds: “I am a selfish, sinful and weak man, but God has put his hand on me. That is all.”

Being unafraid to be publicly weak was true of King David. The end of Psalm 40 has always resonated deeply with me. This psalm contains a great deal of fruitful ministry and joyful worship, yet David summarizes himself this way: “As for me, I am poor and needy, but the Lord takes thought for me.” David's strength grew out of his comprehensive sense of weakness, and his confidence in God's strength.

We see something very similar in the life of the apostle Paul. He pleads with God to take away a very distressing affliction, but the Lord says, “No, my grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.” Paul goes on to say, “I will gladly boast of my weakness as the doorway through which the strength of God enters my life.” Supremely we see fearlessness of public weakness in the life and words of Jesus himself. The Beatitudes sound the keynote of Jesus' keynote talk, the Sermon on the Mount. What Jesus says to us captures what he himself embodies. When we think about how the image of Christ is expressed in our lives, the Beatitudes show us how the right kind of weakness, a fundamental sense of neediness, then leads directly to the right kind of strength, a strength grounded and founded in need.

Think about the qualities of strength that the last four beatitudes portray.

- “Blessed are the merciful” — to have your life characterized by a deep concern for the welfare of others, to be generous, open-hearted and open-handed.
- Jesus says, “The pure in heart are blessed,” describing the ability to approach all people free from duplicitous motives, free of self-serving.

- Jesus says, “Peacemakers are blessed — they’re nothing less than the children of God.” Peacemaking is the ability to be candid, constructive, and caring; to pursue peace in a world that is full of war, dissension, conflicts, arguments, and avoiders.
- Jesus says, “Those who are persecuted are blessed.” He calls us to joyful purposefulness, finding courage in affliction, finding perseverance in opposition. These are wonderful traits. These are the traits of leadership and loving fruitfulness in Jesus’ life — and ours as well.

The right kind of strength comes from the right kind of weakness. The right kind of weakness is expressed in the first four beatitudes:

- “The poor in spirit are blessed” — those who know they need help outside of themselves. Jesus is described as one who, though he was rich, became poor. He became poor for you. He became utterly dependent, utterly needy. He died in the ultimate weakness and perishability of the human condition.
- Jesus is portrayed throughout his life as one who mourns: “He is a man of sorrows, acquainted, well-acquainted, deeply-acquainted, with grief.” “Blessed are those who mourn.” He mourns for your sake, he mourns his own suffering that he must face, he mourns all the things that are wrong in this world, and he comes on a mission of mercy to make wrongs right.
- “The meek are blessed.” Jesus describes himself as meek and lowly in heart. Meekness is not weakness in the negative sense. It’s weakness in the positive sense, being under the hand and voice and will of Another, heeding the voice of his Father. He was meek for you and for me, fully trusting God’s promises, fully obeying God’s will. He is the one in whose image we are to become.
- Jesus is blessed because he hungers and thirsts for righteousness. He makes right what is wrong. He makes true what is false. And he remakes what is evil for the good of His people. He who is all-righteous hungers and thirsts for righteousness for our sake.

So we see in the very life of our Lord that he is all these things. He is fruitful, he is strong, but he is fruitful and strong on the foundation of this abiding sense of weakness and need. And it’s that weakness and need that we see supremely exhibited at the end of his life when he goes to death in our place, casting Himself on his Father’s mercy and power. He was raised in strength, while retaining compassion and sympathy for our weakness and our need. He warmly welcomes us to the throne of his grace, that we might receive the mercy we need and the grace specific to whatever difficult situation we are in.

My deepest hope for you is that in both your personal life and your ministry to others, you would be unafraid to be publicly weak as the doorway to the strength of God Himself. - David Powlison



## Catalyst Planning

As we follow our timeline for 2019 we are preparing to engage in Catalyst Planning. It will begin in July as we spend 3 Wednesday evenings brainstorming goals, refining goals, and prioritizing goals that will enable us to fulfill our Mission and Vision. Please sign up in the narthex at Barnwell Street to participate in Catalyst Planning.