

The Paradoxes of Faith

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2 Corinthians 11:19–12:9 or Hebrews 4:9–13

“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9)

The paradoxes of faith are dangerous things. They are dangerous because they can so easily, by a subtle twist in application, become poison. Often when I hear them invoked, especially in the context of a seminary, I cringe because I don’t really know what is coming next. They can so easily be used to excuse rather than challenge or judge our own mediocrity. And then they become poisonous. I would like to select a few of these paradoxes which, I think, are particularly dangerous for budding theologians.

“My strength is made perfect in weakness.” This is certainly one of them. And it is certainly very convenient. By a subtle turn we can use it as an excuse for our weakness, our inadequacy, and even just plain laziness. We all, we readily admit, have our weaknesses. But here it appears that God’s power is made perfect in weakness. We have a ready-made crutch, indeed, even a sanctification of our weakness. But then the paradox becomes a poison. We have glorified our mediocrity.

If we were to extend the logic of such an application of the paradox we could just as well say that weakness ought to be cultivated, that inadequacy and laziness should be celebrated as theological virtues. Instead of having courses to strengthen we ought to practice weakness. And, silly as it sounds, perhaps, unconsciously, we do this more than we realize.

A second paradox which is particularly enticing to the budding theologian has to do with the simplicity of the gospel. It is expressed by saying that the wisdom of God is foolishness to men and that the wisdom of this world is folly with God. What a magnificent excuse for not studying theology! The gospel is a simple thing, and, indeed, foolishness. So why study? Indeed, would it not appear that studying, getting all involved in complex and complicated theology is a bad thing?

If the gospel is simple, what possible use is history, exegesis, systematics, ethics and so on? Is it all some sort of conspiracy to rob us of our simplicity? But when we put it this way, the

paradox has become a poison. This happens over and over again. We sanctify our ignorance. Extending the logic of this kind of application it would follow that we really ought to cultivate some kind of simplemindedness rather than a precise and disciplined theology. The simplicity of the gospel gives us a convenient escape from any kind of mental exertion.

A third convenient paradox has to do with the nature of the church. The true church, we say, is invisible. One is tempted to think that if there ever was a dogmatic proposition which doesn't need any proof these days, it's this one. If there's such a thing as the true church, it certainly must be invisible, because it's pretty hard to find it anywhere!

But this gives us a convenient excuse. The true church is invisible, so why sweat? But when we say this, the paradox has become a poison. Following this logic we really ought to cultivate some kind of sanctified invisibility. And perhaps we are really a lot closer to this than we realize.

The paradoxes of faith are dangerous things. But perhaps they are dangerous for a reason. They will inevitably separate the sheep from the goats, the men from the boys. Certainly they are not meant as convenient excuses for our inadequacies. Let us take a closer look at our text. "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." It's God's power that we are dealing with here that is made perfect in weakness, not ours. God's power is made perfect in the weakness of the cross. That's the paradox, and it's meant as a promise, not as poison. It's not an invitation to cultivate our weaknesses. It's a power which has overcome the world and can turn weakness to strength – because nothing now can bear the cross.

Closely related to this is the paradox of the simplicity of the gospel. It's true, the gospel is simple. But that simplicity is not to be confused with our simplicity or ignorance. The simplicity of the gospel is revealed in the paradox of the weakness of the cross which is strength. And that, certainly, gives us no license to theological ignorance. For it is just as easy for us to obscure and lose the simplicity of the cross with our ignorance as it is with our knowledge.

For all the wisdom of this world is folly with God, both our simple as well as complex and complicated thoughts. And it takes a good amount of hard and continuing theological labor to make sure that we do not obscure the simplicity of the cross, either by our ignorance or by our knowledge. And this leads directly to our third paradox. It's true, the true church is not invisible, but better – hidden.

For the church too participates in the paradox of the weakness of the cross. But we have always maintained, the true church is revealed at certain definite points. It's revealed to faith in the preaching of the word and the administration of the sacraments, in prayer, in acts of charity, in suffering and in bearing the cross. And when we have turned the paradox to poison – when we sanctify our weakness and ignorance – when we do not preach the true simplicity of the cross both in our words and our deeds, then the church fades into obscurity and remains hidden. And I'm afraid this happens all too often.

“My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” That is promise, not poison, if we can bear the paradox. In the gospel, God turns weakness to strength. That means that not even our weakness will stand in his way. For he has overcome all things. He can use even that, if we do not seek to sanctify it and thus remain bound by it. The paradox hides, and reveals his promise, a grace sufficient for all people. The task is to discover what that means. That's an invitation which demands our complete dedication – and it's an invitation which we shall find at the same time gives what it demands. Amen.

SOURCE

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