

April 23, 2006

“When People Expect Vessels of Clay to Hold Up Like Stone and Bronze”

II Cor. 1:8-11 / II Cor. 4:1-12 / Job 6:11-13

Today we come to a couple of the most profound verses in Job. Not profound in the sense of revealing some magisterial truth, but profound in terms of their relevance to the personal experience of nearly every person seated here today. Because these verses describe a feeling most all of us have had, or a frustration nearly every one of us has had to deal with, at one time or another.

The frustration of feeling (or better yet knowing) that we cannot, no matter how hard we try, live up to some of the expectations that others have set for us.

Like the social, family or church imposed pressure of having to live up to expectations that are so high, and so unrealistic, and so unattainable, that our constant inability to measure up to them, has left us frustrated, despairing and ready to give up or call it quits—withdrawing from church, family, or other relationships because of them.

As a pastor I've heard it over and over and over again from the lips of young and old alike, male and female alike, in relation to the expectations that parents or peers or employers or fellow Christians have placed upon them.

People have said to me: “It seems like no matter what I did, it was never good enough.” / “I feel like I can't be human when I'm around them.” / “I feel like my parents expect me to be perfect—and I'm not—yet that is what they expect.” “I feel like my boss has these unrealistic and superhuman expectations for me—and I just can't live up to them!”

And depending on what's happening in their life, they will often add: “If the pressure doesn't let up, I feel like I'm going to crack. I'm going to lose it, or have a nervous breakdown.”

Or with a degree of anger they'll say: “I just feel like telling people to back off, and leave me alone! Just let me be who I am! Let me be human! ”

The purpose of “perfectionism,” says Richard Winter in his insightful book, “Perfecting Ourselves to Death,” is “to increase our dissatisfaction and discontentment with who we are, and what we possess.” Be it your body, your house, your car, your job, what you eat, your parenting skills, how you dress, how you carry yourself, your spiritual life, or your overall performance as a person — “perfectionists” are always trying to make you feel like you are unacceptable as you are, and always will be, until you are better, thinner, more productive, more intelligent, own more, strive more, do more, and achieve more!

Something Winters says has led to eating disorders, neurosis, anxiety, depression, obsessions, compulsions, a plethora of fears and relational problems of all kinds.

And that struggle with the perfectionistic expectations others place on us, is essentially what we hear Job expressing today. His inner frustration, or vexation of spirit that comes from his perfectionistic friends expecting him to be, or do, something he just can't be or do (at least not at this particular point in his life)!

It is true that when everything was going well in his life, Job probably could have been the type of person they were expecting him to be. Before he was struck by his numerous afflictions he did seem to be a very confident, successful, rich, well-respected, godly, blameless, motivated, independent, and optimistic man of faith.

But from chapter 3 verse 1 right up to the present (and beyond) we find Job to be a VERY DIFFERENT MAN—depressed, angry, cynical, lacking faith, cursing, voicing suicidal desires or intentions, and just plain ready to give up on life. In fact, if we take Chapter 7:6-8 at face value, he seems to be hopelessly convinced that his sickness will shortly result in his death.

Even in today's verses you can tell he's feeling totally overwhelmed. And what has made the situation worse, is the fact that no one seems to understand what suffering like he has, actually does to a person's emotional, mental, and spiritual state.

He's still stinging from the emotional trauma of losing all his possessions and even more so all of his 7 sons and 3 daughters at once—and even now he's experiencing the immense and indescribable pain of having open, oozing sores from the crown of his head to the soles of his feet—his whole body being covered with scabs and worms, he says, and skin that is open and festering (Chapter 7 verse 5).

Yet his friends seem to expect him, in some unrealistic and superhuman way, to be cheery, composed, full of faith and hope, and spouting off positive, pious, optimistic words! (Something he did do initially.)

But that was months ago if we read Job 7:3 correctly! His intense suffering has dragged on for what has to have been at least “two months” (and maybe longer, though “months” in 7:3 simply being in the plural), and because it has, it has driven him to the depths of despair, depression and hopelessness.

It confirms what Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones said in his book “Spiritual Depression,” where he wrote:

“The greatest and the best Christians, when they are physically weak [due to tiredness, overstrain, illness or habitual pain] are more prone to an attack of spiritual depression than at any other time, and there are great illustrations of this in the Scriptures.”

And then he goes on to say that we need to recognize this and “make allowances for it...” Yet Job’s friends DON’T do that. They don’t cut him any slack. But rather, in a somewhat cruel way, they expect that Job (suffering as he has and is) should respond like a person who hadn’t suffered any trauma at all!

They somehow expect that in spite of what he’s been through, and is still going through (with no indication it will end soon or at all), he should be as clear headed, and emotionally stable, and devoid of frustration, and hopeful and optimistic toward God and life, as someone who hasn’t lost anything / and hasn’t been racked with pain for months / or spent those months in nights in sleepless misery / tossing and turning till dawn (7:3-5).

With no visible signs of any compassion or empathy for what he’s going through, they just keep hammering away at him, somehow under the impression that he should be as clear-headed, emotionally stable, and hopeful as THEY ARE—who haven’t suffered at all!

Isn’t that the “gauge” we often use when setting our expectations for others? The gauge of ourselves? And not just ourselves, but ourselves when we we’re performing at our best! Sort of like expecting a car that’s been totaled—(a car with fenders crushed and jammed into wheels with dented rims and deflated tires; a mangled bumper, hood and radiator, and punctured oil pan)—to perform up to par with one that’s never even had a scratch!!

Don’t we frequently make the mistake of basically thinking, “If I can do it, then they should be able to do it as well”... often forgetting that the playing field is not always even, or that not

everyone has been dealt the same hand in life. Some seemingly get pampered, while others seem to get run through the mill!

That's why my grand-father always used to quote the old Indian Proverb (at least he said it was an Indian Proverb!): "Don't judge anyone until you've walked a mile in their shoes."

I believe Job would have agreed. Only after we've lived through what they've lived through, or experienced the things they've experienced, can we really understand why they do what they do, and why they feel the way they feel.

It's one of the reasons ex-drug addicts tend to be the best at helping those presently trying to break their addiction to drugs; and why recovering alcoholics are best suited to speak into the lives of those still living in denial of about their alcoholism. It's a principle that applies almost across the board—those who have BEEN THERE are the best at helping those who ARE THERE.

WHY? Because their experience of having shared one's pain—of having struggled with addiction, or having felt the sting of loss, or the pain of repeated failures, or the anguish of betrayal or divorce, or the personal humiliation of rejection, or rape, or molestation, or any other heart-wrenching ordeal, brings with it both a certain degree of otherwise un-learnable understanding, and empathy.

That's the primary reason why "Support Groups" have flourished so greatly in the past 30 years. Because better than a "professional" counselor, is someone who has been there, and has learned in the school of hard knocks what a counselor has only studied in a classroom, or from reading a book.

Which brings me to the **SECOND** point I need to make: That EMPATHY is developed in us THROUGH SUFFERING. In the First Chapter of the Second Epistle to the Corinthians, Paul describes what we could call somewhat of a "Job Experience" he had had.

With a display of openness, honesty and transparency rarely seen in most churches, he tells the Corinthians that he went through a time of depression so intense, and apparently so prolonged and unshakable, that he "despaired even of life itself" (v. 8), and "felt in his heart the sentence of death" (v. 9). And he wasn't alone, since he says "we were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life."

Now I have to say that being that open and that honest about personal struggles is NOT the normal tendency of most people I know! Most people don't readily share about being so depressed they wanted to die! It's not the type of story that makes people "look up" to their spiritual leaders!

In fact, some of you might be thinking, "But wasn't Paul an Apostle?" And aren't apostles supposed to have their spiritual act together"?! Aren't they supposed to be men full of faith, who never doubt, and are like super-spiritual?? People who would never even entertain the thought of giving up on life, and would never succumb to spiritual depression?

You see, Paul risked A LOT when he shared this experience, because like many today, the Corinthians DID have very HIGH expectations for an Apostle (as we've seen in our study through II Corinthians on Wednesday nights). Expectations that would have caused some in the church to lose respect for Paul when he shared this story of his emotional struggle with personal inadequacy, and depression.

Yet Paul shares it anyway (just like Job did). WHY? Because he obviously didn't feel the need to live up to the unrealistic expectations the Corinthians had for him! He was merely a human being like everyone else—a Jar of Clay, and NOT a man with "the strength of stone" or "flesh of bronze" as some might wish and even demand that he be if he expected them to follow him!

Which brings me to my **THIRD** point—the Perils of Perfectionism! Which really amount to nothing more than this: Perfectionists do expect their hero's to be bronze-like, or stone-like, even before they die, and we actually do make them into statues of stone or bronze!

Statues are able to weather time (and severe storms) much better than mere flesh and blood. Statues that are bigger than life, freeze people in some surreal pose (George Washington), hide all their flaws (Oliver Cromwell's nose), and usually give them the bodies of Greek god's (like Michelangelo's Statue of David) which is more an expression of Platonic Greek Idealism, than Hebrew Realism!

Yet the sad thing is, we often fall prey to actually trying to live up to the unrealistic and perfectionistic expectations of others because we want please them, have them affirm us, or approve of us! Even though it's an affirmation that never usually comes, because no matter how hard we try, or how well we do, the gaze of the perfectionist tends to see only the flaws—even in our best performances (You could do 99 things right, and they'll inevitably focus in on the 1 you did wrong)!

So, even at the risk of making him look bad in the eyes of some, Paul shares about his struggle, because his goal isn't to get their approval, but to offer something that might minister to them when, or if, they went through that same common spiritual experience of depression.

Though some surely thought less of the great apostle for falling prey to depression, there were others who might receive comfort and encouragement in their spiritual life through hearing about it—even if it was just to know that someone like Paul experienced it as well.

So, why do Christians sometimes suffer, according to Paul? Because it produces in us the ability to impart comfort to others, and produces in us the spiritual fruit of empathy. An empathy Job's friends lacked precisely because they had not suffered like he had.

Which may even explain why they had such unrealistic expectations. Because people who have suffered intensely, and know what it's like to suffer in that way, don't place such callous and unrealistic expectations upon people in agony! Job's friends could not minister comfort to him, because they lacked the empathy which is almost exclusively produced by the experience of suffering.

Which leads us to a truth every one of us must grapple with if we desire to minister grace and comfort to others. I've said it in the past and I say it again:

If you really desire to be used by God in the service of truly ministering to others (and not just to be admired by others) then you will have to suffer. You will be tempted, and buffeted, and go through immense struggles and agonizing experiences. Because it's only by suffering that you learn to understand, and empathize with the struggles of others.

Only in suffering do we truly learn what it means to depend totally upon God, discover the depths of His compassion and comfort, and as a result become able to share with others what we've received from Him.

You see, given what Paul tells us in this passage, we see that it can be a dangerous thing to ask for God to really use us to help other people. Because one of the ways God answers that prayer, is to break us of all self-reliance, and our innate tendency to depend on our own inner human resources when doing the work of God. Something he accomplishes in your life by putting us into situations where we, like Paul, are "under great pressure, far beyond our own ability to endure."

He must put us in a place where we learn by painful experience that our resources are useless to get us through or out of some situation. A place where we realize that either God must do it, or it will not happen!

That was God's stated purpose in letting Paul go through the harrowing experience of being so hard pressed he either wanted to die, or felt like he would. Said Paul:

"This happened that we might not rely on ourselves, but on God who raises the dead." (v. 9b)

You see, Paul was a **VERY** gifted individual. He was an intelligent, self-motivated (pro-active as we say nowadays), zealous, enthusiastic, visionary; a persuasive man who had had extraordinary spiritual experiences (II Pet. 3:15-16; II Cor. 12:1-5).

But that was the whole **problem!** Talented people are more likely to trust in their own talents! Enthusiastic and energetic people often rely upon the abundance of their own enthusiasm and energy!

But that's NOT what God wants! God wants people who trust in Him, and rely on His divine power, rather than their own! People who seek to do the work of God clothed with His power, and relying on His supernatural abilities, rather than their own natural abilities!

That's why God had to send Paul through this breaking experience. Because even after all his years as a Christian, he apparently STILL relied too much on HIMSELF—on his gifts, skills, and abilities.

And thus if God was to continue to use Paul in greater and greater ways, He had to break Paul of that natural human tendency. The tendency we all have to rely first upon ourselves, and only secondarily (if at all) upon God—even when doing the work of God!

Roger Ellsworth, speaking of this tendency in reference to the church in general put it this way in his book, "Come Down Lord:"

"The church, in order to maintain credibility in the world, has to have the power of God. She is involved in a great spiritual warfare, and only God's power will enable her to prevail. Human ingenuity and wisdom are simply not equal to the task. Trying to do this kind of work without the power of God is like trying to break huge granite boulders with our bare hands. The problem as I see it is that the church is trying to subsist on her own power. She is relying on her own abilities. Human wisdom can produce many things, and the church is trying to pass

these things off as the hand of God at work. But the world is not buying it.... If we will get alone and examine our hearts, we will be driven to admit that the many things we are producing are cheap and shabby substitutes for the real power of God... God's people can become dangerously self-sufficient [forgetting] how utterly helpless and hopeless we are apart from God... We can reduce the work of the church to shrewd maneuvering with statistical probabilities and psychological jargon. We can be guilty of doing what David refused to do—fight in Saul's armor. We need to realize that God can do more in one minute with His power than we can in a lifetime with our 'strategies.'"

So how does God remedy the problem? He puts them into situations where they are pushed "beyond their ability to endure"—beyond the ability of their own human resources to get them out of it!

The place where they see how insufficient, and limited their own strength is, and how utterly hopeless their situation is apart from the divine and supernatural intervention of God.

Luther described the process of God breaking us of our self-reliance this way:

"God creates out of nothing. Therefore, until a man nothing, God can make nothing out of him." Another said: God only builds on ruins." And Spurgeon wrote: "The Lord gets His best soldiers out of the highlands of affliction."

Read any of the great saints and they'll say the same thing:

If God truly seeks to use a person, He must first strip them of all the human things they rely on, until they (like Paul) realize that God's work must be done in God's power—a power that often rushes in, only when we have been brought to the end of our own.

Then **LAST**, How do we deal with the blight of perfectionism in the church? Psychologist Albert Ellis says, "Excessive striving to be perfect will inevitably lead to disillusionment, heartache, and self-hatred..." To want to perform well is healthy, he says, but to demand we perform perfectly or else, is disastrous!! And that perfectionistic attitude, when placed on people in churches all over the world, has driven many a soul from its ranks!

You see, Jesus did say, "Be perfect therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." And in that sense we could say He was a "perfectionist" (though we must remember, as my Greek professor used to emphasize, the word perfect there means "complete," and its spoken in the context of being complete or perfect in love)! And it is also true that the Old Testament Law DOES demand perfect obedience to all its commands. A perfect obedience that God still expects today!

But you see, that's only half the story! Because the other half, presented in the Gospel, is that "God so loved the world that He sent his one and only Son into the world." WHY? The Gospel tells us it was for two main reasons:

1st) He came to die on the cross for all our transgressions of God's Law. He took upon himself the penalty we deserved for all our disobediences to His Law—all the times we failed, by omission or commission, to perfectly obey all the commands of the Law—the primary one being our need to "love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength" at all times, and in whatever we do, and our neighbor as ourselves.

But that's only half the Gospel story! Because the 2nd) thing Jesus came to do was to live a life of absolutely perfect, flawless obedience to all the commands of the Law, for us—in our place, as our substitute! He didn't just DIE to supply our pardon, He also LIVED to supply our perfection!

John Owen, the great Puritan theologian, once wrote:

"The OBEDIENCE of Christ unto the law, and the imputation of it to us, is no less necessary unto our justification before God, than His suffering of the penalty of the law, and the imputation of that unto us.... The Lord Jesus Christ fulfilled the whole law for us; He did not simply undergo the penalty of it due unto our sins, but ALSO yielded that perfect obedience which it did require."

It's what theologians call "double imputation," and we do need **BOTH** aspects of Christ's righteousness credited to us by faith, or, as Owen goes on to say, "we can never, in the sight of God, be justified."

George Whitfield said the same, "When talking of the merits of Christ, we tend to mention only Christ's death, when his life of active obedience is equally necessary as well...Christ not only died, but lived; not only suffered, but obeyed for, or instead of, poor sinners. And both these jointly make up that complete righteousness which is imputed to us."

Which means what? Which means that although God demands the punishment of every sin, and perfect flawless righteousness or obedience in order to be saved (and He will never lower that standard)—yet in great condescension and unspeakable love He sent Jesus to merit both for us, so that He may then take, and give each one to us, as a free and undeserved gift of His grace!

And when, by faith, we receive that gift—the gift of pardon through His **DEATH** and the gift of perfect obedience merited for us by his **LIFE**—we are made totally acceptable to God! At that moment God looks at us as perfect, even though we are not and never will be in this life!

And you know what that means? It means I'm freed from the heart-ache and self-hatred of striving to be perfect, because Christ's perfection has become mine! God already sees me as perfect in Christ!

And yes, "I am to strive to do that which pleases Him." *But I am to do it from the standpoint that I'm already as acceptable to God as I'll ever be! I no longer work FOR God's acceptance, but FROM God's acceptance!*

And because of that, I can offer that same gracious acceptance to others! No more unrealistic demands of perfection, or expecting people to be what they can never be! No more expecting suffering people to have the strength of stone, or flesh of bronze. I can be gracious, knowing perfection is something I shouldn't expect of anyone—at least not in this life!