

**Even This Is A Gift  
II Corinthians 12:8-10  
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Rev. John Burns  
University Baptist Church ~ College Park, MD 20740  
Website: [www.weareubc.org](http://www.weareubc.org)

By now we know a lot of the facts concerning the unpleasant encounter that occurred between Harvard professor, Dr. Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Cambridge police officer James Crowley. A neighbor lady noticed two men with backpacks entering her neighbor's front door. One of the men was shoving hard against that door and so she called the police to report a possible break-in. Officer Crowley responded to the call and a conversation ensued between Dr. Gates, the owner of the home, and the officer that escalated and ended with Professor Gates being arrested for disorderly conduct. Those charges have since been dropped.

Although the full glow of media attention has been placed on this event, we still do not know exactly what was said by whom in this verbal altercation. Dr. Gates, an African American, felt he was being treated unjustly due to his race. This perception was no doubt influenced by the countless times Dr. Gates has been treated unfairly because of his race. All black Americans have had encounters in which they either suspected or knew that the color of their skin caused a person to assume they were either dumb, dangerous or derelict and treat them accordingly. Although fear and race undoubtedly influenced Dr. Gates's response to Officer Crowley, it is not clear to what degree.

Officer Crowley felt he was being called names that were not warranted by his record, character or behavior. His response was no doubt influenced by the number of times he has been called names by people he either tried to arrest, manage, intimidate or assist. Although fear and race definitely played a part in his response to Dr. Gates, it is not clear to what extent.

What is clear is that both men had their pride injured. Dr. Gates was infuriated that a man of his stature and accomplishment was being treated as a criminal suspect in his own home. Officer Crowley was similarly angered that his authority and integrity as a police officer was being challenged and impugned in front of the whole neighborhood. Both men's wounded egos were on display after the so called "beer summit" at the White House. The first thing both men said to the press following their conversation was, "I didn't apologize for anything." That is the language of battered pride.

None of us can fully know what it feels like to be a person of another race. We all have experienced, however, what it feels like to have our pride injured. Once it happens, our next response is rarely our best response.

In the tenth chapter of Second Corinthians, the apostle Paul reacts out of battered pride. Something happened to him that caused his temper to flare. The ninth chapter of II Corinthians concludes with Paul commending the church in Corinth for their amazing generosity and compassion, but the next time he puts pen to papyrus, he writes with fuming anger.

What happened to set him off? We don't know. Did a letter arrive from Corinth that hurt his feelings? Did a friend drop by who delivered gossip that kept Paul up all night in a stew? It is impossible to know for certain. What is clear is that Paul heard information about the Corinthian congregation's attitude toward new leaders that lacerated his pride.

The only recorded description of Paul's physical appearance is found in a second century text known as The Acts of Paul and Thecla. Since much in this work is of dubious veracity, scholars are unsure as to whether this description is accurate or not. Even if it is not precisely true, however, the description must have captured some of the flavor of Paul's physique and countenance. Here is what was written: "He was a man small in size, bald-headed, bandy-legged, well-built, with eyebrows meeting, rather long-nosed." Nothing wrong with the way the man looked but it doesn't sound like he would have been mistaken for George Clooney or Denzel Washington.

Paul began the church in Corinth with tireless effort, great compassion, selfless service and solid theology. After Paul left Corinth to establish churches in other areas, however, new leaders arrived to direct the congregation. In contrast to Paul, these men were evidently handsome, flashy, full of pizzazz. They were far more eloquent and charming than the bald, bandy-legged apostle. Drawing constant attention to themselves, these preachers regaled the people with stories of their prestigious family histories, superior education, impressive accomplishments, astonishing miracles, stunning visions and profound insights into the working of God.

The men and women of Corinth were swept off their feet and made unflattering comparisons of Paul and these golden boys. Some of their unkind words must have reached Paul's ears for he repeats their most offensive statements. They say, Paul writes with smoking pen, "Paul's letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak and his speech contemptible."

To add insult to injury, these "super apostles" as Paul sarcastically refers to them, were passing off trite, catchy ideas about Jesus and his teachings that were not true. In addition, they were using their handsome faces and manipulative preaching skills to persuade the people to provide them with hefty salaries and luxurious accommodations.

"How could they treat these charlatans like God's gifts to humanity while mocking me?" Paul must have thought. "How could they reward these religious imposters with adoration while speaking of me in such disrespectful ways? How could they compensate these fools so handsomely when they never paid me a penny?"

The church he founded dealt Paul a serious affront to his pride and in response, he embarked on a two chapter rant. "You think they're so well educated, I've got as much education as they do. Are you impressed by their pristine Jewish background? I've got the same ancestry. Babble on, if you want, about what wonderful ministers of Christ these men are, but I'm here to tell you that I am a better minister than they are. I've suffered more for the gospel, accomplished more miracles and seen greater visions than all these 'pretty boys' put together."

I have been know to rant from time to time so I know how it feels. Someone offends me, strikes a blow to my pride, self image, precious ego, and I launch off on a tirade. That is what Paul is doing here. He knows it. Multiple times in these passages Paul says, "I'm bragging like a fool" "I'm boasting like a madman" "Bear with my foolishness" "I speak now, not with the authority of Christ, but as a fool."

Injured pride makes us all fools. When someone assaults our own self esteem and tenaciously protected image of ourselves, we feel immense pain. I think the pain is born of a fear that we are not good enough, smart enough, competent enough, beautiful enough to be loved. Whatever the origin, we explode in anger, like Paul.

For this text to bring us to a deeper understanding of God's activity in our lives, however, we must go beyond relating to Paul's defensive rant and hear what he says when he calms down. I can almost hear him panting, letting the words of his tirade settle around him in silence. Struggling with the stinger left in him from the hornet-like gossip so injurious to his spirit.

As his anger slowly subsides, Paul acknowledges that some of what his former congregants are saying is true. He thinks, I'm really not much to look at. Although the content of my lessons is strong, my delivery is listless, dry, rambling and boring. I have these other disabilities and inadequacies. I do write far better than I speak and I can say far more in correspondence from a safe distance than I can face to face. Why won't God take away these weaknesses and give me a handsome face, a striking physique, a compelling eloquence, an inspiring confidence? Why doesn't God take away my disabilities and shortcomings when I've asked him so sincerely and passionately? Why doesn't God protect me from the petty comments and malicious criticisms of the people I serve? Why won't God remove these thorns from my flesh?

Then the great apostle remembers. He remembers what God has told him every time his pride has been wounded by insults, hardships, persecutions and weaknesses. He recalls what God has told him every time he has grown afraid that he was not good enough or brave enough or handsome enough to be loved. In every instance God has said, "I give you these experiences to keep your ego from being so inflated that you lose sight of me. I allow these things to happen so you will not trust in your own power, charm and charisma but will lean upon me, depend upon my power and walk in my grace. As always dear Paul, my grace is sufficient for you, my power is made perfect through your weaknesses."

People with great talent are susceptible to grossly inflated egos. Kurt Vonnegut, in the forward to his book Bluebeard, expresses great exasperation with the star athletes, actors, singers, artists and dancers who seem to believe they are the most important people on the face of the earth. He reminds the egomaniacs, "you are being paid grotesque amounts of money for making mud pies of art and playing children's games. Dancing. Singing. Throwing. Running. Jumping. Pretending." I don't hold the same view of the arts as Vonnegut expresses (I'm not even sure the great novelist really holds this view), however, people who live in that stratosphere probably need others to bring them down to earth from time to time.

Paul came to understand that God sends us such cold appraisals of our importance in this world to humble us and keep us relying upon God's grace instead of our own ability. He therefore concluded that even the hardships of life: the criticism of others, our glaring weaknesses, flaws that make us far from perfect, even our disabilities are gifts from God. Gifts to keep us grounded in the love, mercy and grace of our Creator rather than allow us to become so bloated with pride and ego that we alienate everyone around us and set ourselves up for even greater pain when our bubble of self importance pops.

This summer we are trying to learn to see all of life as a gift. Sometimes this is easy. A welcomed vacation, a beautiful sunset, a promotion, a deepening friendship, a good meal, a restful night, a kind word, a successful venture are easily framed as the gifts of life. But how do we handle the insults, failures, weaknesses and disabilities? How does this new perspective help us respond to the assaults on our pride and self image and subsequent fears that threaten to overwhelm us? Paul says, we learn to see them too as gifts from God that keep us grounded in God's mercy and grace. Eugene Peterson's The Message paraphrase's Paul's discoveries like this: "At first I did not see these things as gifts and begged God to remove them. Three times I did that. And then God told me, 'my grace is enough; it's all you need. My strength comes into its own in your weakness.' Once I heard that, I was glad to let it happen. I quit focusing on these things as handicaps and began appreciating them as gifts."

When I returned to my office after my vacation, I had a message on my phone from a woman I've never heard of who is trying to organize a reunion of my high school class. She asked that I return her call if I was in fact the John Burns who graduated from Salina High South in 1974. Fifteen years ago, I tried to get some information about my high school reunion and received no reply from my inquires so I thought I should call this lady and thank her for including me in this year's festivities.

I reached her on my first attempt and she asked, "Are you really the John Burns who graduated form Salina High South in 1974?" "All day long." I replied. "What's your middle name?" she followed rather suspiciously. "Phillip" I answered.

There was a short pause and then she said, "Our records showed that you died in 1993. Sixteen people from our class are listed as deceased, you have been included in that list for the last fifteen years."

I thought, well that certainly explains why I've not been getting the reunion invitations and for a moment I took comfort in that. Then a second thought arose. My entire high school class was informed that I died in 1993 and yet no one ever called or sent a card to my mother or any other member of my family to express their condolences.

I guess the good Lord saw that my ego was about to fly off into the stratosphere again and sent a little message to hold me to the earth. If I ever thought the world spun around me, that was corrected. My entire graduating class could be told that I no longer walk the earth and not notice or care.

Paul says the phone call was a gift. All such exchanges are gifts to keep our pride in check, our egos right-sized, to keep us grounded in the grace of the Lord. For only that grace is sufficient to calm our fears and meet our deepest needs.