

There's an ad out recently with Tim Cahill in it. Tim's one of the big stars of the aussie socceros. And in the ad Tim's playing in a game. And he gets a free kick. Now. As he lines up to take the kick. And Tim's not the biggest bloke on the park. In fact, he's one of the little guys. And as he lines up to take the kick. The six big guys in the lineup are hurling insults. They're TAUNTING him. You're not strong enough one says. You're not fast enough. You're TOO SMALL.

But Tim just looks at them. And he lines up the kick. And they chant you're too small you're too small to a crechendo.

And as he's about to take the shot. A kid on the sideline yells out. You forgot one thing. And in slow motion Cahill boots it past the players...past the keeper.....for a goal. And as the defenders turn on each other in confusion....Tim walks off the field he looks up and he says. "I'm a WEET BIX KID".

And the crowd goes wild.

Now while I enjoy the ad. I don't for a second – believe that eating weet bix will improve my soccer skills. Nor do I think it'll improve my cricket. Or my general sports ability.

But in chapter 12, the apostle Paul is deadly serious, as he makes an even bolder claim. Not about the power of WEET BIX. But about the power of WEAKNESS.

Verse 9 this is God's message to Paul that Paul's passing on to you and I. My grace is sufficient for you God says.

For my power is made perfect in WEAKNESS.

Which in fact, sounds a lot like WEET BIX doesn't it.

My power is made perfect in WEAKNESS. Either way. It's hard to get your head around.

On WHAT PLANET. Is there power in weakness?

Maybe the same planet eating weet bix will make me like tim Cahill at soccer?

It's totally upside down.

But Paul says it's true. That when it comes to God's power. That's one thing you better remember.

If you're impressed by people's great successes in this world - and if you're tempted to want it.

Or if you're faced with claims to great spiritual success and power in this world – and you're tempted to want that.

Then remember – God's power in you...looks like weakness. But it's not at all.

Now as we saw last week. There's a power struggle in Corinth. Between Paul and his critics.

And the critics are offering an upgrade to a better class of Christianity.

They're offering the Christianity of success...without the suffering.

They're spiritual WARRIORS..with no WORRIES.

Their message is about a Jesus of VICTORY. And a spirit of POWER. And a gospel where you get everything.

Of course with themselves on the top rung.

Jump in the lift they're saying. We're headed for the top floor.

Which looks attractive. But like a lot of things that are attractive. It's also very dangerous.

And before Paul points out God's power in weakness. There's something else. And that is that the reverse is also true. What looks like strength. Is actually weakness.

Because while you might think you're adding to what you've already got....you're actually in danger of losing it all. It's a SCAM says Paul.

And that's what I'm afraid of Paul says. Verse 2. He's not upset for himself. That he's been somehow left behind.

I am jealous for you with a Godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him. But I am afraid that just as Eve was deceived by the serpent's cunning, your minds may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ.

See what's being presented as a better spirituality. What's being presented as a stronger faith, something that's more more more.... Is actually so much less. It's not a better gospel at all.....in fact....it's a different one altogether. Verse 4.

For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus OTHER than the Jesus we preached, or if you received a DIFFERENT spirit from the one you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough.

The weakness of a gospel that looks impressive. Is the same sort of a weakness of a Nigerian bank scam. Or a Pyramid scheme. It offers so much. Tantalises you with great possibilities.....But it takes you for a ride. Because it's no gospel at all. And it's worse than worthless.

I'm afraid Paul says. That you'll be deceived.

And it's a deception that we're ripe for as well.

Don Carson puts it this way.

From the time of the fall to the present day, men and women have frequently succumbed to the deceptive devices of the devil. Christians are especially open to the kind of cunning deceit that combines the language of faith and religion with the content of self-interest and flattery. We like to be told how special we are, how wise, how blessed...We like to have our christianity shaped less by the cross than by triumphalism or rules or charismatic leaders or subjective experience.

Another writer put it this way:

The wolves in the church that devour sheep do not howl and bare their teeth. They come in sheeps clothing, smiling reciting Scripture, full of understanding, promising something more than Christ.

And we get sucked in.

It's a false gospel. And you might be impressed even jealous of these kinds of people. But they've been around for a long time....and they're not superior Christians at all. They're FALSE APOSTLES. He doesn't mince his words here. Verse 13 deceitful workmen, and they're masquerading as apostles.

Like 22 year old Brett Bevan last year. Brett was caught representing defendants in the Newcastle Magistrates Court last year. Impersonating a solicitor.

They're impersonators.

Now I'm not sure how they found out he wasn't for real. I guess someone got suspicious.

But it's a lot harder in church circles isn't it?

No wonder Paul says. Even Satan masquerades as an angel of light. So you have to be careful.

They'll use religious language. Great sounding arguments. They'll even quote the bible.

But they'll lead you astray. And deceive you.

So watch out.

So be careful.....but at the same time.....it's not that hard Paul says. Because we're worlds apart.

Here's the argument in chapter 11. Paul didn't take any money from the Corinthians.

His opponents DID.

That makes Paul WEAK they say. His message is worth exactly what he charged.

Which is pretty much how it works now. The more you charge as an appearance fee the more valuable you are as a speaker.

So if you measure it like that. Paul looks pretty bad. That is, until you understand why. And there's a principle here at work. there in verse 7 dripping with sarcasm. Was it a sin for me to elevate you by preaching the gospel of God to you free of charge?

That is –implication.... instead of you elevating me?

Do you see the difference? Between someone who's self important. Who's standing on the shoulders of their followers. Like celebrities. And someone like Paul who says. For me it was the other way around. I lifted YOU up. Was it a sin for me to elevate you?

You stood on my shoulders. And he says. I robbed others to serve you. And the poor Macedonian church down the road looked after me.

I heard an American speaker last year who came to Australia. And talking about celebrities – which they've got their fair share of. He said – celebrities are just parasites that live off a culture. And that's what Paul's pointing out.

And as he points out the difference Paul says. Far from being embarrassed about that. That's my boast. To serve you. Instead of the other way around. Verse 12.

And I will keep doing what I am doing in order to cut the ground from those who want an opportunity to be considered equal with us in the things they boast about.

See Paul's doing a bit of a Tim Cahill here. There's no sign of backing down.

There's something they don't know. And that is the real power of the gospel.

The power of the Son of God who was rich but became poor for their sakes.

Just like Paul's doing.

It's the power. It's God's power in weakness.

But before he can make that point. Before he can talk about the power of weakness....There's something Paul's got to do. Something he doesn't want to do.

Something he can't stand. But that he has to do – to make his point.

And that is....he has to boast.

There from verse 16 it's foolish he says. But hey. I've got no choice.

Let no one take me for a fool. But if you do, then receive me just as you would a fool, so that I may do a little boasting. In this self confident boasting I am not talking as the Lord would, but as a fool. Since many are boasting in the way the world does, I too will boast.

See Paul's open to the charge – of being a sore loser. He's open to the charge of being a little man....who can't keep up with the big boys. So he has to yap at their heels.

But that's not true at all. Because he can go toe to toe. Point for point. Boast for boast. It's foolishness he says. But I have to. So here you go. Bring it on.

Verse 21

What anyone else dares to boast about – I am speaking as a fool- I also dare to boast about. Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Abraham's descendants. Gotcha there too. So am I.

At every point I'm equal he says. On their terms. And if he wanted to, we know from the book of Acts Paul could have gone on with stories of miracles. Visions. Angelic encounters. Things that would elevate him even above them...on their terms.

But his whole point is.....there's nothing in it.

The whole point is....the real power lies somewhere else.

So there's a great little twist here. Because that's not where it's at according to Paul.

I'm not any better because of any of those things he says. They're not even worth mentioning. But I am better. Because I'm a better servant.

Are they servants of Christ? I am more.

And then instead of going on to list off his personal glories. He lists off every little hardship. Every difficulty he's suffered for the sake of Christ.

And he dares them to keep up.

And we read out this list before. It's impressive isn't it.

Prison, floggings, shipwrecks, danger, sleeplessness, hunger, nakedness, stoning.....stress, pressure.

And he says. That's my boast.

And the ball's pretty much hitting the back of the net.

They might have the same pedigree. But there's a world of difference between the sort of super spiritual gurus of Paul's day. And of our day too. And Paul himself.

And if you're going to boast he says. That's where it's at.

If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.

And to make a point.....there's this little story about how he was lowered out of a window in a wall to escape Damascus.

Because in Paul's day about the greatest honour you could ever be awarded. Was called the coronis muralis. And you'd get the coronis muralis for being the first soldier over the wall in a siege. The first soldier to climb the siege ladder. With the enemy shooting arrows and tipping boiling oil. And waiting with their swords. It was a great honour to get the coronis muralis. And hardly anyone alive got the award because if you're the first over the wall. Your chances of staying alive were not very high.

So here's Paul boasting. About the opposite. I went over the wall he said. I swear it on oath. I went down it. Hiding. In a basket. And I ran away.

And he's making a point.

Now that's not to say you set out on some sadistic quest for hardship so you can boast about it. Paul doesn't say any of that stuff's something to look forward to. It's just a by product.

You don't ask to be flogged. But that's what you get if you speak about Jesus. It's a by product. You don't ask for shipwrecks or danger. You'd rather not go without food or sleep.

But if you're going to walk in Jesus' footsteps. In THIS WORLD....that's the kind of thing up ahead.

So I'll boast about that Paul says.

Chapter 12 I must go on boasting. Again matching it with the best of them. This time it's about a great vision. A revelation.

But he's so embarrassed he talks about it like an awkward problem you might have. And you say I've got a "friend" ,But it's the kind of experience that'd put you up with the spiritual giants. The kind his critics would die for. That they'd shout about from the rooftops. This man he says was caught up to the third heaven. Was caught up to paradise. Where he heard inexpressible things.

I'll boast about a man like that. But I won't boast about myself...except in my weaknesses.

Now if you're a cynic you'll say come on. He just did boast. He's just dropped the bombshell.

And verse 6 he makes it clear it was him.

Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth.

It was me.

But there's something you don't know. And he's working up to it.

There's a reason he's dropping this little bomb.

And that is....to talk about the thorn.

See Paul calls his opponents super apostles as a joke. Because they talk themselves up. And they talk about ecstatic experiences. And they couldn't help themselves but talk about the kind of experience Paul had. And you might have heard of people who've had experiences like that too. But Paul's point is.

That's not what they're for.

I had this great experience. But here's what God thinks about boasting. To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh.

To stop me boasting.

And we don't know what that was. Maybe some recurring or debilitating disease he doesn't say...but I bet the Corinthians had some idea. And maybe that's part of their taunts about Paul. And about how weak and unimpressive he is. But he says.

God gave it to me so I wouldn't boast.

To keep me from becoming conceited.

Because he hates boasting.

Here's Paul. Healed so many others. But when he asks God to take away the thorn. God says NO.

Does God approve of boasting? NO. So Paul lives with the painful thorn.

Reason?

I pleaded with God Paul says. But here's what God said.

Verse 9 but he said to me, My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.

So I'll boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.

I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Here endeth the lesson. And it's a tough one to get your head around isn't it. And I think that's one that needs to just swim around in your head for a while. Because you and I just love kicking goals. We just love the strength of strength. But Jesus demonstrated God's power in weakness. So did Paul. So should we.

And though he could have had it all. Jesus shunned the strength of strength.

When he had it in spades.

Born in a shed. Suffered in life. Died in humiliation. To demonstrate God's power in weakness.

There's a warning here from Paul. Not to be bamboozled by boasters. Not to be scammed.

But there's also a pretty good comfort here too. It's not up to you. As a follower of Jesus. To impress people. As if you're impressiveness will be the magnet that brings them to faith. So you can just be real. And then God's real power can work through you.

It's not an excuse to be SLACK. It's not an excuse to let go and let God. God's power's not made perfect in SLACKNESS. But it is made perfect in weakness.

So when you're thinking about boasting. Don't do it. And don't be sucked in by others who do.

So I'll boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.

I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

