

STRENGTH THROUGH WEAKNESS

2 CORINTHIANS 6:3-13

THE VALUE OF VULNERABILITY



FIRST BYRON CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH

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INTRODUCTION

The most useful Christians I know are vulnerable Christians. Vulnerability is "a state of emotional exposure that comes with a certain degree of uncertainty. It involves a person's willingness to accept the emotional risk that comes from being open and willing to love and be loved."

I know Christians who will never admit to any weakness or any imperfection. There's one in particular that I have in mind. She is completely impregnable. She views her perfection as a strength and looks down on everyone else as weak. She is the most critical Christian I know, the most disconnected, the most lacking in compassion, and the most useless. She has no friends and no ministry. She does not realize that vulnerability, weakness and imperfection multiplies courage, compassion, connection, and usefulness.

That's why social scientist and researcher Brené Brown entitled her book on vulnerability: *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go Of Who You Think You're Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are: Your Guide to a Wholehearted Life*. That's not a specifically Christian book although we can learn from the truth that does appear in it. **How important is vulnerability in the Christian life and in ministry?**

BACKGROUND

Paul was in a conflict with spiritual enemies in Corinth who were seducing the Corinthians away from Paul and turning them against Paul. In the previous verses he practiced vulnerability by emotional and reasonable pleading with them to be reconciled not only to himself but to God. Knowing that his enemies would despise this exposure of his heart, he doubles down on his vulnerability in verses 3-13.



How does vulnerability begin?



1. VULNERABILITY CHAMPIONS OPEN HEARTS (3-11, 13)

Vulnerability in theory

We put no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry (3)...We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians; our heart is wide open (11).

Paul's tried to be as open, honest, transparent, authentic as he possibly can. He's just poured himself out in pleading and persuading the Corinthians to be reconciled to God and himself. He doesn't protect his own heart and feelings by distancing himself from them or denouncing them. He puts no obstacle in the way of his communication. He takes off the filters of self-image, fear, officialdom, tradition, family expectations, culture, etc., and lets them see deep into his heart.

Vulnerability in practice

Paul isn't just theoretically vulnerable but practically vulnerable. Instead of hiding, minimizing, excusing, or spinning the reasons of the Corinthians' rejection of him, he owns them and is open about. Vulnerability is the ability to let oneself be seen as we really are.

His humble commendation: **but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way (4)**

His multiple sufferings: **by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger (4-5).**

His unusual manner: **by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love (6).**

His simple methods: **by truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left (7).**

His mixed results: **through honor and dishonor, through slander and praise. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything (8-10).**

CHANGING OUR STORIES WITH GOD'S STORY

Value vulnerability. Jesus was even more vulnerable than Paul. He took vulnerability to the holy extreme of crucifixion to show how much he loved and cared. Through his wide open heart on Calvary, we see his courage, compassion, and connection which influences us in the same directions. The most useful Christians are the most vulnerable Christians.

Practice vulnerability: Vulnerability is liberating. Dads and husbands especially need to work at this. I've seen marriages and families transformed by male vulnerability. Vulnerability opens the way to ministry and helping others as well as getting help ourselves. Embrace imperfection and vulnerability. Let go of your need to please, perform, and perfect. Let go of being cool and always in control. Mark Twain wrote: Dance like no one is watching. Sing like no one is listening. Love like you've never been hurt and live like it's heaven on Earth."

VULNERABILITY IS VALUABLE



So what makes us resist or even despise vulnerability?



2. VULNERABILITY CHALLENGES CLOSED HEARTS (12-13)

You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted in your own affections. In return (I speak as to children) widen your hearts also (12-13).

Common restrictions and limitations on vulnerability are:

- **Self-image:** "That's not who I am...That's not my character...That's not who I want to be."
- **Reputation:** "What about my reputation? What will my boss/pastor/friends/neighbors/peers think?"
- **Position:** "But people in my position have to maintain decorum and respect."
- **Tradition:** "That's not the way we've done things in the past."
- **Family:** "But my family never did that and doesn't do that....What would my parents say?"
- **Culture:** "But I'm Scottish/Dutch/German...we don't do emotions."

Ultimately, every single one of these come down to shame which is the opposite of vulnerability. If vulnerability is the way to connection, shame is the disconnecter. As Paul said, **"You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted in your own affections."** These internal emotions like shame are like so many padlocks and chains that keep us secure but also shut us off from others and shut others off from us. They limit our Christian usefulness and limit the help we can get from others. They narrow our hearts and narrow our usefulness. They disconnect us from ourselves and from others.

Paul speaks to them as his children, reminding them of his relationship to them, and his own courageous vulnerability even as their spiritual father, and therefore how they can trust him not to abuse or take advantage of their open hearts. Brown reminds us that "The original definition of courage, is from the Latin word 'cor,' meaning 'heart.' The original definition was to tell the story of who you are with your whole heart. [The vulnerable] had, very simply, the courage to be imperfect." Courage is being "willing to let go of who you think you should be in order to be who you are." It's speaking openly and honestly about who we are, what we're feeling, and about our experiences.

CHANGING OUR STORIES WITH GOD'S STORY

Break your shame chains. Try to understand what's holding you back from vulnerability. Name it and own it. Then take the first step to vulnerability. Don't start by 'spilling your guts' on Facebook. Rather, start with one person you trust, somebody you have a close relationship with, someone who's been vulnerable with you. Brené Brown said that it took her a year-long struggle with vulnerability before she let it win.

Enjoy deep connection. Brené Brown's research identified that the deepest connections happen when we are widely vulnerable. Brown says, "You cannot selectively numb. So when we numb vulnerability, we numb joy, we numb gratitude, we numb happiness." "But it's risky," you protest. It is risky because we may lose, but we will certainly lose if we don't. As Brown asked, "What's the greater risk? Letting go of what people think or letting go of how I feel, what I believe, and who I am?" Start out with these small steps: "I'm scared...Can you help me...I don't know...I'm hurting." Every time you choose such courageous vulnerability, you make everyone a bit braver and you bring everyone a bit closer.

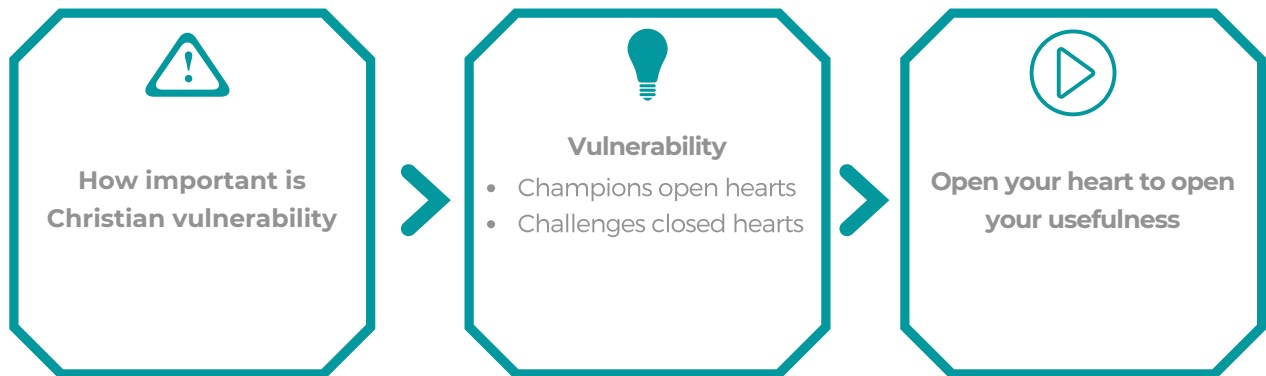
VULNERABILITY IS VICTORY



Hear God's Story > Change your story > Tell the story > Change others stories



SUMMARY



PRAYER: Invulnerable God, thank you for becoming vulnerable in Jesus so that we can connect with you. Make us more vulnerable to make us more useful.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Who do you know that practices Christ-like vulnerability and what's the impact of it?
2. What did you think of vulnerability before this sermon? What do you think now?
3. What imperfections in your life are gift from God?
4. In what ways did Jesus show his vulnerability (even though he was morally perfect)?
5. What chains close your heart to vulnerability.
6. What first steps will you take towards vulnerability? Make a vulnerability plan.

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