

Boasting in the name of Jesus

2 Corinthians 11.21-12.10

10/27/24

We all know this bit of wisdom. The main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing. When we forget the main thing, we begin to drift and focus on things that may not matter at all.

We've reached that part of Second Corinthians where the Apostle Paul goes on the offensive. Those who oppose his leadership have lost focus on the main thing and so some in the church were beginning to embrace a different kind of Jesus than the one Paul preached, a different kind of Spirit than the one they received and a different kind of gospel than the one they believed (11:4). The stakes were high.

At issue was the creeping conclusion that the Apostle Paul did not have what it took to lead the church. He didn't have the right kind of background, and he wasn't doing the right things to leverage the culture and build the kind of organization the people expected to see.

Rather than gain a patron's sponsorship or charge a fee for his teaching, Paul supported himself in a working-class job. That was an embarrassment and evidence that he was not enough of a professional to receive payment. Paul even admitted to not being a trained speaker (11:6) and his belief that the content of his message was more important than the way he presented it made his lack of skill all the more obvious!

He didn't tout his accomplishments or attempt to persuade anyone of his own merits. He didn't dress the right way, speak the right way or act the right way. Clearly, Paul was not the kind of apostle the Corinthian church needed.

But now there was a new crop of leaders who were boasting that their ministry was just like Paul's (11:12). They were doing it the "right" way. And when you compared Paul's lack with their skill, they looked like "super-apostles"!

In this morning's text, Paul turns the spotlight on the metrics the Corinthians used to evaluate leaders to tell them that their metrics were meaningless and foolish. To do this Paul temporarily condescends to play the fool by using their standards to evaluate himself.ⁱ

Paul's focus is on the main thing of Christ's work and *His* measure of success. And he has in mind what God said through the prophet Jeremiah (9:23-24):

This is what the Lord says: "Don't let the wise boast in their wisdom, or the powerful boast in their power, or the rich boast in their riches. But those who wish to boast should boast in this alone: that they truly know me and understand that I am the Lord who demonstrates unfailing love and who brings justice and righteousness to the earth, and that I delight in these things. I, the Lord, have spoken!"ⁱⁱ

In chapter 11 Paul agrees to play their game (11:18). Yet multiple times he says he is doing this under protest because it does not honor the Lord or acknowledge God's gifts and work. Therefore, it is foolish, inappropriate, serves no purpose, and they are the ones driving him to do it (12:11).

I want to walk through this lengthy text one block at a time, commenting along the way. Paul begins with claims of his apostolic authority, then moves to evidence of his being a servant of Christ, and finally he shares evidence of his close connection with Christ. Each salvo grows in emphasis and power. He begins by describing the apostolic authority found in his lineage, 11:21-23.

Whatever anyone else dares to boast about—I am speaking as a fool—I also dare to boast about. ²² Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Abraham's descendants? So am I.

Paul begins with a statement of equality as he addresses their concerns point by point (common rhetorical tool). When it comes to family heritage, he can claim what the others claim. He could go into greater detail here, like he did with the Philippians (Phil 3:4-7), but the point is made. He comes from the right family line to do what he is doing.

He quickly moves on to address his superiority, claiming to be more of a servant of Christ than they are.ⁱⁱⁱ 11:23-29.

²³ Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. ²⁴ Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one.^{iv} ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked,^v I spent a night and a day in the open sea, ²⁶ I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. ²⁷ I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked.^{vi} ²⁸ Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. ²⁹ Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?^{vii}

Instead of unpacking each example, let's just note that the point Paul wants to make is that he has suffered for Christ more than any of them.

There are two possible sides to this argument. One side is like the stories shared by philosophers, generals and lovers who might list their suffering as proof of their devotion to a cause or a person. They wrote such things down to prove the strength of their endurance. "Watch what I did and be amazed!"

But Paul is making a different point. In verse 28 he shifts to talk about the concern he has for all the churches.^{viii} And then he does the thing that no one could understand—he associated himself with the weak. He is saying that everything he’s gone through highlights his weakness, not his strength. This connection with weakness is all the clearer when compared with what other leaders were doing.

In writing and in person, other leaders would boast in their exploits, but never their setbacks.^{ix} It seems like Paul was boasting about his setbacks as if they were his successes! I think he is intentionally trying to reset their focus back onto the main thing.^x

Paul is saying that his “weakness” is based in his willingness to identify with those to whom he has been sent. Even though he is one incredibly strong person, he chooses to emphasize his weaknesses, not his strengths.

This becomes even more clear in the next few verses.

³⁰ If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. ³¹ The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, who is to be praised forever, knows that I am not lying. ³² In Damascus the governor under King Aretas had the city of the Damascenes guarded in order to arrest me. ³³ But I was lowered in a basket from a window in the wall and slipped through his hands.

Roman culture gave great glory to the first soldier to break over a wall. Paul, however, was put in a basket, shoved out a window and lowered down a wall! This was not humbling; this was humiliating, and unlike other leaders, Paul did not hide it.^{xi} He came to Damascus in strength. He left it in weakness. His descent into weakness has been part of his Apostolic calling from the very beginning.^{xii}

At this point I can imagine some of the Corinthians were hoping he would move on to the next topic because it didn’t seem like he was helping his cause. But Paul picks it up again and shifts his focus from heritage and service to spiritual experiences, 12:1-7.

I must go on boasting. Although there is nothing to be gained, I will go on to visions and revelations from the Lord. ² I know a man in Christ^{xiii} [*verse 6 and 7 reveal that Paul is speaking about himself here*] who fourteen years ago^{xiv} was caught up to the third heaven.^{xv} Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know—God knows. ³ And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows—⁴ was caught up to paradise^{xvi} and heard inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell. ⁵ I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses. ⁶ Even if I should choose to boast, I would not be a fool, because I would be speaking the truth. But I refrain, so no one will think more of me than is warranted by what I do or say, ⁷ or because of these surpassingly great revelations.

The words in the last verse are plural, which suggests that 14 years ago may not have been the only time this sort of thing happened to Paul. But the fact that he had been with the Corinthians for almost two years and never mentioned this before confirms that Paul considered this experience to be of little benefit for building up the church.

What did he think was of greater importance? 1 Corinthians 13 tells us it was love. Paul wrote:

If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. ² If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.

Knowing mysteries and knowledge is not as important as displaying God's love. In verse six he says he wants others to evaluate him by his actions, not his stories. He didn't want anyone to think more of him than what was warranted by what he did or said.

While he was forbidden to speak about what he heard in heaven, he is now free to quote what Christ said to him about his life on earth. 12:7-10.

Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. ⁸ Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me.^{xvii} ⁹ But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. ¹⁰ That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Rather than join the speculation on what this thorn might have been, let's focus on what this verse does make clear.

Whatever the thorn might have been, Paul understands God to be the source of that thorn and that the thorn is given to him for his good. So, both the visions and the thorn are the work of God. The revelation occurred at a very specific point in time. It had a starting point and an ending point. The thorn arrived after the visions. It had a starting point but did not yet have an ending point.

Like a chronic burden, this thorn inhibited his ministry in some way and made him feel weak and less effective. It was such a concern that Paul prayed and pleaded multiple times for the Lord to remove it. but God did not remove it. Instead, God answered the prayer by changing Paul so that he fully embraced the thing he originally did not want.^{xviii}

Now, instead of asking God to remove the weakness, he boasts about it so that God's power might rest on him. For when he is weak, then he is strong.

According to Paul's words, this thorn is delivered by Satan but given by God to keep him from becoming conceited due to the surpassing greatness of his revelations. (Now there is something to chew on for a while.)

There are many paths we could explore here but I'd like to get us back to the main thing Paul seems to want us to grasp and I do that with a question.

In the hidden places of your heart, what do you look to in order to affirm your part, importance, or worth in God's kingdom work? Is it in the work you've done and the life you've built or are you able to rest in a humble awareness of your weakness and God's grace which sustains you each day and strengthens you to endure in any circumstance?

The words Jesus said to Paul and that Paul said of himself can also be said of us. Jesus says to us, "My grace is sufficient for you for my power is made perfect in your weakness." We say of ourselves, "For when I am weak, then I am strong."

Paul's lengthy list of struggles in chapter 11 could be taken in one of two ways. When focused on the person, it becomes a boast of that person's strength to endure any trial. But when focused on Christ, it becomes a boast of Jesus' grace and sufficiency to strengthen that person to endure any trial and show how Christ's power is present in any suffering. The difference is determined by the attitude we carry and the words we speak.

But Paul's lengthy list of struggles does not describe my life, not even close! It probably does not describe yours either. This list is not our list nor is it supposed to be. More important is for us to understand what is behind and under these examples of Paul's weakness and suffering.

Paul's core message is not about imitating his weakness and suffering. His core message is about humility expressing itself in dependence on God's sovereignty and love no matter what.

God has many tools for developing humility in our lives. He used a thorn in the flesh for Paul, but He may use something different for you and me.

No matter what tool He uses they all lead us all to the same place—an awareness of how weak we are and how generous and sufficient God is. Our weakness becomes the place where God's power is perfected and becomes the lens through which others can see God's power on display in us.

When we put our strength on display, we diminish God's honor. When we acknowledge our weakness, it highlights God's strength. That is why Paul will boast about his weakness, even as others choose to mock him for it.

In one way, this passage speaks to those who rely on and boast about their own strength and abilities. But there is another message for another audience here as well.

The Corinthians forgot the main thing when they evaluated their leaders by the wrong standards. In the same way, we can forget the main thing when we evaluate ourselves by the wrong standards.

When we look at all Paul did and the difference he made it is easy to conclude that we don't have what it takes to be God's ambassador in this world. But let's remember who made up the bulk of the Corinthian church and why God called them into His family.

Paul identified with those who are weak because Jesus identified with the weak. In fact, the gospel is good news for those who know they are poor in spirit, weak and oppressed! With this in mind, listen to Paul's description of his congregation and God's plan for them. 1 Corinthians 1:26-31

²⁶ Remember, dear brothers and sisters, that few of you were wise in the world's eyes or powerful or wealthy when God called you. ²⁷ Instead, God chose things the world considers foolish in order to shame those who think they are wise. And he chose things that are powerless to shame those who are powerful. ²⁸ God chose things despised by the world, things counted as nothing at all, and used them to bring to nothing what the world considers important. ²⁹ As a result, no one can ever boast in the presence of God.

One's Christian heritage, education, skillset and giftedness are not primary. What is primary is a relationship with Jesus and a humble heart that follows him and relies on His sufficiency to meet any need.

What Paul said about himself in 2 Corinthians 3:5-6 is true for you and me. "It is not that we think we are qualified to do anything on our own. Our qualification comes from God. ⁶ He has enabled us to be ministers of his new covenant."

God's grace is sufficient for you. His power is made perfect and complete in your weakness. And through your weakness, God will use you to make a difference you never thought possible.

What is the thing that seems to hold you back, that weakness that dilutes and distracts your effort? Maybe it is intellectual, and you just don't seem to have the knowledge you think you need. Maybe it is physical, the freedom that comes from stamina and strength just isn't there. It could be relational, financial, experiential or any of a dozen other weaknesses that slow you down and limit your ability. Whatever it is, God delights to show His strength through it. Ask Him about it and He will show you the way.

When the reality of God's strength in our weakness becomes clear, we will find ourselves naturally giving God glory as we boast in the name of Jesus.

Life is about increasing God's reputation, not ours. It is about relying on his strength, not ours. And it is about recognizing His loving presence in the middle of any circumstance, no matter how hard it may be or long it may last.

Prayer

It is all about you. You are the center of creation and the center of our lives. As it was with you on the cross so too it is with us in this world. Your Spirit displays your power and glory through our weakness (2:14; 3:2-3; 12:5, 9-10).

Humble us, Lord. Help us learn to rely on you more than ourselves. Help us not speak our names, but to speak your name over all our circumstances. Help us speak your name with our lips and shout your name with our lives. That we might boast in you and give you the glory this day and forevermore.

EXTRAS

This life is not about me; it is about Jesus. My history is actually his-story of redeeming me and then transforming me into His image, the image of one who took the form of a servant and became obedient even to the point of death on a cross.

Food for Thought:

This "world" ... is the way in which our collective life in society (and the culture that goes with it) is organized around the self in substitution for God. It is life characterized by self-righteousness, self-centeredness, self-satisfaction, self-aggrandizement, and self-promotion, with a corresponding distaste for the self-denial proper to union with Christ.

David F. Wells, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 40.

As for me, may I never boast about anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. Because of that cross, my interest in this world has been crucified, and the world's interest in me has also died.

Galatians 6:14

Questions:

- It is good to feel proud when you do something well. In fact, God delights in our creativity and work. When you do something well and feel good about it:
 - Does your success puff you up and make you feel proud
 - or fill you with gratitude to God who gave you the opportunity and ability?
- In what ways do you acknowledge God's part in your success? In what ways do you turn the attention toward you?

- Both Jesus' and Paul's gentleness was misinterpreted as weakness. Would Paul have had fewer troubles if he demanded things and pushed people around? How would that have misrepresented the gospel?
- How have you seen God work in and through you during a time of weakness?

ⁱ He starts in chapter 10 by saying they were judging others by external appearances as they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves. But, he says, when people commend themselves, it doesn't count for much. The important thing is for the Lord to commend them (10:18).

ⁱⁱ Paul already summarized Jeremiah to them in his first letter. "Therefore, as the Scriptures say, "If you want to boast, boast only about the Lord." (1 Cor 1:31).

ⁱⁱⁱ This is madness for it denies the very basis of apostolic authority—the call of the risen Christ to take on the character of the crucified Christ.

^{iv} Dt 25:2-3 prescribes a maximum of 40 strokes and not one more than that. Receiving one less may have been to ensure that the law was not exceeded through miscount. They didn't want to miscount and so do more than the punishment. Exceeding the prescribed punishment would have been worse than meting out slightly less.

^v Three times he was shipwrecked. No lifeboats or life jackets. No Coast Guard flying out to pluck you from the waves. If in the open water, you clung to whatever floated and waited in the weather for the current to take you to land or another boat to happen by. If close to land you tried your best to get to shore. For ancient hearers, surviving multiple times could suggest divine protection.

^{vi} Naked points to being inadequately clothed for the conditions he was in.

^{vii} Burn with anger toward the one who was leading the person into sin.

^{viii} Anxiety or worry over the state of God's people. This was the same kind of worry seen in the OT prophets. In Phil 4:6 Paul said to be anxious for nothing. There is a difference here. Paul's anxiety flows from his love for people not his concern for how things will turn out for him (2 Cor 2:13; 7:5–6; 1 Cor 7:32—same word; 1 Thess 3:5). Paul's anxiety is not directed toward himself, it is for the welfare of others and flows from his love for them.

^{ix} Augustus listed his glories and achievements on bronze pillars in Rome and had copies distributed to the provinces for all to remember. In it he said things like:

Twice have I had the lesser triumph ... three times the [full] curule triumph; twenty-one times have I been saluted as "Imperator." ... Fifty-five times has the Senate decreed a thanksgiving unto the Immortal Gods ... Nine kings, or children of kings, have been led before my chariot in my triumphs ... thirteen times had I been consul.

^x I find it interesting that the climax of his list is the danger he has been in from false believers. They look authentic but are not. By placing it here Paul calls special attention to the dangers posed by false teachers. It is a subtle reminder of their serious peril.

^{xi} Identifying with the weak would have been another offense to socially powerful leaders in the Corinthians Church. This was a sign of low status that others tried to avoid. Paul saw suffering as the mark that distinguished him from the others. The other leaders would regard themselves as being above suffering. They considered suffering as a sign that God was not using a person for His work.

^{xii} As an aside, it seems to me that Paul's narrow escape from Damascus, his escapes from other life-threatening moments, and his rescue from despairing of life itself in 1:8-11 serve to highlight God's deliverance and sustenance.

^{xiii} The fact that he speaks of himself in the third person is another instance of his hesitancy to share these stories and facts about his life.

^{xiv} This would have been about 7 years after his conversion and several years before traveling to Corinth. Most likely in or around Tarsus or Antioch prior to his first missionary journey.

^{xv} God's dwelling is in the sky and the view was it had multiple levels. The Third Heaven or Paradise, refers to the highest heaven and sets a strong contrast between the place where God and heavenly beings dwell land where people dwell. In Acts 9:1-9, Christ came bodily to Paul on earth. Here, Paul went to Christ in heaven (spiritually and maybe even physically).

^{xvi} Paradise is the new Eden that is the opposite of Gehenna. It will exist on earth in the world to come but is currently reserved in the highest heaven. Like the first Eden, it is the place where God and humans share space.

^{xvii} Three times could mean exactly three times, but more than likely simply states that he prayed repeatedly about the matter. Saying he prayed three times communicates that the matter is now over and done, having gone through the beginning, middle and end.

^{xviii} Three times, echoes the number of times Jesus asked the Father to take the cup of suffering from Him. Like Jesus, Paul has pled his case before the Lord and the Lord has chosen to allow the experience to continue. Paul believes that, though unpleasant, it will be used for good. Jesus was made perfect through His suffering (Heb 2:10). His followers walk that same path.