

“Boasting in Weakness”
 2 Corinthians 11:16-12:10
 Pastor Jason Van Bommel

16 I repeat, let no one think me foolish. But even if you do, accept me as a fool, so that I too may boast a little. 17 What I am saying with this boastful confidence, I say not as the Lord would but as a fool. 18 Since many boast according to the flesh, I too will boast. 19 For you gladly bear with fools, being wise yourselves! 20 For you bear it if someone makes slaves of you, or devours you, or takes advantage of you, or puts on airs, or strikes you in the face. 21 To my shame, I must say, we were too weak for that!

But whatever anyone else dares to boast of—I am speaking as a fool—I also dare to boast of that. 22 Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they offspring of Abraham? So am I. 23 Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. 24 Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. 25 Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; 26 on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; 27 in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. 28 And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. 29 Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?

30 If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. 31 The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, he who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying. 32 At Damascus, the governor under King Aretas was guarding the city of Damascus in order to seize me, 33 but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall and escaped his hands.

12 1 I must go on boasting. Though there is nothing to be gained by it, I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. 2 I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. 3 And I know that this man was caught up into paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows— 4 and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter. 5 On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses— 6 though if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I would be speaking the truth; but I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me. 7 So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. 8 Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. 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 of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 10 For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

We live in a boastful age, in a culture that boasts in boasting. Politicians, professional athletes, celebrity musicians, and even ordinary people all boast openly of being the greatest of all time, or of just how amazing they are. Humility has always been an underrated virtue, but in our day and age, it is seen as an embarrassing flaw to be ashamed of and kept hidden.

In many ways, our culture is just returning to its pagan, pre-Christian roots. The Greco-Roman culture boasted with the best of them. It makes sense. Without the fear of the Lord, or at least a decent reverence for God, and a basic biblical understanding of virtue, what are we left with? Only pleasure, power, profit, and prestige, and a prideful boasting in how good we are at getting these.

True Christians should recognize immediately the foolish sinfulness of this kind of “boasting in the flesh,” as Paul terms it. For children of God saved by grace through the merits of Jesus Christ alone, all such fleshly boasting that our culture celebrates is beyond inappropriate and out-of-place. Rather, if we are forced to boast, we must boast in a way our culture considers completely absurd, for we must boast in our weakness.

Paul’s words in 2 Corinthians are often dripping with irony and even sarcasm, as he exposes the deadly foolishness of the false apostles and defends his own apostolic ministry – and, more importantly, defends the Gospel of Jesus Christ and all faithful Gospel ministry – in a highly unusual but powerful way.

Too Weak to Take Advantage of You, vv. 16-21

At the beginning of today’s passage, Paul is still directly targeting these false apostles for their abusive and unfaithful ministry:

16 I repeat, let no one think me foolish. But even if you do, accept me as a fool, so that I too may boast a little. 17 What I am saying with this boastful confidence, I say not as the Lord would but as a fool. 18 Since many boast according to the flesh, I too will boast. 19 For you gladly bear with fools, being wise yourselves! 20 For you bear it if someone makes slaves of you, or devours you, or takes advantage of you, or puts on airs, or strikes you in the face. 21 To my shame, I must say, we were too weak for that!

The sarcasm in verse 21 is obvious, as is its purpose: How shameful it is that we were too weak to make slaves of you, to devour you, to take advantage of you, or to put on airs. You may hear these verses and shake your head wondering how in the world any group of Christians could be so foolish as to allow arrogant, boastful people to take full advantage of them and exploit them so blatantly, but this is sadly not surprising at all.

How did these false apostles make slaves of the Corinthians? Two ways: by adding requirements to the Gospel, which the Judaizers and other legalists did so well, and by convincing them that they needed to receive spiritual power and wisdom only from these super-gifted so-called apostles – that only they had the wisdom, insight, or power the Corinthians were seeking.

We still see these two kinds of false doctrine at work enslaving Christians today, and both of them are based on the idea that we need something more than Jesus and the Gospel: The cult of personality convinces God's people that they need the celebrity preacher or miracle-worker. If you only receive God's word through one person exclusively, then you're probably caught in this cult of personality trap. Also, if your loyalty to a person is stronger than your convictions of the truth, then you've elevated men to an inappropriately high level.

The legalism trap convinces people that you need to follow an additional set of rules and regulations, in addition to the Ten Commandments, in order to be truly spiritual or to mature as a believer or to be successful or even to be truly saved. Legalism comes in many shapes and sizes. Sometimes people mistakenly think that calls to obey God's moral law in the Ten Commandments as an act of grateful obedience to God is legalism. It's not. It's not legalistic to obey God, especially from a heart of gratitude. It is legalism if we think we will obtain God's favor through our obedience or if we add to God's moral law in the Ten Commandments, following a list of man-made rules.

Once you have someone enslaved to a cult of personality or a code of legalism, it becomes so easy to take advantage of them. You have them right in the palm of your hand, and they dare not question you for fear of missing God's blessing or God's salvation. This is another way this kind of slavery is enforced: Fear of the consequences of not sticking with the chosen man or the required plan. "If you don't follow this man" or "If you don't keep with this plan" then the fearful threatened consequences are severe.

Verse 19 makes it clear how people can fall for such a trap: "*For you gladly bear with fools, being wise yourselves!*" Pride. Proverbs 16:18 famously says, "*Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.*" People who think they are right, who think they are the wise ones who really understand, that they are the good ones who make the world a better place by being in it, who see all the wrong in the world as the fault of "those people over there" are setting themselves up to be exploited. In a biblical terms, there's no bigger fool than the man who thinks he is wise.

How much better is the reported response of G.K. Chesterton when asked by the *London Times* to submit an editorial on the question, "What's Wrong with the World?" Reportedly, Chesterton's letter to the editor of the *Times* was very brief:

To the Editor of the London Times:

Regarding the question, “What’s wrong with the world?”

I am, yours truly, G.K. Chesterton.

Now, whether Chesterton ever actually wrote that letter has been debated by scholars, but the idea itself is perfect.

Paul was too weak to take advantage of the Corinthians in part because he loved them too much to stroke their egos and nurture their pride. He loved them enough to tell them the truth and not make false promises crafted to appeal to the selfish pride of the Corinthians.

Boasting in “Weak” Service to Christ, vv. 23-33

Halfway through verse 21, Paul shifts to a foolish kind of boasting, beginning with the credentials of his own Jewish heritage:

But whatever anyone else dares to boast of—I am speaking as a fool—I also dare to boast of that. Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they offspring of Abraham? So am I. – vv. 21b-22

The Judaizers would often use their Jewish heritage to qualify themselves to teach the Law of Moses and the “right” way of God to the church. They would say, “Well, we know the Scriptures so much better than you because we’re Hebrews. As Jewish people, we’ve been walking in the way of the Lord our whole lives.” Or even “We’re the offspring of Abraham, and so the promises of God rightly belong to us. If you want to know how to have these promises, you need to listen to what we tell you.” This was presented as qualification for teaching that circumcision was necessary for salvation or that keeping the dietary laws made you more holy or other related things.

But Paul makes it clear that he is as Jewish as anyone. In Philippians 3, when pressed into a similar situation by Judaizers in the church in Macedonia, Paul expands even more on his Jewish credentials:

If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. – Philippians 3:4-7, ESV

Paul is not really interested in comparing spiritual bona fides rooted in a Jewish ethnic heritage. He realizes that the Gospel of Jesus Christ is for everyone, as he wrote in Galatians 3:26-28:

... in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise. – Gal. 3:26-29, ESV

Everyone who believes in Christ belongs to Christ by faith and is a child of Abraham and an heir of all of God's good promises, all of which are yes in Christ. So, Paul moves quickly from his Jewish heritage to his service to Christ. And here his boasting becomes very strange, because here he begins to most clearly demonstrate what it means to boast in our weakness.

Verses 23-33 are the exact opposite of how the false apostles were boasting. They boasted in how accepted, praised, and commended by others they were. Paul boasts instead of how much he suffered and how often he was despised and rejected. They would boast of how gifted they were and of how easy ministry was for them because of their gifts. Paul spoke of how burdened he was and how difficult and even overwhelming ministry was for him:

²³ Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. ²⁴ Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; ²⁶ on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; ²⁷ in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. ²⁸ And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. ²⁹ Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?

³⁰ If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. ³¹ The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, he who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying. ³² At Damascus, the governor under King Aretas was guarding the city of Damascus in order to seize me, ³³ but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall and escaped his hands.

Paul's boasting here, as foolish as it is and as reluctant as he is to boast in this way, has a point. He has a reason for speaking in a way that he says is "talking like a madman." There's no way Paul would ever voluntarily claim to be a better servant of Christ than someone else, but when the false apostles claimed to be better servants of Christ for all kinds of fleshly, worldly reasons, Paul needed to clarify what actually made someone a better servant of Christ, which comes down to Christlike faithfulness and perseverance when despised, rejected, persecuted, and overwhelmed with burdens.

Paul says, "If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness" for one very good reason: In Galatians 6:14-15, Paul writes: "But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus

Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. For neither circumcision counts for anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation.”

Paul does not want to boast in anything but the cross, and so if he is called on to defend his ministry for Christ, he will only do so by boasting in his weakness. In the Garden of Gethsemane on the night before the cross, Jesus was overwhelmed by the pressure of what it would take to save His people from their sin. Then, on the cross, Jesus was despised and rejected and crushed for our sin. And so, Paul’s ministry, his service to Christ, was indeed better because it was shaped by and reflected the cross of Jesus Christ.

The cross in which Paul boasted was that by which the world was crucified to him and he to the world, so being worldly, imitating the world instead of imitating Christ, is just unthinkable to him. In the world, circumcision and uncircumcision are categories of distinction that matter, that men may boast in. But through the cross, something far, far better than circumcision has come. Through the cross and resurrection of Jesus, we are made new creations and a part of God’s new creation that has come to light in the resurrected Jesus.

Paul’s last paragraph in chapter 11 may seem strange and a bit anti-climactic but he’s making an important point:

If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, he who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying. At Damascus, the governor under King Aretas was guarding the city of Damascus in order to seize me, but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall and escaped his hands. – vv. 30-33

He even introduces the concluding story about the escape from Damascus with a solemn vow that he is telling the truth. Usually such a vow would be followed by some awe-inspiring boast. But he says “God knows that I am not lying: I escaped by being lowered out of a window in a basket.” This hardly seems like a thing to solemnly swear was true. It’s weak, almost cowardly?

No. Paul was delivered by God and preserved for ministry through his weakness and God’s providence. There’s also a biblical echo in this story: Rahab helped the two spies escape Jericho through her window on the wall and she and her family were rescued when she tied a scarlet thread out the window of her house in the wall of Jericho. So, Paul’s rescue was a re-enactment of the deliverance of the spies in Jericho, and Rahab’s scarlet cord was an act of faith that delivered her and her family, and she went on to be a direct ancestor of King David and of Jesus.

Paul didn’t need a miraculous show of power. He didn’t need powerful wisdom. He needed humble faith, the same thing Rahab had. God delivers His people according to His providence when we trust in Him. Jesus humbled Himself and trusted His Father when He poured out His life on the cross. God rescued Him from death and made Him the author of life for all who believe.

So, it is a cross-shaped, humble, God-trusting ministry and life of service to Christ that best glorifies God and bears lasting fruit. The world will always tell us otherwise, that we need power or wealth or great wisdom or fame. None of what the world values matters at all in God's kingdom. The cross is the great symbol of victory, and the crucified and risen Messiah leads His people home when we take it up and follow Him.