

“No More Boasting”
Ephesians 2:1-10
January 25, 2015

INTRODUCTION:

I want to talk today about a poison that is more deadly than what can be found in the most poisonous viper on our planet. I am referring to the poison of boasting. Paul talks about this poison in the passage before us today for two reasons. First, he has just prayed that the eyes of the Ephesians would be opened so that they might know and love God, and this poison blinds our eyes to the glories of God. Second, Paul’s theme throughout Ephesians is the new community God is creating in the church. We saw last week how the church is the fullness of Christ, destined to spread over the face of the earth and bring about the peace God has always intended for his creation. This poison destroys the church. Paul speaks of it in verse 9. **“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”**

Boasting has a surprisingly large presence in the Bible. In its various forms, the word occurs 79 times in our English versions. When we read the verses about boasting, we discover that it is not always the bad thing that it is in our text. Whether it is good or bad depends on the object of the boasting. So Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 1:31, **“Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”** The boasting he forbids in verse 9 of our text is self-boasting. It is a boasting that says, “Look at me!” This is the kind of boasting that keeps a person from heaven. It appears in Paul’s list at the end of Romans 1 describing the results of a life in rebellion against God. Perhaps Paul was thinking of Psalm 94:4, which says, **“All the evildoers boast.”**

I saw something this week I had never before seen about boasting. In Matthew 25, that well-known passage about the final judgment in which Jesus describes the separation of people into two groups, like the shepherd separating the sheep from the goats, we see something about boasting in what each group says. Those who are sent away into judgment protest by boasting. When Jesus says, “I was hungry and you gave me no food,” they respond, “When did we see you hungry... and did not minister to you.” In other words, their perspective is that they had never failed to minister in this way. They were boasting, claiming that they had always done what they were supposed to do. The righteous, on the other hand, have a completely opposite response. Though they have in fact ministered to Jesus by ministering to the least of these, they are unaware of having done so.

Boasting destroys everything that is precious, including the ability to live with God in eternity. How is it, then, that we can learn not to boast? The one

thing in the universe that is powerful enough to root out boasting in our lives is the gospel of Jesus. In today's text, Paul's gives a shortened version of the gospel. It is the same content that he develops in a more extensive way in the book of Romans. This is his "elevator speech" version of the gospel.

I. No More Boasting Because of Our Complete Brokenness

Three ideas dominate Paul's view of the human condition. We are dead, enslaved and condemned. First, **"you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked"** (2:1-2). Paul clearly does not share our modern notion of the innate goodness of human nature. His summary word for our natural condition is not "good" but "dead." What could he possibly mean by this? If we look around, we see people who don't look dead. And we also see people, even those who are apart from Christ, bringing good to others. Is Paul being overly pessimistic here? When he says that we are dead, he means that we are spiritually dead. We are cut off from life because we are cut off from God. We are like fresh cut flowers. For a time, they may seem to be full of life. But since they are cut off from the source of life, they will soon fade and wither. Paul's evidence for this is walking in trespasses and sins. When the Bible uses this image of walking, it is referring to a lifestyle. Our lifestyle gives evidence of being cut off from God, because our lives consistently cross the boundaries he has established.

Spiritually speaking, we are like the 19th century philosopher Jeremy Bentham. His will directed that upon his death his entire estate should be given to the University College Hospital in London on the condition that his body be preserved and placed in attendance at all the board meetings of the hospital. So at every board meeting, his body is taken from wherever it is kept and brought to the boardroom, complete with the kind of clothing and hat worn by 19th century British gentlemen. When the chairman calls the roll, he says, "Jeremy Bentham, present but not voting." In our natural state, we are just as incapable of responding appropriately to God as Bentham's body is incapable of speaking and voting at a board meeting.

We are not only dead, but also enslaved. Paul describes three masters. The first one is the world, because we follow **"the course of this world"** (2:2). The world is like a swift current in a river sweeping us along with it to think and behave in a certain way, a way different than God's way. To resist this pressure is like swimming upstream. There is also the devil, called here **"the prince of the power of the air"** (2:2). Frighteningly, it says here that he is **"at work in the sons of disobedience."** Satan is a hard worker, and his work is to destroy everything that is precious to God. The most precious thing to God in all his creation are his image-bearers, and it is precisely these that Satan works to destroy. It is in the lives of those who are dead, described here as the "sons of disobedience," in whom and through whom he works.

Our third master is our own sinful nature, which Paul refers to here as **“the passions of our flesh”** (2:3). He doesn’t have in mind by this just bodily lusts. In addition to the desires of the body, he also mentions the sinful desires of the mind. He is referring to such things as intellectual pride and selfish ambition. Kris Lundgaard speaks of this sinful nature in a book he has written called *The Enemy Within*. He gives an example of his own sinful nature that all of us can identify with. Ever since he and his wife had moved into their new house twelve months previously, he had been promising her that he would reverse the door hinges on their refrigerator so that it would swing in the direction she preferred. When his wife was away one afternoon, he set about to do the job. Here’s how he describes what happened next.

I was halfway through the job. I had the refrigerator and freezer doors off and wanted to get them back on soon so nothing would spoil. I was at the pivotal step of swapping the hinges from the right side of the refrigerator to the left, when I realized that each hinge was fastened by two torx screws. Two lousy torx screws. There is only one tool in the universe that can (safely) remove a torx screw: a torx socket.

I didn’t have a torx socket.

Right then my three boys decided to move their Travelling Sibling Rivalry Show into the middle of my angst. I lost it. I let them have it, though they didn’t deserve it. They stared at me as if I were a monster from Alpha Centauri, while I ranted in an unknown tongue.

In mid-fit I had an out-of-body experience. I saw my contorted red face screaming at my charming boys and knew at once I was doing something evil. So I stopped and asked their forgiveness, right? Wrong. Something had control of me—it was as if an alien had invaded my body and was forcing me to do his bidding.

You might think that with such masters we might escape blame for our rebellion against God, but that is not the case. Paul goes on to say that not only are we dead and enslaved to these terrible masters, but we are also condemned. We are **“by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind”** (2:3). Paul has not been describing the worst of mankind, but all of mankind, even those we would regard as the best. It is our nature as children of Adam to be destined for God’s holy wrath, with no exceptions.

To accept Paul’s view of mankind in his natural state ends all boasting. Apart from God, we are dead, enslaved and condemned. Accepting this view does one more thing for us as well. It prepares us to accept God’s remedy for our condition. A mentor of mine, Jack Miller, was famous for saying, “Cheer up, you’re worse than you think.” It was his way of drawing attention to this basic paradox of Christianity. The only way to have hope comes from accepting our hopeless condition. We turn next to this hope.

II. No More Boasting Because of God’s Complete Salvation

The first two words of verse 4 are glorious words. **“But God...”** All of mankind, without a single exception, is under the just wrath and condemnation of God. There is no possible human remedy available. We are, in Luther’s words, a “caterpillar in a ring of fire,” with no possible help except from above. Where human resources were inadequate, God intervened. He did so out of the richness of his mercy and the greatness of his love. It is significant, I think, that Paul finds no contradiction between the wrath of God and the love of God. He speaks of them both in verses right next to one another. He doesn’t say, “The ancients used to believe in a wrathful God, but we have evolved beyond such barbarity.” Instead, he affirms the love of God in a context of the wrath of God. The love of God cannot be grasped without an affirmation of the wrath of God. One of the chief elements of our salvation is that we have been saved from the wrath of God.

Paul describes our salvation here as being made alive together with Christ. He is returning to his favorite theme of our union with Christ. Jesus was raised from the dead, ascended into heaven and was seated on his heavenly throne and given all power and authority. We refer to these three as Jesus’ resurrection, ascension and session. But notice here that Paul isn’t talking about Jesus’ resurrection, ascension and session, but about our sharing in that. He says that we have already been made alive because of the richness of God’s mercy and the greatness of his love. We have already been seated with Jesus, which means that in a way we are already sitting on a throne in heaven.

Paul goes deeper still and describes God’s motive in this great salvation. It is a God-centered motive, **“that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus”** (2:7). Throughout the coming ages, which refers to the future eternity, we will all be illustrations of how great is the grace of God. Angelic beings will look at us and break forth into praise of God. We will look at ourselves and others, all saved by grace, and do the same. Our attitude will be that reflected in the great Isaac Watts hymn we will sing at the conclusion of today’s service. “While all our hearts and all our songs join to admire the feast, each of us cries, with thankful tongue, ‘Lord, why was I a guest? Why was I made to hear your voice and enter while there’s room, when thousands make a wretched choice, and rather starve than come?’ Twas the same love that spread the feast that sweetly drew us in; else we had still refused to taste, and perished in our sin.” That will be our heartfelt attitude in heaven. What will not be present in heaven is a single person who says, “I deserve to be here.” No boasting in self will be present there for the simple reason that our salvation is completely a gift from God. The “this” in the sentence **“And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God,”** doesn’t refer just to faith, but to our whole salvation.

Let’s ask a further question. Why is God so concerned that heaven be a place where his grace is highlighted and not a place where there is any

boasting in self-accomplishment? One answer to that question is simply that God is God, and we are not. But there is another answer that needs to be understood, and it lies within the very nature of the Trinity. Christians believe that God exists as one God in three persons, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Each member of the Trinity loves the other two members perfectly, and is also loved by the other two persons. In this great love, they glorify one another. As humans, we understand this, because our happiness too comes from loving and being loved. No member of the Trinity withholds love from the other two by standing up and saying, "But what about me? I deserve to be loved too." At the heart of their relationship is an other-centeredness. This is the answer Jonathan Edwards gives to our question. In his work *A Dissertation Concerning the End for Which God Created the World*, he said that "the only reason God would have had for creating us was not to *get* the cosmic love and joy of relationship (because he already had that) but to *share* it." (Keller, *Prayer*, p. 68). A heaven that is focused on self is no heaven at all, but hell. John Piper says, "No one goes to the Grand Canyon to increase his self-esteem." So when God says there will be no boasting in heaven, he is not saying it so that he alone will be able to boast. Rather, he is inviting us into the very joy of heaven, the joy at the heart of the Trinity.

He wraps things up in verse 10 by saying that even our good works after our salvation are God's creative work. We cannot take credit for them. We learn from this that good works are essential for salvation, but not as its basis. Rather, such works are the consequence and evidence that God's grace has been at work in us. So we come full circle here. Paul began this section by speaking of our walk, by which he means our behavior. Prior to our salvation, this walk was evidence of our brokenness and spiritual deadness. But now there is another walk. It is a walk with no self-boasting, and one in God-created good works.

CONCLUSION:

Is there boasting in your life? Perhaps it's a boasting in your children and their accomplishments. Or maybe it's a boasting in some accomplishment you have. It could be simply an all-consuming anxiety about what others are thinking about you. All such boasting is completely self-focused, and brings destruction. It eats away at faith in Christ, and it eats away at all our relationships. There is only one solution to human boasting. Accept God's view of your spiritual condition, that you are spiritually dead. And then accept the love of God in Christ. Realize that heaven is not a prize to be gained by your achievement, but a gift to be received by God's great mercy and love.