

“Love Does Not Boast”
2 Corinthians 11:16-23, 30-33; 12:9-10
June 30, 2019

INTRODUCTION:

We are looking today at the second quality of love that Paul states negatively in the love chapter of 1 Corinthians 13. Love does not boast. One who boasts says, “Look at me, notice me, praise me.” Lewis Smedes says that “boasting is a way of trying to look good when we suspect we are not good.” C. S. Lewis says that such sins as envy and boasting arise out of a sense of inferiority.

No man who says *I’m as good as you* believes it. He would not say it if he did. The St. Bernard never says it to the toy dog, nor the scholar to the dunce, nor the employable to the bum, nor the pretty woman to the plain. The claim to equality, outside the strictly political field, is made only by those who feel themselves to be in some way inferior. What it expresses is precisely the itching, smarting, writhing awareness of inferiority which the patient refuses to accept.

The impulse to boast can be seen even in young children. They will sometimes say the very words, “Look at me!” While we overlook such overt attempts to be praised when it comes from children, the same words on the lips of an adult would be unseemly. That doesn’t stop adults from boasting, but simply drives them to do so in more subtle ways. Adults typically boast by use of symbols, things like clothes or cars or the friends they have, the names they drop or the parties they attend. And these days, all these things can be successfully displayed on social media. Isn’t it a case of boasting when a person is constantly curating his or her life on Facebook, always seeking to present oneself in the best possible light? There is a never-ending effort to burnish one’s image in order to look good before others. Love doesn’t do this because love requires us to take attention off ourselves and put it on others. If we are always plotting how best to present ourselves on social media, there is too much noise in our lives to hear the needs of others.

The longest passage in the Bible on boasting, spanning parts of three chapters, is found at the end of 2 Corinthians. Let’s look at it now.

I. The Culture of Boasting

The city of Corinth was marked by a culture of boasting. Typical of this was a monument found that was erected by a mayor of the city, a man named Babbius. The monument was inscribed with this epigraph: “Gnaeus Babbius Philinus, commissioner and overseer of religion, had this monument erected at

his own expense, and he approved it in his official capacity of mayor.” That is typical of the kind of more subtle boasting done by adults. At one level, the epigraph was simply giving information. But the driving motive is clear, as if he were saying: “I’m a big shot in this city, including my official role as mayor and commissioner and overseer of the most important area of religion. Further, I’m rich, rich enough to pay for this great monument.”

This culture of boasting gave Paul no end of trouble as he sought to help this church God had used him to start. The chief expression of this boasting was the celebrity culture surrounding their teachers. Teachers were a very important part of the Greek culture of this day, especially among the higher classes. Education was accomplished by attaching oneself to a particular teacher, and paying very high fees for the privilege of doing so. As a result, there was a great deal of competition among these teachers for available students. These teachers, called sophists, would market themselves by giving public speeches that were specifically designed to impress. Not only were they expected to impress with their oratory, but their physical presence needed to be strong and attractive. Once a student attached himself to a teacher, it was expected of the student that he would promote the honor of his teacher. This spirit was carried over into the church, leading to a spirit of competitiveness that Paul addressed in the early chapters of his first letter. Some were aligning themselves with Paul, others with Peter, and still others with Apollos.

The culture of boasting presented another problem in this church. A group of false apostles came along and began to criticize Paul. These apostles fit the mold of the celebrity teacher that the culture of Corinth championed. They were gifted orators who were not bashful about tooting their own horn. They engineered something of a coup against Paul’s leadership by pointing out how far short Paul fell of this standard of the celebrity teacher. Apparently, Paul’s physical appearance wasn’t much to look at. He didn’t follow the conventions of Greek oratory, but spoke more simply and plainly. He seemed always to be getting into trouble, and had even been imprisoned on several occasions. In addition, he worked with his hands as a tentmaker, supporting himself instead of looking to the Corinthians for financial support. Such blue collar work was frowned upon in Greek culture. Paul’s concern in addressing these criticisms had nothing to do with preserving his own reputation. Rather, he was concerned that the Corinthians would be carried away into falsehood by these boasting, celebrity teachers.

We’re going to see in our next point how Paul countered these teachers. But before doing that, let’s take a broader look at this whole area of boasting. The truth is that it is not just the Corinthian church that had a problem with boasting. It has been a human problem since the fall of the human race into sin. After Adam and Eve sinned, they felt great shame and attempted to cover up using fig leaves. It was a laughably inadequate solution. Fig leaves dry up and fall apart in time. They are too small to do the job without being sewn

together. Yet, the strength of the leaf is really not adequate to hold a seam. Such clothing would reduce a person to perpetual repairs.

Boasting is a form of our fig leaf project. We attempt to address our shame by burnishing our image. In short, we want to look good before others. Let's talk about some of the modern ways we boast. We carefully select a picture or experience to post on social media in order to put ourselves in the best possible light. Then we check back repeatedly to see how many likes we've received. If we don't get enough likes or witty comments, we despair. Or have you ever been sitting in a meeting when an idea comes up that you first thought of. When no one credits you with the idea, you die a little on the inside, desperate to be given public recognition for it. You may even craft a statement that subtly reminds everyone that it was your idea. I know I have done that. Or consider another example of boasting. Have you ever been talking with someone, and for most of the conversation you only listen enough to craft what you should say next? And your goal is not necessarily that of listening well and then speaking words that bring life and joy to the other person, but rather a goal that somehow puts you in a good light. You may be thinking of something witty you can say or something that will make you appear smart and competent. In any case, your goal is simply to look good, not to love a brother or sister. Such boasting is the opposite of love.

II. The Counter-Culture of Love

If you pay close attention to your heart, you will begin to see how much you are motivated by this desire to look good, to boast. You will start to see it everywhere. How can we ever begin to overcome such a deep-seated sin as this? Paul is going to answer that question in a fascinating way. He is not going to say, "Stop boasting." Rather, he's going to tell us to change the object of our boasting. Let's look at this more carefully.

Paul is speaking ironically through much of this passage. Beginning in verse 16 of chapter 11, it is as if he is saying, "You Corinthians seem to be drawn to these fools who like to boast of their credentials, these false apostles. So receive me as a fool, too, and let me do some boasting." He gets a shot in on the false apostles before he starts his boasting. He says, again speaking with irony, "**For you gladly bear with fools, being wise yourselves**" (v. 19). In other words, Paul is saying that the Corinthians think of themselves as so far above fools that they condescend and bear with them. But then he goes on to enumerate all the ways these false apostles, from whom they are bearing so much, have hurt them. "**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**" (v. 20). Paul was not speaking figuratively with that last phrase. One commentator said, "It was not uncommon at that time for those who held positions of ecclesiastical authority to strike, or cause to be struck, on the

mouth any whom they considered to be uttering impiety” (Hughes). That’s why Paul mentioned elsewhere that one of the requirements of church leaders is that they are not to be strikers (1 Timothy 3:3).

Then Paul starts his own boasting, with the repeated qualification that he is a fool and madman for doing so (11:16, 21, 22). He starts his boasting as the culture of his day might expect, by mentioning his Jewish pedigree (v. 22). But then he veers away from what the Corinthians would be expecting and begins boasting in his sufferings. Like us, they tended to think that weakness and suffering were indications of God’s frown instead of his favor. Paul talks about his many beatings, imprisonments, experiences of hunger and thirst, and his anxieties for the churches he had planted.

Paul says, **“If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness”** (v. 30). He then gives a specific example of something that happened right after his conversion. In Damascus, he avoided arrest by being let down the city wall in a basket. The strong message of weakness in this example would not have been lost on the Corinthians. In ancient warfare, the breaching of a city wall was one of the most challenging situations an army would face. Those defending the wall had all the advantages, able to quickly mobilize their troops to whatever point needed defending. They had the advantage of gravity, able to hurl such things as large stones and burning oil upon the attackers. As a result of this challenge, the Romans honored the man who breached the wall with their highest military honor, the Wall Crown. It was a gold crown shaped like the wall of a city. The European crowns worn by royalty with the little turrets on them comes from this Wall Crown. Paul is pointing out how he was the opposite of this. Instead of going up the wall in mighty conquest, he went down the wall, hiding in a basket and fleeing his enemies.

After giving a second example, that of his thorn in the flesh and God’s denial of Paul’s threefold request for God to remove it, Paul summarizes in 12:9-10. **“Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 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.”** In his new book, *The J Curve*, Paul Miller says, “Paul still loves the limelight; he just has a different person under the lights: Jesus Christ.” So Paul doesn’t tell us to stop boasting, but to change the object of our boasting.

This gives us a completely different perspective on our weaknesses. They should be seen as God’s call to trust him and to receive his power at work in our lives. What are the weaknesses in your life, those things you would like to change if you could? It could be a health issue, a financial issue, a marital issue, or a difficult situation at work. Let me say that there’s nothing wrong with changing them or asking God to do so. But like Paul, there may be times

when God chooses to leave them in place in your life. Then what do you do? You do what Paul did: you boast in them as God-given opportunities to experience dependence on God and his strength at work in your life.

Think about the weightlifter. As he is doing his bench press, he is feeling weaker with each lift. He doesn't say, "This is not working. I wanted to lift weights to get stronger, and now I'm getting weaker." On the contrary, weightlifters boast of weakness following a workout. They might say, "I had a really good workout today and now I feel so weak." The weightlifter knows that these temporary feelings of weakness are the path to strength. Paul knew the same, and that's why he boasted of weakness. He had learned that when he was weak, when he came to the end of himself, that God's strength always proved itself adequate.

So the application is to agree with Jesus, who said, **"Apart from me you can do nothing"** (John 15:5). Begin the day with these words. Continue the day with these words. Parent with these words, live in marriage with these words, go to your daily job with these words. But don't end with the weakness. **"For when I am weak, then I am strong"** (2 Cor. 12:10).

So how does this help us love others? I can think of several ways. First, closing down the marketing department of our lives frees up large amounts of time and energy, time and energy that can then be used to love others. The opposite of boasting in self is to do what Paul urged elsewhere. **"Outdo one another in showing honor"** (Romans 12:10). Or, **"in humility count others more significant than yourselves"** (Phil. 2:3).

Second, boasting in our weakness in order to then boast in Jesus centers our hearts in the grace of God. We come to understand that we deserve nothing from God but judgment, but have been given everything by him. We have nothing of which to boast, but everything to enjoy because of the grace of God that has come to us through Jesus. When that truth sinks in, we learn to show grace to others. We are not as judgmental or critical of others. We know that if God has changed us, he can change anyone. No matter how hopeless someone's situation may appear to be, we have hope in God's grace because we repeatedly experience the grace of God for ourselves when our condition seems hopeless.

CONCLUSION:

Do you still want to sign on to this love project now that you know the cost will be God's project to make you weaker? I hope so, because I think it's the only way to learn to love. God is at work to make us both weaker in ourselves and stronger in our dependence on him. The result is that we learn to love.