

2 Corinthians 11-12

Boasting in Weakness

Here are two boasting illustrations I found online that made me chuckle.

A doctor, an engineer, and a politician were arguing as to which profession was older. "Well," argued the doctor, "without a physician mankind could not have survived, so I am sure that mine is the oldest profession." "No," said the engineer, "before life began there was complete chaos, and it took an engineer to create some semblance of order from this chaos. So engineering is older." "But," chirped the triumphant politician, "who created the chaos?"

A sightseeing bus was making the rounds through Washington, D.C., and the driver was pointing out spots of interest. As they passed the Pentagon building, he mentioned that it cost taxpayers millions of dollars and that it took a year and a half to build. While everyone was looking at it, a little old woman piped up: "In Peoria we could have built the same building for less, and it would have been completed even sooner than that!" The next sight on the tour was the Justice Department building. Once again the bus driver said that it cost so many millions to build and took almost two years to complete. The woman repeated: "In Peoria we would have done it for less money, and it would have been finished much sooner." The tour finally came to the Washington Monument, and the driver just passed slowly by without saying a word. The old woman was curious. "Hey," she shouted to the driver, "what's that tall white building back there?" The driver looked out the window, waited a minute and then said, "I'm not sure, it wasn't there yesterday."

Those are funny.

When I first married my wife, there was a time she caught me off guard. She ate a dinner I prepared and said, "It's really good." I thanked her.....but she said she did not like the way I handled her comment. I wasn't sure what she meant until she told me that when she tells me one of my meals are really good, I shouldn't say, "It is good, isn't it." I don't know what it is, but there is something inside us that likes to boast. I think the root cause is that we want recognition. But according to the Bible, boasting is foolishness. So the interesting thing about this section we will cover is that Paul decides to demonstrate foolishness.

2 Corinthians 11:1-2

I wish you would bear with me in a little foolishness. Do bear with me! [2] For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ.

Here, Paul prefaces his foolish boasting, by using it in the context of *divine jealousy*. The term is understood to refer to God's jealousy of His people. There have been commentators who believe that God is still growing, still in process. They are known as Process Theologians. These folks look at God as someone who is learning and still in process. But there is a jealousy that has nothing to do with being in process. In the Bible, divine jealousy revolves around the monotheism established by God. God is one and there are no others. Divine jealousy is demonstrated when god's people bring other "gods" into the equation. Now here, Paul extends the definition to include god's people who are following the false doctrines of false teachers. These folks came to Christ under Paul's ministry....and false teachers have led some astray. Therefore, Paul's boasting stems from divine jealousy.

In this section there are three things Paul boasts about.

1. Paul boasts about not being paid

Notice the question Paul poses in verse 7. *Or did I commit a sin in humbling myself so that you might be exalted, because I preached God's gospel to you free of charge?* The churches had a responsibility to pay their leader for sharing the gospel. Paul says here that he “robbed” other churches in order for him not to be a burden to them. What was happening was that false teachers came into Corinth and they were charging money for their services. We see this based in what Paul says in chapter 2 verse 17. *For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God's word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ.*

Paul saw these folks as peddlers of God's word, so he did not charge them. He wanted to give and not take....although he was entitled to receive monetary compensation for his preaching & teaching ministry. Paul concludes boast # 1 like this: *And when I was with you and was in need, I did not burden anyone, for the brothers who came from Macedonia supplied my need. So I refrained and will refrain from burdening you in any way. [10] As the truth of Christ is in me, this boasting of mine will not be silenced in the regions of Achaia.*

Paul will not accept pay because he wants the entire region of Achaia to acknowledge that Paul ministered to the Corinthians free of charge.

Okay, here is boast # 2

2. Paul boasted about his ministry “scars”

As a skeptic by nature, it's not the miracles, the signs and wonders, the healings, and the growth of the church that convinces me that Christianity must be true. Many faith books have tried to prove they are the right one because of successes and wars, and some of those accounts are remarkable. No for me, it is the ability to experience hardships and yet continue to minister for Jesus. Here Paul provides a list of ministry scars that validate his conviction as an apostle.

2 Corinthians 11: 21-23

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.

When I first worked in the glass industry, most of the folks that worked on the floor relished in telling whoever would listen about their scars. I had people come to me and show me their scars and share their stories. Nine times out of 10 there was another guy there who would try to out do the other. “Oh that's nothing, look at this scar.” Having scars was in some ways a sign of manhood in the glass industry.

This sounds very much like the scar stories I heard at work. But Paul is being foolish for a reason. Apparently, boasting was revered among the Corinthians. So Paul boasts about his ministry scars. These include, but are not limited to

- a. Five times receiving 39 lashes
- b. Being beaten three times with rods.
- c. Being stoned (Not that kind of stoned)
- d. Being shipwrecked three times (By the way, a fourth one occurs at the end of Acts, written later
- e. Being in danger from the sea;
- f. Danger from robbers
- g. Danger from Gentiles
- h. Danger from his own people, the Jews
- i. Danger from the wilderness
- j. Danger from false Christians
- k. Having sleepless nights and experiencing hunger
- l. And apart from the scars, the daily pressure on me of anxiety for all the churches, Like Corinth.

Like I said, it was not the successes that convince me; it is the obstacles and failures Paul had to overcome. He had every reason to give up—but he could not stop being a witness for Christ. I cannot imagine enduring what he did—and yet continue to preach Jesus wherever he was at, a sinking ship, a prison, a remote island where he was shipwrecked, wherever and with whoever, he would not stop. I can't wait to ask questions to him in heaven. He absolutely taught that the hardships he experienced were momentary in light of the eternal bliss he would receive in heaven. He was right. I can't wait to talk to him.

Finally, the third foolish boast revolves around his revelation.

3. Paul boasts about his revelation & Thorn

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.

If only us Christians, I include myself, would resist the temptation to boast to others about our spiritual experiences. The way we live—not what we experience—should be sufficient to impress others of our relationship with Jesus. But we are so convinced that having spiritual experiences, like being transported to heaven, is necessary to show others we have a more complete relationship with Jesus.

When I went to the Willamette Celebration I had a lady who was not drawing very many people to pray for in her booth, walk toward me, and proclaim, “The Lord told me to talk to you.” As I looked in her eyes, I sensed that she felt I was a lost soul trying to find my way. She kept saying, God wants me to pray for you. He told me.” Reluctantly, I went in her booth, where she gathered other prayers and told them God told her to pray for me.

When someone finally asked me what I did for a living, they looked at this lady and said, did you know he was a pastor. She became a little defensive and blurted out. “Yes, I knew, God told me!”

Why not just ask me if I can pray for you. Why try to gather my attention by claiming God spoke to her specifically to me?

In this section, Paul says he was caught up in heaven? Was it an out of body experience? He says he is not sure. It does not seem to be important to him. Also, it is important to know that Paul still will not share what God revealed to him in heaven. The only thing they know is that he received some information. So why not boast now that he has our divided attention? Because he knows we would think differently of him. Read verse 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.

Paul does not boast because he does not want people to think of him on a higher spiritual plateau. He does not want the content of his revelation to be the talk of the table. It is good enough for them to know that God did indeed speak to him. Lastly, instead of boasting about the content of his revelation, he boasts about the weakness he experienced because of it.

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.

The purpose of his suffering was to keep Paul from building himself up. He concludes that God told him his power is made perfect in Paul's weakness. So Paul shifts the topic away from himself and moves it toward God. He concludes, he will gladly boast of his weaknesses so that the power of Christ may rest on him.

In fact, he ends by saying that he is content to boast in his weaknesses. He wants God exalted; him lowered. So what does boasting in our weaknesses look like in our culture? I would like to suggest a few.

1. Relationally, don't hide our weaknesses

We are all very prideful people. We are all ashamed of our shortcomings. We care about what people think about us. We have all failed and have been hurt to some extent or another. Our natural tendency is not to let others know about our shortcomings. We like other people to think we have our act together. We must somehow understand that it is through these weaknesses where others can benefit. I think this is one of the reasons why some of us find it hard to grow more mature and to connect deeper with people. Our culture has taught us to hide our weaknesses. If we ignore or hide our weaknesses, how can we become stronger? In the context of Christian community, the Bible teaches that we should help carry each other's burdens. We can't do that if others hide their burdens.

This is fundamentally important when it comes to engaging our culture. There is this perception out there that Christians come across like they have it all together. Allowing others to know your weaknesses takes down their guard and actually makes you more approachable. Makes you

more real. It is okay to tell someone I am really struggling in this area and I am trusting God to help me in growing stronger. God is glorified and we are not.

2. Focus on your own sin; not someone else's

It is easy for us to be critical of others. We don't like the things they say, or how they look, or how they live their lives. It is easy for us to think that we are better looking, more intelligent, better liked, etc. Everyone has a critical spirit to some extent, the major difference is that some are just more vocal about it than others. But there is a reason Jesus said, "Why are you so concerned with the speck in your brother's eye, when you have a log in yours." My hope is to work on being less critical and more in tune with my shortcomings. In reality, there is not much I can do about others, then to tell them. Ultimately, it is my shortcomings I can work on to be a better person.

3. Maintain humility, let others talk about your accomplishments

We like to focus on things we have earned, like our accomplishments. One thing about accomplishments is that they are relative. I was the first to have a bachelors and masters degree in my family. Now there are other families where everyone has a Masters, some have even more advanced degrees. So what impresses one person—doesn't seem like a big deal to another. It is like that in all fields. That is why it is good to maintain humility and let others boast about your accomplishments. It is okay to be proud of them; but it is another thing to toot your own horn. Let others toot it for you. There were times Paul bragged about his churches to others. For example, he said the Macedonian churches were in dire poverty, and yet they begged for the desire to give. Paul boasts and says they gave beyond their means. That is great and we are impressed by such an attitude. But it would be quite another thing for the Macedonian churches to tell everyone how great of givers they were, despite having nothing. Then we would have quite a different response.

4. We can focus on our dependence on God for our salvation

I have a friend on Facebook, who is not a Christian—who who knew me before I was a Christian when we hung out at the bars. One night we were talking about salvation and the Christian claim that you need to accept Jesus in your life. He said he doesn't believe this and that Christians like me are self-righteous because we think we have a corner on truth.

Then I told him that I was not the self-righteous one; he was. He paused for a second and said, what are you talking about, you're the one who laying claim on the truth. I said, "Well Thomas, I recognize I cannot make it to heaven without Jesus. I am completely dependent on him. But you, on the other hand, are convinced that God will not judge you because you have done enough." You see we, Christians, do not boast on our own abilities, we believe we fall far short and need a savior."

Our witnessing would be so much more affective if we focused on our deficiencies, our weaknesses, and the dependency we have on our loving Savior. In the end, God has to get the glory, not us.