

Last week, Pastor Dillon described how much he loathed boasting because it's so opposite of humility. When people begin bragging, he's done with them and even secretly hopes that they'll fail miserably in front of the whole world so they can be humbled. Since God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble, let's bring on the opposition. As I listened to all of you laugh, I thought, "These guys hate bragging just as much as Dillon does!"

In this morning's text, you'll see the word 'boasting,' in all its forms, even more than last week. And you'll discover just how much Paul just despises, too. You'll see how he kind of gets backed into a corner and really has no choice but to boast like those self-inflated super-apostles.

As we read through today's passage, you're also going to see 'foolishness' and 'weakness' all over the place. Boasting, foolishness and weakness. This is going to be interesting.

Paul is making one last run at drawing the Corinthians back into a right understanding of the gospel and a right relationship with Christ. To do that, he's taking off the gloves and coming hard after the false apostles who have led them astray. Paul wants the Corinthians to know—no matter what his opponents may say—that serving others may come at great cost, but we are called to magnify Christ, not ourselves, as we do. That's our big idea today.

Dwindling Devotion (11:1-6)

If you don't already have your bible open to 2 Corinthians chapter 11, go ahead and get there and follow along. I'm reading from the ESV. [READ 11:1-3]

"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. ³ But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. ⁴ For if someone comes and proclaims another Jesus than the one we proclaimed, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or if you accept a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it readily enough. ⁵ Indeed, I consider that I am not in the least inferior to these super-apostles. ⁶ Even if I am unskilled in speaking, I am not so in knowledge; indeed, in every way we have made this plain to you in all things."

Paul is concerned that the Corinthians are being seduced by the slickly spoken lies of his opponents. Super-apostles, hyper apostles, false apostles, newcomers, whatever you want to call them, have arrived and led some of them away from the simplicity of the true gospel. The super-apostles have presented a different gospel and, ultimately, a different Jesus! They're preaching the cross + Mosaic Law. Basically, they're [The super-apostles were] teaching works righteousness instead of righteousness through faith in Christ alone. They're saying that to be right with God a person needs faith in Jesus *and* to follow the Laws of the Moses. Beware of anyone who teaches the cross + *anything else* because they're lying to you. Only faith in Jesus and what He accomplished through His life, death and resurrection can save you. Anything added to that will not lead you to freedom but to bondage. That's why Paul is so fired up. He loves the Corinthians and these deceivers are leading them away from Jesus!

The opposers accused Paul of not being a trained speaker; a professional. 'He's not a gifted lecturer so, clearly, the message he shares can't be from God.' Paul says, 'I may be a layman, and you may be professionally trained speakers, but I know the One I'm talking about and you don't!' Paul knows the Gospel. He knows—and personally met—the

One who is the Source of the message he preaches. The super-apostles can't claim that.

Love & Money (v 7-15)

Take a look at verse 7. [READ 11:7]

"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?"

In Greek culture, professional orators would come and give Ted Talks for money. Any speaker who had something of value to share welcomed financial gifts from those to whom he spoke. The hyper-apostles took full advantage of this in a couple ways. First, they loved being elevated and publicly respected so as to get money for the message they peddled. And they used the fact that Paul refused to be paid as 'evidence' that not only is Paul's message weak, but so is he. Their position is, 'If he's not willing to be paid, he's not worth listening to.'

Paul was intent about preaching for free because the Gospel isn't for sale. It's not a product being sold or entertainment for hire. Paul was not a client of the Corinthians, but Christ's Apostle to them. The Corinthians think Paul doesn't love them because he won't allow them to support him. But he loves them so much that he doesn't want them to think that he gave them the gospel for their money.

The super-apostles loved taking their money because it 'proved' their worth and disguised their greed. Paul's unwillingness to take the Corinthians' money, because of his love for them, undermined his opponents' ability to demand payment and then say, "We love you, too!" Paul's self-support highlighted his true motives and he's not changing that.

In verses 13-15, Paul tells the Corinthians precisely who the super-apostles *really* are. Check it out. [READ v 13-15]

“For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. ¹⁴ And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. ¹⁵ So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds.” They’ll get what’s coming to them. Don’t be deceived. Don’t let their disguise trick you. They do not speak the true gospel. They do not have your best interests in mind and they do not love you.

Desperate times... (v 16-30)

In verse 16, Paul writes, “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.” Desperate times call for desperate measures. The Corinthians seem content to listen to the foolish boasting of the super-apostles as they try to prop themselves up and validate their ‘ministry.’ So Paul, reluctantly, grudgingly, unwillingly, maybe with a little *gag*, speaks in a language they seem to connect with. He’s going to be foolish and boast a little. Boasting is foolish because it focuses on Paul’s unique human, and private spiritual experiences instead of calling attention to Christ as the giver of all things.¹ So, he’ll *boast* but not to prop himself up. He’ll do it for their sake and the sake of the true gospel that he preaches. So he proceeds. Look at the second half of verse 21 and following. [READ v 21b-23a]

“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...” (Don’t get me started!)

You can sense his discomfort with all this. He doesn’t want to do it, but he does it anyway. Think about how much he must love them to boast foolishly. Just like the super-apostles, he speaks the language of the

¹ Hafemann, Scott J. *The NIV Application Commentary: 2 Corinthians* (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 2000), 424.

Jews, he's part of God's chosen people and he's an actual descendant of Abraham. But he's a better minister of Christ! He must be out of his mind to talk like this...! Then he goes on to describe what makes him a better minister: the suffering he's endured as he's served Christ and ministered to others. He's been through overwhelming labors, imprisonments, beatings, and been close to death countless times. But the cause of even greater suffering than all of that is the daily pressure he endures as he aches for the welfare of the churches Christ has called him to serve. He identifies with the weak and he grieves over those who have been tempted and misled by false apostles; it breaks his heart and it makes him furious! All that he [Paul] suffered was to magnify Christ and make Him known. The false apostles said his weaknesses, his trials, his sufferings, are indications that he's not really God's man. "Paul is 'weak' not because of his own inadequacies, but because of his willingness to identify with those to whom he has been sent with the gospel (11:29)."² A true apostle is willing to suffer for his people as an ambassador of the crucified Christ. His opposers won't risk themselves for others because they're motivated by their own self-interests—so they brag about themselves, their heritage and their 'ministry.' Boasting isn't Paul's thing but he's willing to be foolish for the sake of Christ and those He loves. You hear his heart in verse 30, "If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness."

Priority Check...

So we have to keep our priorities in check. It's so easy to self-promote, self-protect, and be self-consumed. But, as people who belong to Christ, our goal is to magnify Jesus; to promote His name and His agenda, not ours. Let me illustrate: You have been called to make disciples (Matthew 28:19-20). Right? How's that going? It's easy to get caught up in work, raising kids, building into your marriage, investing in your health and all sorts of other good things. Christ has called you to make disciples: are you doing that? We've to keep our priorities in check.

² Hafemann, 441.

While we may not be called to be apostles, [but] we *are* called to be ambassadors of Christ. We are called to be His witnesses. And that's going to cost. You may not feel up to the task. You may not think you have enough fuel in your tank. You may not feel gifted enough or trained enough. That's okay because *it's not about you*. Check this out...Look at chapter 12 verse 1.

Visions and Revelations (12:1-6)

"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."

Because his opponents bragged about their spiritual experiences as well as their ethnic identity, Paul was 'forced' to boast, even if it's foolish, about his visions and revelations, too. He goes on to say that fourteen years earlier, he was taken to heaven by God. There Paul heard things that he's not permitted to talk about. He could brag about being taken up *by God* to be *with God* in the highest heaven, but why? His [Paul's] ministry isn't to puff himself up like the false apostles. His ministry is [but] to magnify Jesus Christ and share the gospel, whatever the cost. So he's not going to brag about his private spiritual experience, as though it makes him awesome. Paul wasn't awarded that opportunity because he was so spectacular; it was *God's idea*. 'It's not about me,' Paul says. That's why he won't brag about it even though he could because it was amazing. That's the exact opposite message the super-apostles are communicating. It's all about *their* gifts, *their* talent, *their* visions and revelations that make *them* so impressive.

Paul doesn't want anyone to think more of him than what they see in him and hear from him (12:6). And what do people see? Weakness. That's why the opposers said was sketchy. And what do they hear from Paul? The Gospel preached. That's it: [Seen in and heard from Paul:] Weakness and preaching the Gospel! His weaknesses are the result of being a minister

of Christ who suffers because he preaches the Gospel.³ Paul's objective was to glorify Jesus, not himself. The same is true for us! The only boasting coming from Paul will be about his weaknesses so that Christ might be exalted (12:5).

One Last Boast (12:7-10)

Take a look at 12:7-10. [READ]

"So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations {plural}, 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."

Paul described an unbelievable, heavenly experience. But the language suggests that he had many revelations, even though he only, vaguely, elaborates about this one. Then came the pain. Paul was given, by God, a thorn in his flesh so he wouldn't become puffed up. Jesus doesn't want His servants to be over-inflated. Paul's using this as another opportunity to take a jab at the super-apostles who are super-conceited.

Scholars don't know what Paul's thorn was. Speculations range from spiritual to fleshly temptations, from opposition and persecution to something with his physical appearance, from epilepsy to eye trouble to headaches.⁴ We don't know. All we know is that Paul repeatedly asked Jesus to remove it. He was forbidden from talking about what he heard in Heaven, but he spoke boldly about what Jesus said after pleading to have the thorn removed: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is

³ Barnett, Paul. *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1997), 565.

⁴ Barclay, William. *Letters to the Corinthians*, Rev. Ed. (Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1975), 257-258

made perfect in weakness.” That power is only appreciated in the middle of our weakness—and the thorn was a concrete example of Paul’s weakness.

Here’s where it gets wild. I don’t know anyone who loves to go through tough times, enjoys difficulties or invites suffering. But Paul considered his thorn to be a gift because he got to enjoy the presence of Jesus so powerfully that he would never trade it.

The second half of verse 9 is the key: “Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.” This reminds us of Old Testament language where God talks about ‘pitching his tent’ with His people. It’s Tabernacle language.⁵ In the New Testament this imagery is seen as the Word becoming flesh and dwelling among us (John 1:14). We also read about it in Revelation where God talks about His future dwelling with His people. Literally, this is talking about God tabernacling or taking up residence amongst us. Stay with me...

Paul is teaching that “Christ in his power ‘pitches his tent’ with [us] in [our] weaknesses...Christ draws near to us, and gives his grace and power to us, in weakness.”⁶ **That** is why Paul said he will brag about being weak because his [Paul’s] weakness is a platform upon which Jesus displays His grace and power. I’ll say that again: Paul’s weakness is a platform upon which Jesus displays His grace and power. Jesus meets him in the middle of the mess. Christ is magnified, not Paul, through Paul’s weakness.

For us...

So think about that for a moment: As a Christ-follower, your weakness gives God the opportunity to set up camp with you and give you the grace and power you need; power you don’t have on your own, strength you don’t have on your own. And here’s something else to consider. His

⁵ Barnett, 575.

⁶ Ibid.

grace *is* sufficient (present tense). Right now, Christ's grace *is* sufficient for whatever you're facing. You may be going through relationship struggles, grief, problems with your kids, health issues, financial hardship, or anxiety about whether your turkey will be dry again this year, but His grace *is* sufficient. He will meet you in the middle of it if you'll let Him.

Many of you have weathered tremendous pain and heartache, and you would gladly talk about how Jesus brought you through it all. We all know people who have gone through enormous health issues and Jesus lavished His grace upon them and was so close to them that they'd never want to change the experience and they're actually grateful for having gone through it *because Jesus, in His grace, was unmistakably present and gave them all they needed to weather the storm.*

That's exactly why Paul said, in verse 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." For the sake of Christ! If it's going to magnify Jesus, I'll gladly endure it all. Paul can say this because he trusts Jesus. That's where it begins for all of us. Do you trust Jesus? Remember, Paul's weaknesses are the result of being a minister of Christ who suffers because he preaches the Gospel. His weaknesses are tied to his obedience to the call of Christ. If he doesn't trust Jesus, he's going to bail out! To be clear, Paul isn't boasting about being feeble, unprepared or suffering because of disobedience. He's talking about the struggles he's facing because he said yes to Jesus and walked in obedience. Christ has called us to Himself. He's called us to a life of service, to sharing the good news and to making disciples wherever we go. That's the call for every believer. When you've trusted Jesus and the struggles, the pain, the trials come, watch for Him, in His grace, to draw near and give you all you need.⁷ Your sufferings can never exceed God's supply of grace.

No Choice (12:11-13)

Look at the last few verses. [READ]

⁷ Richards, L. O. (1991). *The Bible reader's companion* (electronic ed., p. 784). Victor Books.

"I have been a fool! You forced me to it, for I ought to have been commended by you. For I was not at all inferior to these super-apostles, even though I am nothing. ¹² The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with utmost patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works. ¹³ For in what were you less favored than the rest of the churches, except that I myself did not burden you? Forgive me this wrong!"

Paul circles back to the beginning, "I wish you would bear with me in a little foolishness" (11:1) and now he says, "I've been a fool!" It's one thing for Paul to be discredited, but he will not allow the gospel to be made ineffective by the deceit of the false apostles. So he endures the distaste of self-justification: boasting. He didn't have a choice but to speak to them in a language they understood. They could have backed him up and bragged about the ministry that Christ accomplished through him...but they didn't. They were on the receiving end of signs, works and wonders and lives were changed⁸ –all clear indicators of an apostolic ministry—but they didn't go to bat for him. So Paul was forced into looking like a fool and boasting.

His ministry to the Corinthians was rooted in love. Unlike the super-apostles, He never enslaved, exploited, took advantage of, put on airs or slapped them in the face (11:20)! The only thing Paul did was make sure that he wasn't a financial burden and they doubted his love for them because of it. That wounded him deeply. He finishes, ironically, by saying, "Forgive me for this wrong!" That's all you've got on me? The fact that I wouldn't charge you to preach the gospel. The fact that I worked hard so that you would know that the message of Christ comes to you at no cost except the price Jesus paid to bring it to you. Ever do something loving for someone, only to have it bite you? Here it is. Paul suffered for loving them and doing the right thing.

⁸ See 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 for a sample of the life change that happened through Paul's ministry.

Wrap

Paul gladly endured all the hardships, persecutions, insults, calamities and weaknesses because in the middle of those trials, the grace and power of Jesus Christ was on full display. People can say what they want, slander me, lie about me, make fun of me, ridicule, ignore and mistreat me—but it's not about me. It's about Christ and His glory. His call. His sacrifice on our behalf. His purposes. His desires. *It's not about me!* Hold onto this, friends. It's not about you...It's about Him. Serving others may come at great cost, but we are called to magnify Christ, not ourselves.