

## **“The Right Kind of Boasting”**

**2 Corinthians 1:12-2:4**

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### **Text Comment**

- v.12 Now, strange to say, “boasting,” and especially Paul’s boasting is a major theme in this New Testament letter. In fact the word group, the verb “to boast” and two related nouns meaning “boasting,” occurs 29x in 2 Corinthians, much more often than in any other letter of Paul. In part this is because Paul was defending himself against opponents who were boasting in the wrong way and for the wrong things. Paul is going to be “boasting” about a number of things throughout this letter and is also going to expose the boasting of his enemies as something improper for a Christian.
- v.13 That is, he didn’t employ the elaborate sophistry of the famous Corinthian orators. He spoke and wrote clearly and plainly so that everyone could understand what he was saying. His conduct was like the Christian writers of the middle ages and the era of the Reformation. Their Latin is not nearly so sophisticated or difficult because they crucified their style. They didn’t write like Cicero because they were not concerned to be admired for their literary sophistication, they were concerned only to be understood.
- v.14 The Corinthian Christians can boast of Paul because they will know that his conduct has been blameless and determined by his love for them.
- v.16 As we said several weeks ago, Paul’s original plan had been to visit Corinth twice. He would cross the Aegean and visit the church, go north to visit the churches in Macedonia, and, then, on his way to Jerusalem, visit Corinth again before departing by sea to Judea. Those plans were made quite some time before this, however. We know that Paul had made another visit to Corinth at some point after the long stay during which he had founded the church. Luke does not mention that visit in Acts, but we know it occurred from 2 Cor. 12:14 and 13:1 where Paul refers to the visit he is about to make as his *third* visit to the church. We conjecture that this visit was made after things began to deteriorate in the church because in 2:1 Paul says he did not want to make *another painful* visit to the church, indicating that he had already made such a painful visit. In all likelihood this visit had been made at some point on Paul’s third missionary journey, perhaps even from Ephesus, where he was when he wrote 1 Corinthians. It was made because Paul had received news of disturbing developments in the church there. It is perhaps more likely, that Paul’s very first letter to the church, the one referred to in 1 Cor. 5:9, was sent after he had made that visit and seen matters for himself. While in Corinth on that second visit or in that first now lost letter, he had told them of plans for this double visit to the church. Meantime, more news of the serious problems in the church had reached him and this prompted the writing of his second letter, the letter we know as 1 Corinthians.

In 1 Corinthians 16 he tells them of his new plans to visit them: now he proposes not two short visits but one longer one. And the reason for this, as he says from 1:23-2:1, is to spare the Corinthians. Rather than having to use the sternest discipline, which he is prepared to use if he must (as he says in 13:2), he wanted to give them time to set their house in order, to respond in repentance to his letter (1 Corinthians), and to prepare for his arrival. He wanted his visit to be a happy one for them and not painful. What is more, he thought it wiser to stay for a longer period to be sure the church was well-established in a healthier condition.

This alteration in plans, however, had been seized upon by the “Johnny-come-latelys” in Corinth as proof that Paul was a man whose word could not be trusted.

- v.18 Are you really saying that my change in plans reflects an undependable character?
- v.20 Nothing could be more incongruous than to suspect the Apostle Paul of insincerity when his entire life was devoted to the service and the proclamation of Jesus Christ who is Truth itself. The message he preached to them, the message by which they were saved, was conclusive evidence that Paul was committed to the truth. They know him as they know his Master to be sincere in word and in character. [Hughes, 35-36]

We know that the “Amen” was being used in Gentile Christian worship, as it had been in Jewish, because Paul refers to its use in Corinthian worship in 1 Cor. 14:16. The Hebrew word suggested firmness and reliability and its use in worship by God’s people expresses their confidence in the faithfulness of God and the certainty of his promise. [Hughes, 37] How unreasonable to suspect the trustworthiness of the Apostle of Jesus Christ, the very man who had taught them to rely on the trustworthiness of Christ and God!

- v.22 Trustworthiness is not our own achievement, of course. It is the outcome of the work of God’s Spirit in us. Everything depends on this close relationship between believers and God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit. See the Trinitarian thought of the Apostle Paul once again. Having been anointed, sealed, and given the earnest of the consummation of salvation promised for the future by the Holy Spirit in his heart, Paul is not likely to be lacking seriousness in making plans for the prosecution of the Lord’s work in the world. Good faith on the part of Christians is the essential reflex of the good faith the Triune God has shown to Christians.
- v.23 Now Paul explains what lay behind his change in plans.
- v.24 Paul is so aware of the readiness of his enemies in Corinth to misconstrue his remarks and to attribute evil motives to him, that he hurries on to say that he is by no means asserting a right to lord it over their faith. As if his desire to spare them meant he thought he had the right to treat them however he pleased.
- 2:1 We have an inept chapter division here for there is no break in the thought.

- v.2 If Paul is a man who cares about their joy, as he said in 1:24, then he is a man who feels their sorrow as his own sorrow and, naturally, he wants to avoid increasing it.
- v.4 He wrote his letter, what we know as 1 Corinthians, difficult as it was to write and hard as it was for them to read, precisely because he loved them and wanted them to repent of sinful ways so that they might go on in the joy of the Lord.

Now what is the preacher to do with this text we have read. I suspect that most sermons preached on this part of 2 Cor. chapter 1 deal with verses 18-20 and Paul's wonderful assertion of the faithfulness of Christ and of how, by his life, death, and resurrection, he has absolutely guaranteed the fulfillment of all of God's promises. Robert Hawker, an English poet of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, sums up in a lovely poem what must be drift of most sermons on our text.

We bless Thee, O Thou Great Amen!  
 Jehovah's pledge to sinful man,  
 Confirming all His Word;  
 No promises are doubtful then,  
 For all are Yea and all Amen,  
 In Jesus Christ our Lord.

Secure in this the Church on high,  
 And all below unceasing cry  
 Amen! Amen! Amen!  
 To Thee, O Lord, all praise is given,  
 The loud response of earth and heaven:  
 All hail, Thou Great Amen!

And such a sermon with such an application would be entirely appropriate, *if our text were just vv. 18-20*. But, in context, those verses are merely part of Paul's argument in defense of himself and of his conduct toward the Corinthians. The text itself is not about Jesus Christ in the first place, but his name is invoked in defense of the character and conduct of his apostle.

Of course, we could use the text as a splendid example of how to speak to a like situation in our own lives. There is a striking parallel to Paul's situation in the life of Augustine. We learn of it in a letter he wrote to the nuns of a monastery who had been stirred up against a woman who had succeeded Augustine's own sister as the prioress of that monastery.

"As severity is ready to punish the faults which it may discover," Augustine writes, "so charity is reluctant to discover the faults which it must punish. This was the reason of my not acceding to your request for a visit from me, at a time when, if I had come, I must have come not to rejoice in your harmony, but to add more vehemence to your strife. For how could I have treated your behavior with indifference, or have allowed it to pass unpunished..." [NPNF, i, 563, Letter CCXI]

As the letter continues it is perfectly obvious that Augustine has taken his cue from the tactful response of Paul in 2 Corinthians 1 and 2. There is no doubt we are given training in the proper

management of disputes between Christians, but that is only because here is something else here. In fact, I think we have here one of the final pieces of the training of a Christian soul, part of the polish of Christian manners and the sound judgment of Christian maturity. For, what we have on display in the Apostle's response is something Christians by and large find it difficult to acquire, at least in a truly biblical form. It is something, quite frankly, that the rest of their training makes them quite averse to, even suspicious of. *I am speaking of the confident assertion of their being right, of their having done right, even of a certain pride in the knowledge that they have been faithful to the Lord and to others.*

Christians, by and large, have learned *sola gratia* so well, they have learned that their salvation is by grace alone and that all the good they do is by the grace of God, they have learned this so well that it seems to them somehow inappropriate, if not downright blasphemous, in any way to claim to be virtuous, to assert that one has done right and been right. They have learned the doctrine of their own comprehensive sinfulness so well it seems to them impossible that they should claim to "have conducted themselves in the world in holiness and sincerity." The godly cringe at the idea that they should say such a thing in public or think it in private.

Now, to be sure, the Apostle Paul says such things, but, then, we think, he is *the Apostle Paul*. He was a man above the ordinary run of men, we think, as near to an angel as a human being gets in this world. We make allowances for Paul because of his uncommon devotion and his extraordinary service and, no doubt, in the back of our minds we assume that because he was an apostle he must have got extra help from the Holy Spirit to live that extraordinary life, that life he lived six inches off the ground all the way from the Damascus Road to the Mamartine Prison in Rome. He is not like us and we cannot learn how to live from the statements he makes here.

But that is a great mistake. Paul isn't the only one in the Bible who "boasts" of his character and conduct in some particular, he isn't the only one who says that, as God is his witness, he has done what is right. He isn't the only one who says that his own conscience testifies that he has lived a holy and sincere life. Frankly that kind of language is found in many places in the Bible. "Vindicate me, O Lord, for I have lived a blameless life," says David in Psalm 26. "Remember me for this, O my God, and do not blot out what I have so faithfully done for the house of my God," says Nehemiah on a number of occasions in the book that bears his name. And so on times without number in the Bible.

Now, to gain an understanding of this language there are some things we must remember.

1. *First, Paul in claiming to be innocent of the charge made against him and in claiming that his behavior was honorable and holy is not making a claim to being sinless.* Nor are any of the other biblical figures who speak of their consciences being clean, of God being a witness to their sincerity, of their behavior being such as will stand the test of God's judgment. Quite the contrary. Paul tells us in no uncertain terms how much of a sinner he remained. In fact, interestingly for our purposes, when he wrote Romans with its great confession of his still so great and so demoralizing sinfulness which we find in Romans 7:14-25, Paul was at Corinth. He wrote Romans during his three month stay in Corinth, the very visit he here is promising to make. If you could ask Paul: "did you mean, when you wrote 2 Cor. 1, that you had committed no sin of thought, word, or deed while you were in Corinth, or in all your relations

with the church there? He would have replied, “My goodness, no! I’ve never done a sinless thing in all my life. I am made of sin. I certainly was not saying that I was sinless. No one is sinless!”

2. *Second, in claiming innocence and holiness here, Paul acknowledges that, if he has lived a faithful life in these respects, he has the Lord Christ to thank for it.* It is not as if these are his own achievements for which he wishes to take personal credit. There is a certain kind of pride that is entirely appropriate to Christians, a certain kind of satisfaction in doing right and being right, but it is boasting “in the Lord.” As Paul will say later in this same letter, quoting Jeremiah 9:24: “Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord.” And that is clearly what Paul does here. In v. 12 he speaks of his holiness and sincerity but says emphatically that they are “from God” and that his behavior toward them has been “according to God’s grace.” In v. 21 he says “Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ.” It was *Paul’s* life, it was *his* behavior, to be sure. But to the extent that it was good and holy and sincere and deserving of credit, it was the fruit of the Triune God’s work in him.
3. *Third, when Paul speaks of a clear conscience, of a righteous life, of blameless behavior, he is speaking in the typically covenantal, antithetical manner.* When speaking of the Christian life, the Bible characteristically speaks in black and white and does not pay much attention to the various shades of gray. If a man or a woman is in covenant with God and living by faith in the God of the covenant, sinner though he certainly continues to be, he is *righteous*. If he is not in such a relationship he is wicked. One is either one or the other. But, the Bible speaks much the same way about the life of men. There is either a righteous life or a wicked one. It does not speak as we tend to of lives that are partially righteous. A man who is in covenant with God is holy. That term refers to his relationship with God by faith, but it also refers to his actual, flesh and blood life, the very different life, that flows from that relationship and demonstrates that faith. There is in such a life real obedience and real service and the reality of those virtues is not diminished or contradicted by the presence of sin and failure in the same life. What separates us from unbelievers is not our sin. Sin is what we have in common with the unbeliever. What separates and distinguishes believers from unbelievers is that believers are also really righteous, righteous in a way that God recognizes and approves. We cannot allow our consciousness of the sin remaining in our hearts and lives to diminish our sense of the difference the Lord has made or the real obedience and service we have, by his grace, rendered to him. To do that is to despise God’s grace and the work of the Holy Spirit in us.
4. *Fourth, Paul’s claim to holiness and innocence in the matters in dispute between him and some of the Corinthians is no denial of the fact that his personality may have rubbed some people the wrong way.* We are all aware that we find some people easier to like and easier to love than others. We find some people’s personality angular and unattractive to us and others’ delightful. Our choices may not be the same as others make of people to admire and love with a special affection. I don’t doubt that there were among the apostles themselves men who found Paul harder to like than the rest of the Twelve. We have been reading at devotions Walter Wangerin’s novel of the life of the Apostle Paul. And, though there are things in his telling of the story that I find unconvincing and unhelpful, I’m sure he is right in describing a man whose personality was so forceful and whose sense of mission so driven that some folk felt that being in his presence was like drinking water from a firehose. I suspect he was a man who tended to dominate a conversation. We don’t have that much

material in the NT, but isn't it true that almost every reader of the Bible thinks that John and Paul were quite different personalities and that Peter and Paul were much more alike.

In Christian history, the more you read, the more you will discover that virtually every great Christian whose name you know rubbed other good men and women the wrong way. Knox and Calvin both had imperious personalities and exasperated one another from time to time. Everyone had problems with the prickly Jerome. Or, in our own day, people who greatly admired the work of Francis Schaeffer were not beyond rolling their eyes at some of the things he said or did. No one has, no one ever has had, a personality that *everyone* finds congenial. Paul isn't speaking of his personal likeability. He is speaking about his conduct as a minister and his character as a Christian so far as they bear on his relations with the church in Corinth.

Now, to be sure, one cannot always say about oneself or about one's behavior what Paul here says of his own. Sometimes we must admit that in a particular instance we *have* failed to be true to our calling, failed to be faithful to God's covenant, failed to serve the Lord and obey him. We read in the OT that David was faithful, righteous man, except in the matter of Uriah and Bathsheba. But in this case Paul was able to say, and in many cases in our Christian life, we are able to say that we have been holy and sincere and that, as the Lord is our witness, we have been and done what we should have.

It sometimes happens to me that someone accuses me of having said this or that, or having meant this or that by what I said, and I use Paul's language here. I say, "As God is my witness I did not say that or did not mean that." And I know I am speaking the truth because what I was accused of saying or meaning is something that *as a Christian* I simply don't believe, something that, as a Christian, a follower of Christ, a man with the Holy Spirit within him, it would never occur to me to say or to mean. It is wonderful to know that I can say such things about myself and know them to be absolutely true! And I sometimes find myself defending some of you in your conduct in the same way. And I don't fear to do that because I know you are Christians and I know your character as Christians and your convictions as followers of Jesus Christ.

You see, there is nothing inappropriate in this, nothing inconsistent with the Gospel of grace. After all, we say that God makes a great difference in a man or woman's life. We say that you can see that difference. You can see the integrity, you can see the honesty, you can see the commitment to God's principles, you can see the love and consideration of others, you can see the faithfulness in Christian service and work. No one is saying that any Christian does anything perfectly, of course not. Paul wasn't saying that either. But we certainly must say, if we are true to the Bible, that a Christian *really is* such a person and really does such things. If we are unwilling to say that, then what difference has God's anointing and his seal made, and what difference has it made to have the Spirit in our hearts as an earnest of heaven?

We must remain humble people at all costs. We must never forget that if there is virtue in us it is the gift and the work of God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. *But, we must also not slander God's grace or Christ's redemption or the ministry of the Holy Spirit within us* by refusing gratefully and confidently to boast in the difference God has made in our lives and in our conduct. We do many things as we should. We really do if we are Christians.

It is very odd in a way. The world accuses Christians of being hypocrites, people who think they are so much better than they are. In actual fact, the larger problem with real Christians, serious Christians, biblically oriented Christians, is that they tend to see themselves as worse than they are now that they are in Christ.

So, by all means, let him who boasts, boast in the Lord. But then, let us boast.