

2 Corinthians 10:12-11:33 “Boasting in Weakness”
Jeremiah 9:2-24
Psalm 11

July 3, 2016

We live in a day when “falsehood and not truth has grown strong in the land.” (v3)
“Heaping oppression upon oppression, and deceit upon deceit,
they refuse to know me, declares the LORD.” (v6)

Tonight we’ll be looking at Jeremiah 44-45,
where Jeremiah shows us that God’s judgment on Jerusalem
is a picture of God’s judgment against all the earth.

When humanity rejects God’s law –
when people forsake the word of the LORD and refuse to listen to his voice –
then we can expect trouble ahead!

So do not boast in your wisdom.
Do not boast in your riches or your strength.
Let him who boasts boast in this – that he understands and knows *me*, declares the LORD

Riches and strength and wisdom are typically the ways that you get ahead in life.
If you are smart – if you’re rich – if you’re strong –
that is how you make something of yourself!

But the problem is that all these things become idols –
or are used in the service of idols.

If you focus your energy on getting ahead in life –
on your own career, your own family, your own pleasure –
you will find yourself drawn into the idolatries of our age.

What is the *one thing* that you should focus your energy on?
Knowing God.
*That I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth.
For in these things I delight, declares the LORD.*

That’s why our Psalm of response says,
“In the LORD I take refuge.”
Psalm 11 asks, “if the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?”
And the answer is simple:
worship God – “The LORD is in his holy temple”
and do what is right – “For the LORD is righteous; he loves righteous deeds.”

When the foundations are destroyed – when everything is going wrong around you –
what can you do?
Worship God and do what is right!

Sing Psalm 11
Read 2 Cor 10:12-11:33

We live in a world in which “self-promotion” is the order of the day.
In that respect, there is little difference between the first century and today.
You gotta know how to work the system – get ahead – put yourself out there!

And there is a perennial danger of this in the church as well!
Pastors are not exempt.
When I was at the PCA General Assembly a few years ago,
there were three questions that I was asked over and over again:
what is your name? where are you from? how big is your church?
And your answer to the third question
was the basis for whether you were someone worth talking to!

Paul warns us against this way of thinking.
And he provides a better path in the way that he calls us to boast in the Lord.

Let him who boasts boast in this – that he *knows me* and understands me.
But what does it mean to boast in the LORD?
Paul takes Jeremiah’s phrase and expands on it in the light of the cross.

First, he gives us an alternative to self-promotion at the end of chapter 10,
and then in chapter 11 he refutes his opponents –
and shows us how to deal with false teachers.
And finally, he encourages us to boast in our weaknesses –
in the ways that God has begun to conform us to the cross of Jesus Christ.

Boasting in the Lord *means* boasting in our weaknesses.

1. “Boast in the Lord” – The Alternative to Self-Promotion (10:12-18)

a. Don’t Compare Yourselves to One Another (v12)

¹² Not that we dare to classify or compare ourselves with some of those who are commending themselves. But when they measure themselves by one another and compare themselves with one another, they are without understanding.

Earlier in 2 Corinthians, Paul had spoken very strongly to the church.
Paul had, in effect, said: you are the problem – not us.
“You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted in your own affections.” (6:12)

Why was Paul so bold as to speak with such confidence?
Remember the *we*.
Paul does not labor alone.
They work as a *team*.
There is no place for self-promotion – there is no competition in the ministry of Christ.

The Roman world prized self-promotion – and Corinth was a Roman colony.
The language of “comparison” was a common rhetorical technique
used in political and philosophical discourse.

As one commentator puts it,
“In the cutthroat competition for plaudits and pupils,
one had to advertise oneself publicly with audacious praise
while impugning the qualities of other contenders for honor.
People were constantly vying with others to attain elusive glory
and engaged in a constant game of one-upmanship.’
Thus one way to move up in the world was to tear down an opponent,
using the opponent’s shredded image as a step stool to greater status.”
(Guthrie quoting Garland, 488)

So when they measure themselves by one another and compare themselves with one another,
they are without understanding –
they are clueless!

And Paul uses strong language to reject this approach.
“We wouldn’t *dare* to classify or compare ourselves” with them.
This sort of behavior goes beyond all bounds!

And so Paul says in verse 13:

b. Don’t Boast Beyond the Boundaries of Your Ministry (v13-15a)

¹³ *But we will not boast beyond limits, but will boast only with regard to the area of influence
God assigned to us, to reach even to you.* ¹⁴ *For we are not overextending ourselves, as though
we did not reach you. For we were the first to come all the way to you with the gospel of Christ.*
¹⁵ *We do not boast beyond limit in the labors of others.*

Paul recognizes that each Christian (even an apostle!) has limits.
God has called you to a particular place –
God has assigned you a particular area of influence.

And in the same way you are a part of the area of influence of others.
Paul is saying to the Corinthians – “you need to pay attention to us.”

We were the first to come all the way to you with the gospel of Christ.

But of course, there are now other elders and pastors in Corinth.
Paul and his traveling presbytery have a wider sphere of influence.
We *should* expect to see multiple overlapping spheres of influence.

I’ve heard some pastors insist that their congregations shouldn’t listen to other preachers.
If Paul thought that way,

then he would insist that the Corinthians shouldn't listen to him!
Because they have their own pastors!

But Paul thinks about the church in a broader sense than just the local congregation.
There *should* be multiple voices teaching and building up the church.
Not *competing* voices – not mutually hostile voices –
but the harmony of different voices who all love the Lord Jesus.

This language of “limits” and “areas of influence” has shaped our Presbyterian church order.
Paul says that these false teachers are *interlopers*.
They have interfered in the Pauline Presbytery's area of influence.
In the same way that Paul would not dream of going to Jerusalem
and trying to start a church there,
these false teachers should not be intruding into Corinth.
(Now, if they had come to Paul and asked how they could help,
that would be another story entirely!)

From the first century to the 19th century, everyone agreed that “area of influence”
had a geographical component.

In the early church, you see the apostolic model of having a single eldership in each city
grow and develop in a variety of ways throughout the world.

In the 19th-century missions movement, the various mission agencies
divided up the world into areas of influence.
(That's why you find Church of Scotland missionaries in some places,
Church of England missionaries in others,
and American Congregational and Presbyterian missionaries in others –
it was only as the Anglo-American churches fractured into tiny pieces
that you see the free-for-all that we have today!)

But this is why we have *presbyteries*
which govern and direct the work all the churches in the region.
Now, if we were doing things *properly* we would have a Presbytery of South Bend,
and a Presbytery of Mishawaka, and a Presbytery of Elkhart!

And each presbytery would encompass all the Christian churches in that city!
But that will take a while.
It has taken the better part of a thousand years to create the mess that we are in –
so if it takes another thousand years to fix it, I won't be surprised.

But as this harmony of many voices works together, Paul looks forward:

c. But It Is Proper to Want to See Influence Increase (v15b-16)

But our hope is that as your faith increases, our area of influence among you may be greatly enlarged,¹⁶ so that we may preach the gospel in lands beyond you, without boasting of work already done in another's area of influence.

Jesus had said that the apostles were to make disciples of every nation,
baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,
and teaching them to observe all that he has commanded.

Paul wants to keep going.

But he recognizes that it will not do to “keep going” if the churches he has planted
are not strong enough to stand.

The influence-peddlers are doing things the wrong way.

But there is a proper way to see your influence increase.

How?

“As your faith increases, our area of influence among you may be greatly enlarged.”

As you grow in the grace and the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ,
our area of influence increases.

Self-promotion – self-inflation – results in the bubble bursting!

And everyone gets hurt along the way.

The proper way for your influence to grow
is through your love and service to others –
because as *they* grow, your influence grows.

John says in 3 John 4,

“I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.”

We are called to find our joy in seeing the fruit in the lives of others.

And that’s why Paul quotes Jeremiah 9:23-24

d. Whose Commendation Matters? (v17-18)

¹⁷ “*Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.*” ¹⁸ *For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends.*

Those who promote and commend themselves are without understanding (v12).

The word “understanding” in verse 12, is the same word used in Jeremiah 9 –

“that he understands me.”

The false teachers – the false apostles – are without understanding.

Therefore, their boasting is in vain.

But before we go further, it is important to recognize that even as Paul is saying

“we wouldn’t dare to compare” –

he launches into a comparison!

But notice the difference!

Paul brings no trumped up charges against them.

He responds to their charges – and warns the Corinthians against them.

Indeed, he opens his refutation by explaining his motives (verses 1-5).

2. Refuting Opponents (11:1-15)

a. Paul's Divine Jealousy: I Want to Present You Pure to Christ (11:1-4)

11 I wish you would bear with me in a little foolishness. Do bear with me!

He recognizes that what he is doing is engaging in “foolishness.”

In one respect, this is a waste of time!

But since they have been engaged in *seriously* wasting time in listening to a false gospel,

Paul will have to waste his time dealing with it!

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.

Divine jealousy!

Jealousy is a good thing – when used properly!

The LORD our God is a jealous God.

Jesus does not want to share you with someone else.

In the same way, Phineas, the son of Aaron, was *jealous* for the LORD

when he saw the people of God turning away from the LORD.

God says of Phineas in Numbers 25:11-13, that he was *jealous with my jealousy*.

And so Paul here speaks of himself as sharing in that “divine jealousy.”

This is how pastors should view their flocks.

You are the bride of Christ.

You do not belong to *me* – you belong to Jesus.

I am not the bridegroom.

I am the friend of the bridegroom.

If the friend of the bridegroom runs off with the bride –

he is no *friend* to the bridegroom!

My task is 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.

Just as Eve was presented to Adam as his bride,

so now the church is presented to Christ as his bride.

As Christ is the second and last Adam,

so also the church is the second and last Eve.

In one sense, we live in the betrothal period –
in between the creation of Eve and her presentation to Adam.
We are the bride of Christ –
but the wedding has not yet been consummated.

(that’s why we look forward to the wedding supper of the Lamb!)

But that also means that there is a moment of danger.
Because just as the serpent deceived Eve
there are servants of Satan who would deceive *us*.

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.

In 1 Corinthians Paul was concerned with the factions in the church.
“I am of Apollos,” “I am of Paul,” “I am of Cephas,” “I am of Christ!”
Factions are bad – but at least they were all proclaiming the same Jesus!

Now, Paul says, he sees a worse problem.
When you are divided by factions it becomes harder to tell when someone crosses the line –
but Paul says there are those who are of a different spirit – who preach a different gospel.

And in verses 5-11, Paul answers these “super-apostles.”

b. Answering the “Super Apostles” – Speaking Skillfully and Preaching for Free (11:5-11)

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.

There appear to be two areas where these “super-apostles” criticized Paul.

First, they said that Paul was “unskilled in speaking.”

That’s okay.

I may be an amateur in crafting speeches.

But what matters is *knowledge* – *knowledge of the gospel*.

You can have all the rhetorical ability in the world –
but if you don’t have the knowledge of Christ,
then your preaching is in vain!

(It’s worth noting that Paul sounds a lot like Socrates at this point.

Paul is *not* saying that he knows nothing about rhetoric.

Indeed, Paul is *using* all sorts of rhetorical tools to make his point!

Rather, he is saying that you should not make a big deal about rhetorical style!
(What *matters* is the content of the gospel.)

And second, the super-apostles criticized Paul for preaching free of charge.

This takes a little explanation.

Think of our public speakers today.

If you want a famous person to speak at your event,
you will pay tens of thousands of dollars.

The more famous and influential the person is – the more you will pay.

It was the same in the ancient world.

Teachers and philosophers would charge for their teaching.

The more influential the teacher – the more expensive the cost.

What did Paul charge?

Nothing.

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? ⁸ I robbed other churches by accepting support from them in order to serve you. ⁹ 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. ¹¹ And why? Because I do not love you? God knows I do!

Why did Paul charge nothing?

To make clear that the gospel of Jesus was not just another pop philosophy.

He still needed to eat –

but he accepted support from other churches to serve the Corinthians.

(This is the pattern that Christian missions still follows.

We have sent the C's to minister among the Tibetans.

We do not expect the Tibetans to pay for this

until the gospel takes root –

then they will be expected to pay for their own ministers.)

Paul made it clear in 1 Cor 9 that he expected the Corinthians to pay their own pastors,

but he did not take advantage of that right –

because he wanted them to understand that the gospel is *not* about making a buck.

But there is another factor in what Paul is saying.

Why did he refrain from accepting their money?

Because Paul understood the Greco-Roman practice of patronage.

He who pays the piper calls the tune!

If he accepts the patronage of the leading Corinthians,

then he will be indebted to them.

Indeed, Paul provides a sharp counter-charge in verses 12-15:

c. They Are Servants of Satan – Not Apostles of Christ (11:12-15)

¹² And what I am doing I will continue to do, in order to undermine the claim of those who would like to claim that in their boasted mission they work on the same terms as we do. ¹³ 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.

This is a strong statement.

They disguise themselves as servants of righteousness –

in other words, they may very well *appear* righteous.

But their end will correspond to their deeds.

Wait, if they *appear* righteous, then what is wrong with their deeds?!

This is the problem with *counterfeits*.

Counterfeits look very much like the thing they imitate.

The disguise looks authentic.

But the counterfeit is *not* the real thing.

A disguise – by definition – is *not* authentic.

Those who are faking righteousness – by definition – are not righteous.

Therefore, their end will correspond to their deeds.

They are frauds – they are not sincere in their obedience to Christ –

therefore their true character will be revealed in time.

And you see how this works in Paul's final point about boasting in weakness.

If the Christian ministry is characterized by the cross – by weakness –

by suffering and affliction –

then authentic righteousness will characterize authentic ministry.

How do you tell the difference?

Well, Paul provides us with the criteria in our final point!

Look at Paul's boasting in verses 16-33.

3. Boasting in Weakness (11:16-33)

a. The Place of Sarcasm in Christian Ministry (v16-21a)

¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ What I am saying with this boastful confidence, I say not as the Lord would^[a] but as a fool. ¹⁸ Since many boast according to the flesh, I too will boast. ¹⁹ For you gladly bear with fools, being wise yourselves! ²⁰ 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. ²¹ To my shame, I must say, we were too weak for that!

Here is what false teachers will do:

they will make slaves of you –
they will devour you – [in other words, they will “devour your resources”]
they take advantage of you – [literally, “kidnap you”]
they put on airs –
they strike you in the face.

But again, they *appear* righteous!

How can a person *appear* righteous while enslaving and devouring you?
If you have ever been in an abusive relationship (or been in an abusive church)
you know *exactly* what this looks like!
The abuser is *really good* at quoting bible verses and making himself look good.

And what happens when someone is under the influence of an abuser?

They defend the abuser!
They put up with the abuse – and say, “Ah, but God has called him!”

So Paul is engaged in the delicate work of trying to convince an abused church
to disentangle from certain abusive pastors.

But I want you to see what Paul is doing.

Even as he *claims* to do what the false teachers do in “foolish boasting” –
he immediately begins to move back to his central stance
of cross-centered ministry!

His opponents use the rhetoric and the power of this age
in order to devour you and take advantage of you.

While Paul and his traveling presbytery use the rhetoric and power of the *cross*
in order to build you up unto salvation.

“Paul will go to any length to keep the Corinthians tethered
to the ‘foolish,’ ‘weak’ message of the gospel.

He even reverts to sarcasm, draping himself momentarily with the ‘foolishness’ of his opponents,
but he does so to undo that foolishness completely.” (Guthrie, 544)

b. Paul’s Catalog of Suffering (v21b-29)

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.* ²⁴ *Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one.* ²⁵ *Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea;* ²⁶ *on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers;* ²⁷ *in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, ^[b] in cold and exposure.*

Notice how he undermines their boasting in verses 21-29.

He starts in the same place that they would:

I am a Hebrew – an Israelite – offspring of Abraham!

Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—

I am out of my mind for engaging in this comparison!

But then precisely where they would boast of their speaking ability and wealth and power
Paul boasts of his weakness!

The catalog of suffering in verses 23-29 is not what the false apostles would have cited.

Their vision of “triumphal leadership” does not fit the way of the cross.

Certainly Greco-Roman orators could use suffering as examples of fortitude –
surviving great trials demonstrates the courage and heroic qualities of a leader!

But what are Paul’s heroic qualities?

Back in chapter 6, verse 3, he had given a similar list –
though in that case, he had commended himself more highly!

³ We put no obstacle in anyone's way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, ⁴ but as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, ⁵ beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; ⁶ by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love; ⁷ by truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; ⁸ through honor and dishonor, through slander and praise. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; ⁹ as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; ¹⁰ as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything.

In chapter 6, he used his weaknesses to demonstrate the character of his ministry.

But now he plays the fool.

Look at the list in verses 23-29.

Where does Paul *name* the good qualities?

He speaks of his imprisonments, his beatings – from Jews and Romans.

He speaks of his dangers – rivers and robbers and shipwrecks.

He speaks of his toil and hardship – without sleep, without food, without heat.

²⁸ And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches. ²⁹ Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant?

Paul celebrates his weakness!

You forced me to it!

Fine, I’ll boast like a fool!

But God has used the foolish things of this world to shame the wise!

Here at the end of 2 Corinthians,

Paul circles back around to where he opened *1 Corinthians!*

If you are going to force me to boast,
then I will boast of the things that show my weakness (v30).

c. Don't Be Afraid of Weakness (v30-33)

³⁰ *If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.* ³¹ *The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, he who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying.* ³² *At Damascus, the governor under King Aretas was guarding the city of Damascus in order to seize me,* ³³ *but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall and escaped his hands.*

And so in verses 31-33, Paul gives a detailed example.

Do you want to see how heroic I am?

Do you want to see your glorious apostle in action?!

There are plenty of stories in the book of Acts that demonstrate Paul's fortitude and courage.

But he picks the story in which he is most clearly the opposite of a hero.

When the governor sought to seize me,

I concocted a clever scheme and outwitted them?!

No, Paul turns to the passive voice.

I didn't do anything.

I sat in a basket – and “I was let down through a window in a wall and escaped.”

If you think that the heroic stories – the glorious and spectacular stories –
are the great stories – the ones you want to imitate and follow,
then you have not yet learned the way of the cross.

Martin Luther distinguished between the “theologian of glory”

who wanted the great and spectacular –

and the “theologian of the cross” –

who understood the gospel of Jesus!

As Carl Trueman puts it,

“The answer to spiritual weariness, fear, and those dreaded *Anfechtungen* (temptations)
that afflict the Christian is found not in anything special or extraordinary
as the world understands it.

That is what the theologian of glory desires.

Further, every theologian of glory probably thinks of himself as unique
and thus as having special problems that require special solutions.

The theologian of the cross, however,

while acknowledging that every Christian is unique

in that every Christian is a specific individual,

also understands that the answer to every unique Christian's problem
is actually very general, and the means are very ordinary.

The answer is always Christ crucified for me, and that Christ is found in Word and sacrament.”

<http://faculty.wts.edu/posts/didlutherunderstandthesacramentsbetterthanwedo/>