

We did a lot of things for our kids when they were younger. Who am I kidding? We still do a lot of things for our kids. When I think about all the sacrifices we made for them, their club sports always seem to go to the top of the list. Those long Saturdays when the alarm would go off at dawn, and I would crawl out of bed and drive a bunch of 5th and 6th-grade girls across the county so they could play in some tournament. It was a lot of sitting on hard bleachers while we waited for our girls to play.

I do enjoy watching sports. I have watched my girls swim, play soccer, and run cross country. But the worst was watching their basketball. For some reason, our city teams of the girls were just not good at basketball. Not good is saying it too nicely. They were bad. And it's one thing that these girls were bad at basketball, but what's even worse was that they thought they were good. I'm driving them to a tournament, and I hear them boasting from the backseat about how they would celebrate winning the tournament that day. For me, I was hoping that each of them would just make a shot that day, but I just kept quiet and kept driving. I'll just say it. Boasting is stupid. And you know what? The Apostle Paul thought boasting was stupid too.

For the past few weeks, we have been working through 2 Corinthians verse by verse. In this section of his letter, Paul is confronting some new leaders who had come into the church. When Paul heard about them, he recognized that they were harmful. Their words and behaviors didn't represent Christ or the gospel that Paul had preached to them. They tried to discredit Paul to the church. Paul sarcastically nicknamed them "The Super Apostles."

While Paul was away preaching the gospel in other cities, these super apostles imposed themselves on the Corinthians. They boasted that they were better than Paul and more blessed by God. They boasted that they were better speakers, more charismatic, and better off financially than Paul. And they attacked Paul's credentials. They were boastful, and they were puffed up with pride. And we get the impression that the Corinthians liked them.

Have you ever seen a picture of a pufferfish? They are an interesting sea creature. According to the National Geographic website, pufferfish can inflate into a ball shape to evade predators. They could fill their stomachs with huge amounts of water and blow themselves up to several times their typical size. But these blow-up fish aren't just cute. Most pufferfish contain a toxic substance that makes them deadly to any other fish thinking of having a pufferfish for a meal. The toxin is deadly to humans—1,200 times more deadly than cyanide. And there is no known antidote.

These super apostles or false apostles were like the pufferfish. They were big and cute. They blew themselves up with pride and arrogance to make themselves look bigger and better than they were. And even worse, they spread their toxin to anyone who came in contact with them.

Like the Corinthians, we have pufferfish in our lives. They look cuddly and harmless, but when you rub up against their arrogance and pride and hear their boasting, they emit a toxin that harms us and those we love. Maybe you are reading this, and God is saying, "Hey, look in the mirror. You are acting like a pufferfish to those around you and throwing a lot of toxic stuff on those you truly care about." Our pride, arrogance, and boasting are deadly to our relationships with our friends and family, but more importantly, they are deadly to our relationship with Jesus. No wonder the late Bible scholar John Stott once said, "Pride is your greatest enemy, humility is your greatest friend."

I think it's safe to say that we all tend to boast about something. What triggers boasting for you? What puffs you up? What part of yourself is getting in the way of your relationship with God? The ministry of these puffed-up apostles was toxic, and Paul had to figure out a new strategy to wake up the church in Corinth. Paul resorted to a bit of boasting of his own to match the false apostles boasting to win back the people's favor. So Paul pens a new strategy in 2 Corinthians 11:16-33. And he turns a boasting match on its head with a surprising twist at the end of this chapter.

"I repeat: Let no one take me for a fool. But if you do, then tolerate me just as you would a fool, so that I may do a little boasting" (v. 16). Paul is saying, "Hear me out, I'm going to do a little boasting but don't write me off as foolish. In fact, it's because you are so gullible to these puffed-up apostles that I have to boast at all. If you take me as a fool, so be it, but hear me out as you did for those other fools.

"In this self-confident boasting I am not talking as the Lord would, but as a fool. Since many are boasting in the way the world does, I too will boast" (vv. 17-18). This is fascinating. Paul is saying, "This boasting that I am about to do is not something the Lord would do because the Lord disapproves of boasting. And Jesus never spoke like I am about to speak." The Lord never boasted about worldly achievement or prestige. So we get the impression that Paul is really uncomfortable as he takes this tactic.

"You gladly put up with fools since you are so wise!" (v. 19). Paul's first crack at sarcasm here. You Corinthians embraced my opponents since you are so wise. He was alluding to the fact that these Corinthians as Greeks prided themselves on their wisdom. And in their sophisticated wisdom, they chose false apostles.

"In fact, you even put up with anyone who enslaves you or exploits you or takes advantage of you or puts on airs or slaps you in the face" (v. 20). Not only did they put up with them, but they also tolerated their abuse. "Takes advantage" in the original language means that they were taken in, they were tricked. Putting on airs means that the false apostles lifted themselves up above them. They became so authoritarian that they slapped the faces of those who defied their authority. Their leadership looked nothing like the servant leadership that Paul exercised when he was with them. They took advantage of their hospitality, their generosity, and the Corinthians put up with it. Paul wants them to come to their senses, to see clearly again.

"To my shame I admit that we were too weak for that!" (v. 21a). Earlier in this letter, Paul had been accused of being weak because he didn't speak well, wasn't good-looking, wasn't rich, and he didn't boast about his accomplishments. So yes, Paul says with sarcasm, "I was too weak to act like the false apostles and then boast about it.

So here is the irony of all of this. Paul is telling us that boasting about our accomplishments is not a sign of strength. Boasting about our accomplishments is spiritual weakness.

It's right to evaluate our hearts regarding issues of pride and boasting. Maybe some listening today are thinking, "I've never thought of it this way, but I think I'm a pufferfish to some people in my life. I think I'm toxic" If this is you, there is help. Acknowledge it. Confess it to God. Repent. Ask for God's forgiveness because he is faithful and loves to forgive. Do a deep dive into the heart issue of humility and what that can look like in your life. And for heaven's sakes, don't boast about your new commitment to grow in humility. Let it be seen in your actions.

It's possible for some of you reading this that you are discovering you are a victim of a pufferfish in your life. Get the help you need from friends, family, or the church to change things. Take advantage of our Biblical Counseling ministry here at CPC. Remember your identity in Christ. Remember, you are made in the image of the one true God. You are worthy of being loved. And through Jesus, you have been adopted into God's family. And I want you to know that God wants you to be safe, and he wants you to learn and grow and to become emotionally and spiritually healthy.

"Whatever anyone else dares to boast about—I am speaking as a fool—I also dare to boast about" (v. 21b). So after deflecting the attack on his accomplishments, Paul confronts another attack. This was about accusations over his ancestry and lineage.

"Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Abraham's descendants? So am I" (v. 22). Paul says, "I have the same pure ethnic Jewish ancestry that the false apostles claim to have." In Philippians 3:5, Paul says he is a "Hebrew of Hebrews."

I am as much an Israelite as any of them. I'm part of the religion. I am in the same social and cultural circles that you claim to be in. I am as you are one of Abraham's descendants. So I am also the recipient of God's promises to Abraham's offspring. Again this kind of boasting is weak. It's not what matters to God.

When I was a young pastor new in a church, I was officiating a memorial service for a family I hardly knew. At one point in the service, I was to introduce the extended family, and they would come up and sing a song from the stage. So I introduced the family, and 45 people filed onto the stage to sing. This was a powerful family, and over the years, they let me know it. I learned more than I wanted about all their ancestors and their role in the life of that church.

Our ancestry, our race, our lineage are not important in God's family. I've heard it said the gospel of Jesus Christ is the great equalizer. God loves all people, every nation, every tribe, and every tongue. I pray our country comes to its senses and learns what God values.

And I just want to add that God calls out racism as evil. And the church sins if it doesn't call out racism as evil as well. And I want to say that we need not only to continue to take a stand against the evil of racism, but we also need to take a stand for our dear neighbors in the Asian community. This violence must stop. It should sicken every follower of Christ to see the violence carried out against the most vulnerable, and even more so when a particular community is targeted. Pray for protection in these neighborhoods and figure out what it looks like for you to take a stand against racism.

So Paul moves on and says, "Let's boast about what really matters." Did these puffed-up super apostles really serve Christ?

"Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have worked much harder" (v. 23a). So Paul says, "If you stack me up against them, I served Christ even more." In the following verses, Paul makes sure the Corinthians know that he worked much harder and suffered much more in his service to Christ than these false teachers.

Paul lingers on this last credential of servant because this is the heart of the matter. They had the oratory skills, the flash, the sparkle, the polished sermons, they had pedigree, but did they have a sincere heart of devotion to Christ?

So the text takes an incredible turn. Instead of listing his accomplishments in his service, Paul lists his setbacks in his service. Wound by wound, scar by scar, Paul lists 24 ministry experiences. Each tells a story of his genuine devotion to Christ. And Paul is saying, did any of your false apostles go through this?

[I've] been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. vv. 23b-27

Paul is trying to tell us that when he looked back on his full life and all his success, the only thing he has to boast about is that he served Christ. And suffering for following Christ is not a sign of spiritual weakness; it's a sign of spiritual strength.

When I read through this list, I ask myself, "What have I ever really endured for Christ's sake?" It makes me feel two things: First, grateful that God has never asked me to endure such things. He could have, he could have asked us all to, but he did not. And second, at the same time, I wonder if my life has not been over-protected. I wonder if I would rise up with spiritual strength if I were called to endure such a thing. You cannot read this without being impressed with what Paul endured for Christ's sake.

"Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?" (vv. 28-29). Next, Paul shows us his strength by his pastoral concern for the Corinthians. He genuinely cared about their welfare. He's asking, "Did these false apostles lose any sleep over your welfare? He cares about those who are weak in faith and who are led to stumble and fall into sin because of the behavior of the false apostles. The suffering of the Corinthians caused Paul grief. Their grief stoked the fires of his grief. What better example of pastoral care than to come alongside and help carry the grief and pain others carry.

As I studied this week, I was reminded how amazing Paul's example of pastoral care is to us; his ability to respond to the emotional heart-cries of people. As we read this, it raises the question: "What made this man willing to go through all this for the church? The best answer I can find is the one Paul himself gives us in Chapter 5 verse 14, "the love of Christ compels me,"

That love flowed through Paul and reached those around him. Paul just loved people. In 1 Thessalonians 2:8, Paul says, *"When we came among you we imparted to you not only the gospel but our very lives also because you became very dear unto us..."*

These false apostles didn't love this. As Jesus himself said, *"So when he [the hired hand] sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away," (John 10:12b).* And Paul ends this section of his letter describing an incident from his early days as a Christian. It seems to be his grand finale on this whole business of boasting.

"If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness" (v. 30). Paul says, if you are not convinced yet of my weakness, listen to this last experience. It was humiliating; no super apostle would boast about this.

The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, who is to be praised forever, knows that I am not lying. In Damascus the governor under King Aretas had the city of the Damascenes guarded in order to arrest me. But I was lowered in a basket from a window in the wall and slipped through his hands. vv. 31-33

The account of this is recorded in Acts 9:23-25. After his conversion, he went into the wilderness of Arabia for a while. There he studied through the Scriptures to understand how he had missed seeing who Jesus was because he had regarded him as fake. But as he searched, he

found Christ on every page. He must have seen him in Isaiah 53 and Psalm 22, in the sacrifices of the Old Testament, in the arrangement of the tabernacle, everything pointed to Jesus.

When he came back from that experience, he had two burning convictions in his heart: First, that the Old Testament proved that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah, and he went into the synagogues and began to demonstrate this to the Jews from their own Scriptures. The second thing that he was convinced of was that God had chosen him to be the apostle to the Jews. And he tried. With his brilliant mind, his great knowledge of Scripture, his work ethic, and with all his Hebrew qualifications, he tried.

But things kept falling apart on him until it reached such a terrible state that one night the governor, at the urging of the Jewish leaders in Damascus, tried to find him so that they might arrest him and put him to death. On hearing about it, his friends took him out to one of those houses built on the wall of Damascus, and through a window, they let him down in a basket in the dark of the night. Paul says, "The night I became "a basket case," and that is the thing I boast about."

Isn't that amazing? Looking back, he says, "That was it. As I walked away from the city of Damascus, with all my plans and dreams of glory for Christ collapsed around my feet, that was the night I began to learn a great truth: My natural gifts are not what qualifies me as a servant of Christ."

We are being bombarded with the philosophy that natural abilities are what make you usable as a Christian—a strong personality, an outgoing, optimistic outlook, gifts of leadership, handsome frame and body, musical ability, speaking ability—all these are the things that God will use.

Paul says, "That's a bunch of baloney. I had to learn that Christ working in me is the only thing that God approves of." Anybody who is a Christian has Christ in them. And if you learn to accept this truth, then our service to Christ suddenly becomes meaningful and valuable. Your basket case experience is what is worth boasting about. Our natural abilities must always follow behind our submission to Christ.

You know, if Paul were alive today, living like many Christians do today, he would have this list of things that he endured printed up and published everywhere, wouldn't he? You would be hearing, "Come and hear the man who was beaten five times for Christ and endured tremendous hardships and dangers. Come and hear this man who has been stoned for his faith, who has been in shipwrecks, night and day, etc." Paul would dismiss all this with a wave of his hand and say, "The thing that I want to be known for is the time I was let down over the wall in a basket."

Paul gives us in this passage the only two things worth boasting about—Christ's strength and our weakness.

In Philippians 3:7-8, Paul writes,

But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I

have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ.

What is the next step for you to embrace your weakness and give yourself away in service to him and others?

What are the actual ways weakness is manifest in your life? Is it a tough marriage? A kid who is a disappointment? A career setback? Your physical appearance? What is your basket lowering experience where God wants you to draw close to him? Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it. (Matthew 10:39)

I am one of those guys who put off getting physical exams in the last year during COVID. Well, I paid my good doctor a visit recently. I said, "Doctor, the only thing new for me is that I am noticing my body and mind don't bounce back like they used to. I can't work as long and as well. And I have a harder time staying focused." There wasn't much he could say to that, so this became a spiritual exercise for me.

I realized that I have this weakness I need to embrace, and this passage showed me that if I embrace my weakness and offer it up to God, it can become a strength. As I journaled about these thoughts, God was saying, "Trust me and carve out rest. Trust me and have regular sabbath. Trust me and maintain healthy boundaries. Trust me and stay connected to me." This is hard. I feel vulnerable sharing this weakness.

Jesus uses the metaphor of a grapevine with branches that are connected to the vine, and these branches receive nutrients and produce good fruit as long as they stay connected to the vine.

I am the Vine, you are the branches. When you're joined with me and I with you, the relation intimate and organic, the harvest is sure to be abundant. Separated, you can't produce a thing. John 15:5, The Message

But for God's strength to prevail through me, I need to embrace my weakness and trust in his strength. It's no longer about serving harder and serving longer; it must now be about serving smarter by staying connected to the vine. It must be about embracing the thought that God has more to teach me so that my weakness of limited energy can become a strength through him.

Don't deny the pain and pressures of life. Paul didn't, and we shouldn't either. Boast in your basket case experiences because if we see them as Paul does, we will see them as opportunities to understand true spiritual strength.

We cannot overstate this. Stay connected to the vine for nourishment. Nourishment is what gives us peace and joy. Nourishment keeps us from panic, from making dumb decisions, from anger, from bitterness, from guilt, and from feeling unworthy.

Staying connected to the vine helps us realize that if we are having a tough go right now, it doesn't mean God moved away from us. Our one true God, in three persons, will always be good, always be powerful, always be personally involved in our lives, and always be in control of all events on earth and heaven as we wait for him to take us home to be with him forever.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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