

“A Call to Boast...in God Alone”

1 Corinthians 1:17-31

January 22, 2017

Pop quiz:

- Christians should never boast?
- Christians should boast?

The Bible tells us not to boast. And the Bible tells us to boast. This is not a contradiction. The determining factor in whether or not we should boast is the object of our boasting. For example:

- Jeremiah 9:23-24 – “Thus says the LORD, “Let not a wise man **boast** of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man **boast** of his might, let not a rich man **boast** of his riches; but let him who boasts **boast** of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD who exercises lovingkindness, justice, and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things,” declares the LORD.
- James 4:16 – “You boast in your arrogance; all such boasting is evil.
- Galatians 6:14 – “But may it never be that I should **boast**, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

As Pastor Nick showed us last week, the problem in the Corinthian church was that they were boasting in the wrong thing. There were factions and divisions in the church because they were taking pride in human leaders rather than centering their lives and fellowship in Christ. The underlying root to every problem in the Corinthian church was pride.

In today’s passage Paul is going to proceed to pull the rug of pride out from under all their improper boasting. Let me summarize it this way:

There is no place for pride, but only praise, in the church where we belong because of grace.

(Casting Crowns: “not because of who I am, but because of what You’ve done; not because of what I’ve done, but because of who You are”)

For today’s purposes let me give you a working definition of pride and praise—both of them are a form of boasting:

- Pride is *boasting* in self and inflating ourselves as all-important.
- Praise is *boasting* in God and exalting His supreme importance.

In our passage Paul is going to contrast man’s wisdom with God’s wisdom in a way that is meant to crush pride (human boasting) and replace it with praise (boasting in God). Let me show you the landing strip at the end of our passage so that you know where we are headed. There are two purpose statements at the end of chapter 1. 1) Vs. 29: “so that no man may boast before God.” 2) Vs. 31: “so that, just as it is written, ‘Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord.’” Now how are we going to get from the church’s prideful divisions (vs. 10-16) to this dual purpose to stop boasting in man and start boasting in God (vs. 29, 31)? Paul needs to remind us that God’s wisdom displayed through the gospel is not like the world’s wisdom that they have brought into the church. He needs to remind us that our place in the church has nothing to do with our own accolades but everything to do with God’s generous grace.

The inherent power of the gospel (vs. 17-18)

Members of the Corinthian church had been arrogantly claiming a sense of status based on which leader they associated themselves with, whether Paul, Peter, or Apollos. Paul wants to immediately defuse any notion that people should be following him at the expense of putting their identity solely in Christ. Paul does not exist to make disciples of himself, but to be a signpost that point people to Jesus Christ. That’s why he says in vs. 17, “*For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not in cleverness of speech, so that the cross of Christ would not be made void.*” As important as baptism is, the heart of Paul’s ministry is the gospel—to proclaim how people could become one with Christ. Even in the preaching of the gospel, Paul the messenger wanted to decrease so as not to distract from the message. Unlike the Corinthian philosophers of his day, Paul refused to use clever speech. They prided themselves in the persuasiveness of their

rhetoric, but Paul didn't leave room for anyone to claim that his effectiveness was based on his oratory skills. That would detract from the inherent power of the gospel message itself.

Furthermore, this message that Paul preaches is regarded as foolishness by those who are perishing [vs. 18]. In other words, from the perspective of worldly wisdom no one would stake their hope on a Messiah who was apparently defeated on a Roman cross. And yet Paul goes on to say that there is real power in the message of the cross for those who are being saved. Here's the point: when you have an unimpressive preacher and a puzzling message, the only way you can explain radically changed lives is that there must be a real power in the message of the cross.

There are tremendous implications here for those who preach and teach. On the one hand we must work very hard to articulate the message as clearly as possible. And yet we must never rely upon our own clever persuasiveness in attempts to change people. It is God's power through the message of the cross that transforms and so we must not only study but pray for His Spirit's work in our hearts.

The Futility of Man's Wisdom (vs. 19-21)

Now Paul goes on to give us two reasons as to why we should not resort to human wisdom.

First ***we should not resort to human wisdom because human wisdom cannot deliver us from the power of God.*** [vs. 19-20]. In vs. 19 Paul is quoting Isaiah 29:14 where Isaiah is prophesying about an event that took place in 2 Kings 17. The king of Assyria was planning to conquer Judah but but the Lord assured his people that they need not worry because the Assyria's plan would fail, not because of Judah's military strength but solely because of God's intervention. God sent a single angel that wiped out 185,000 of Assyrian soldiers. The point is this, you can never be clever enough to outsmart God or circumvent His power. No amount of human wisdom can deliver you from the power of God. Nahum 1:9 – "*Whatever you devise against the Lord, he will make a complete end of it.*" Proverbs

14:12 says, "*There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.*" Human/worldly wisdom that disregards the Lord, is by God's design foolish and will be ultimately destroyed by Him.

Second, ***we should not resort to human wisdom because human wisdom cannot lead us to the knowledge of God.*** [vs. 21] By God's design, the world cannot arrive at a true knowledge of God by means of mere human wisdom.

This makes perfect sense because human wisdom factors God out of the equation. Humanity is blind to the true knowledge of God. Yet God is pleased to save those who believe in the seemingly foolishness of the message of the cross.

Do you see now that if human wisdom is not match for the power of God and human wisdom cannot lead you to the knowledge of God, it leaves no room for human boasting.

The surprising power and wisdom of the gospel (vs. 22-24)

Paul turns now from discussing the futility of human wisdom to show us the surprising power and wisdom of God in the gospel in vs. 22-24. "The Jews ask for signs"—they want to see displays of power and even though Jesus gave them many miracles they still refused to believe His claims. "The Greeks search for wisdom"—they love to debate philosophy and express high ideas with eloquence. "But we preach Christ crucified" which is a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles. Generally speaking the Jews and Gentiles both reject the message of the cross because the idea of a crucified messiah doesn't fit in their perspective of one we should put our hope in. They are looking for someone who is strong, not someone who has been crucified on a Roman cross. It seems foolish and offensive to suggest that a crucified man should be considered the epitome of power and wisdom.

And yet Paul goes on to say in vs. 24, "*but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God.*" Who are "the called"? (Notice that the definite article is included here so that it is a specific group of people) "The called" are the same group of people

referred to as those who believe in vs. 21. Paul has just reminded us that we cannot come to the knowledge of God (believe) on the basis of human wisdom alone. We are blind to spiritual truth. So how is it then that some can see and believe? They are called by God. In vs. 2, saints by calling. In vs. 9, those whom God has called into fellowship with Jesus. The gospel is preached to Jews and Gentiles indiscriminately, but the called are those whom the Spirit of God reveals the truth of the gospel to in such a way that the eyes of their heart are opened to repent and believe in Jesus. Do you see how this eliminates human boasting in the church? We belong because of God's gracious calling, not because of our own wisdom! And so we can say, ***There is no place for pride, but only praise, in the church where we belong because of grace.***

Do you see how this all fits together? Human wisdom is not match for the power of God (which the Jews seek) and human wisdom cannot not lead to the knowledge or wisdom of God (which the Greeks seek) yet both the power and wisdom of God are found in the unconventional message of the cross. This crucified Christ is Himself both the wisdom and power of God bringing salvation to those who believe.

The Supreme Wisdom and Power of God (vs. 25)

Therefore Paul concludes in vs. 25, that *"the foolishness of God is wiser than men and the weakness of God is stronger than men."* Wait a minute! Is there any foolishness or weakness in God? No. Paul is talking about the message of the cross from the world's perspective. This crucified Messiah which seems weak and foolish to the world is superior to the wisdom of the world because human wisdom cannot lead to the knowledge of God or deliver from the power of God. But Jesus, the crucified Messiah, is both the wisdom and power of God to those who believe.

The Paradox of God's Wisdom (vs. 26-28)

There is a paradox¹ here, that in the wisdom of God He chooses what is weak and foolish from a human perspective to shame those who appear to be strong in the world's eyes. Paul takes this paradox and reminds the believers at Corinth that it reflects God's choice of them. **[vs. 26-28]** In other words, look around you and consider whom God has called. The church by in large is filled with pretty ordinary people. So what do they have to boast about? How can they proudly posture themselves above others in the church when God chose them for their weakness rather than their strength?

The Purpose of God's paradoxical Wisdom (vs. 29-31)

Now we can see the runway approaching. In vs. 29-31 Paul lands on the dual purpose behind God's paradoxical wisdom. Why would God choose the weak, foolish, and despised in the world's eyes? *"So that no man may boast before God"* (vs. 29). In His wisdom God has undermined what the world values (strength, status, might, worldly wisdom) so that no one can boast before God. That's the first part of God's purpose, to undermine/eliminate human pride.

The second part of God's purpose is that He Himself has undertaken to accomplish for us all we need for salvation and godliness so that God will receive the praise—vs 30: *"but by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption, so that , just as it is written, "Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord."* Our wisdom, our righteousness, our sanctification, and our redemption are not the result of our own accomplishments, but God's grace. So how can we boast in ourselves? And how can we not boast in the Lord? In the words of Ephesians 2:8-9, *"It is by grace that you have been saved, through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God that no one should boast."* May all praise be to God!

¹ Paradox- a statement contrary to commonly accepted opinion; seemingly absurd or contradictory.

Here's the bottom line: ***There is no place for pride, but only praise, in the church where we belong because of grace.***

Pride will bring ruin and death wherever it is allowed to reign because postures you in opposition to God. God hates pride.

- Prov 6:16-17 – “There are six things that the Lord hates, seven which are an abomination to Him...” and the first one mentioned is “haughty eyes.”
- Prov 16:5 – “Everyone who is arrogant is an abomination to the Lord.”
- Jeremiah 50:31 – “I am against you, O proud one.”

In the Corinthian church pride surfaced in divisions and factions, finding status in the human leaders they identified with. But there are a thousand other ways that pride can surface not only in the church but also in our home and workplaces.

We would be completely amiss if we went home and said, “good word,” without looking for the root of pride in our *own* hearts. So I want to end by moving into a time of reflection. Nancy Leigh DeMoss has identified a number of characteristics that portray a proud heart and the corresponding traits of a broken heart. I want to share some of them with you ask you to prayerfully weigh your heart before the Lord. This is not a time to weigh someone else's heart, but to carefully examine yourself. I'm going to read some cooresponding sets of traits followed by a few seconds of silence for you think and pray. But before we do that, let me just pray for us.

The Heart God Revives²

Attitudes toward others:

- **Proud people focus on the failures of others and readily point out those faults.** *Broken people are overwhelmed with a sense of their own spiritual need.*
- **Proud people have a critical, faultfinding spirit. They look at everyone else's faults with a microscope but view their own with a telescope.** *Broken people are compassionate, able to forgive much because they know how much they have been forgiven.*

- **Proud people are especially prone to criticize those in authority and talk to others about the faults they see.** *Broken people encourage and pray for those in authority.*
- **Proud people are self-righteous; they think highly of themselves and look down on others.** *Broken people think the best of others and esteem others more highly than themselves.*
- **Proud people have an independent, self-sufficient spirit.** *Broken people have a dependent spirit, recognizing their need for God and others.*
- **Proud people have to prove that they are right—they have to get the last word.** *Broken people are willing to yield the right to be right.*
- **Proud people claim their rights with a demanding spirit.** *Humble people yield their rights with a meek spirit.*
- **Proud people are self-protective of their time, their rights, and their reputation.** *Broken people are self-denying and self-sacrificing.*

Attitudes about service and ministry:

- **Proud people desire to be served—they want life to revolve around them and their own needs.** *Broken people are motivated to serve others and to be sure other's needs are met before their own.*
- **Proud people desire to be known as a success.** *Broken people are motivated to be faithful and make others successful.*
- **Proud people feel that this ministry is privileged to have them and their gifts.** *Broken people have a heart attitude that says, “I don't deserve any part of this ministry. They know that all they have to offer is by God's grace.*

Attitudes about recognition:

- **Proud people crave self-advancement.** *Broken people desire to promote others.*
- **Proud people have a drive to be recognized and appreciated by others for their efforts.** *Broken people have a sense of their own unworthiness; they are thrilled that God would use them at all.*

² Nancy Leigh DeMoss, *Brokenness: The Heart God Revives*, pg. 88-98.

- **Proud people get wounded when others are promoted and they are overlooked.** *Broken people are eager for others to get the credit, and they rejoice when others are lifted up.*
- **Proud people are elated by praise and deflated by criticism.** *Broken people know that any praise of their accomplishments belongs to the Lord and that criticism can help them grow into spiritual maturity.*

Attitudes about themselves:

- **Proud people feel confident in how much they know.** *Broken people are humbled by how very much they have to learn.*
- **Proud people are self-conscious; they worry about what others think of them.** *Broken people are not preoccupied with what others think of them.*
- **Proud people are concerned about appearing respectable; they are driven to protect their image and reputation.** *Broken people are concerned with being real; they care less about what others think than about what God knows—they are willing to die to their own reputation.*
- **Proud people can't bear to fail or for anyone else to think they are less than perfect. This can drive them to extremes—workaholic tendencies, perfectionism, the tendency to drive others or to place unrealistic expectations on themselves or others.** *Broken people can recognize and live within God-given limitations.*

Attitudes about relationships:

- **Proud people keep others at arm's length.** *Broken people are willing to take the risks of getting close to others and loving intimately.*
- **Proud people are quick to blame others.** *Broken people accept personal responsibility and can acknowledge where they were wrong in a situation.*
- **Proud people wait for others to come and ask for forgiveness when there is a misunderstanding or a breach in a relationship.**

Broken people take the initiative to be reconciled, no matter how wrong the other party may have been.

- **Proud people are unapproachable or defensive when corrected.** *Broken people receive correction with a humble, open spirit.*
- **Proud people find it difficult to discuss their spiritual needs with others.** *Broken people are willing to be open and transparent with others as God directs.*
- **Proud people try to control the people and circumstances around them—they are prone to manipulate.** *Broken people trust in God—they rest in Him and are able to wait for Him to act on their behalf.*
- **Proud people become bitter and resentful when they are wronged; they have emotional temper tantrums; they hold others hostage and are easily offended; they carry grudges and keep a record of wrongs.** *Broken people give thanks in all things; they are quick to forgive those who wrong them.*

Attitudes about sin:

- **Proud people want to be sure that no one finds out when they have sinned; their instinct is to cover up.** *Broken people aren't overly concerned with who knows or finds out about their sin—they are willing to be exposed because they have nothing to lose.*
- **Proud people have a hard time saying, "I was wrong; will you please forgive me?"** *Broken people are quick to admit their failure and to seek forgiveness when necessary.*
- **Proud people tend to deal in generalities when confessing their sin to God ("Dear God, please forgive me for all my sins...") or expressing spiritual need to others ("I need to be a better Christian...").** *Broken people are able to acknowledge specifics when confessing their sin: "Lord, I agree with You that I love myself more than I love my mate; I confess that I am addicted to television; I'm a glutton; I have a critical spirit; I am an angry mother..."*
- **Proud people are concerned with the consequences of their sin.** **They are disturbed over the problems caused by their sin—for example, the financial bondage created by their overspending, or the problems in their marriage that have resulted from selfishness**

and immoral choices. *Broken people are grieved over the cause, the root of their sin. They are more concerned about how their sin has grieved and dishonored God than about the problems it has created in their lives.*

- **Proud people are remorseful over their sin—sorry that they got caught or found out.** *Broken people are truly repentant over their sin, and the evidence of their repentance is that they forsake their sin.*

Attitudes about their walk with God:

- **Proud people are blind to the true condition of their hearts.** *Broken people walk in the light and acknowledge the truth about their lives.*
- **Proud people compare themselves with others and feel worthy of respect.** *Broken people compare themselves with the holiness of God and feel a desperate need for His mercy.*
- **Proud people don't think they need revival, but they are sure everyone else does.** (In fact, right about now, they are making a mental list of people who need to read this). *Broken people continually sense their need for a fresh encounter with God and for a fresh infilling of His Holy Spirit.*