

## **PRIDE: WHEN IT'S WRONG & WHEN IT'S RIGHT 2 CORINTHIANS 10:12 – 11:33**

Most of us find it difficult to be around people who boast and brag about their accomplishments. The late heavyweight boxing champion, Muhammad Ali, somehow got away with it. He raised boasting to an art form and made it somehow entertaining. Here's a few examples: "I'm not the greatest. I'm the double greatest. Not only do I knock 'em out, I pick the round. I'm the boldest, the prettiest, the most superior, most scientific, most skillfullest fighter in the ring today." ... "It's hard to be humble when you're as great as I am." ... "Float like a butterfly sting like a bee – his hands can't hit what his eyes can't see." ... "I'm so fast that last night I turned off the light switch in my hotel room and was in bed before the room was dark." That's boasting! In addition to being a great boxer, Muhammad Ali, knew how to market himself and the sport of boxing. His boastful statements got people interested in boxing – lots of people who would otherwise have had no interest in either Ali or boxing whatsoever.

What on earth does Muhammad Ali and boasting have to do with the Bible and Paul's second letter to the Christians living in Corinth? Perhaps more than you might imagine! Boasting is one of the dominant themes in chapters 10 and 11 of 2 Corinthians. When you boast in something – be it yourself, or someone else, or something else - it means you take pride in or you have confidence in whatever you just boasted in. The overarching, mega theme of 2 Corinthians is the idea of being cruciform – living a cross-shaped life. When you and I resemble and reflect Jesus in our actions, in our attitudes, in how we treat other people, and in how we live out our lives each day, we're cruciform. We have a cross-shaped life. Being cruciform even impacts what you take pride in, what you have confidence in, and what you boast about.

As we've been learning, Paul had a difficult relationship with many of the Christians in Corinth even though he was their spiritual father. Most of them had become followers of Jesus through his evangelistic ministry. But, as a group, they were still very immature spiritually. They were still more Corinthian than Christian in their values, in their morals, in their understanding, and in what it meant to be cruciform. After Paul left Corinth, a group of so-called Christian leaders and teachers arrived. They did everything possible to undermine Paul's influence and impact in the congregation while boasting about their credentials, their accomplishments, and their spirituality. Like Muhammad Ali, they were champion boasters. Greco-Roman culture in the first century expected leaders – even spiritual leaders - to toot their own horn. So, most of the Corinthian Christians weren't offended by their boasting. How these rascals presented themselves was culturally acceptable to the Corinthians. In fact, when Paul wrote about God's power being seen best in and through human weakness, many of the Corinthians just scratched their heads in bewilderment.

In the interests of time today, we're going to read just parts of chapters 10 and 11. Notice how often the theme of boasting comes up. Whenever we read Scripture, it's appropriate to ask these questions, "How can I apply this to my life today? What difference does this make in how I live out my faith today?" This passage we just read helps us answer at least two questions.

## WHAT'S WRONG TO BOAST ABOUT OR TAKE PRIDE IN?

First of all, it's wrong to put my confidence in my physical appearance. Paul alluded to this in a verse we didn't read. "For some say, 'Paul's letters are demanding and forceful, but in person he is weak, and his speeches are worthless!'" (2 Cor 10:10 NLT) All the available evidence points to the fact Paul didn't make have an impressive or particularly attractive physical appearance. In Greco-Roman culture, a person's physical appearance was considered to be very important and necessary to being a leader and making a good impression on others. People haven't changed that much 20 centuries later. Very attractive people or those who can project authority, clout, or charisma just get noticed more and inspire more confidence than those who don't. But we need to be reminded today that our physical attractiveness or lack thereof has no standing before God. God made that clear back in the Old Testament, too, when he selected David to replace Saul as king. "People judge by outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart." (1 Sam 16:7 NLT) Of course, this doesn't mean we should just care less about our physical appearance. There's every good and biblical reason to make the most of what we've been given! It simply means that physical appearance – either my own or someone else's – is not something we should take pride in. It's nothing to boast about.

Then, it's also wrong to put my confidence in my background. This is pride in or boasting about your ethnicity, the family you come from, or the class or social group you're born into. Paul wrote here, "But whatever they dare to boast about—I'm talking like a fool again—I dare to boast about it, too. Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they descendants of Abraham? So am I." (2 Cor 11:21-22 NLT) That implied these false teachers were ethnic Jews who suggested that just because they were Jewish, the Corinthians should listen to them. They took pride in their Jewish heritage. They believed they were born into a chosen race. They were in a place to provide spiritual knowledge simply because they were physical descendants of Abraham. Again, in that day and time, it was assumed you could only ever be an exceptional person if you were born into the right kind of family. Nobility only surfaced in those who were well-born, never among people who had humble beginnings.

Now, here Paul suggested that if these men wanted to brag about being Jewish, then the Corinthians should remember he was no less Jewish than they were. But in other places, Paul made it very clear your background makes no difference to God. God loves all people and He will work in and through anyone surrendered to Jesus regardless of your ethnicity, what family you were born into, or what social class you come from. To Christian Jews and non-Jews he wrote elsewhere, "For you are all children of God through faith in Christ Jesus.... There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Gal 3:26, 28 NLT) Your background is not something to take pride in. It's nothing to boast about.

These two chapters underline the fact that it's also wrong to put my confidence in my natural abilities or learned skills. Again, Greco-Roman culture in the first century put a

premium on rhetorical skills like eloquence, oratory, and persuasive speech. If you were a speaker or a teacher, you were expected to put on a show! What did Paul say about that here? “But I don’t consider myself inferior in any way to these ‘super apostles’ who teach such things. I may be unskilled as a speaker, but I’m not lacking in knowledge.” (2 Cor 11:5-6 NLT) Apparently these false teachers considered Paul to be inferior or deficient as an orator. Paul admitted he hadn’t been trained in public speaking, but so what? What mattered was having correct knowledge about God not being a great speaker! Paul had no interest in amusing, entertaining, or using persuasive arguments to convince people about their need for Jesus. Instead, he depended on the power of the Holy Spirit to convince people about the meaning of Jesus’ death and resurrection. In the Christian faith, what matters is not style but substance. That’s not to suggest your abilities or skills are unimportant or shouldn’t be developed or used. It’s just that they aren’t something to take pride in or boast about.

We also learn here it’s wrong to put my confidence in my successes or accomplishments. These false teachers were apparently bragging and boasting about how many visions they had received from God, how knowledgeable they were about God, and how many followers they had. Paul was particularly irritated by the fact that while these men wanted to be recognized as spiritual leaders by the Corinthian Christians, they had done nothing to evangelize these people or get the church started. Paul was the one who had done that. Then they had the gall to undermine Paul and try to get the Corinthians to disown him! So, he wrote here, “We will not boast about things done outside our area of authority. We will boast only about what has happened within the boundaries of the work God has given us, which includes our working with you.... Nor do we boast and claim credit for the work someone else has done.” (2 Cor 11:13, 15 NLT) We can be thankful to God for any and every success or accomplishment we receive in life, but who gets the ultimate credit? Is it God or is it me? If God is the One who make us successful in life or gives us the ability to accomplish certain things, then those are never things to take pride in or boast about.

These chapters help us to sum up wrongful pride or boasting. It’s always wrong to promote or put ultimate confidence in myself. Paul mentioned that specifically here. “Oh, don’t worry; we wouldn’t dare say that we are as wonderful as these other men who tell you how important they are! But they are only comparing themselves with each other, using themselves as the standard of measurement. How ignorant!” (2 Cor 10:12 NLT) In the first century it was very common to compare yourself with other teachers. That’s how you attracted new students and the money they’d give to you for teaching them. You were expected to advertise and praise yourself publicly while casting doubt on the qualities of your competitors. Boasting in and about yourself was considered honorable. By the same token, a person’s race, upbringing, education, status, physique, and accomplishments – or lack thereof - were all fair game in sizing up yours and your rival’s merits and standing. Paul said that kind of evaluation had no place among Christian leaders or among Christians at all anytime for that matter.

He went on to explain why. “When people commend themselves, it doesn’t count for much. The important thing is for the Lord to commend them.” (2 Cor 10:18 NLT) When

you have to promote yourself and explain to other people why you're so special, it all gets to be rather pathetic. At the end of the day, what matters is if we get the Lord's pat on the back, not whether we pat ourselves on the back. What matters is to hear the Lord say, "Well done, good and faithful servant," not whether we congratulate ourselves for a job well done. Now, let's understand this correctly. This isn't about having a healthy sense of self-esteem and knowing you're a person of value before God. Of course you are! This is about giving credit where credit is due. Does God get the credit or do you? The fact is people are going to promote and commend themselves until Jesus returns. But promoting and commending yourself instead of God has no place among God's people. Resist the temptation to promote yourself. And don't ever follow a spiritual leader who promotes or commends himself. It's the wrong kind of pride.

You've heard of pufferfish, right? Pufferfish can inflate into a ball shape to evade predators. Also known as blowfish, these clumsy swimmers fill their elastic stomachs with huge amounts of water (and sometimes air) and blow themselves up to several times their normal size. But these fish aren't just cute. Most pufferfish contain a toxic substance that makes them foul tasting and potentially deadly to other fish. The toxin is also deadly to humans—1,200 times more deadly than cyanide. There's enough poison in one pufferfish to kill 30 adult human beings, and there is no known antidote. Like pufferfish, human beings can blow themselves up with pride and arrogance to make themselves look bigger than they are. And this pride can become toxic to a marriage, a church, or a friendship. No wonder the late Bible scholar John Stott once said, "Pride is your greatest enemy, humility is your greatest friend." Well, can pride ever be a good thing? Yes! Absolutely Let's think about it together.

## **WHAT'S RIGHT TO BOAST ABOUT OR TAKE PRIDE IN?**

It's actually right and good to put your confidence in the right person or the right thing. It's right and good to take pride in or boast about certain things. In 2 Corinthians 10 and 11, it's a bit obscure, to be sure, but it's definitely there. There is a proper, good, and right kind of boasting that should never be omitted or shunned simply because sometimes boasting is done for the wrong reasons. Paul did something kind of sly and ironic here. On the one hand, he adopted some of his enemies tactics by talking about what he had accomplished for Jesus and what he had endured in his ministry while at the same time admitting it was foolish to do so. "Such boasting is not from the Lord, but I am acting like a fool. And since others boast about their human achievements, I will, too." (2 Cor 11:17-18 NLT) And then he went on to describe how hard and faithfully he had worked for Jesus. "Are they servants of Christ? I know I sound like a madman, but I have served him far more! I have worked harder, been put in prison more often, been whipped times without number, and faced death again and again." (2 Cor 11:23 NLT)

On the other hand, what Paul mentioned as his credentials, his achievements, his accomplishments, or his successes was not your typical list. He said nothing about number of converts, number of churches started, number of miles traveled to spread the Gospel, how many of his letters ended up being acknowledged as God's inspired Word, how many visions he had received, or how much money he had raised for the starving

Christians in Jerusalem. Instead, he took pride in whatever revealed Jesus' power through his sufferings, setbacks, disappointments, and weaknesses. Listen to Paul's list of "successes" or "accomplishments." "Five different times the Jewish leaders gave me thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked. Once I spent a whole night and a day adrift at sea. I have traveled on many long journeys. I have faced danger from rivers and from robbers. I have faced danger from my own people, the Jews, as well as from the Gentiles. I have faced danger in the cities, in the deserts, and on the seas. And I have faced danger from men who claim to be believers but are not. I have worked hard and long, enduring many sleepless nights. I have been hungry and thirsty and have often gone without food. I have shivered in the cold, without enough clothing to keep me warm. Then, besides all this, I have the daily burden of my concern for all the churches." (2 Cor 11:24-28 NLT) That list might sound impressive to us, but it must have seemed doubly foolish to Paul's enemies. They thought all those things disqualified Paul from being a great Christian leader, but here he was boasting in them and taking pride in them!

So, what can we learn from all that? It's right to put my confidence in whatever reveals Jesus' power more fully in my life – even my weaknesses. If you want to boast, boast about what Jesus has helped you endure as you follow Him. If you need to brag, brag about how Jesus' power is revealed in and through your weaknesses and failures. If you want to feel pride about something, take pride in how Jesus has sustained you, blest you, and used you to help build His kingdom despite all the setbacks, all the humiliating experiences, and all the tough moments life has brought your way. Isn't that what Paul was doing here? He said here, "If I must boast, I would rather boast about the things that show how weak I am." (2 Cor 11:30 NLT) Then, he went on to describe how when he was a brand new convert he had to escape the king of Damascus by being lowered from a window in the city wall! Hiding in a basket wasn't something someone with great power and influence would do. That humiliating, undignified experience was a snapshot of what was to come in the years ahead for Paul. But it was also proof positive he was Jesus' true servant.

Suffering, not success, authenticated Paul's ministry. He boasted in his weaknesses, not his strengths, because they revealed the all-sufficiency of Jesus. This was radical thinking – a counterculture way of thinking - unique to Paul who was expanding the concept of what it means to be cruciform – to have a life shaped by the cross. And it also flies in the face of today's resume-obsessed culture which still worships physical beauty, pedigree, credentials, intelligence, success, and accomplishments just as much as people living in first century Corinth. As odd as it may sound, there's a good kind of pride or boasting. It's whatever reveals Jesus' power in my life – even my weaknesses.

What Paul said here was a unique way of getting around to a very basic, but very important truth about a good and right kind of pride. It's right to put my confidence in Jesus alone and all He has done for me. Perhaps the most important verse in these two chapters is a short one. "If you want to boast, boast only about the LORD." (2 Cor 10:17 NLT) Paul was quoting the Old Testament prophet, Jeremiah. "This is what the Lord says: 'Don't let the wise boast in their wisdom, or the powerful boast in their power,

or the rich boast in their riches. But those who wish to boast should boast in this alone: that they truly know me and understand that I am the Lord who demonstrates unfailing love and who brings justice and righteousness to the earth, and that I delight in these things. I, the Lord, have spoken!” (Jer 9:23-24 NLT) Paul knew it was ridiculous for him to take pride in his achievements or in how many ecstatic spiritual experiences he might have had. Those only pointed to Jesus’ greatness, not his. This wasn’t some kind of false humility. It was reality. Nothing of any spiritual or eternal value is produced unless the Lord enables it to happen. So why take credit for what only God can do?

It’s human to boast and we all do it. But to boast in the Lord is what God’s people are called to do. Did you know that’s really what any and every worship service should be about? We gather here on Sundays – in person or online – to boast in who God is and what God has done. Our songs brag about God’s greatness, Jesus’ love, and the Holy Spirit’s power. Our prayers boast of God’s ability to meet all of our needs. We listen to messages that encourage us to place an increasing amount of our confidence in this God who loves us and has done so much for us. In a few moments we’re going to celebrate the Lord’s Supper together. I realize it might sound weird, but Communion is another way we boast and brag about what Jesus accomplished through His death and resurrection. We are proud of and thankful for what He achieved on our behalf. It’s an expression of our confidence and our trust. We take good, right, and justifiable pride in all that God has done on our behalf. To boast in the Lord is what we’re called to do. “If you want to boast, boast only about the LORD.” (2 Cor 10:17 NLT)

A few decades ago, the Chicago Bulls were the best team in professional basketball. That’s probably true because they had arguably the best basketball player ever in Michael Jordan. During the 1990 season, the Bulls had a reserve player named Stacey King. During that long season, King only started in six games and averaged 15 minutes per game. But one night, during an overtime game against Cleveland, he contributed to an important victory. He said it would always be the greatest memory of his life. It was the night he and Michael Jordan scored a combined total of 70 points in a playoff game. That’s something to boast about, brag about, and take pride in, right? Well, it depends on how you look at it.

Michael Jordan scored a career-high 69 points in that game and Stacey King scored 1 point. So, he and Jordan literally combined for 70 points, but Jordan scored 69 of them. When you do well in life, when you have some notable achievement, when you succeed, or when you engage in some kind of ministry and people are blest by your efforts and congratulate you for a job well done, who should get the credit? The One who gave you the brains, the talent, or the ability. The One who empowers and enables each and every success. Every time. Sure, take some pleasure in the 1 point you scored, but boast about and brag about the Lord who scored the 69.

Are you cruciform? Do you have a cross-shaped life? If you do, it will even change what you take pride in and what you boast about in life. You will boast about, brag about, and put more and more confidence in Jesus and in Him alone.