

However bold anyone might be (I am speaking in a foolish way), I am going to be bold too. ²² *Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Abraham's seed? So am I.* ²³ *Are they ministers of Christ? (I am speaking in a crazy way.) I am even more. I've done more hard work, been in prisons more often, been whipped far more, and I've been close to death many times.* ²⁴ *Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one.* ²⁵ *Three times I was beaten with rods. One time I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked. I have spent a night and a day on the open sea.* ²⁶ *I have often been on journeys, in danger from rivers, in danger from robbers, in danger from my own people, in danger from Gentiles, in danger in the city, in danger in the wilderness, in danger on the sea, in danger among false brothers.* ²⁷ *I have worked hard and struggled. I've spent many sleepless nights. I've been hungry and thirsty. I've gone without food many times. I've been cold and lacked clothing.*

²⁸ *Besides those external matters, there is the daily pressure on me of my concern for all the churches.* ²⁹ *Who is weak without my being weak? Who falls into sin without my being distressed?*

³⁰ *If it is necessary that I boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.*

Boast Well

During my stay in Wisconsin, there was such mythical talk of the 30 pointer, the fish this big, the one that got away, and of course if you had a wall in your house it would be decorated with the one you got. My first experience in Milwaukee involved walking into work and the office was filled, not just one wall but all four, with a hippo, bear, and many others. When the duck fell off the wall my boss would pet it and put it back. They were cherished trophies on the wall of honor where hunters boasted about their catch and shared it with you.

I'm not saying all boasting is bad – technically proper boasting is good not only in recognizing individual achievements but also in bringing honor to the community. Such boasting was good for both parties. But there is another kind of boasting, that we call bragging. And the sole purpose of bragging is to demean the group while building up the individual. I can't say the walls in Wisconsin do such a thing but there are some numbers, where boasting, and bragging isn't right.

Paul had to deal with a group of individuals whom he calls the "super-apostles," and they acted like it. As Paul went around preaching, teaching, administering the sacraments, planting churches, and being pelted with rocks and beaten with rods – another group came in behind him and boasted about how great they were doing and how well they spoke. They abused the church in Corinth and took advantage of the people. And Paul goes pastoral on them. In this section of 2 Corinthians he pours out his heart for these people. His concern for them goes well beyond anything monetary that he could gain from them – he cares for their spiritual well-being.

And if they have so foolishly followed the numbers and boasting of these super-apostles then they should at least put up with some boasting on Paul's part. But Paul's boast is different. He doesn't build himself up and boast of numbers, baptisms, letters written but he highlights his weaknesses in order to display God's grace.

So what's going on in Corinth? After Paul worked his way throughout the Roman Empire preaching the Gospel and moving on to new fields of labor another group came in behind him. Paul calls them the "super-apostles" because of their bragging. They say that Paul is weak and unreliable (1 Corinthians 1:23). They claim that, "*His letters are weighty and strong, but his physical presence is weak, and his speech amounts to nothing*" (2 Corinthians 10:10). In other words, "His bark is worse than his bite." Paul is a pushover in person and his speech is sadly lacking. They claim he is an unsuccessful preacher who is met with repeated failure. Paul admits, "*We were burdened so greatly, so far beyond our ability to bear it, that we even gave up hope of living*" (2 Corinthians 1:8, chapter 4). They attacked Paul and worst of all cast doubt on his teaching.

These "super-apostles" were false teachers who appeared to be superior to Paul in their manner and authority. They brag about themselves and their success while demeaning Paul's work. Paul has never made a habit of bragging about his work, his success, his numbers, who he was but simply referring to himself as a "jar of clay" carrying precious treasure.

But now the gloves come off and if, "You want to boast? Fine, let's do this then. Let's both speak like fools." *Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Abraham's seed? So am I.* These were serious things. Paul is from the right race, the right tribe, the right people. He has all the right credentials. *Are they ministers of Christ? (I am speaking in a crazy way.) I am even more.* Paul was called by Christ himself. We're they? Hmm. He then shifts, "*I'm talking like a mad man.*"

I've done more hard work, been in prisons more often, been whipped far more, and I've been close to death many times. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. (That means the Jews counted, the Romans did not). One time I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked. I have spent a night and a day on the open sea. I have often been on journeys, in danger from rivers, in danger from robbers, in danger from my own people, in danger from Gentiles, in danger in the city, in danger in the wilderness, in danger on the sea, in danger among false brothers. I have worked hard and struggled. I've spent many sleepless nights. I've been hungry and thirsty. I've gone without food many times. I've been cold and lacked clothing.

Paul is humble, timid, physically persecuted, self-supporting, unskilled, and physically ailing. He preached the gospel to them free of charge. Paul took no money from the Corinthians. But the "super-apostles" exerted authority and took money for their support. The super-apostles were just the opposite—bold, talented, respected, healthy—and more than

willing to take money from the Corinthians. They were not afraid to deal with the Corinthians in an authoritarian manner. Paul calls the other teachers “super-apostles” because, from all outward appearances, they are the successful ones, while he is the failure. Paul says, “If I’m going to boast – I’ll boast in things that show my weakness. These things magnify God’s grace and power to accomplish his will in spite of insurmountable odds.”

So what’s going on in Lodi? Sure we can boast about our livable, loveable Lodi. We want to instill a sense of pride in our city. Even among family we recognize great achievements such as graduations, marriage, and children. Those are all great things.

But the church is a different story. The saying goes, “The church is the only organization where you have to be unqualified to get in.” We also say that those who commune are not those who are worthy, but only those who recognize how unworthy they are. But those who think they are worthy cannot believe that we won’t allow them to eat and drink judgment on themselves. When Paul said, “Do not be deceived” he meant don’t deceive yourself. Don’t fool yourself into thinking you are greater than you are, that you have something to boast or brag about before God.

But we do it all the time. We want to be part of a winning team. We’ll ask the question, “How is the church doing?” In other words, “How do the numbers look? Are we growing? Are we gaining?” When churches are, we’ll boast about our ministry, its size, scope, whether or not a high school is involved.

If we were to gauge Paul’s ministry according to the numbers and the reaction of the people – you’d have to assume he’s a terrible pastor. They tried to kill him on multiple occasions. He didn’t appear successful. He was run out of town multiple times. You can’t judge ministries as successful based on prosperity, popularity, or an ability to command respect. Look at Jeremiah. Look at Paul. But we like numbers.

We like to look important and while we might not boast or brag about our greatness we have other ways of doing so. Pastors will brag about how busy they are and how full their schedule is. Why? Because that tells us how important we are and how necessary we are to the ministry. They can’t get along without me... look at all I do! The truth is the church was doing just fine without me. God doesn’t need us as if we were necessary to accomplish some part of his will.

But he allows us to participate in his will, in bringing about his kingdom. Some plant the seed and others harvest along the way but it’s not the planter or the harvester that has anything to brag about when it is the Word that does the work.

We are nothing without the Lord. We are nothing without his Word. God makes us something special.

In spite of insurmountable odds and everything stacked against his Church – God’s will, will be done. In spite of Paul himself – God’s will is done. Paul writes, “*God chose the foolish things of this world to put the wise to shame. He chose the weak things of this world to put the powerful to shame*” (1 Corinthians 1:27). Paul came to the Corinthians funded by the country bumpkins. Paul brought this message of Christ crucified to the coastal elites largely on the backs of the Macedonian farmers. They paid the way and yet they too were reflecting the love that God had poured out on them. And Paul poured out his life for them and by the time he wrote this letter he wasn’t finished. His trials weren’t over. He would experience further difficulties and humiliations for the cause of Christ.

He would sacrifice his life for the gospel, something the super apostles never would do. Why? Because they were hirelings. They were only interested in their comfort and what they could gain. But Paul knew that Jesus gave his life and death for people like him and the Corinthians, you and me. Jesus was completely committed to this world. Paul was completely committed to that simple message. He writes later to the Galatians, *May I never boast except in Jesus Christ and him crucified.* (Galatians 6:14) *I will boast all the more about my weaknesses so that Christ’s power will rest on me.* The reason Paul boasts of his weakness is so that Jesus might be lifted up. In a self-deprecating fashion he goes about pointing out his failures. And in these failures God reminds him, “*My grace is sufficient for you.* And that is what really matters! If we have Christ and forgiveness and salvation, the rest will pass. *For my power is perfected in weakness.* (2 Corinthians 12:9).

By that, God means us to understand that when He works through the weak and unpopular things, like faithful Christians and sound doctrine, then it is clear to anyone who cares to look and think, that it is not the elegance or the eloquence of those who stand and confess that have created the difference, it is the power of God. The word being "perfected" does not mean that it is made better or stronger or more complete, it simply means that it accomplishes God's own purposes for it, and that it is undeniable that the power belongs to God, and not to us.

We are completely committed to this. We insist on the pure word of God alone because it is through the Word of God that he gives us everything that he would have us know. It is through his Word that he pours out his Spirit. So if you must boast or brag look to your weaknesses. Look to your failings. Our weaknesses bring home how much we need God. Your life is not about what you can do but about God’s grace and power at work in you. God's grace works through our weakness. He forgives them.

That means you may or may not cross mountains or deserts to tell the good news of Jesus to others. You don’t have to travel the world but you can. He may not be asking you to give up home and family to tell others about Jesus but he is asking for complete commitment. Finally

you may suffer for the sake of Christ. You may have scars. What really matters is that we have Christ and that is eternal. That is something that no one can take away from us.

Build each other up. Boast a little for the purpose of building up those around you. Don't look to your own strength, no matter how often we are told, "Believe in yourself." Look only to God and the weakness and foolishness of the cross where Jesus worked out his act of salvation for you. It's not about how big the fish is. How great your wall is. What you've accomplished in this world. The only thing that matters is what God has done for you. In Christ and because of his Word – you've heard his call from death to life. That's worth boasting about. Amen.