

## What We Boast About

### 2 Corinthians 11:21b-30 (NIV)

Whatever anyone else dares to boast about—I am speaking as a fool—I also dare to boast about. Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Abraham's descendants? So am I. Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have worked much harder, 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. 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? If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.

When you think of boasting or bragging, what comes to mind? Maybe Babe Ruth calling his home run shot or one of Muhammed Ali's famous boxing quips. Or maybe you think of the Instagram or Facebook posts of weightlifting achievements or what fancy food a person is eating. Maybe you think of the subtle boasting of someone's family as they casually drop that their kids made National Honors Society or how busy they are doing all the extracurriculars that they're involved in. Maybe you think of boasting with work, whether it be the self-promotion essentially required for job interviews or a casual drop of how many hours you put into work every week that shows that they are kind of proud of being a workaholic.

Boasting is not a modern invention. The Apostle Paul himself had to deal with certain boasting that he found affecting the Christians in Corinth. There was a group of so-called "super-apostles" who boasted about how they were vastly superior to Paul. They boasted that they were Hebrews, could trace their lineage through the tribes of Israel all the way to Abraham. They boasted about their training in speech and rhetoric, how eloquent and persuasive they were. Because of their degrees, their intellect, and their pedigree, they charged Christians for their preaching services. You gotta pay to have a "super-apostle."

While they built themselves up with their boasting, they also tore Paul down. They claimed that Paul was all talk in his letters and no bite. He was like a timid little mouse. He didn't have the gravitas to be an effective preacher. He was a lesser apostle, a poor imitation of the real thing, in their opinion.

In response, Paul asks his readers and us to put up with something foolish: his boasting. He's also a Hebrew of Hebrews, one who can trace his lineage through the tribes of Israel all the way to Benjamin, great grandson of Abraham. He too is a servant of Christ who works much harder than these so called super-apostles and preaches the Gospel free of charge to people so as to not burden them. He does all this while also suffering through imprisonment, flogging, stoned and left for dead, shipwrecked, danger on all sides, scarcity of food and clothing, and the list goes on.

Does that list feel like a humblebrag? A humblebrag is when someone says something that looks like they are being humble but it's meant to draw attention to them, to talk about the things that they're proud of. "I have to study until midnight every night so that I can maintain my 4.0 and my full ride scholarship." "My kids have to practice one hour every day so that they can continue to be starters on the travel team." "I'm so tired from yet another 65-hour work week."

Is Paul humblebragging? Is he subtly implying that he is actually great because he has been persecuted so severely? Is he elevating himself that we would admire him more because of all the awful things that he has experienced? Is he the guy who has to one up everyone in the pain department? Does he want us to know how hard it's been for him so that we appreciate him more instead of focusing on these super-apostles?

Maybe we jump to that idea because we know people who humblebrag or we ourselves humblebrag. Maybe we puff ourselves up during our job interviews, that when they ask what our weaknesses are we say something like we work too hard, stay late to make sure the job gets done, or are a perfectionist. When someone takes notice of something that we did, that we put so much time and effort into it, we are quick to say, "Oh, it's nothing, really," but inwardly we feel validated and, honestly, built up, that we deserved that notice, that compliment.

On the first read through, it sounds like Paul is humblebragging. But when you get to the end, the tone shifts. “If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.” (verse 30) Paul did not make this list to show some false humility in order to get the credit he thinks he deserve. He’s not writing these things so that the Corinthian Christians appreciate him more for what he has suffered rather than these “super-apostles.” You can tell that he feels awkward about writing these things, that he’s speaking like a fool, a madman. It’s just like if you start listing a whole bunch of examples right now to show how faithful you’ve been as a worker, a student, a husband, a wife, a son, or a daughter, and it instantly starts to feel weird and wrong, that we shouldn’t be boasting.

So, why is Paul boasting in his weaknesses? He’s showing that he is not the most eloquent, not the most learned, not the most dynamic, not the most powerful, not the most successful, not the most beloved apostle. He has worked hard and yet has been paid back with pain and isolation and danger. He’s not griping about it. He’s not trying to get you to appreciate what he has endured. He’s not saying that these are marks of success. He’s saying that he is actually weak. It’s proven by how much danger and hostility he has faced. He’s saying that he is not enough and honestly believes it. He wants to show us his weaknesses so that he can point us not to himself, not to his abilities, but to the one overcomes our weaknesses.

Paul’s “boasting” in his weaknesses leads him to recounting his prayer to remove from him his thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, that tormented him. When Paul had pleaded to have God remove this from him because it made him weak, God answered, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” (2 Corinthians 12:9) Our weaknesses, our real weaknesses - not our humblebrags - show how much we need God and his grace. The weaker I am, the stronger my God is, the more I have to praise him over, the more credit goes to God for what he does for me, how he is strong for me.

God’s people are weak. I’m weak. You’re weak. We can’t do this life on our own. We can’t work hard enough. We can’t be perfect enough. We are not enough, but our God is more than enough. He is everything for us. He is our perfection, our forgiveness, our meaning, our value. He is our strength and our confidence, not us or our abilities. The more we realize this, the more we admit this, the stronger our God is for us. He overcomes all our weaknesses, like he did for Paul. Paul boasted about his weaknesses to show how strong his God is.

So, are you willing to show how you are weak? Or do you feel the need to cover up your weaknesses because someone might accuse you of a humblebrag, that you show false humility really to impress someone and build yourself up? Do you cover up your weaknesses because you’re afraid that people are going to accuse you of creating a pity party? Do you cover up your weaknesses because it feels wrong to “boast” about such things?

We boast about our weaknesses in order to point to Christ, to point to how he is our power, that he is stronger than our weaknesses. This is why Paul boasted here, as uncomfortable as it was for him, just the same uncomfortableness that you feel when you fill out an application or do a job interview where you have to praise yourself or when you have to explain your honest overwhelming schedule to someone else. In all that we do, especially when we boast about our weaknesses, we want to point to Christ so that people have his perfect power and strength.

Without Christ, we are nothing and have nothing to boast about. We boast in Christ and what he has done for us, how he truly did what we could never accomplish. God didn’t come to earth looking for the best of the best, the elite super-apostles, the holy rollers. He came for the weak, the sick, the people who would be cast off by society. God came not for the self-sufficient, but for the needy. He came not for the one who can hide his blemishes, but for the one who sees his weaknesses, his sins, his imperfections and is defeated by them.

When we are weak, when we show our weaknesses, boast about them, then we see how big of a Savior we have. Then we see how God’s grace truly is sufficient for me, that his power is made perfect in my weakness. When we are weak, we need God that much more and we trust in him that much more. That’s why we boast in our weaknesses as Paul did. Amen.