

2 Corinthians 1:12-14
(Jeremiah 9:23-24; Luke 10:17-20)
“Proper Confidence”

Introduction

Doesn't the Scripture warn against boasting? Doesn't Paul in his previous letter to the Corinthians quote the prophet Jeremiah, "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord"? Doesn't he later in this letter engage in an ironic, even sarcastic, send-up of human boasting? How can he here seem to speak so naturally of boasting in his own behavior and his clear conscience, and look forward to the day of the Lord when he will continue to boast even in the Lord's presence? This passage is crucial to our understanding of what it means to have a proper sense of confidence as we face each new day, as well as anticipating the day of our death and the great day of the Lord without fear, but rather with a hopeful confidence that it will be a day of rejoicing. But first we must recall the context of this opening chapter.

Paul had a tumultuous relationship with the church in Corinth, a church that he planted and then revisited a number of times. Only two of the several letters he wrote to them have survived. In this particular letter, Paul is responding to a direct attack on his ministry, an attack that is itself an attack on the gospel. It seems that certain traveling teachers, self-appointed apostles, had visited Corinth pretending to supernatural power and authority. They pointed out all the troubles that Paul had faced, his suffering and weakness, the times that he had thought that he was to visit Corinth and then had to change plans, the times that he had been hounded from one town to another, the times that he had been physically sick. These things, they claimed, discredited his apostleship. They preached instead a message of power over sickness, freedom from trouble, essentially the health, wealth and prosperity message that many preach in our day.

In response, Paul argues that his troubles confirm his apostleship, because he is continuing the ministry of Jesus, who suffered in our place in order that he might comfort us in all our troubles. As we have seen, Paul presents a powerful and compelling picture of God as the "Father of mercies and God of all comfort" who uses the difficult things that we face to teach us patient endurance, and when we are pushed beyond our ability to endure, to teach us not to rely on ourselves but on God "who raises the dead." Suffering puts us at the center of a community of prayer so that we can experience the reality of Christ's body in ways that we simply do not experience when all is well, and finally, suffering ends up bringing praise and glory to God who meets us and comforts us in all our afflictions.

Paul's comments about boasting arise directly out of this concluding idea of everything finally bringing God glory. The words used frequently by Paul to describe boasting include the notions of confidence and rejoicing, in that they point to the basis of our confidence and our reason for rejoicing.

So, perhaps the best way to approach these verses is to ask ourselves this: In the crush of daily life, what is the basis of our confidence? What fills us with hope and joy as we look ahead to the future?

Body

- 1. When is boasting appropriate?** As we have said, Paul's whole life and ministry is being called into question, and he is letting us in on his own way of understanding and evaluating of his life's mission. This brings us to the heart of Paul's self-understanding. Here was a man who literally turned the world of his day upside-down, and through his writings continues to do so today. Anyone concerned with living significantly would do well to listen to what Paul says about his own motivation, confidence and hope.

The context is essential: The Corinthians knew Paul's view of boasting in oneself. In the opening chapter of his first letter to them, Paul declares that his life's work involves preaching the gospel, "not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power" (1 Corinthians 1:17). He then continues by describing the "message of the cross" as "folly to those who are perishing," but "the power of God" to those who are being saved (1:18). This seeming weakness and foolishness of the message is essential, claims Paul, in order that all our natural tendency toward boasting in ourselves be destroyed, and we be left alone before the cross, seeing it as the wisdom and power of God. This is why it is so crucial: *The source of our alienation from God is our pride, our desire to boast in ourselves, to go our own way and do our own thing. Only a message that strips me of my damnable pride is able to prepare me to cast myself upon the mercy and grace of God.* Again, Paul summarizes in the words of Jeremiah, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord" (1:31). We could easily trace this theme in all of Paul's letters.

See how carefully in this second letter Paul gives God all credit and all glory for what Paul will cite as his reasons for boasting: His conduct is attributed completely to God's work in him: "We behaved in the world with simplicity and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God" (2 Corinthians 1:12). He attributes nothing to himself according to nature, but all to God's grace at work in and through him.

So, boasting is appropriate when it is clear that all honor and praise belong, not to us, but to the Lord. Because all that Paul says here is in light of God's grace at work in and through his life, all glory and praise belong to God alone. Thus, he is once again, in effect, quoting Jeremiah: "Let the one who boast, boast in the Lord."

- 2. How can we face this present moment of our lives with a proper confidence?** Having established that Paul is not boasting in himself, but in the Lord, let's now come to the point of these verses, and see what Paul

considered the evidence of God's grace at work in his life, so much so that he could face his accusers with proper confidence. He points to two evidences of God's grace at work within him: the inner evidence of a healthy conscience, and the outer evidence of a healthy life.

The inner evidence of a healthy conscience: The word "conscience" is not used in the Old Testament, but its functions are applied to the heart, that is to the very core of a person's identity. Paul, who had been raised in the Hellenistic culture of the empire, frequently uses the word to describe our sense of whether or not we are living according to what we believe to be God's will.

A clear conscience from doing what we believe to be God's will: Of course, Paul knew that a conscience is only as good a guide as the information that it has been given, and he speaks in the book of Acts (23:1) as always having sought to keep his conscience clear, presumably even when he persecuted the church in obedience to what he thought was God's will. Nevertheless, the first point is important: *We have no hope of proper confidence before God and man if we do not seek to live according to the light we have been given, according to what we believe is God's will for our lives.*

A clear conscience from keeping short accounts with God and with people: We know that Paul was deeply grieved that he had persecuted God's people, although he had done it out of ignorance. But when he realized the truth, he repented and sought forgiveness. He was not immobilized by a bad conscience over past sin. Again, in the first letter to the Corinthians, he stated clearly that we are not, in the final analysis, judges of our own hearts. There is one alone who will finally pronounce sentence on our lives (4:3-5). Fortunately, that is none other than, "the Father of mercies and God of all comfort," who gave his Son to pay in full the penalty for our sins. *My point here is this: Do you know that forgiveness and grace that cleanses the conscience, and do you keep short accounts with the Lord and with his people daily, so that you can continue to know the confidence of a clear conscience?*

Of course, Paul's whole point here is that his inner confidence is based on a pattern of observable conduct that can be tested and verified by those around him. This takes us to our next point.

The outer evidence of a healthy life: Paul gives three descriptions of his conduct, and then offers a snapshot as illustration of his point.

He says, "We have behaved in the world with simplicity and godly sincerity." Paul's simplicity and sincerity are under attack. But he appeals to their long-standing relationship with him. He is not deceptive in his relationships. His yes means yes, his no means no. He does not try to complicate things so that people can't pin him down. *He is simple in the moral sense of the word.*

And, he continues, we have conducted ourselves “with godly sincerity.” The word Paul uses for sincerity means unmixed, pure. He is speaking of his motives. He has no hidden agenda in dealing with the world and the church. There is nothing hidden that would scandalize if it came to light. *He is saying in effect, what you see is what you get.*

And we do not conduct ourselves “by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God” (1:12). Paul was a brilliant man with a great education, and apart from God’s grace would have been a devastating opponent. But his desire is that the power of God have free course in the lives of his people, so *Paul relies not on rhetorical eloquence nor on human wisdom, but on the message of the cross.* As he wrote to the church in Rome, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” (1:16).

He illustrates this simply by referring to his correspondence with the church in Corinth. “We are not writing to you anything other than what you read or understand” (1:13). If you have ever read some of the apocryphal books of the Bible, if you have spent much time reading the sacred books of other religions, or if you have read many philosophical works, the contrast between them and the Scriptures is striking. However difficult certain passages may be, on the whole the Bible is compelling in its clarity. *Our problem with God’s word is not that we cannot understand it, but that we don’t want to obey it.*

- 3. How can we face the future with a proper confidence?** Finally, Paul takes his point to the next level and reminds us that all of our confidence, all of our boasting, must be in the light of the future. We will one day stand before the Lord of life, and however much we may have been able to fool our selves and fool others in the present, there will be no fooling in that day. As the Bible teaches, the books will be opened and our lives exposed for what they really were about, whether lived in the grace and power of God, or lived in our own strength and for our own glory.

We will all meet again before the Lord’s throne. Jonathan Edward’s “Farewell Sermon” to the people of Northampton was from this text. If we really believed that we will meet again in the presence of the Lord and brought this truth frequently to mind, how differently we would behave toward one another, and how different would be our zeal for the kingdom of God that alone will stand firm in that great day!

Who and what we claim to be will be tested against the reality of our relationships, against the simplicity, sincerity and godly grace displayed to those entrusted to us through “a long obedience in the same direction” (E. Peterson). This little moment may not be all there is, but who we were last year, who we are this year, and who we will be next year, when taken

together, begin to describe the trajectory of our life. Here is where the entire passage gets its torque. These words are reminiscent of the fourth chapter of his first letter to Corinth:

But with me it is a very small that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each will receive his commendation from God" (1 Corinthians 4:3-5).

In other words, our confidence comes from knowing the grace and mercy of the "Father of mercies and God of all comfort," from seeing the evidence of his grace at work in conforming us, however imperfectly, to the image of his Son, so that we deal with one another in simplicity and sincerity rather than in duplicity and insincerity, always relying on God's grace to make us gracious toward others.

Conclusion

The Table of the Lord is a place of reckoning with the greatest issues of all: it is a place that invites us to come, but that cautions us against coming carelessly. It calls us to taste God's grace and forgiveness, but reminds us of the cost of discipleship. It gives us the only solid basis of facing the present and the future with proper confidence, and warns us against boasting in anything except the Lord of glory and his work graciously manifested in our lives. So come, take and eat, and cleanse your consciences from all that would keep you from being the joyful and confident children of the living God.

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