

“Boast in the Lord”

“I am the greatest.” These were the famous words of boxer Muhammed Ali, with which he taunted opponents and defined himself for media and fans. For a time, he was able to live up to his boastful words. He was the greatest. He was the champion at his sport. But eventually, he lost his titles. Eventually, years of boxing took an extreme physical toll. Eventually, he passed away, and his boastful words along with him.

My point is not to heap insults on someone who has died, but Muhammed Ali is an obvious example of boasting. Of course, he is far from the only example. I am sure that we could come up with countless sports stars, celebrities, presidents and other politicians to mention as examples of boasting. And they would all have in common with Muhammed Ali that one day their boasting will come to an end. Their power, wealth, influence, and fame are all limited by time and circumstance. Until these things end, though, many will continue to boast.

Boasting is not limited to the famous or the most influential in society, either. It is a temptation for many of us to boast in our accomplishments, our wisdom, our success, or anything else we can find in which we compare favorably to others. In many cases we boast even though it is, or at least should be, obvious that we are far from the greatest even in what we are boasting about.

Perhaps this tendency is why the Holy Scriptures speak against boasting in many ways and in many places. Psalm 52 asks, “**Why do you boast of evil, you mighty one? Why do you boast all day long?**” Psalm 75 warns: “**To the arrogant, I say, ‘boast no more.’”** Proverbs encourages us, “**Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring forth**” (27:1). And one of the Israelite kings turns an interesting phrase with his warning: “**One who puts on his armor should not boast like one who takes it off**” (1 Kings 20:11). In view of these and many other such warnings, it is somewhat surprising and striking to hear Scripture invite boasting. But in the passage we are considering in our sermon this morning, and in other places, Scripture does exactly that. It invites us to boast in the Lord.

You heard Paul’s words to the Christians in Corinth as our Second Lesson this morning. The Christian church at Corinth was an interesting one. It had its problems to be sure. It was divided by favoritism and was caught in scandal. It was at the crossroads of trade in a sinful and corrupt society. But all of that was put aside for Paul to address these believers as “brothers.” They were brothers in Christ, and that’s not just the men of the congregation, but all of God’s children who had been adopted as sons and heirs of God’s goodness. It is not a stretch to do as many recent translations have and to start this section, “Brothers and sisters.” Even though they were brothers and sisters, Paul gave them a sharp reminder that they were unworthy to boast. He reminded them to think about their state before they became Christians, without Christ. They were not wise, nor influential, nor nobility. Not most of them at least.

Does that put you in the same category? It puts me in the same category. Most of us are everyday people. While there are certainly accomplishments, skills, and talents that each of us possess, we are not necessarily known for these things in society. We aren’t the richest, or the most influential. We weren’t born into the most famous families. All of the things that could easily lead to boasting don’t really apply to us any more than they did to the Corinthians. And even if they did, these things would be only temporary.

It almost sounds overly harsh to us to hear Paul describe the Corinthians, and us by extension, in the terms that he does. He seems to suggest that not only do we not fit the positive categories he lists, we actually fit some rather negative ones. He speaks of the foolish things, the weak things, the lowly and the despised things.

This description brings out the contrast between the way God views things and the way the world views things. Who would boast in being the weakest or the most foolish? Who would boast about needing the most help or being the most despised? But as bad as those descriptions are, the reality is even worse. While the Corinthians were generally lowly by earthly standards, they were even worse by heavenly standards.

Sure, they may not have been the best in comparison to other people, but in comparison to the absolute perfection that God demands, they were as lowly as can be imagined.

So their calling was not according to earthly standards either. Earthly wisdom would have called for the Corinthians to work harder, to be better. It would call on them to get their act together so that they could become richer and more successful. It would call on them to become wiser and more learned, to become stronger and more powerful. But God's calling was for them to realize their worthlessness. It was for them to give up entirely on human wisdom and to simply trust the wisdom of God.

And it is the same for us. Boast in the Lord means that we cannot boast of our own accomplishments or our own wisdom or our own strength. It means that we recognize that we have nothing before God other than our lowliness, our foolishness, and our weakness. It means that we don't judge things the way that the world does. Recall how Jesus described these things in his Sermon on Mount: Blessed are the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, those who are persecuted. Blessed are they, blessed are you, because God fills you up. He gives you the earth as your inheritance. He has in store for you a heavenly reward. Boast in the Lord. Give up on human wisdom, on worldly wisdom entirely. No one may boast of themselves before God.

But in the place of worldly human wisdom put God's wisdom. Christ Jesus as become for us wisdom from God. Where we were powerless to help ourselves, Jesus was powerful to save. Where we were weak, he was strong. But the amazing thing about it is that he was powerful and strong for us by becoming weak like us. He was despised as we are, if not more so. He was more lowly than any other human being in spite of the fact that he is also the true Son of God. That is God's wisdom: that Jesus became our righteousness, our holiness, our redemption.

By his death on the cross for us, Jesus made our relationship right with God. He gave us his own holiness in the place of our sins. He bought us back from our slavery to death and hell. That's what we have to boast in. God called us out of our darkness and unbelief into the light of life in Jesus. He has filled us up. He has given us the kingdom of heaven, even and especially in our meekness, our weakness, and our foolishness.

Boast in the Lord. Tell others not about yourself, but about your God who loves you, who forgives you, who calls you his own. Be focused first and foremost not on improving yourself, but on strengthening your relationship to your Savior. We do have before us this morning a striking example in the three men from our First Lesson, who faced the fiery furnace. These men could have easily gone along with the king's wicked decree. They could have bowed down before a statue for the sake of their lives, even if they did not mean to worship it. They could have put their own self-preservation and self-interest ahead of what they knew was right, but they didn't. The God who called them to faith strengthened them to stand firm and to boldly confess their confidence. They were confident that God could rescue them even from the hot furnace, and they were just as confident that even if he did not, they would be safe with him.

Their actions were not wise in any worldly way. Instead they trusted in God's wisdom. Their boast was in the Lord, and we still know their story because the Lord rescued them. The Lord has rescued us from the worst enemies that we have. He promises to bring us to heaven for the sake of Jesus his Son. He gives us something to boast about.

You see, Scripture certainly does not denounce all boasting. Psalm 34 says, **"My soul will boast in the Lord."** Psalm 44 announces, **"In God we make our boast all day long."** The Lord says through the prophet Jeremiah, **"Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about thus: that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight."** May that be our boast now and always. Our God is the greatest!

The text: 1 Corinthians 1:26–31 (NIV84)

²⁶ Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. ²⁸ He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, ²⁹ so that no one may boast before him. ³⁰ It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. ³¹ Therefore, as it is written: “Let him who boasts boast in the Lord.”