

2 Corinthians 11:21-33

A Different Kind of Boasting

Boasting.

What do we think about boasting?

According to a dictionary boasting is: *'To talk with excessive pride and self-satisfaction about one's achievements, possessions or abilities'*.

We generally regard boasting as an unpleasant characteristic, rude and arrogant. If we hear people boasting about themselves, it's often a good way of turning us off them completely.

In chapters 11 and 12 of 2 Corinthians, we hear a lot about boasting. Paul mentions the word boast or boasting fifteen times (NIV) - I counted! The part we heard read this morning is part of 'Paul's Boast' given in response to the false teachers who were influencing the Corinthians. In Paul's time, it seems as though it was acceptable for people who considered themselves important, to boast of their credentials. That is certainly what the false teachers to the Corinthians were going round doing - you can just imagine them boasting of how educated and knowledgeable they were, how eloquently they had spoken in a particular place, what a wonderful reception they had experienced from the crowd, how they had been honoured, received gifts and been entertained with wonderful banquets....
all the while, rubbishing Paul as not very attractive, a poor speaker, weak and indecisive.

'Fools!' says Paul, but the Corinthians were lapping it up even to the extent where they were allowing themselves to be enslaved and exploited by these teachers.

Paul rather sarcastically states that if that's what they want then he will have to be a fool too so he parodies the boasting (even though, he says,

it's not what he would really choose to do – he is only prepared to do it to defend his preaching of the Gospel).

So he sets about declaring his 'credentials'. 'Paul's boast' What did Paul have to boast about? Well, he'd seen impressive miracles, lots of conversions, established churches over a very wide area. He had the blessing of the church leaders in Jerusalem, and had received prophetic words about his life, been commissioned by Jesus himself appearing to him on the road to Damascus. Amazing things to boast about!

But - here is the **big** difference: That's not what we hear about. Paul is not like the false apostles. Rather than declaring all his great accomplishments, Paul chooses to boast about all the humiliating troubles and difficulties he has endured in his ministry for Christ. He lists an amazing catalogue of woes: imprisonment, Jewish floggings, near death experiences, Roman beatings, shipwrecks, floods, attacks by robbers, hunger, thirst etc, etc. and all this in addition to the daily pressures and anxieties of all the churches he had set up.

'If I must boast', he says, 'I will boast of the things that show my weakness' (v30) He even includes the humiliating account of escaping as a fugitive from Damascus through a window in a basket – not exactly an incident which would inspire confidence in him as a great leader.

Why is Paul so keen to recount all these afflictions? Why is his boast so different from that of the false apostles?

Because Paul knows that it is through his weakness that **God's** power is shown, and that really is something worth boasting about! – to bring praise and glory to God, the only one who really does deserve it.

When Paul talked to God about his suffering (12:8), he was told *'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness'*.

So Paul goes on to say *'Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.'* (12:9-10)

Paul actually delights in all his weakness and troubles because he knows that this is where God's strength will be seen!

Are we prepared to boast about or even admit our weakness and inability, our need for God's power and help?

I wonder if sometimes, are we inclined to want others to think that as Christians, we are strong and capable?

Our world prizes strength. We admire the physical strength of athletes and sports people. Companies are measured by their financial strength. We're concerned about the political strength of governments.

But Paul has a completely different notion of strength: weakness can make a person strong.

Most of us don't usually have a problem thinking of God working in our lives through our natural areas of strength. Perhaps we're good at organising, managing, getting alongside people? But suppose he chooses to use us in areas where we think we are hopeless, weak? How do we feel about that?

There are lots of great heroes of the Bible who didn't think they were up to the tasks God gave them:

- Moses claimed to be a poor speaker yet God used him as his spokesman on Israel's behalf.

- The great prophet Jeremiah said he was 'too young, couldn't speak and was scared!'
- Peter tended to be impulsive and hot-headed but he became one of the great leaders of the early church.

God doesn't always call us to do things we already know how to do, **but** he does offer to give us the power and the ability to do what he wants. That way he can demonstrate his nature, strength, love and kindness to us, and then through us, to those around us.

It will be God and us doing it together. His strength in our weakness. If God is at work through ordinary, weak people then there will be no confusion as to the source of power. People will see this and give glory to him!

I'm reminded of a line in a Song: *'He turns our weaknesses into his opportunities, so that the glory goes to him!'*

I read the story of a man called Dave Cooke, who as a schoolboy was told by his headmaster 'You'll never achieve anything, you're a waster!' - hardly a most encouraging remark. However, after many years of struggling through a difficult life, but sticking with his faith in God, he went on to found a remarkable and extensive aid operation. It all started when, in 1990, he was distraught by the images on the TV of children in orphanages in Romania. Children who knew no love, play or care. Enlisting the help of relatives, the idea of filling and wrapping shoeboxes with Christmas presents for the children in Romania was born. With publicity via the local radio station, there was a massive response of people donating gifts. This was the start of 'Operation Christmas Child' (now part of Samaritan's Purse). This man, who as a child was told 'You'll never achieve anything',

has brought love and life and the message of hope in Jesus to countless children all over the world.

An example of God working powerfully through someone very ordinary.

What kind of ways might we see God working in our weakness?

As I said before, it might be being prepared to give something a go when we don't feel very confident about doing it, when it's not something we think we're good at. We will really have to trust God. Weakness has a way of making us rely on God far more than our strengths do.

But another way, something we can all do, is to pray. Admit we are weak and need God's help. Pray, and expect him to answer! Prayer is powerful! Could we be more open about sharing our needs and struggles with each other and praying for each other? Then when we see God's power breaking through the weakness in our lives, affecting those around us, we can give thanks and rejoice together in our great God.

Remember, we have a God *'who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work in us.*

To him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen'. (Eph 3:20-21)