

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: AUTHENTIC

(studies in the book of 2 Corinthians)

Bragging Rights

(2 Corinthians 11:16-33)

Study #17

Introduction: To the winner goes the...

Little did I know, when I titled this message “Bragging Rights” that Bragging Rights is a professional wrestling event produced annually (since 2009) by World Wrestling Entertainment.

But then, little did Bragging Rights know, when they titled their annual event, that they would be showcased in my sermon.

At the end of the Bragging Rights event, either the Raw or the Smackdown team wins the coveted Bragging Rights trophy and has “bragging rights” as the top team for the year.

Bragging rights. Have you ever had them?

Think back to a time when you WON something (a race, a contest, a competition, a game). Did you brag? Did you show off your gold medal, trophy, or medallion?

Bragging is not a particularly attractive behavior, and when mentioned in Scripture, is usually frowned upon.

But the Apostle Paul engages in boasting in our passage today, a particular kind of boasting that proves his Christian and apostolic authenticity.

This morning, we get a real treat as Paul gets autobiographical. In this passage we learn more about Paul’s life than we do in any other collection of twenty verses in the New Testament.

He talks about himself. Oh, and it’s not that he wanted to talk about himself. In fact, he wouldn’t have if he didn’t feel pretty much forced to do so. Paul generally considered talking about himself “foolishness.”

But those who opposed a crystal clear, grace-based Gospel in Corinth had dragged his name through the mud - and with it the truth of the Gospel! And he knew that the time had come to set the record straight, even if he had to do so by the foolishness of boasting.

Fighting Fire with Fire (vv. 16-21)

Paul’s Hesitation (vv. 16-17)

[16] Again I say, let no one think me foolish; but if you do, receive me even as foolish, so that I also may boast a little. [17] What I am saying, I am not saying as the Lord would,¹ but as in foolishness, in this confidence of boasting.

Jesus is our example in everything, and He didn’t boast. The Bible refers to boasting as folly throughout.² So, Paul is on safe ground when he says that what he is about to do - boast - is foolish.

But here, he determines that it’s wisdom to engage in a little foolish boasting. The reason is that the Corinthians themselves were such suckers for foolishness!

Sarcastic “commendation” (vv. 18-20)

[18] Since many boast according to the flesh, I will boast also. [19] For you, being so wise, tolerate the foolish gladly.

¹ This comment does not impact the inspiration of this passage. Paul is not saying, “What I am now saying is not inspired by the Lord.”

² See 1 Samuel 2:3; Psalm 10:3; Proverbs 25:14; Romans 3:27; 15:17; 1 Cor. 3:21; 1 Cor. 5:6; James 3:5; 4:16

[20] For you tolerate it if anyone enslaves you, anyone devours you, anyone takes advantage of you, anyone exalts himself, anyone hits you in the face.

Some have taken all of these remarks (including this last one about being hit in the face) in a figurative sense. They think that Paul is using hyperbole. But I wonder...

I believe he could very easily be describing, quite literally, exactly what was happening in Corinth.³

Can't we imagine that the opposition in Corinth lorded it over the flock by an ugly abuse of authority? We don't know that this is what was going on, but if it was, the Corinthians were not the last Christians to allow themselves to be abused by leaders.

Heavy-handed leadership was not a 1st century only phenomenon. You may recall having heard stories of leaders who have lorded it over their congregations. You may have even experienced it firsthand, yourself.

In the 1970's Jim Jones started off just a bubble off plumb as a pastor of The People's Temple in California. Then he became increasingly authoritarian. Then dictatorial. He ended up taking his whole church to Georgetown, Guyana, South America, settled down deep in the jungle (he called the site "Jonestown") and eventually led the entire group of over seven hundred men, women, and children in a mad mass murder/suicide bloodbath.

Now, of course, every example of abusing-leader-syndrome is not that extreme. Sometimes it's just a bit heavy on the control-freak side of things. Sometimes, it's yelling or swearing at people from the pulpit.

Sometimes, it's enforced involvement or enforced giving or enforced serving.

³ In another place (1 Timothy 3) Paul felt it necessary to require that if a man had a reputation as a "striker" he should not be considered for the office of elder. And what does this say but that churches might have been tempted to recognize a man as an Elder who did have a reputation as a striker!

But wherever such anti grace-based styles of leadership appear, it is ugly and destructive. That is what was happening in Corinth.

So, even though boasting was not the generally accepted way for an apostle to get across his point, Paul says that here he is going to make an exception - and BOAST!

A Boasting Strategy (v. 21)

[21] To my shame I must say that we have been weak by comparison. But in whatever respect anyone else is bold - I speak in foolishness - I am just as bold myself.

A willingness to boast

The opposition has been stronger than Paul has been - at least as measured by tyranny, greed, arrogance, and violence. Paul has been an abject failure in all of these things.

But, he will be weak and inept no more. He is going to boast about himself and his exploits so as to protect his friends in Corinth from a spiritual disaster.

Ministry training 101

So, think with me for a minute about what Paul was doing. He engaged in boasting, even though boasting is usually frowned upon.

Of course, he never sinned by what he did, but he did act in a way that he would not normally have so as to respond to a very particular situation.

I think that his behavior here requires that we admit to some ambiguity, some "grey" in life and it invites us to using a godly creativity to respond to needs in our own world.

Some of us might be tempted to look at what Paul has done and tell him, "*Nope, Paul, you should have never dropped to the level of those fools in Corinth and boasted.*"

We might even point to Proverbs 26:4 which says,

***[26:4] Do not answer a fool according to his folly,
Lest you also be like him.***

But then, if we kept on reading in Proverbs we'd come to the very next verse, which tells us.

***[26:5] Answer a fool as his folly deserves,
Lest he be wise in his own eyes.***

So, do you answer a fool according to his folly - or not? Wisdom says, "It depends..."

Now, by opening to the possibility of utilizing different ways to address different kinds of situations we haven't opened up the gates to moral relativity.

We are just admitting to the reality that there may be times when we will be called upon to *finesse* a situation and to make a choice as to a course of action when there is not an obvious "right" or "wrong" path.

Paul reveled in the liberty that wisdom brings, boasted, and proved himself the genuine apostle while also revealing the self-inflated opposition in Corinth for the phonies they were.

He starts off his boast with a run-down of his physical and spiritual pedigree.

Paul's Apostolic Credentials (vv. 22-29)

A True Blue Jew - and so what... (v. 22)

[22] Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they descendants of Abraham? So am I.

It may seem that Paul is simply claiming to be a Jew three times, but there is more going on here.

- **Racially**, he was a member of an ancient near eastern tribe that grew to prominence during the days of Moses: the Hebrews. (1500 BC)
- **Socially**, he was descended from Jacob (who was renamed by God, Israel) - and Jacob's son, Benjamin: an Israelite. (1800 BC)
- **Spiritually**, he was of the ancient seed of Abraham, the father of the faithful. (2000 BC)

Incredibly, the opposition in Corinth may have been claiming that Paul was not a full-blooded member of God's chosen people. So, he pulled out his pedigree papers and proved them wrong.⁴

Moving forward, Paul goes on to give us a window into the things he has experienced in his service for Christ.

If anyone in the opposition in Corinth had been nutty enough to want to compare himself to Paul, he probably didn't want to after reading what we are about to see. Right off the bat he lists outright persecutions.

Suffered for Christ (vv. 23-27)

Physical persecutions (vv. 23-25)

Imprisonments

[23] Are they servants of Christ? - I speak as if insane - I more so; in far more labors,⁵ in far more imprisonments

The book of Acts tells of the night Paul and Silas spent a night in jail in Philippi (Acts 16). We also discover that he was imprisoned in Caesarea (Acts 23) and at Rome (Acts 28).

⁴ In Philippians 3, Paul compared all of these pedigrees to barnyard manure in comparison to knowing Christ and the power of His resurrection. We should note, too, that as he lists his ancestors, there is a rising crescendo as to what was his true, greatest boast. Significantly, he lists his "Jewishness" first, or as the **least** important of the things he is personally proud of.

⁵ Paul is not conceding that the false teachers are truly "servants of Christ." Rather, that by cataloguing his own credentials, he will show them to NOT be servants of Christ.

But at least one ancient church historian (Clement) says that Paul was actually imprisoned seven times. Imagine that. Jailed for varying amounts of time, for Jesus, on seven separate occasions.

And, Paul was beaten. Oh, how he was beaten.

Beatings

[23]...beaten times without number, often in danger of death. [24] Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes. [25] Three times I was beaten with rods

First, he mentions Jewish beatings, the infamous “40 lashes less one.”

The Law of Moses prescribed for certain offenses a public whipping of forty lashes.⁶ But it also required that if more than forty lashes were inflicted, then the man who did the whipping had to himself receive forty lashes.

So “the whipper” was VERY careful to not beat “the whipped” over forty times. The standard Jewish beating thus became “40 less one” (to protect against poor counting). And Paul endured this beating from his fellow countrymen five times.

He was also beaten, though, by the Gentiles, who had no scruples about any forty lash limit. They beat people until the whipper grew tired of carrying out the beating.

This was such a degrading punishment that Roman citizens were exempted from being beaten with rods.

⁶ Deuteronomy 25:3, “***He may beat him forty times but no more, lest he beat him with many more stripes than these, and your brother be degraded in your eyes.***” Such flogging was done by the Jewish authorities to scholars who were deserving of the synagogue ban, consorting with Gentiles, or who ate forbidden food. (Mt. 10:17)

Paul, being a Roman citizen⁷ should have been exempted – but, you know, when there are angry mobs and weak judges the law is sometimes disregarded. So, he was beaten with rods three times.⁸

Stonings

[25]...once I was stoned

We know about this one. Paul was pelted with rocks by an angry mob with such violence that he was left for dead outside the city limits of Lystra (Acts 14).

Then there were the high seas adventures.

Seafaring disasters

[25]...three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep.⁹

We know that Paul traveled by ship frequently. A total of nine seafaring trips are recorded in the book of Acts, and there may have been more. As you would guess, none of these voyages were exactly Carnival cruise line affairs...

On three of those journeys he was shipwrecked. (And none of those can refer to the shipwreck recorded in Acts 27, because it hadn’t happened as of the writing of 2 Corinthians).

During one of those mishaps, he endured what I would consider the ultimate nightmare - spending a day and a night either treading water or hanging on to floating debris so as to not drown before deliverance came.

⁷ There is one instance where Paul was *almost* beaten with rods - Acts 22:22ff

⁸ We read of a couple of other places in Acts where Paul was beaten with rods, but these occurred after he wrote 2 Corinthians, so we would have to total the Roman beatings as at least five times.

⁹ In this listing are many events that are not recorded in Acts. But, we should remember that Acts was written, not to recount the lives and achievements of men, but to draw attention to the sovereign activity of the Holy Spirit in founding and expanding the church.

Paul goes on to summarize the persecution side of his apostolic ministry, and tells us that everywhere he has turned, everywhere he has gone, and in everything he has done he has encountered serious, life-threatening peril.

Dangers at every turn (v. 26)

[26] I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren

It's not necessary that we identify specific situations that would correspond to every "danger" listed here. It is enough to realize that his day-to-day experience in serving Christ was no picnic.

He really suffered. He really was threatened. He really was in danger. Both by legal process and by mob violence, his own people, the Jews, as well as Gentiles worked to end Paul's work by ending Paul's life.

He continues, mentioning some suffering he endured "just on account of because." You and I will discover that these kinds of things simply come with the territory of serving Jesus.

Comes with the territory (v. 27)

[27] I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure.

Most moms and dads can identify with sleeplessness. But Paul accepted sleepless nights to stay up late and talk, or to get up early to pray.

And he mentions hunger. People are sometimes hungry because they simply don't have the funds to buy enough food for themselves or for their family - and that was sometimes Paul's lot.

But, sometimes people are hungry because they don't have time to eat and are too wrapped up in what they are doing to grab a bite. Sometimes people are hungry because they choose to not eat as when they are purposefully fasting.

Whatever the case, Paul was committed to serving Jesus and serving people for Jesus, and that led to unavoidable hardships - physical hunger,¹⁰ being exposed to the elements, working hard.

And there is more.

Filled With Love (vv. 28-29)

[28] Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure upon me of concern for all the churches. [29] Who is weak without my being weak? Who is led into sin without my intense concern?

This is the boast of love. What he had told us earlier in this letter was evidently true - ***[2 Corinthians 5:14] the love of Christ [controlled him].***

I think that one of the most impressive aspects of Paul's life is that he cared so deeply for people who often didn't care for him at all.

It is relatively easy to care for people who love you and who appreciate you. It is a whole lot easier to NOT care for someone who does NOT care for you. But Paul kept caring for those who couldn't have cared less for him. I find that inspiring.

The Apostle Paul:

- allowed himself to be hurt by people over and over again because he refused to stop spreading the GOOD NEWS that Jesus saves.
- kept on exposing himself to physical suffering because of a dogged determination to serve the Lord.
- was continually wracked with emotional pain over the failures of God's people; he refused to walk away when there were problems.¹¹

¹⁰ Barrett thinks that "***without food***" must refer to voluntary fastings, though it could have to do with abstinences he underwent on account of his determination to take no money from the Corinthians.

¹¹ Jesus said it best, (paraphrased) "*When the wolf comes, the hireling runs away but the true shepherd will lay down his life for his sheep.*" (John 10)

He told us he was going to boast, and he has. His boasting claim to be a genuine apostle and a genuine follower of Jesus consisted of pointing to his heritage (but not much!), his willingness to suffer, and his love.

So, when we see someone who doesn't put a lot of stock in their standing in life - no matter where they are in anyone's pecking order - AND who is also willing to suffer for Christ AND who genuinely loves, we can know that we have found the genuine article. These are traits of the Christian living authentically.

So, Paul has gotten down to the level of the Corinthians and has boasted. But, he's been somewhat reticent about this boasting. You can see that he was uncomfortable about it.

Well, all of that is about to change. In the final verses of this chapter Paul lets loose and really brags.

In this last paragraph, he tells us about something that happened to him twenty years earlier. It is THIS one incident he wants to draw attention to more than anything else. Here is his boast. Ready? Here we go...

To get to that incident, we need to backtrack to the book of Acts, chapter 9.

One Boast-worthy Moment! (Acts 9; 2 Corinthians 11:30-33)

LIFE Begins in Damascus (Acts 9:1-19)

There, we find Paul (then known as Saul) on his way to the city of Damascus. He and his companions were looking for Christians to drag back to Jerusalem for trial for the purpose of either imprisonment or death.

But, as they neared Damascus, both Paul's trip and his life were interrupted by Jesus. A light from heaven flashed around him and a Voice spoke to him, [4] *"Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?"*

When Paul asked how it was that he could have been guilty of persecuting God, the Lord responded, [5] *"I am Jesus whom you are persecuting."*

And in an instant, Paul recognized that in his opposition to Christianity, he had been attacking God. He had chosen the wrong enemy and had leaned his ladder against the wrong wall. His efforts to stamp out "the Way" were **PERFECTLY** wrong.

And the instant Paul recognized the Voice as the voice of Jesus, everything came into focus, he was wonderfully converted and became a follower of Jesus. He never looked back.

Accepted in Damascus (Acts 9:19-22)

Once inside Damascus, having been led there by his friends, a Christian named Ananias laid hands on him, the Lord restored his sight, and the persecutor became the preacher.

Paul spent a few days in Damascus and then left for an extended season in the Arabian Desert for meditation on the Old Testament Scriptures. When he returned to Damascus,¹² he came back as a powerful Christian preacher.

Persecuted in Damascus (Acts 9:23)¹³

Saul's encyclopedic knowledge of the Scriptures proved too much for anyone who tried to contend with him.

His Damascus Road encounter with Christ followed by his time in the desert had equipped him with an irrefutable arsenal of arguments to demonstrate that Jesus really was the Promised Messiah.

¹² It is impossible to piece together the life of Saul during these early days without going to other New Testament passages where his story is filled out with details left out of Acts. Specifically, in Galatians (1:15-24) the apostle Paul tells us that very soon after becoming a believer, he went away to the region of Arabia (Galatians 1:17, very close to Damascus, located directly to the east of the city), probably for spiritual reflection and meditation on the Old Testament in light of his new found faith in Jesus.

¹³ [Acts 9:21] *All those hearing him continued to be amazed, and were saying, "Is this not he who in Jerusalem destroyed those who called on this name, and who had come here for the purpose of bringing them bound before the chief priests?" [22] But Saul kept increasing in strength and confounding the Jews who lived at Damascus by proving that this Jesus is the Christ.*

But, opposition soon rose up against Paul.

[23] When many days had elapsed, the Jews plotted together to do away with him [24] but their plot became known to Saul. They were also watching the gates day and night so that they might put him to death

Saul was so unanswerable and the Jews were so helpless in debate that they saw no recourse but to resort to violence, and the persecutor turned preacher now became the persecuted.

The opposition blockaded the city so that Paul was hemmed in with no escape through the major gates. It was a foolproof prison, guaranteed to lead to Paul's capture and probably to his death.

And the plan would have worked, too, except for action taken on behalf of Paul by his new friends, the **CHRISTIANS** in Damascus.

All of that is enough background for us to make our way back to 2 Corinthians and listen to Paul's greatest boast.

Rescued in Damascus (Acts 9:24-25; 1 Corinthians 11:30-33)

[30] If I have to boast, I will boast of what pertains to my weakness. [31] The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, He who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying. [32] In Damascus the ethnarch under Aretas the king was guarding the city of the Damascenes in order to seize me, [33] and I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and so escaped his hands.¹⁴

¹⁴ The walls around ancient cities were often wide enough to drive a chariot around on top, and such was probably the case in Damascus. The walls, in fact (just like the lower walls of some of the Catholic Missions near downtown San Antonio) actually housed people. Homes were built into the walls.

¹⁵ There is a marked difference in the atmosphere between Acts 9's telling of the story and here in 2 Corinthians. There, Luke shows that God will always see His people through their trials as Paul triumphantly thwarted the plot of the Jews. Here, the emphasis is on the humiliation and weakness to which Paul is exposed.

Telling this story of an event nearly twenty years in the past makes it look almost like an afterthought, "*Oh, and I almost forgot about the time I was rescued in Damascus...*"¹⁶

It's not an afterthought. This event was crucial to shaping Paul into the man he became, for Jesus' sake.

When Paul returned from the Arabian Desert to launch his life as a Christian apostle, he was convinced of two things. One, Jesus was the Messiah. Two, he - Paul - was the one who could most effectively reach his fellow Jews for Jesus.

But, as he limped away from the city of Damascus (sore and cramped from being stuck in a basket), he had begun to learn a great truth: his strengths were not what qualified him for success in serving Jesus.¹⁷

He entered Damascus a tower of strength, a powerful preacher. He exited under cover of darkness after having hung off the city walls in a fish-basket.

Paul's breakthrough moment came when he saw that he was a "basket case."

He relates his basket experience as his boast because it was in the basket that he finally saw things clearly. His weakness paved the way for the display of God's strength.

The Lord Jesus blessed a human recognition of weakness at the very beginning of His own ministry when He said in the Sermon on the Mount, "***Blessed are the poor in spirit***" (Matthew 5).

Paul got it. And his boast about an experience from his own life here in 2 Corinthians is nothing more than an echo of Jesus' own heart.

¹⁶ This is the position taken by some commentators - among them Tasker and Moffatt.

¹⁷ Perhaps significantly, the next time we read of Paul's activity was when he became involved in the ministry at Antioch - by invitation!

Conclusion:

Getting lowered over a city wall in a basket taught Paul that the key to effective service for Jesus is the power of God. It would NEVER be the power of Paul.

Had he not learned this crucial lesson, he would have been just another flashy figure who fizzled and faded.

But because he learned to depend on the power of God, His service was New Covenant relevant, real, impactful, long-lasting, and triumphant.

You and I can learn what Paul learned. It is our openness to God's strength that makes the difference. It is the recognition of our own weakness that is the key to powerful, effective service.

In another place, Jesus put it this way: *[John 15:5] "apart from Me you can do nothing."*¹⁸

¹⁸ J.I Packer wrote a wonderful little book back in 1961 that highlights this theme of "strength through weakness." In *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, he comments that it is the modern church's dependence on her strengths that has led to the diminishing of evangelistic success. He suggests that if we would admit that we can't accomplish the end in view with respect to evangelism - that is, we can't save people by our methodology, only God is able to do that - His power would be released in our admission of weakness.