

How to Boast

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[0 : 0 0] Great. Thanks so much, Morag, for reading. May I add my word of welcome? My name is Martin Ayers. I'm the Senior Pastor of St. Silas. It's great you can join us wherever you are, and we hope you can stay connected with us. And I do hope you could get a Bible from somewhere off the shelf. 2 Corinthians chapter 10 is what we're looking at in our series in 2 Corinthians, and it's really important that everything I say is just expounding what's there in the Bible rather than my own thoughts. So do have that with you and be checking that and working through that with me.

If you don't have a Bible, you can go to BibleGateway.com and find that. And as we turn to God's Word, let's pray. Let's bow our heads and I'll lead us in a prayer. In Psalm 119, we read, the unfolding of your Word gives light. It gives understanding to the simple. So, Father, as we come to your Word this morning, we ask that you would enlighten our eyes and give us understanding that we might hold to your teaching, know the truth, and be set free. In Jesus' name, Amen.

Amen. Well, we're thinking this morning about the theme of boasting, which we associate with pride. You might have noticed how often in that little section that Morag read for us from 2 Corinthians 10, it mentions boasting. And Christians tend to be very down on pride. In a sense, we think of pride as the essence of sin. What causes us not to treat other people as we should in other person-centered love? What causes us not to treat the planet as we should? Ultimately, what causes us to push God off the throne in our lives and say, no, I'm going to be king in my life? Well, is it not pride? Is it not thinking of ourselves more highly than we ought to? But we have to be more careful about the way we're sometimes heard to be down on all kinds of pride. As we say, pride is one of the great sins or the ultimate sin. When I was in Preston, which is where Kathy and I lived before we moved to Glasgow five years ago, I had a mate who became a Christian. He was a great bloke, a really down-to-earth guy.

You might be watching this morning, John, from Preston. I don't know who's watching. John came to see me a few months after he'd become a Christian. And he said, can I just talk to you about something? It's just, I'm feeling a bit worried because at church, people keep saying that it's wrong to be proud. I'm hearing that in the sermons. I'm hearing that from conversations that pride is wrong. But I never realized that. And it's a bit of a problem for me because for centuries, the motto of Preston has been proud Preston. And the problem is quite personal for me because, and then he lifted up his trouser leg and he showed me that he had a tattoo that said proud Preston on it. And he said to me, now I've become a Christian, have I got to get that removed? You can see, you can see the problem.

What would you have said to that? What would you have said? When is taking pride in something appropriate? When is it wrong? Maybe, maybe you've got a proud Glasgow tattoo. Maybe you haven't. But we, we all have things that we boast in that we get confidence from. That's what a boast is. It's the thing we get our confidence from. It's the thing you go to when you're under fire that you take comfort from. So when you think about a boast like that, it's the thing that you're taking confidence in. It's what you find your joy in. It's actually quite closely tied with the thing that we often talk about today. A lot of people talk about identity. When the chips are down, who am I really?

[4 : 05] Where do I go to say, no, that's who I am. That's where I feel secure and settled. Now we might get our confidence from things that we didn't choose for ourselves. Things like our nationality or our family or how we look. Or we might take our confidence from things that we've done ourselves.

Maybe that we feel that in our lives there's been a big challenge and we've managed to get through it. Or we've achieved something. Maybe something that we've done for other people. Might be something we would find confidence in. But it's this issue. That's our boast. It's where we go for reassurance, for confidence. Now what's going on in this letter to Corinthians is the Apostle Paul is writing, defending his ministry to a church he planted because there are false teachers who have got in among the church and have pulled people away from Paul. And critically, what really matters is that means they've pulled people away from Paul's message about Jesus. And their message, which maybe in lots of ways is similar, but has seduced them away, is devastatingly deceptive. And we're going to see more about that in the coming weeks. But Paul here identifies the ways that these false teachers wrongly boast. They boast in the wrong things. And he's calling the church to boast in the kind of things Paul boasts in. So that's what we're going to look at. We're going to look at the kinds of boasting to avoid, the kind of boasting to embrace, and then the key to healthy boasting. So first of all, the kinds of boasting to avoid. And we see two sides to it. The first is comparing ourselves with others. So if you have a look at verse 12, it's on the screen there hopefully, next to me.

Verse 12, he says, we do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some who commend themselves. When they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise.

So they've turned up with these letters of recommendation that they want the Corinthian church to accept so that they come under their ministry. Who were the letters from? Probably from other false apostles, false teachers. They're measuring themselves by themselves and comparing themselves with themselves. And they want to see how they stood up against the standards of other people. And so it raises this theme for us of when we might compare ourselves as a church and as people with other people in Christian service. And that's a really toxic thing to do. It's toxic for a church. I've got a friend whose church went, it went adrift. They appointed a pastor who led the church. He pulled the church in an unhealthy direction. And it happened gradually over a period of years.

If you'd gone in on a typical Sunday, you might have not thought anything was wrong. But over a period of years, the church drifted from its biblical moorings. And there was no great split in the church. But fine godly people over a period of years who were effective in ministry just gradually moved on, one by one, family by family. Some went on a church plant, others moved away. People went to different churches.

[7 : 38] And I said to my friend, what do you think went wrong in that church? Where do you think it went wrong? And he said, I think the biggest problem was we were always guilty of looking over our shoulders as a church. Oh, look at what they're doing over there. Look at how they're growing. Why aren't we like that? We need to try that. You can see how it happens. Looking over our shoulders. And instead of seeing other churches in our city as ultimately as partners in the gospel and looking to be generous with them and thinking we're on the same team as them, instead of that, comparing ourselves.

How are Rehope doing? What's Adelaide Baptist up to? How many people go to the Tron these days? What's P's and G's doing in Edinburgh? Why are they growing so much? Maybe we need to do what they do.

Almost as though when we look at another church, at its worst, we're almost hoping that they're not doing very well so that in comparison we feel we're doing well. And that can make us, when we compare ourselves with other ministries, it can make us selfishly proud when we think, oh, we're doing a bit better than them. Or it can make us fall into self-pity. Oh, it's just so much harder here. Why is their ministry growing and mine isn't? Which is just another form of pride, self-pity. So we shouldn't get our validation from comparing ourselves with others. And that's what these people had wrongly done. They get their validation from comparing themselves with others. And the next type of boasting to avoid is credit for work we didn't do. So Paul sarcastically points out that that's what these false teachers are doing. If you look at verse 14 there, he says, we, you know, Paul and his apostles, his band, well, it's basically Paul when he says we there, we're not going too far in our boasting, as would be the case if we had not come to you. For we did get as far as you with the gospel of Christ. Neither do we go beyond our limits by boasting of work done by others. In other words, it was Paul who planted that church in Corinth, but it looks as though these false teachers want to take the credit for what's going on there. And we just need to be aware of that kind of boasting today and beware of it. Maybe if we see another ministry or we see a church leader who is trying to bring us under their ministry and attract us to their ministry, which might be healthy, but what would we need to be aware of? Maybe it would be a ministry where it does seem that they are wanting applause all the time, like these false teachers did, that it seems to be more about this person's platform than it is about them putting Jesus Christ on the platform. Let's be aware of ministries that people name after themselves. I think we just need to be wary of that and think, well, why have they named that ministry after themselves? What's going on there? Let's be wary of ministries that ask us for support with sweeping stories that don't seem all that plausible about how many people have been radically affected by their ministries. And maybe sometimes we need to think, is that really what's going on there? Or were those people affected by other ministries? And this ministry is just taking the credit for it. Of course, we want to be encouraged to hear about Jesus Christ at work, but we shouldn't be too taken away by the numbers game when we hear it. Let's take care to examine a ministry and think, let's hold it up against the New Testament pattern of ministry and think, how does it compare? Is it healthy? Paul's told us what that ministry looks like in recent weeks in 2 Corinthians. His ministry was a ministry in weakness, where he set out plainly to other people the truth about Christ, and he carefully reasoned with people from the New Testament and from the Old

Testament, from the Scriptures. So that's when we're thinking about other people and other ministries. In our own lives, we also maybe need to have a bit of a bonfire of wrong boasts, these kinds of boasts.

Let's repent of the times when we're just trying to fill ourselves up with approval from other people, thinking, no, I'm okay, because other people say I'm okay. And we're so desperate to do that, we crave praise from other people. And let's turn from comparing ourselves with other people, so that when we feel we're doing better, we swagger around in pride, or we have the opposite problem, we feel unnoticed, and we get resentful, resentful of other people's apparent success, and we get envious and jealous. So that's our first point, kinds of boasting to avoid.

[12 : 49] But it's not that all boasting is wrong, and that's our second point, the kinds of boasting to embrace. And there are two we're going to focus in on. Paul says that he will boast about some things.

One thing he boasts in is he boasts in the work God gives him to do. He'll boast in the work God has given him to do. Look at verse 13. Here is a man gripped by God's calling on his life, and he's not going to worry about what God calls other people to do, or how God might grant success to other people in other places. His focus is, what's God called me to do? What's the sphere of service that God has placed me in and called me to serve in? For any of us, we could think of how we have a sphere of service for the Lord Jesus.

Ephesians chapter 2 verse 10 says, this is the New Living Translation, but we are God's masterpiece. He has created us new in Christ so that we can do the good things that he planned for us long ago.

So God has prepared good things in advance for us to do. And for Paul, that meant pioneering church planting, writing the New Testament, the greatest pastor theologian. For you or me, it might be something a bit less glamorous. It might mean, and we're going to see next week actually, Paul's life was anything but glamorous.

We'll see that next week. But for you or me, it might mean looking after children because the schools are closed, being unproductive for a season in our life because you're up every night changing nappies.

[14 : 40] It might mean serving in a church where there's very little growth and where the ground is hard ground, and people around in the area where the church is seem hard-hearted to the message about Jesus.

But our confidence can remain intact when it comes from being able to say, this isn't about success. This is about the sphere of service God is calling me to in this season of my life. And if we boast in that, we'll care less how other people are doing.

When we hear about other gospel servants doing well, we'll rejoice in that. The next way Paul boasts well is he boasts in the advance of the gospel. So look at verse 15.

He says, Neither do we go beyond our limits by boasting of work done by others. Our hope is that as your faith continues to grow, our sphere of activity among you will greatly expand so that we can preach the gospel in the regions beyond you. So Paul brought the message of Christ crucified to this church in Corinth. His longing, his heart, his priority is that the message, they will so grow and be established in their faith that the message of the gospel can spread further beyond them, that the gospel will cross new frontiers. As they grow to maturity, they can become ascending church and the gospel about Jesus will go out. There's a documentary series I'm watching at the moment called The Last Dance about Michael Jordan. I actually watch it when I'm on the exercise bike. I mean, you can't run in this snow. And it's good for motivation to see Michael Jordan winning the NBA every year as you're on an exercise bike. Anyway, Michael Jordan was playing for the Chicago Bulls. They were a bit of a laughing stock of a franchise when he joined the team. And through him, they won year after year after year in the basketball. But it emerges very quickly in the documentary as you look at Michael Jordan that he very quickly was much bigger than the Chicago Bulls. He was a global cultural phenomenon.

You know, there was Nike Air Jordan trainers all around the world, the dream team in the Olympics. He was much bigger than the team he played for. And it caused tension within the team at times.

[17 : 14] Well, as the church today and in Paul's day, there's one savior, there's one Messiah, one hero, and no Christian leader can ever take his place. So for Paul, there's no danger like that.

He's not going to become bigger than the team. It's not going to become about him. When he wants people to boast in him, as we'll see shortly, it's that they boast in his message about Jesus and what he's modeled to them about Christ. Christ is the one on center stage. And so when Paul boasts, it's about the name of Jesus Christ being known and received in new regions and new places.

In other words, Paul has found something so worth living for and even worth dying for that he wants to boast in what he and others can do to promote that work, the name of Jesus.

And maybe that's an area that we need to continually work on as a church, that Christ would mean so much to us that new people calling on his name would be the driving goal of our lives and our life together as a church. I think to reflect Paul's priority, what it might look like is for people at St. Silas to be able to say things like this. Well, you know, I'm a vet or a plumber or a paramedic living in Glasgow and I go to St. Silas and I'm a partner there in the gospel and I've got a sphere of service God has given me and I find confidence enough in that because that's what God's called me to.

And you know, if there was just one thing that I really wish God would have called me to other than this, it would have been to go to a place where the gospel wasn't already known.

[19:05] I'm resolved to be content with what God's called me to do for him because that's his gift. But I know that my sphere of service is second best to being in a Muslim country as the only Christian people know or being in Japan, having that privilege of shining as a light where there aren't many lights for Jesus Christ. Because my longing is that the gospel will go to new places. These are the ways that Paul boasts. And it's really good to understand, for us, each of us to understand how fundamental this boasting theme is to the whole letter. So let me just show you that. There's three sections to 2 Corinthians, the letter, the book. The first one was chapters 1 to 7 of 2 Corinthians. And in that, in chapter 5, Paul explains why he's defending his pattern of ministry. And he says this, chapter 5, verse 12, we're not trying to commend ourselves to you again, but are giving you an opportunity to take pride in us so that you can answer those who take pride in what is seen rather than what is in the heart. You see that? So that's the theme of boasting in the first section of the letter. In the next section of the letter, Paul writes to those who are already on board with Paul in chapters 8 and 9 about the collection he's going to make of financial support. And he says in that section, therefore show these men who make the collection the proof of your love and the reason for our pride in you so that the churches can see it. So he wants them to be able to boast in him, chapters 2 to 7.

He wants to be able to boast in them, chapters 8 and 9, as they contribute and give to support the work. And now he's telling us in this section, where he's more dealing with his opponents, chapters 10 to 13, he's telling us how they wrongly boast and how to rightly boast. So here's a question.

If boasting is so dangerous and so easy to get wrong, why is Paul going on about it so much? It's because everyone boasts. It's unavoidable. And what Paul wants is to redirect their boasting and our boasting so that we turn from comparing ourselves with others or craving approval from others. And instead, we can boast in the sphere of service God calls us to and boast in the progress of the gospel as people are reconciled to God through Jesus Christ. So how do we do that? Well, we've heard the boasting to avoid, a boasting to embrace. Thirdly, we're going to think about the key to good boasting. So the Bible story explains why we crave acceptance and approval from other people.

It's because our relationship with God has been broken. We were made to find acceptance and approval from God to find our joy and glory in knowing him. And ever since we've rejected God, we're left with that gaping hole in our lives, longing for approval. We were made for this declaration from God, well done, good and faithful servant. And so when we turn from him, we want to fill that hole with something.

And some of us do that very successfully. We fill our lives with praise and honor from other people. Others of us who don't manage it go through life continually insecure. It's what the whole self-esteem movement is designed to address. You know, we get urged in our schools, this is going on with our children, is getting urged to boost our self-esteem, saying, I'm doing well, I'm great, you're wonderful, everyone's a star. And lots of our life decisions and behavior is based around this longing to hear other people affirm us and accept us, to glorify us because we're trying to fill that void. Now, why does Paul want the Corinthians to boast in him in chapters 2 to 7?

[23 : 13] And why does he want to be able to boast in them in chapters 8 and 9? It's because if they boast in him, they're boasting in his message of Christ crucified. And if he's boasting in them, he's boasting in a pattern of behavior in them that shows that their lives have been transformed by that message of Christ crucified. They've been transformed by the gospel and they're boasting in Paul preaching the gospel.

And Paul sums up that heart of good boasting in verse 17. You just have a look. He says, but let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord. What does that mean, to boast only in the Lord?

Well, first and foremost, it's that Paul has taken a decision, a revolutionary decision in his life, not to care what other people think, but to care what the Lord thinks of him. And he follows that in verse 18 to show that. It is not the one who commends himself who was approved, but the one whom the Lord commends, audience of one, what does God think of my life? What does God think of how I've lived?

Then crucially, when we do that, what happens next is we get stripped of any attempt to boast in ourselves before God. So you can see that verse 17 there is in quotation marks, and that's because Paul is quoting Jeremiah chapter 9 verse 24. He does it the same in 1 Corinthians 1 as well, where God says this, Jeremiah 9. He says, Let not the wise boast of their wisdom, or the strong boast of their strength, or the rich boast of their riches, but let the one who boasts, boast about this, that they have the understanding to know me, that I am the Lord. When we have an encounter with the living God through his word, we get stripped of all these worldly ways of boasting. God does not approve of you because of the wisdom you have. He does not approve of you because of the power you have, or the money you have. They might impress other people, they don't impress God, because our hearts are turned away from him. We've broken our relationship with him. And friends, this is why the message of the cross is so deeply offensive to people who shine in the world's eyes. If you are able to boast in what other people think of you, you find it hard to stand before God completely humbled, which is what the message of the cross calls us to do, to say, I have nothing I can boast about before God.

I cannot offer anything because my heart is turned from him. And then we hear the words explaining the cross. So in chapter 5, verse 21, God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. Or in 1 Corinthians 1, Christ has become for us our righteousness, holiness, holiness, and redemption. Therefore, as it's written, let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord. So we're deeply humbled as we hear the message of the cross, and yet at the same time deeply filled by knowing that God's grace reaches down and puts the stamp on our lives approved. He freely gives us the glory that we need. The glory we've been searching for in other places our whole lives is granted as a gift, filling us up to overflowing. So that when Paul says elsewhere, he says, I've been crucified with Christ, and I'm dead to the world, and the world is dead to me. What he's saying is not just from now on I'm going to live for God and not for the things of the world. What he's also saying is the world has no claim on me anymore. I'm dead to the world, and the world is dead to me. It doesn't claim me. I'm liberated from needing to accumulate money so that I can boast in it, and other people will think well of me because of my money. I'm free from that. I'm liberated to give God my best at work, not to enslave myself to my career so that I can boast in it. I'm liberated to go out into the world to love and serve other people because I don't need to crave their affirmation and try and steal it from them. All I have to do is boast in the cross, and that's all I do, on which my Savior, the Prince of Glory, demonstrated his love for me, and he filled me up with his acceptance and approval. It cost him everything. He had to bear the utmost shame that he could get me glory from his Father, and it's given me all that I need. Let's pray together. We praise you, Lord Jesus Christ, for your name, the only name by which we can be reconciled to God, that your Father and ours made you who had no sin to be sin for us so that in you we might become the righteousness of God. We ask that by your Spirit our grasp of the ways we fall short would deepen, that our sense of the greatness of your finished work at the cross would grow so that we can boast in the Lord alone. Help us to turn from unhealthy boasting so that we can say, I don't care what other people think of me. I just gladly get on with the sphere of service that God has given me. Lord, that our ambition, would our ambition as a church simply be to see your gospel message spread? And for us as individuals, would our security in Christ overflow so that we can boast only that we know you and that you are our righteousness, holiness, and redemption. For your name's sake. Amen.

[29 : 20] We're going to respond by singing to God together of how we can boast in the cross.