

Humble Boasting

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Philippians 3:4b-14

“Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ.”

Have you ever looked up to someone? Maybe you placed that person on a pedestal, or maybe you always thought about that person with a kind of idealistic, dreamy way. Have you ever thought about someone in terms of perfection, or at least close to it? Grandparents are especially guilty of idealism when it comes to grandchildren. It's not their fault, they just normally don't get to spend enough time with the children to see them as the deceptive, manipulating, creatures that all children can be. So grandparents idealize their grandchildren... most of the time.

We all like to have someone to look up to. We like to speak well and think well of others. There is a website, “My Hero” that describes modern day, real heroes. People like Dorothy Day, Mother Theresa, Martin Luther King, Jr., Gandhi, and others. These are people who are like you and me that we have made into heroes. We have almost given them the cape and tights in creating them, talking about them, and making normal people legends. And we do that with others. Have you ever looked up to someone?

We do need heroes to give us some hope and promise and even purpose. People we look up to can inspire us as we face our own challenges. When we look at someone who prays well, who has the gift of prayer and we say, “I wish I could do that,” that is someone inspiring us. When someone's dedication and persistence gives us focus and direction then our heroes are, in a sense, a model for us. In the Catholic tradition, the saints are heroes that offer an example for all. Saint Francis gives us the example of living simply and peaceably, Saint Dominic gives us an example of preaching, and St. Thomas that of intellect. We use others as examples to inspire us. We see anyone with skills, someone who excels in one thing or another and we become inspired. In the movie *The Incredibles*, the arch villain was someone who admired the heroes so much that he wanted to be just like them in as many ways as possible. He created a suit, and other gizmos that would give him similar qualities as a super hero. He wanted to be just like his idols. From athletes to scholars to presidents to our next-door neighbor, we look to others for inspiration.

We look to those sitting next to us in the pews, we look to those in other churches, and we look in our history. Even if we don't find any actual heroes, wearing their masks and fighting evil, we do find people we admire for one reason or another. This is the person who is very good at numbers. Or the person who can bake the best cake. Or the person who can remember the most Bible verses, who can pray the longest, or remembers the most sermons. The person who was always here when the pipes would break, the person who would always go the extra mile. These are the saints of the church. We admire their traits, their abilities, and their skills, and maybe we would like to be like them.

Many of the Philippi community to whom Paul was writing this letter were looking for an example of Christianity. They were looking for someone to show them how to be a good Christian, a full Christian, and a true Christian. They wanted someone they could copy, imitate and follow in the faith. As Christians we often look with the Philippians for examples, guides and models showing us ways to live out the faith. The members of the Philippi church were also looking for people to admire and guide them in their faith. Remember, they were still fairly new as Christians; they were still trying to understand what it means to live as a community and follow Christ. They were looking for someone to mentor them and guide them in their faith. Like finding a faith partner whom they can mimic and become. And they found a group of people who followed Christ and the Jewish law with zeal. They found a group of people who felt that the righteousness of the law as completed by Christ, but the law still needed to be fulfilled. They seemed so pious, they seemed so connected to God, that the

Philippians were sure these Judiazers could be trusted, followed and mimicked.

Can you imagine where the church might have been heading? Neophyte Christians mimicking and imitating the Judiazers like two-year olds, copying their forms and methods of prayer, their practices, and trying to be as much like these misleading Christians. And then they would brag and boast because they have gone one step farther than Christ in being like these “super Christians” who had the best of both worlds. Can you imagine where that church might have been heading, because it is still happening today?

What is a fad but people imitating each other? What is a trend but everyone trying to do and be the same thing? Forms of worship, approaches to preaching, and even the words used in prayer are influenced by those around us. From mega-church trends to theological trends we are like those Philippians looking around for someone or something to be a Christian Hero to us, modeling the right way, the best way to be Christian in the world. It used to be the pastor, but luckily, most people have realized that we are normally the worst of the bunch. Although, as Oscar Wilde once said, “Bad artists always admire each other’s work,” and many congregations still look to the pastor as the example of Christian living. God help us all.

It is a dangerous path we walk. It is a path that can lead towards pride, arrogance, and selfishness. The Philippians found their example in these Judiazers, and they not only followed their practices, but their rhetoric. Those who were circumcised found reason to boast. Those who could follow the Jewish law without fault had reason to boast. The boasting became louder and louder until prayers diminished, taking the place of chest thumping and bragging.

These Judiazers that the Philippians were following, may very well have been some of the most pious and holy Jews. And maybe they came to know Christ in an authentic and powerful way. But they were enamored with their own gifts, and returned to those gifts, oblivious to everything else around them, and they considered their way the best way.

Churches are so easily drawn in. The church with the great music program focuses all of its energy and resources on the music program to the detriment of everything else. Or this can happen with a youth program, young adult, or even form of worship. Most of the Church growth seminars are bragging sessions for churches that have grown, bragging about how much they have grown. Pastors who have had a “successful” ministry begin to look at themselves as responsible for that success - when we know where that success really came from.

This is the danger of boasting. We begin to look at our own navel so closely, admiring ourselves that we no longer lift our heads to look around us. C.S. Lewis said, “A proud man is always looking down on things and people; and, of course, as long as you’re looking down, you can’t see something that’s above you.” Remember the Titanic? The ship that God couldn’t even sink, sank. And we are so easily drawn in just as the Philippians were drawn in. We want to mimic and copy the church growth method. We want to be just like the popular person, so we can also boast and brag. It often seems that churches are just groups of people running in circles either bragging, or following someone else who can brag.

But we continue to brag, boast, and look for things we do well. Paul even jumps in. He hears about the Judiazers and what they are teaching. Paul hears about the ideas and jumps in with his own story. “If you want to see a real Jew, look at me,” claims Paul. He is a Jew from birth, of a reputable tribe. Paul is someone who studied the law, and then lived the law to a high level of perfection. Here is someone who can boast and does. Here is the ultimate in boasting.

But Paul then turns everything on its head. He gives a very impressive list why the Philippians should admire him. Paul boasts, brags, and swaggers about with his credentials, and then throws them to the side. They are all rubbish, they are worthless, and they are not leading to the Lord. Such bragging, such boasting, and placing hope in works are a loss in the eyes of the Lord. This is Paul’s claim and call to the Philippians and to us as well. No matter how closely you follow the law it will never be enough to compare to the cross. No matter how well you pray it will never be enough to take the place of the cross. Our heroes, our models, our individuals with great skills and abilities will never compare with Christ. This is what Paul is saying to the Philippians and to us. We have to avoid the temptations of following one person or another over or away from Christ. We have

to avoid the temptation to place all our hope in one skill, in one talent, in one program, in one church, and even in one preacher over Christ. We aren't good Christians because we have good preaching, or good music, or a good education program. We are good Christians because we want to be Christ.

We look at someone who is talented, and of course say, "It would be nice to be like that person." But Paul is calling us to look past human accomplishments to the Cross. Paul looks at Jesus and doesn't say, "It would be nice..." but cries out "I want to be with that person." To the Philippians, the works of the law will never substitute or overtake the power of the cross and the resurrection. To us today, the best preaching, praying, thinking, planning, music, or anything else will never take the place of the power of the sacrifice at the cross and the salvation of the resurrection.

There is a novel called *The Servant*. It is about one individual who made it in the business world. He was a leader with power and money. This is the kind of person that many pastors and other church leaders try to emulate. But this individual saw how empty his life was. He saw how much was missing and how his boasting could only take him so far. So he gave up all his power, all his money, and all his prestige to join a monastery. He saw the power of the cross and wanted to share in that power. In the cross is no room for anything else. Our gifts, our talents, our prized possession, our boasting becomes humbled and silent in the shadow of the cross. If you want to follow a hero, follow Christ, for that is where Paul is calling us to turn and lift our eyes, to the cross of suffering and salvation.

We turn our eyes to the cross, and Christ becomes the example, which we strive to live in the model and example. This is the brilliance of Paul's move. He calls the Philippians to look to him as the prime example, and then throws their gaze to Christ. And then Paul calls them to live out the model and the example of Christ daily, reminding them of God's grace. Do you hear that call in his letter when he says, "I have not already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me my own..." Here is that race imagery again, but it is a fitting imagery. We are called to keep walking, running, crawling, and looking toward the cross. We can't place our hope in any program, not any individual, but the cross. We are, in a sense, working out our own salvation. We may not be there, yet. We may not be at the place where we can brag to be perfect Christians. I imagine we all have our faults, our failing, and the places where we need to improve. That is what it means to be human.

I was sitting in the airport one day, studying for a Bible exam when someone sat down next to me and asked if I was a Christian. I wasn't thinking. I was lacking all of my clever and witty responses, so I offered an honest answer. He asked if I was a Christian, and I responded, "I'm trying." I'm trying to live in the model of Christ. I'm trying to embrace the suffering of the cross. I'm trying to reap the fruits of the resurrection. I'm trying. (You could imagine his surprise when I told him that I am a pastor).

Aren't we all trying? Aren't we all working out our salvation, so that one day we will live the resurrection? So none of us has any place to boast, none of us has any justification to brag, for we are all still living into the people God has called us to be. How can we boast when we are only halfway there? How can we boast when we are still working at it? Our boasting is humbled as we continue to walk towards the cross.

But when our eyes are on the cross, when we are trying to be Christians, then our gifts are useful and worthy. Paul never says that the law is worthless, only that it cannot compare to the cross. But the law can guide us to live in the way Christ calls us to live. Our gifts of music, of praying, of reading, of finance, of preaching, or whatever else can be gifts that will help us to be the Christians we are called to be. The trick is to keep our eyes not on ourselves and how well we are doing, but on Christ. The trick is to keep our eyes not on those who may be watching us, but on Christ. You run to Christ, not to anyone else, and you live by the rule of Christ.

So we try, and we try, and we try. We use the gifts that we have been given by God to reach the cross and be the Christians that we have been called to be. But I don't want to leave you with the thought that we have to work out our salvation alone. Remember that we have grace, we are saved, and glory is here. Yes we are trying, always trying, to be the Christians, but grace is present, grace is assured. Remember that it was grace that brought you to Christ, it was the anointing grace infused by the Holy Spirit that washed over you. It is that continued grace that gives us the assurance that no matter what we can always get up and run again to the cross. Oh that grace, that amazing grace levels all of our bragging, all of our boasting. Oh that grace, that amazing

grace makes all of our reasons to boast rubbish and the cross attainable. Oh that grace, that amazing grace which calls us to the table, and sends us to the cross. Live out that grace as you run to the cross.

Let go of your boasting, turn your eyes to Christ, and experience the grace that grants us the assurance of our salvation.

AMEN