

Falling Short

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Romans 1:16-17, 3:22b-28

“... all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...”

We like to brag. We like to boast, thump our chest, claim our place, shine in the light, and be the best. We do like to brag, it makes us feel good about ourselves, and it makes us feel important. It is an opportunity to tell people what you do well, where you shine. But bragging can go to far, it can get annoying. Like that one individual at the gym who can do everything very well and lets you know it. You do ten push-ups and he does twenty. You run for three miles, and she runs for five. This individual's very actions brag superiority, bravado, and arrogance. I don't know about you, but I find those people very, very annoying.

But would you do the same if you could? Would you show the world what a great person you are if you could? Like gorillas beating their chests, would you stand up and shout, I am the best, and I tell you why? Because even if for a moment, the adrenaline rush and the power rush feels good the glory and the limelight feels good. So as we begin to feel the pull toward pumped up confidence, towards bragging, let us remember what the great football player Johnny Unitas said, “Conceit is bragging about yourself. Confidence means you believe you can get the job done.” We want confidence, not conceit, but it is a fine line, isn't it. The line between conceit, and confidence is thin and easily crossed. Because if we do a job well, then we should claim our talents and skills. If we have abilities, we shouldn't hide them. So we must walk the line between confidence and conceit remembering that the lure of bragging is constantly pulling and tempting. We like to brag and boast about what we are good at, and it is easy to cross over the line.

In the movie *Saved*, one of the main characters played by Mandy Moore crosses that line. She is a senior at a private Christian High School, her faith is strong, her lifestyle is holy, and she loves to brag about how great a Christian she is. She loves to flaunt her perfection of faith, her pious attitude, and her close relationship with God. She is the perfect Christian, and she will show the world how perfect she is, if she is just given the opportunity. Like the rest of us, Moore's character loves to brag.

But there is something more insidious about Moore's character than just bragging. She is not just portraying a snobbish, stuck up, social bragging individual that you may see on your average noonday soap opera. She is not just bragging about her grades or her looks. Moore's character is bragging about her faith in a way that puts down others that do not agree with her doctrinal point for point. She is that bragging Christian, the self-righteous Christian, and one who uses his or her relationship with Christ as a bragging right to show how great of a person she is.

Do you know what or whom I am talking about? The Christian who claims that he or she has managed to live a life without sin, and rubs it in. The Christian who claims that he or she really knows how the pray, and will show you. The Christian who likes to show his or her faith in a condensing way is this bragging Christian, this boastful Christian. Some Christians show off their own material gain as a sign of God's favor and their faith. They brag about how much God has blessed them. Some churches like to brag about their ministry, the size of their congregation, or the political power in the town. I once attended a church growth seminar, my first and last church growth seminar, and every speaker was a pastor of a thousand-member congregation. While they were supposed to be offering direction, they only bragged about how great their own individual ministry was. They only wanted to show off what they had done, and then throw some points out which were so bland and so universal that they had no real impact. I left that seminar singing, “O' Lord, its hard to be humble, when your looking as good as I am, O' Lord, its hard to be humble when you are perfect in just every way.”

But this isn't new, this religious bragging and positioning. This religious attitude of conquering and being better than your neighbor is not unique to 21st century America. Paul wrestled with boasting and bragging in his own ministry. From members of the Corinthian community bragging that their

salvation was so assured that they could live any kind of life they wanted, to Jewish Christians bragging to the Galatians that a Jewish Christian was the better than a Gentile Christian. Bragging about who baptized whom, who had more money and who knew the law better was common for the churches Paul was working with just as it is today. Paul knew about Christian bragging. Hence we find Paul writing to the church in Rome, a community of Christians still trying to understand who they are and how to follow Jesus, that bragging is excluded. Paul was just with the bragging Corinthians, he just dealt with the Galatians, and he can only assume that some in the Roman community were bragging about their righteous lifestyle, their favor by God, and their greater salvation demonstrated by works. Or at least Paul could assume that the seeds for bragging were embedded in the fertile, new Christian soil. Maybe in an attempt to nip it in the bud, with what many assume to be an introductory letter, Paul reminds the community that bragging about one's faith is worthless, it is empty and it is excluded. Yet the boasting in Christian communities continues for two thousand years.

The cantankerous preacher, Will Campbell describes religious boasting thus, "Today we are bombarded with a theology of certitude. I don't find much biblical support for the stance of 'God told me and I'm telling you and if you don't believe as I do you're doomed.' A sort of 'My god can whip you god' posture." (From *Soul Among Lions: Musings of a Bootleg Preacher*)

One person says, "I pray three hours a day," the next claims to read the Bible for four hours a day, and suddenly the church becomes a breeding ground for the religious Olympics of piety. Bragging is the rhetoric of these Olympics. It is pervasive, it is insidious, and as long as humans occupy the church, the bragging and the bravado seem to be a permanent fixture in our Christian story.

But if you ever look just a little closer, you will see all the bragging, all the posturing, all the show is just that – a show. Walk behind the scenes in a circus act and you will see how the illusions are made. Get to know the boastful, and the illusion of greatness will fall, the balloon will deflate. Like the "Schofield Kid" in the Eastwood movie *Unforgiven*. The "Schofield Kid" is a young man who claims to have killed five men when in reality he hasn't killed any, and has horrible vision. He can't see let alone shoot. Yet his words, his bragging painted him as a great fighter, as a larger than life individual. Look a little closer, and the curtain will fall away, revealing the little man controlling the wizard. Look a little closer and realize that the bragging is but a front, a false support, and false security.

Where does our boasting and bragging come from but pride? Pride, in who we are, at least in our own mind, attracts us, like a moth to flame to the selfish and conceited bragging so pervasive in our culture. Reinhold Niebuhr talked about pride as the selfish self-centeredness and root of evil. For Niebuhr, the sin of pride is greatest in those who see themselves as good, and is pervasive in governments, business, democracies, and even in religious institutions. Remember individualism, which I talked about last week. Bragging is individualism combined with a front of pride. Yet the façade is just that – a façade that holds little depth, and even less truth. Look closer and you will see behind the scenes behind the show to the truth.

What is that truth but that we are all fallen, faltering, stumbling and clumsy individuals? The great unifier of humanity is that we are all less than perfect, we are all less than ideal, we all have faults, and we all tend to err from time to time. Watch the news and see evidence of our fallen nature, of our propensity to do wrong, to make bad choices, and to cause harm to each other. Selfishness, greed, arrogance, hate, and pride are ubiquitous in our culture, and in our lives. Can you relate? Do you understand what I am talking about?

Any who is without sin, any who has never made a decision which broke your relationship with God in one way or another, who has never acted against another person no matter how small or how large, who hasn't gone against creation as it has been given and blessed by God, then you are the exception. As for me, I find myself with the sinners, among the sinners, and consider myself a sinner. I try, you try, we all try to walk the path of righteousness, of holiness, of Christ without faltering or slipping, but we all get distracted from time to time. We all lose our focus from time to time, we all look to something else beside God from time to time, and we find ourselves falling short of the holy, righteous life, which God calls us to live.

In the play *The Skin of Our Teeth*, Thornton Wilder displays our falling short as a part of human nature, which we can never avoid. In this play the human race again and again goes through the flood and the rebuilding, again and again. And always the Cain of the characters murders another human, the Adam of the characters lusts, and the Eve of the characters acts and lives in a selfish way. It is a cycle, which cannot be avoided. It is part of our nature.

No wonder we boast, because we don't like to beat ourselves up all the time. We don't like to wear the camel hair every day. No wonder we boast because we like to hide behind that façade which our boasting creates. No wonder we boast because, especially in the church, we are supposed to be different. Isn't that right? Aren't we supposed to be better, holier, and closer to God when we become a Christian so that our boasting will be merited and justified? But Paul says, "there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the Glory of God." He was writing to a community of some that wanted to boast because they were originally Jewish, of some that wanted to boast because they were prestigious Gentiles, and of all who to set themselves apart from the rest of the Roman culture as better, and Paul brings them back to earth. Paul reminds the Roman church and reminds us as well that we all are fallen; stumbling, clumsy creatures that sometimes get it right and sometimes get it wrong. Paul reminds us that no one has a place for boasting.

And then, at that moment, when we realize that we have no place to boast, and that we have no room to brag, then the grace and the justification of God offers us redemption. This is the power of the message not just of Paul's letter to the Roman church, but of the whole of the Gospel. This message is that God looks at us, sees our fallen selves, and says, "I will make you whole." Through the cross, through the power of Jesus the Christ God tells us and we believe that our lives will be worth boasting, will be worth bragging, will be justified because God will make us whole.

Listen to this again. God will make you whole. What can you do to merit bragging and boasting? Nothing. What can you do to claim to be justified in the eyes of the Lord? Nothing. It is God who acts, it is God who intervenes, and it is God, in God's righteousness that offers us the opportunity to live as fully and as truly as God intends us to live.

Have you ever been to a testimony? Normally in a testimony the witness shares how God has changed his or her life. Normally in a testimony the witness shares the before and after of his or her story – the different choices and different opportunities. Imagine instead that at a testimony one gets up on the platform and shouts out, "there is nothing I can do to merit my full righteousness," and then lets God finish the testimony. Imagine if the individual gets on the platform and shouts, "Lord, I am a sinner," and then lets the Lord finish the story. That is the

righteousness of God, that God does finish the story through the cross of Jesus Christ. Listen to the words of Martin Luther as he meditated on this passage:

"I greatly longed to understand Paul's Epistle to the Romans, and nothing stood in the way but that one expression, 'the righteousness of God,' because I took it to mean that righteousness whereby God is righteous and deals righteously in punishing the unrighteous... Night and day I pondered until... I grasped the truth that the righteousness of God is that righteousness whereby, through grace and sheer mercy, he justifies us by faith. Form *Luther's Works*, Weimar ed., Col. 54, pp. 179.

Do you hear what Luther is saying? That God makes us whole, God makes us blessed, that God offers us life because God sees how precious we are and stays true to that part of our life. Because God truly does love us, does God intervene? Let me say it again, there is nothing you can do but rest in God's arms, knowing that God saves us, cleanses us, and redeems us. Through the crucifixion and the resurrection of Jesus Christ are we assured of God's mercy and God's righteousness? The cross brings us to God's mercy and righteousness, and all we have to do is say, "Yes" to God. Then God finishes our story. There is no amount of works, no hours of prayers, no time of pious posturing that gains our salvation, only the mercy and righteousness of God.

So can you say "yes" to God? Can you say "yes" to God and experience the justification, which Christ offers? John Wesley describes it thus: "It is not possible to find words that should more absolutely exclude all consideration of our own works and obedience, or more emphatically ascribe the whole of our justification to free, unmerited goodness."

And that is why boasting will end, because there are no works, there is no demonstratable pious way to show your justification but just saying "yes" to God again and again. Saying, "yes, God, this is your life, it is in your heart where I belong." The righteousness of God will accept you, change you, and bring you into the fullness of the precious person God has intended you to be. This is the mercy of second chances again and again. This is the Gospel of forgiveness offered every day. This is the life, which God created, intended, and makes available to you every moment. Can you say, "yes" to God, believe in God's

righteousness, and trust in God's mercy. Can you say, "yes" to Christ and have faith that through the cross we are justified and redeemed? Can you say, "yes" to Christ and follow him to into God's loving and healing arms? He is calling you, he is guiding you, fall back and believe for the first time or for the hundredth time that you are redeemed by the love and righteousness of God. Do you hear Jesus calling you? Do you hear Jesus beckoning you to follow him, be with him, love him and live with him? Softly and tenderly, Jesus is calling. Jesus is waiting, calling, pleading and promising. Softly and tenderly, Jesus is calling. Softly and tenderly, softly and tenderly, softly and tenderly.

*Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling,
Calling for you and for me;
See, on the portals He's waiting and watching,
Watching for you and for me.
Come home, come home
Ye, who are weary, come home;
Earnestly, tenderly, Jesus is calling,
Calling, O sinner, come home!*

Say, "yes" to God, and live the life God intended for you and for me. Come home into God's arms and know that you are justified, you are redeemed, and you are forgiven.

AMEN