

We have a tendency in this part of the world to be a little self-deprecating. We always bring things down a little bit, make it a little bit negative. Immediately follow up what anybody says with this kind of a statement. When somebody says, "Thank you," for example, we often say, "No big deal. Don't need to worry about it." When somebody says, "You did a nice job," we will often say, "Ah, it's nothing. I could've done better." If somebody says, "How are you doing?", we say, "It could be worse." And if somebody talks about the weather, we'll say, "At least it isn't blowing," although you can't say that about today. This is just the way that we are. There's nothing wrong with it. We have this tendency to bring everything down just a little bit, because we don't want other people to think that we are boasting. We don't want other people to think that we're somehow being arrogant. If somebody said, "You did a nice job," and you said, "I know. Thank you," we'd say, "What's with this guy? He's kind of being a little boastful." We don't want to be thought of in that way.

But because of this, it tends to color the way that we understand our reading for today when Paul talks about boasting in our weakness. Boasting in weakness does not mean that we cut ourselves down, to make ourselves less than what we are. Boasting in our weakness means that we boast in Jesus and what he has done, and not in ourselves. That's what Paul wants us to learn in our lesson for today.

Because there were false teachers in Corinth, Christians, who were boasting in themselves. They said, "We are great speakers. We are very wise. We are very knowledgeable. We are the people you should be listening to, because we speak the truth. We actually believe the Bible, and so on. Unlike Paul over here. Paul who is not very impressive. Paul who doesn't speak very well. Paul who is teaching you lies in the name of God. And so you should listen to us," they say, "because at least we know what we're talking about." But unfortunately these false teachers were using the Corinthians for their own advantage. They were abusing them. As Paul says in verse 20: "For you bear it if someone makes slaves of you, or devours you, or takes advantage of you, or puts on airs, or strikes you in the face." So who's the real fool? Paul or the Corinthians for putting up with this?

And so Paul to speak against this engages in a little bit of irony. He's even a little bit sarcastic in the way that he speaks. Because he's says, "I'm going to speak like a fool. I'm going to speak like those false teachers do over there to show you just how silly all of this is. Anything they can claim for themselves, I can do one better!" This is what Paul means when he says in verse 22: "Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they offspring of Abraham? So am I. Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one--I am talking like a madman--with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death." "So I sound just like them," Paul says, "boasting in this way. And I am better than they are in all of these things."

But notice what Paul boasts in here. He boasts in things that seem like failures. He boasts in things that we would never think to boast about. "These guys over here claim to be great public speakers, but I have been whipped five times. These guys over here claim to be very wise, to know what they're talking about, but I have been beaten with a rod three times and stoned once. These guys over here claim to present the truth, but I have been shipwrecked three times. These guys over here claim to be better than me," Paul says, "but I have suffered in ways that they

never will." Anything they can claim for themselves, Paul can do one better. So if they want to play this game, Paul is going to win every single time.

But notice what Paul is doing. He is not boasting in the things they boast in and says, "I can do better." He's not saying, "If they claim to be a great public speaker, well, I'm a better one!" No. He boasts in the things that matter, the things that actually count, the things that show that he belongs to God. We wouldn't expect him to boast in this way, but it shows that Paul is boasting in his weakness.

And Paul doesn't have to do this. Paul could boast in himself and be right to do so. This is why he goes on to say in chapter 12 that he knows of a man who was taken up into the third heaven, "whether in the body or out of the body, I don't know--God knows." And that man, he says, saw things and heard things which words cannot express, which we couldn't even begin to express in our language. That's how great that revelation was. This man, of course, is Paul himself. He knows who he is, because, he says, "Well, it's me. I am the one who saw all of these things." But he speaks in this way to drive home his point. He wants to distance himself from those things, saying that "I could boast in these things if I wanted to, and I would be right to do so." This is why he says in verse 6: "If I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I would be speaking the truth." Speaking the truth unlike those fools over there who only claim to be speaking the truth. So he could boast in this and be right to do so. But he doesn't. Paul boasts in his weakness. Paul boasts in his suffering. Paul boasts in the things that he has to endure, because all of these things show that he belongs to Christ.

Now, maybe we think that's kind of strange. Why would you boast in things like your suffering? Why would you boast in your weakness? Wouldn't that be the kind of thing you wouldn't talk about? The kind of thing that you would try to avoid? Why would you glory in that? But Paul does boast in it. He glories in this, unlike those foolish false teachers in Corinth. Because this suffering, Christians, this weakness shows the power and the grace of God.

This is why he goes on to even talk about his greatest weakness of all. Verse 7: "To keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited." We'll talk about what that thorn is in just a moment, but pay attention to what he says. He says, "A thorn was given to me." Well, given by who? Given by God! God had given him this thorn. God had laid this suffering upon him. God had made him weak. And this helps us to understand, then, what he means by that thorn. It is everything that he has had to suffer on behalf of Christ. All of the whippings, the beatings, the shipwrecks, the hunger, the thirst, the danger, all of it God had laid upon him, because he belongs to Jesus Christ. All of these things he suffered, because he is in Christ. And whatever Jesus suffers, Christians, we suffer along with him too. This is why Paul prays three times to have this suffering taken away, just like Jesus prayed three times in Gethsemane to have his suffering taken away too. But just as Jesus submitted to the will of his Father, so Paul does the same thing. He endures the beatings. He endures the shipwrecks. He endures all of this suffering, because it shows that he belongs to Christ. And united with Jesus, the power of Christ now rests upon him. And that's why he boasts, because it shows how strong Christ is.

And so Christians, this is what boasting in our weakness actually means. It is not being self-deprecating. It's not bringing yourself down. It is boasting in the cross which God has laid upon us. Though the world considers it to be foolish, we boast in what we suffer on behalf of God. Though the world considers it to be weak, we boast in the thorns which God has given to us. Though the world considers it to be silly, we boast in what we cannot do, because in so doing, we boast in what Jesus has done and can do for us. Because all of these other things, Christians, without Christ do not matter. Even if we were the very best public speaker in the world, without Christ it is nothing. Even if we were the wisest and the most knowledgeable person of all, without Christ it is nothing. Even if we have seen visions of heaven and heard things which we can't even begin to express, without Christ it is nothing. But with Christ, we have everything. Because even if we have nothing else in this world, we have all things in Jesus Christ. And that is something worth boasting about. This is why Paul says in verse 10: "For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

So Christians, let us be content with what we suffer for the sake of God. Let us boast in the insults. Let us boast in the hatred of the world. Let us boast in the suffering that we go through. Let us boast in all of it, because it shows that we are not part of this world. We don't belong to it. Let us boast in these things because it shows that we belong to Jesus, Jesus who is our strength, Jesus who is our salvation. And though we lose everything in this life for his sake, we have lost nothing at all, because Jesus Christ is our all in all. Jesus Christ is everything. So let us boast in our weakness, because it shows the strength of God.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, you have united us with your Son, Jesus Christ, and even as we suffer with him, help us always to be patient, knowing that you intend all things for our good. In his name we pray. Amen.