STRENGTH THROUGH WEAKNESS

2 CORINTHIANS 11:16-31

I AM THE WEAKEST

FIRST BYRON CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH

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INTRODUCTION

"I am the greatest!" boasted heavyweight world champion Muhammad Ali before the biggest fight of his life, against Sonny Liston, winning the world title in the seventh round in 1964.

Almost sixty years later, men and women are still claiming to be the GOAT (Greatest Of All Time) in different sports. They not only want to be great at something, they want to be the greatest, even the greatest of all time.

What about the Christian life? Are there any circumstances in which we should boast, "I am the greatest"? **What's the best boast for a Christian?**

BACKGROUND

In 2 Corinthians, the Apostle Paul was losing his ministry influence over the Corinthians because false teachers were boasting about how much better they were than Paul. "We are the greatest!" they boasted. How does Paul respond? He responds with a bad boast and the best boast.

1. "I AM THE GREATEST" IS A BAD BOAST

I repeat, let no one think me foolish. But even if you do, accept me as a fool, so that I too may boast a little. What I am saying with this boastful confidence, I say not as the Lord would but as a fool. Since many boast according to the flesh, I too will boast (16-18).

Boasting is foolish

Six times in this chapter, Paul says boasting is foolish (1, 16, 17, 19, 21). The kind of boasting he's targeting is "boasting according to the flesh" (19). That's boasting that comes from our sinful nature and it's foolish because it's usually expressed in sinful ways for sinful purposes. It's Muhammad Ali type boasting and many were doing it in the Corinthian church: "Since many boast according to the flesh" (18). Just before Paul wrote this, Augustus Caesar ensured that his funeral inscription would be placed on multiple statues and buildings. It has 35 paragraphs on "Why I love me..."

I will boast as a fool

Having condemned bad boasting, Paul then does it! "Since many boast according to the flesh, I too will boast" (18). Is Paul sinning when he does this? No. He knows it's not what Jesus would have done (17), but it's not coming from his sinful nature and it's not being expressed in sinful ways for sinful purposes. It's not a lie, it's not about self-love, and it's not about self-promotion. It is truthful, out of love for the Corinthians, and for the glory of God. He's effectively saying, "Although boasting is so foolish, if you really want me to compete with the false teachers, I'm better than the best of them in a number of areas, and I'll boast about it if that's what it takes to recover you from deception. I'll play the fool to expose the foolishness of my opponents and bring you back to Christ" (1, 5-12). "You expose yourself to their foolish boasting and actions. So listen to my foolishness for a short time" (19-20). He then boasts away in verses 21-23, concluding with "I am talking like a madman" (23).

A rich man refused to spoil his son, Zach, throughout his childhood. He lived well below his means, refusing to buy his son the latest gear all the time, even though he could afford it. In his teen years, Zach started saying to his Dad, "I wish you were as successful and rich as Joe's Dad. He's really made it in life and they've got all the latest stuff. I wish he was my Dad." His Dad took Zach to the computer and showed him his bank accounts and investment accounts with millions of dollars in them. "I hate doing this son, and I hoped I'd never have to. But I don't want to lose your love to a lie, and therefore I'll compete with Joe's Dad to win your heart back." That's what Paul did and why.

CHANGING OUR STORIES WITH GOD'S STORY

Five questions to identify a bad boast:

- Is this coming from my sinful nature or my God-given holy nature?
- Am I lying or telling the truth?
- Am I aiming at the good of my hearers or my own good?
- Is this for the glory of God or my glory?

WHEN WE SAY "I AM THE GREATEST"
GOD SAYS "YOU ARE THE WORST"

If "I am the greatest" is the worst boast, what's the best boast?

2. "I AM THE WEAKEST" IS THE BEST BOAST

I am the weakest

Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant? If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness (29-30).

As Don Carson suggests, his opponents expected him to say something like: ""I have established more churches; I have preached the gospel in more lands and to more ethnic groups; I have traveled more miles; I have won more converts; I have written more books; I have raised more money; I have dominated more councils; I have walked with God more fervently and seen more visions; I have commanded the greatest crowds and performed the most spectacular miracles."

Instead, Paul lists his weaknesses, the very weaknesses that would have disqualified him in the eyes of the "super-apostles", in verses 23-28:

- I was weakened by constant hard work (23)
- I was weakened by multiple punishments (23-25)
- I was weakened by dangerous travels (25-26)
- I was weakened by dangerous people (26)
- I was weakened by painful poverty (27)
- I was weakened by mental stress (28)
- I was weakened by feelings of empathy (29)

This was an ironic parody of Caesar's funeral oration. Suffering, not success, authenticated Paul's ministry.

I have divine strength

The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, he who is blessed forever, knows that I am not lying (31).

How does God know he's not lying. It's not only because he knew the facts of Paul's weakness; he'd also felt the weight of Paul's dependence in his weakness. He'd strengthened Paul in such a way that God's support and approval was obvious to all. No one in these circumstances would have or could have continued to serve God without God's evident help throughout. He finishes the chapter with a specific example of God's obvious deliverance (32-33).

CHANGING OUR STORIES WITH GOD'S STORY

Boast in your weakness: We're tempted to use credibility and celebrity to advance the Gospel. Unless we absolutely have to, we should generally boast in our weakness for our good, our hearers good, and God's glory

Boast in Christ's strength: Tell of the many times that God has strengthened you in your weakness. "Yet not I, but through Christ in me."

FIND YOUR WEAKNESS TO FIND GOD'S STRENGTH

SUMMARY

What's the best boast for a Christian?

Bad boast: I am the greatest

Best boast: I am the weakest

Boast about your weakness to show God's strength

A NEW CHAPTER

- **Gospel:** Are you still trying to impress God and others by boasting of your strengths? Is it not time to give it up and trust in Christ's strength?
- **Jesus**: Jesus was crucified in weakness and therefore raised in power (2 Cor. 13:4). Christ is the power and wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1:24).
- **Discipleship**: If we disciple out of weakness, we attract the weak.
- **Monday**: Embrace weakness and embrace the weak.
- **Praise**: How amazing that the all-powerful God is not interested in GOAT's but WOAT's.

The night is dark but I am not forsaken
For by my side, the Saviour He will stay
I labour on in weakness and rejoicing
For in my need, His power is displayed

- **Prayer**: Almighty God show me my weakness so that I can find and boast in your strength.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What strength are you tempted to boast about?
2. Can you imagine any circumstances or reason when boasting would be appropriate?
3. How can you tell when you (or someone else) is boasting
4. What would your list of weaknesses look like?
5. How will you help someone this week to embrace their weakness?
6. How does this passage make you love Jesus's weakness more?

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