

New Testament Perspectives on Boasting

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- Rom. 2:17, 23 The Jews boasted of God and his law but lacked the true righteousness that comes through faith. They were hypocrites, self-deceived about their obedience to the law and their relationship with God.
- Rom 3:27; 4:2 The gospel of justification through faith in Christ precludes boasting, for it has nothing to do with human works. God gives righteousness freely on the basis of the work of Jesus Christ; all we have to do is accept his gift by faith. Therefore, if a person is saved, he/she has no basis for boasting, having done nothing to overcome the guilt of sin and earn God's favor. Boasting would only be legitimate if salvation could actually be earned by works.
- Rom. 5:2, 3, 11 If justification by faith prevents us from boasting about our role in securing the blessings of salvation, it does not preclude every form of boasting. Romans 5 specifies three appropriate reasons for boasting:
- The hope of God's glory (2)
It is not clear from the immediate context whether this hope is to be materialized in time or eternity.
 - Trials (3)
Our experience of trials starts a chain of events that makes us stronger believers, full of virtues and hope.
 - God (11)
This is not some generic boasting in God, but is connected to his work of reconciliation through Christ.
- Rom. 11:18 In God's wisdom the Gentiles were given the opportunity to become part of God's people even as that opportunity was withdrawn from the nation of Israel. Under this regimen of grace the Gentiles were advised not to boast of their position in relation to the Jews.
- Rom. 15:17 Paul was called to a ministry of Gentile evangelism. He served Christ where none had ever witnessed before, so he could rather objectively measure the impact of his ministry. He boasted of his missionary accomplishments. He took care, however, to practice such boasting in the context of his relationship with Christ (*εν Χριστω*) and to limit it to the sphere of God's work (*τα προς τον θεον*).
- 1 Cor. 1:29, 31 The Corinthian believers had a high regard for wisdom—an attitude that apparently contributed to divisiveness within their church. But Paul confronted them with the fact that their faith should rest in Christ, whose cross symbolized neither wisdom nor power. Rather, God had chosen people whom the world considered foolish and weak to show the inadequacy of human wisdom and power. He did this so that no one

could legitimately boast of having merited his favor. Therefore, quoting Jer. 9:24, he reasoned that if anyone was inclined to boast, he should boast in the Lord (ἐν Κυρίῳ)—that is, in recognition of Christ’s person and work.

- 1 Cor. 3:21 The Corinthian church had split into factions, each of which identified itself with a Christian leader. Paul pointed out that each leader’s success was dependent on God’s blessings; that faithful leaders collaborated rather than competing; and that each one’s work was subject to God’s judgment. He then chided them for their participation in a personality cult. They were not to boast about any given human leader, but rather to focus on what was theirs in Christ and in God.
- 1 Cor. 4:7 The Corinthians had gone beyond idealizing their preferred leaders and had imagined themselves to be better than other members of the church. Paul confronted this proud attitude by reminding them that everything they had was a gift from God, and that they should not boast about gifts they had not earned.
- 1 Cor. 5:6 The Corinthian believers had a pride problem—no doubt about it. Their pride was all the more egregious in that it prevailed in the presence—perhaps even via conscious tolerance—of gross immorality within the church membership. Paul confronted the church about this dissonance, insisting that the evildoer be disciplined and judging them for their evil boasting.
- 1 Cor. 9:15, 16 As an apostle, Paul had the same rights and privileges as other early church leaders. Among them was the right to gain a living from his ministry. However, Paul had not taken advantage of his privileges as other leaders had. In fact, he considered this a motive for boasting. It was not so much that he wanted to distinguish himself from other apostles (or even from those who sought to undermine his leadership in Corinth), but that he was willing to forego what was rightfully his in order to advance the gospel. So he boasted about the extent of his dedication to the ministry to which God had called him.
- 1 Cor. 15:31 Paul provided the Corinthians with an extended argument in defense of the reality of the resurrection of the body. In the middle of that argument he found it appropriate to insert a statement about boasting. The immediate context has to do with the folly of Paul’s exposure to suffering if the resurrection is a farce. In the midst of this discussion he swears by his boasting about the audience. What this seems to convey is that the resurrection is as real as the Corinthians’ faith, for which Paul had probably put himself in harm’s way. After uttering this oath, he returned to the argument about the sufferings he had endured in the hope of the resurrection.

2 Cor. 1:12, 14

In his relationship with the Corinthian believers Paul boasted of the fact that he and his collaborators had conducted themselves with integrity and by the grace of God. Furthermore, Paul claimed that the church and its founders were sources of pride for one another. Perhaps we should understand that the Corinthians' faith and obedience validated Paul's ministry among them, leading him to boast about them, while their connection to a faithful minister such as him was for them a source of pride.

2 Cor. 5:12

The Corinthians' respect for Paul and his fellow leaders had waned under the influence of others who were more appealing. Paul defended his credibility, noting that while others prided themselves in external matters, his heart was right and thus gave them legitimate cause to boast about him.

2 Cor. 7:4, 14

Paul's relationship with the Corinthians had been strained, but thanks to some confrontation via letter, they had affirmed their loyalty to his leadership. Titus returned from a visit to Corinth with a good report, bringing much comfort to Paul. The apostle then wrote again to the church, this time affirming his confidence in them. In this context he asserted that he had a habit of boasting to others about them. He had done so to Titus before his visit, and he continued boasting after that visit.

2 Cor. 8:24; 9:2, 3, 4

Paul had challenged the believers in Corinth to contribute to a collection for Judean Christians who were experiencing material need. They had responded very willingly to his appeal and he had gone on to other churches encouraged by their promise to contribute. After a year had passed Paul had witnessed the generosity of poor believers in a neighboring region, Macedonia—generosity that had been stimulated at least in part by Paul's testimony of the Achaians' pledge to participate in the collection. In fact, Paul made repeated reference to the fact that he had boasted to the Macedonians about the Corinthians' willingness to give. Their gift not yet having been collected, Paul wrote 2 Corinthians and sent Titus to collect their offering and validate the legitimacy of his boasting.

2 Cor. 10:8, 13, 15, 16, 17

The Corinthian believers had come to question Paul's authority, apparently under the influence of other leaders who sought to supplant Paul's authority. In response to this opposition, Paul refuted false assertions and boasted of his rightful authority claims. He reminded the Corinthians that he boasted within the limits of legitimacy; if he claimed authority over their church, it was because he had founded it. He did not boast about the product of others' labor. He qualified his remarks by alluding to Jeremiah 9:24, arguing that boasting should be "in the Lord." He interpreted this statement to mean that complimenting oneself means nothing; rather, one is to seek God's approbation. Therefore, one is to labor so as to please God and validate this boasting.

- 2 Cor. 11:10, 12 The Corinthian believers' loyalty had been swayed away from Paul—and indeed from Christ—by false apostles. Paul surmised that he had not met the Corinthians' worldly expectations because he had done manual labor to support himself and lacked the rhetorical skills of the impostors. But the fact that he had never taken financial support from the Corinthians was something that he regarded as a motive for boasting, and he was determined not to concede it.
- 2 Cor. 11:16, 17 In the face of false apostles who were distracting the Corinthian church from following his leadership, Paul felt compelled to do a little foolish boasting. The impostors were quick to praise themselves, but he had stronger credentials. Not only did he have a solid Jewish heritage, he had undergone great suffering in the Lord's service. So even while it is inadvisable to compare oneself with another, Paul thought it necessary to boast in order to draw attention to his opponents' hypocrisy.
- 2 Cor. 11:30; 12: 1, 5, 6, 9, 11 Paul had even more experiences and accomplishments that might have led him to boast. But he had learned to shun grandiosity because of a persistent problem—"a thorn in the flesh"—that God had allowed Satan to inflict on him. This "thorn" served as a constant reminder of Paul's need for God's sufficient grace. Since Paul's weakness motivated him to humble dependence on God, he regarded that weakness as a reason for boasting. So, rather than concluding his discussion with a strong affirmation of his credentials, Paul did the opposite: He boasted about the liabilities that most seemed to undermine his capacity for leadership.
- Gal. 6:4 Life in the Christian community balances both interdependence and individual responsibility. Those who are spiritually mature should restore fallen believers gently and cautiously. Believers at large are to help one another bear the burdens of life, for this is their calling in Christ. In their dealings with one another believers are to avoid the twin evils of conceit and comparison. God wants us to keep our eyes on our own work, not others', for he will hold us individually accountable. To the extent that we find that we have been faithful in the work God has entrusted to us, we may take pride in that work—but not in comparison to others' work.
- Gal. 6:13, 14 Paul faced opposition in Galatia from those who wanted to bind the Christians there to obey the Old Testament law, including submission to the rite of circumcision. He accused those opponents of taking this position merely to avoid persecution (presumably from unbelieving Jews who disapproved of their reliance on Christ's cross). Their pride in circumcision was both hypocritical and misplaced. It was hypocritical in that they were not fully obedient to the law of which circumcision was a symbol; it was misplaced in that, in the matter of our standing with God, we can boast of nothing except what Christ did for us on the cross.

Whether or not a person has been circumcised is irrelevant; all that matters is whether one has experienced new creation.

Eph. 2:9

We Christians have our identity as such due to God's work in our lives. We all have a sinful past—a time in which we lived according to the desires of the flesh and the ways of the world. When we were dead in our sins and destined for God's just wrath, God reached out to us in mercy, saving us by grace through faith. This salvation has no ground in our good works, but is God's gift to us, lest we should be prone to boast about playing a role in accomplishing our salvation.

Phil. 1:26

Paul wrote to the Philippian church from a prison. He could not foresee the outcome of his imprisonment—whether he would receive a death sentence or be released to return to Philippi. Torn between these two prospects, he surmised that he would be freed because the church would profit as a result. He further projected that the church would enjoy his return so much that they would overflow with pride for his sake—a boasting that he qualified as being in Christ Jesus (ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ).

Phil. 2:16

Paul was absent from the Philippian believers—in prison, in fact. But he urged them to live lives of obedience, working out their salvation and illuminating the wicked society in which they lived. In so doing they would persist and demonstrate the value of Paul's labors among them, enabling him to boast of his service at the judgment seat of Christ.

Phil. 3:3

Paul had strong credentials—at least by the standards of first-century Judaism. After he became a Christian, he faced Judaizing opponents who put much stock in external things, including circumcision. But Paul had come to realize that all of his fleshly advantages amounted to nothing in God's sight. Therefore, he had jettisoned all of them for the sake of knowing Jesus Christ. Rather than relying on his credentials, he boasted in Christ's worthiness.

1 Thess. 2:19

Having planted a church in Thessalonica, Paul and his coworkers moved on to minister elsewhere. And though he often desired to pay the Thessalonian believers a follow-up visit, Satan hindered him from doing so. Eventually he sent Timothy to check on them, then penned a letter (1 Thess.) to them. In it he assured the Thessalonians that they were very much in his heart despite his absence. In fact, he made it clear that his joy was in some measure dependent on the progress of their faith. In the course of explaining this, he identified the Thessalonian disciples as a crown—a token of reward for faithful service—of which he would be able to boast when Jesus returned.

2 Thess. 1:4

The Thessalonian disciples remained faithful and grew spiritually in the midst of persecutions and afflictions. As a result, Paul felt compelled to boast about them among other churches. In this boasting he does not

appear to have had any selfish motives, but merely wanted to arouse others believers to faithfulness amid adverse circumstances.

- Jas. 1:9 James addressed a community of believers that included both rich and poor. In this life the rich enjoyed luxury and high status, but they were to remember that such advantages were temporal. Both they and the poor should boast about their standing in Christ: the rich in that their impending loss of earthly wealth would lead them to possess true (eternal) wealth, and the poor in that through Christ they had begun to experience the uplift that would eventually culminate in their receipt of the kingdom.
- Jas. 2:13 [Not relevant to the ethics of human boasting]
- Jas. 3:14 James wrote to an audience that needed to demonstrate genuine spiritual wisdom. This wisdom makes itself known through godly conduct and gentleness. But some of his readers were possessed of a different, worldly kind of wisdom which led to jealousy and selfishness. People with this sort of wisdom, said James, should not be hypocrites and boastfully claim to have true wisdom. Interestingly, James does not seem to judge boasting about the possession of genuine wisdom; rather, he condemns boasting that flies in the face of truth by laying false claim to the possession of virtue.
- Jas. 4:16 We tend to make plans for the future that assume a favorable environment, yet fail to include God in the equation. One such example is that of business planning. James confronts that sort of attitude and calls us to recognize that all of our best laid plans are contingent for their success on God's blessings. Therefore, he says, we should qualify our plans for the future with a statement that we will accomplish certain goals if God allows us to do so. Given our human frailty, doing anything less than this constitutes boastful arrogance—a practice that James confronts as evil and exhorts his readers to avoid.
- Heb. 3:6 The writer of Hebrews addressed his audience with an exhortation to assure themselves of their position in God's household. If they were in fact members of his household, they would exhibit firm confidence and boast about the hope they had been given in Christ.