

Boasting—Right or Wrong?

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Jeremiah 9.23-24

- 23 Thus saith the LORD, Let not the wise [man] glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty [man] glory in his might, let not the rich [man] glory in his riches:
- 24 But let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me, that I [am] the LORD which exercise lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness, in the earth: for in these [things] I delight, saith the LORD.

It seems we humans have a love affair with pride, self-glory, and boasting. We are, by our very nature, intensely competitive and given to comparing our merits with those of others. Not surprisingly, the Bible disapproves of arrogant, self-exalting forms of boasting. This is a significant part of the message of Jeremiah 9.23-24.

There are three areas of supposed achievement of which we most often tend to boast: intelligence, physique, and wealth. These correspond quite closely to the terms mentioned in verse 23: “wisdom” (*chokmah* [2451], wisdom; skill; wisdom in administration; shrewdness; prudence), “might” (*g@buwrah* [1369], strength, might; valour, bravery; mighty deeds), and “riches” (*osher* [6239], wealth, riches). Jehovah forbids boasting on account of any of these accomplishments (v 23); by extension, he condemns self-exaltation entirely.

The prohibition of selfish bragging notwithstanding, there is, according to Jeremiah, one acceptable form of boasting. Verse 24 makes it clear that, if a man is to boast, he should do so in regard to his relationship with God. At first it might seem dangerous for God to authorize us to glory in knowing (*yada'* [3045], to know; to perceive; to discriminate; to know by experience, to be acquainted with; to admit, acknowledge; to be skillful in) and understanding (*sakal* [7919], to look at, have insight; to consider; comprehend; to act prudently; to prosper) him and his ways. But such is not the case, as Jeremiah makes clear: to know God truly is to comprehend the “lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness” in which he delights (v 24). When we glory of understanding these attributes of God, we cannot be lifted up in selfish pride.

No one who truly grasps the mercy, justice, and righteousness of God can do less than give him glory. Thus to boast of our knowledge of the ways of God is actually a form of praise; it is a proclamation of his character. It is interesting to note that Jeremiah 9.24 is quoted (in a somewhat adapted form) twice in the New Testament. It is even more revealing to consider that both occurrences of the quotation are found in Paul’s epistles to the Corinthian church (1 Cor 1.31; 2 Cor 10.17)—a church which is known to have had serious problems of pride (1 Cor 4.6-7), factiousness (1 Cor 1.11-12), and selfish immaturity (1 Cor 3.1-4). It seems that the truths spoken so many centuries ago by Jeremiah are timeless: they were relevant in the first century, and they will be applicable in the twenty-first.

We have no right to boast of what we perceive to be our accomplishments. Indeed, everything good about us can be traced to the grace of God. However, we exalt the name of the Lord when we boast of our knowledge of his attributes, for such glorying serves to portray him as he is in truth—a God who has reached out to us in mercy without compromising his holiness.