

2 Corinthians 11:16–33

‘THE FOOLISH BOAST’

Boasting in Rome

It's the 1st Century.

- In the heart of Rome, the most prominent of Roman roads - Apian Way - terminates outside the Imperial palace.
- The palace glitters gold in the sunlight. It's literally been plastered with gold.
- Taking in the fountains, the pavilions and baths, and the vibrant green hues of the expansive landscaped gardens that surround the palace - you might almost forget that this was the site of devastation, ruin and loss for so many during the great fire not that long ago.
- You stand in a massive courtyard and in the centre, under construction, stands a 30 metre edifice.
- A statue of Emperor Nero.
- You're used to seeing the face of emperors throughout the Empire. Their sculpted images are everywhere.
- The coins in your pocket have his face stamped into them.
- You don't really need a reminder of what your esteemed leader looks like,
 - but Nero is a lover of the arts and, perhaps a bronze statue of himself over 1000 times larger than life, is exactly the kind of statement piece this public square, and this renewed city needs right now.
- As a citizen of Rome
- In these heady days of power and prestige, you get ahead by promoting yourself.
- If you want to climb up in the clearly delineated social hierarchy, you'll probably need to amass wealth and property.
- You want to gather a group of supporters. You become a patron to a crowd of people who'll stand behind you in press conferences nodding and looking impressed.
- You'll assume the best seats at public events and parties so you can be closer to the action.
- And if you gain a measure of fame and notoriety you might decide to commission an artist to help promote your public image,
 - you might have a statue of yourself erected in your hometown, for example.

Now, if ideas are your thing – perhaps you have your heart set on a career in literature, philosophy or politics, then you'd better brush up on your public speaking skills because people will always follow a powerful orator.

It's not that hard to imagine, is it? This 1st century Roman world. It's not that far from the 21st Century western world we inhabit today is it? – really.

We've been latching onto Greek and Roman forms of society and culture since the Renaissance in the 15th Century.

And, like 1st Century Romans, we know that, in order to achieve success, we need to embrace a level of self-promotion.

- If we want to succeed in our careers,
 - we need to be ready with a prepared list of career highlights, all our achievements, our skills and our attributes that make us especially suited to that next job or promotion.
 - That puts us above the rest of the pack.
 - And the people that seem to climb to the top are the ones who play the game well.
 - They tell a good story.
 - They massage their public image and...sometimes...take credit for someone else's work...
 - and sometimes break a few rules to get where they want to get
- Someone who knew a little about subterfuge and backstabbing,
 - Julius Caesar once said "If you must break the law, do it to seize power."
 - I guess it worked for him...at least for a while.

But this relationship between power and authority – and shiny self-promotion is deeply flawed.

It was Jesus, the humble, sacrificial servant – who didn't abuse his privilege, that God exalted to the highest place.

Jesus, who taught his disciples that if one of them wanted to be greatest, they need to become become the servant of all.

Greatness, in God's kingdom, is not seized.

God opposes the proud and lifts up the humble,

And Paul, speaking to this community of Jesus' followers here in Corinth can't believe that they've fallen for a bunch of showy, self-aggrandising preachers, who know how to draw a crowd with a shiny message that is actually leading them away from Jesus, a message that makes Paul look like an idiot.

The Boasting of Paul

And in this passage today, In the second half of 2 Corinthians 11, Paul decides to play the game, and engage a bit of self-promotion.

He says, "I'm not an idiot, I've actually got more to boast about than any of those peacocks you've been taken in by,

"so let me play this silly game of self-promotion with you and we'll see where it leads."

He concedes in v.17 and following that, *“¹⁷ In this self-confident boasting I am not talking as the Lord would, but as a fool. ¹⁸ Since many are boasting in the way the world does, I too will boast. ¹⁹ You gladly put up with fools since you are so wise! ²⁰ In fact, you even put up with anyone who enslaves you or exploits you or takes advantage of you or puts on airs or slaps you in the face. ²¹ To my shame I admit that we were too weak for that!”*

So here he goes. Here’s Paul’s attempt at self-promotion. Let’s see how he goes listing his career highlights, his strengths and achievements.

Starting at the second half of v.21 there, *“Whatever anyone else dares to boast about—I am speaking as a fool—I also dare to boast about. ²² Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Abraham’s descendants? So am I.”*

So far so Good

“²³ Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again.”

Hang on a second...

“⁴ Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. ²⁵ Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, ²⁶ I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers. ²⁷ I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. ²⁸”

Imagine for a moment Paul’s sitting across the desk.

Your organisation is looking for a patron to be the figurehead, to promote your cause and inspire people.

You’ve just come out of meetings with social media influencers and TV personalities.

You’ve even had some promising conversations with wealthy philanthropists.

And now, you’re sitting across from a rather cranky middle-aged man,

who was once thought of as a promising young leader

but he just sits there rattling off a list of the many, many terrible things that have happened to him,

and about how people don’t like him.

Is that really the sort of leader you’re looking for?

“Thanks for your time today Paul, we’ll be in touch (no we won’t!)”

What are you doing Paul? This isn't how the self-promotion game is played. Not in the 1st Century and not in the 21st Century.

Paul's attempting to establish and confirm his authority, as this church's founder, as their spiritual father.

And what he does is play the self-promotion game by making fun of it – and boasting about his weakness.

V. 28 *“Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. ²⁹Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?*

³⁰If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. ³¹The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, who is to be praised forever, knows that I am not lying. ³²In Damascus the governor under King Aretas had the city of the Damascenes guarded in order to arrest me. ³³But I was lowered in a basket from a window in the wall and slipped through his hands.”

In the process of making fun of this self-promotion game, Paul ends up making fun of himself – it's a ridiculous, almost cartoon like image of him sneaking out of a city in a basket.

He's also making fun of the showy 'super apostles' and he's making fun of his readers too.

It's a pretty deep piece of satire right here.

Paul's sending up the whole system that equates authority and power with self-promotion. Because it's a system that is at odds with the kingdom where Jesus sits in the highest place.

In many ways Paul's celebration of his weakness mirrors Jesus' story.

Jesus – who had every right to take advantage of his privilege, sacrificed it all, he suffered and even died like a criminal.

And Paul recognises that there are riches down there in that dirty story that he can't get enough of,

and he's just going to keep digging down there to find as much of that gold as he can lay his hands on.

It's in suffering that Paul finds an opportunity to serve God's cause,

- and it looks like Jesus,
- and if feels like Jesus.

More than once, in letters to other churches, Paul speaks about our hardships as sharing in the sufferings of Christ.

The Apostle Peter also uses the phrase, he says “Rejoice that you share in the sufferings of Christ.”

But this church in Corinth has found something shinier to grab their attention,

something much more superficially attractive

– people who sound so wise and look so successful,

and whose message isn’t quite as hard to swallow.

The distraction of success

And if this passage of scripture says anything to us it’s this

– Don’t be fooled by an easy and shiny message that dresses up in prestige.

Don’t be taken in by messengers that revel in their apparent success.

Don’t be fooled by leaders who boast, even if they are incredibly engaging and popular.

If your Christian leaders don’t prepare you for hardship.

If they’re not modelling humble service

and finding opportunities to elevate those who are downcast,

then you may be on the wrong train.

I’m not saying all the stupid and weak looking things are good and that all the successful and impressive looking things are bad...of course

But we’re so easily led astray by people who know how to tell a good story with conviction.

We’re like Bower Birds that believe anything blue is worth collecting

and we end up picking up all the discarded blue straws and pen lids and bottle caps and wrappers.

We’re like moths that get where they need to go by following the starlight and the moonlight

but end up flat on our backs flapping about under a fluorescent light tube.

The deception of self-promotion succeeds because people will believe anything they hear if it’s packaged convincingly.

What I’m saying is don’t be fooled by someone who’s claiming to have a message for you to believe,

- whose appeal is based on their attractive style,
- their talents or gifts,
- or the impressiveness of their many successes
- rather than the Christlikeness of
 - their message,

- their ministry
- and their character.

Power and Authority in God's kingdom has nothing to do with shiny self-promotion.

Those of us who have been around long enough, have seen trendy people and trendy movements come and go.

- 1st Century churches weren't immune to it.
- 21st Century churches certainly aren't immune to it.
- Our own denomination isn't immune to it.
- Our church isn't immune to it.

We need to listen to the warning and encouragement of the Apostle Paul here and make sure that the dazzling lights of prestige or prosperity or popularity don't take our attention away from Christ in all his magnificent humility and apparent weakness.

Embracing Weakness

Here's another thing we can take away from this passage.

I think it challenges us to consider the extent to which we engage in this game of self-promotion ourselves.

I'm not claiming Paul's approach with the Corinthian church here is any kind of comprehensive guide to speaking about yourself

– in fact, I'd probably advise – in most cases - against using the kind of sarcasm Paul employs here with his readers.

But this passage does raise the question of how comfortable we are impressing others with our strength and success.

If you're very comfortable convincing others that you're excellent

- It's entirely possible that you are excellent – and you understand that you're very good at what you do, and that you have a lot to contribute.
- There's nothing wrong with that.
- Paul, himself, recognised his own God-given gifts fairly clearly
 - and he exercised those gifts confidently
 - and he defended his authority because he understood his value.

But if you are someone who's very comfortable convincing others of your excellence

- make sure you are at least as familiar with your weaknesses.
 - You might find that a deeper familiarity with your weaknesses helps you develop a deeper sense of empathy
 - – helps you connect with others to serve them more lovingly.
- You'll definitely find that a deeper familiarity with your weaknesses will drive a deeper sense of reliance on God. And that is a healthy place to be.

Be at least as familiar with your weaknesses as you are with your strengths

But maybe that's not you. Maybe you're the type that see your weaknesses very clearly.

I've seen God do amazing things with humble people. It's not always obviously impressive, but it can be deep and powerful in a way that the bright loud competent show can never be.

Because God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things – and the things that are not – to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. (1Cor 1:27)

If you're the sort of person, for whom this shameless game of self-promotion, that typifies the world we live in, leaves you a constant loser.

Know that you are in the perfect place for God to demonstrate his power, and to highlight his priorities.

- To show the world that boasting
- in the face of God...
- is a joke, so utterly absurd that one day we'll all be wondering how we ever thought we'd get away with it.

Ultimately, it's not Caesar who sits on the throne, it's Jesus.

Jesus who has always, in every way, embraced weakness

Rejoice in your weaknesses, like Paul does here in this letter.

Because God does incredible things when people rely on him instead of themselves

There's a profound beauty in weakness

- and if you find yourself drawn to manifestations of pride, be careful
- And if you find yourself speaking more frequently about your strengths than you do about your weaknesses, be careful.

There's a profound beauty in weakness

- because it's where Jesus chose to be.
- It's where God focusses his attention.
- It's where God builds a kingdom.
- It's where we find true hope.

God, in his power used weakness to subvert the prestige of 1st Century Rome and he'll use weakness to bring his purposes about in our 21st Century world too.

Let's pray

Loving Father you are great.

And Our Lord Jesus is great.

He identified with our weaknesses

And he's the king in your kingdom

And we live in a world that mistakenly equates greatness with self-promotion.

Please save us from this foolishness.

Help us to see through impressive facades

Help us to avoid self-promotion and self-reliance

And find beauty in weakness.

Help us to know and share in Christ's sufferings

Form our self-image, our understanding of who we are as a community, our vision of success and our hopes for the future around the cross of our Lord Jesus

Cause us to be humble

And to rely on your power to bring about your purposes and raise us with Christ.

We pray in his name.