

## **The Only Thing Ever to Boast About**

Romans 5:1-11

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What is there ever really to boast about? Depends who you ask ...

Ask the blind man (as the story goes) who once boasted he could beat Arnold Palmer in a round of golf. So strong was his self-confidence, it spilled over into what seemed to be excessive pride when he backed up his boast by wagering \$10,000 on it. Now Palmer was quite curious about how a blind golfer knows what direction to hit the ball. It was explained that the caddy goes out ahead, stands next to the hole and rings a bell. I guess this sounded feasible enough and seemed an easy enough way to get some extra cash, because Palmer accepted the challenge. What silliness, a blind golfer listening for a bell boasting he could beat Arnold Palmer! As the deal was struck, however, Palmer asked, "What time do we tee off?" That's when the boasting blind man said, "10:30 ... tonight!"

Ask the current MVP of baseball's National League about boasting (who happens to be Jimmy Rollins of my beloved Phillies) and he'll quickly tell you he boasted in spring training of last year that the Phillies were the team to beat in their division. He backed up his boast big time. But I'm not sure that's going to be enough this year ... since the rival Mets are now boasting the same thing for the season now starting to bloom. And they have already begun backing up their boast by signing a new teammate – who happens to be the best pitcher in the major leagues!

There's also boasting going on beyond the arena of sports, of course. Consider, especially, that we're already in the thick of quite a heated political race for the Presidency of the United States. Ask any of the final contenders what there ever really is to boast about and I trust you'd be hearing and reading the same sort of rhetorical boasts as I am. There are boasts about personal character attributes and voting records, about being the only one offering straight talk, the only one offering solutions instead of speeches, and the only one offering the audacity of hope. All in all, though, I've got to say I'm always glad to hear these sort of boasts over against than the boasts of maniacal terrorists.

In every instance, when a boast is made it sets the stage for the expectation that the person boasting will back-up, will *justify* their own words.

This morning, we ask not sports figures and politicians, but the Apostle Paul what there ever really is to boast about.

His response first calls our attention to the word “boast” itself. As my illustrations so far have hopefully reinforced, in our culture we generally interpret “boast” to mean an excessive, sometimes aggressive, mostly self-centered expression of pride. It’s a word of “oneupsmanship.”

What possible purpose, then, was there in Paul using this potentially divisive word in his letter to Christians in Rome? What has *boasting* got to do with building up a community based on the humility Jesus exhibited and exhorted his followers to have?

Well, it turns out the sort of boasting Paul speaks of is not the same as we most likely are quick to assume. Yet his sort of boasting was a response to the negative sort of boasting that was in heavy circulation throughout the congregation in Rome. Jews who has accepted Jesus as their Messiah had been boasting of their superiority over non-Jews who had done the same. Conversely, those non-Jews (the Gentiles) boasted about their own superiority right back. This was the ugly situation Paul chiefly aimed to address in his letter. What would you have to say?

Paul’s response reinforced one of the main themes of all his ministry and writings. He absolutely insisted that Christians need to be united together in a strong community of faith. He knew well that any true spiritual formation among the Roman believers was not going to take place if these two groups were to go on with their unending boasts. So in so many words, he wisely reminded them that everyone is a world-class sinner, that neither group had anything to be proud of. (See introduction to Romans in the Renovare Bible). No matter how a person has come to Christ, nobody should have a superiority complex. In this context, Paul punctuated his point by explaining the one and only thing really ever to boast about.

The only thing ever to really boast about, Paul taught, is the hope born of believing that God’s grace alone can graft everyone into Christ. It is God’s initiative, God’s superior love alone that is freely poured out through the Holy Spirit and is able to unite and create true community. No divisions. No superiority-based social strata. Everyone is justified, that is, is aligned with God, through Christ. Boasting in this hope alone is what strengthens and empowers communities to be unified. Anything else runs the costly risk of breaking Christian congregations down into little blockades of who’s better than whom.

We are a long way from first century Rome. Yet as I reflect on the overall vitality of local and national and global Christian communities, I get to wondering how much counter-productive boasting is still going on. Does every follower of Jesus Christ truly, humbly love their neighbors, differences and all? Do we all confess that any capacity to love and to come together and to endure challenges is first and foremost an unearned gift of God's grace?

The only thing any of us really ever has to boast about is the hope we have of sharing in God's glory, of believing that God's grace alone can graft everyone into Christ. That truly is a big bottom line for our faith. So if you are asked sometime soon about whether being boastful is a proper attitude for a follower of Christ, I pray you'll have the spiritual wisdom to echo the Apostle Paul. Praise be to God, Amen.