

“So That No One May Boast”

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¹You were dead through the trespasses and sins ²in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. ³All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else. ⁴But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us ⁵even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ — by grace you have been saved — ⁶and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God — ⁹not the result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life. (Ephesians 2:1-10)

While doing some research for this sermon, I came upon a website that was so perfect I have to lead off with it. It was a story posted on the website of a show that appears on the Lifetime network called “The Balancing Act.” I had never heard of this show in my own lifetime, but apparently that is on me, because according to this website, “The Balancing Act” is, and I quote, “*America’s premier morning show that fits perfectly into the modern [person’s] busy lifestyle, delivering essential information and sensible solutions in an entertaining, fast-paced format. Daytime TV legend Montel Williams joins Olga Villaverde to present everything from delicious recipes, style makeovers, and dream vacation getaways to parenting tips and the latest news in health and wealth.*”

Like I said, I have really been missing out! They seem to think quite highly of their show. So, I guess I should not have been surprised when I came across this piece of “essential information” and “sensible solution” – a piece they titled “Mastering the Subtle Art of the Humble Brag: A Guide to Polished Self-Promotion.”¹ According to these TV legends, this is a skill we all need to master in world driven by social media. But it’s not easy. As Lifetime says, “Striking a balance between self-expression and humility can be a delicate task.” It is “an art form that requires finesse and strategic communication.”

Most of us, I am guessing, know what a “humble brag” is. Even if you don’t know the term, you know what it is. To “humble brag” is to make a statement that seems modest or self-critical on its face, but that is really meant to draw attention to something great about you.² For example: “I’m so sorry I was late. I left on time, but people kept stopping me on the street to get my autograph.”

Or “After my big promotion, I’ve been so stressed out that I’ve lost 15 pounds. I can even fit into my old jeans from high school.”

These are humble brags, and we’ve all heard them. The statements feign modesty, but their real purpose is to say, “Hey, look at me. Admire me. Give me some credit. Look at what

¹ <https://thebalancingact.com/mastering-humblebrag-self-promotion/>

² <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/humblebrag>



I've accomplished." Still, according to the Lifetime network, learning to humble brag effectively is an important life skill for the modern person on the go. "When executed skillfully," they say, the humble brag "allows individuals to share their achievements without alienating their audience or appearing boastful."

And that brings us to the word for the day: "boastful" – given to or marked by boasting, or the expression of excessive self-pride.³ Boasting is a major concern of today's passage from Paul's letter to the Christians in Ephesus. Paul begins by reminding the Ephesians of who and what they once were. "You weren't just a mess," Paul says. "You were *dead*." At one time, we were all slaves to whatever the world wanted us to be into. We were slaves to "*the passions of the flesh*" and "*the desires of the senses*." Our only interests were selfish interests. If we saw it and wanted it, we just grabbed it. "*We were by nature children of wrath*," Paul says.

And then, something wonderful happened. We were given new life. Christ came to show us the very nature of God, to point us back to lives marked by faith, hope, and love. Through the grace of God, we were released from our slavery to sin and given new life.

And how did this happen? "By grace." By grace we were saved. To quote Paul, "*God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ... and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places.*"

Celebrate this with joy, Paul says, but be careful to remember how it came to be. Remember who really deserves the credit. We moved from death to life, we were brought out of the darkness and into the light, not because of anything we did, but only by God's grace. This blessing, Paul says, "*is not your own doing... It is the gift of God... not the result of works, so that no one may boast.*"

In other words, do not try to take credit for these winds of fortune. Do not pat yourselves on the back for your new life. We are not saved by our hard work. We are not saved by our good theology. How are we reclaimed, reborn, and reformed? *Sola gratia, sola Christus*. By Grace alone, by Christ alone. God gets the credit. Period.

And that seems to be primary factor for Paul, the primary beef he has with boasting. ***It's about credit.*** Let's admit it: we like getting credit for good things we do. Authors expect to get credit for the newspaper or magazine articles they write. People who put up money for a movie expect a prominent producer credit to roll up the screen. Tonight, at the Oscars, a group of actors and directors will get credit for being nominated for outstanding work, and a few of them will get the extra special recognition of taking home a trophy. It feels fair and right for people to get credit for jobs well done.

But what about people who claim credit for things that they did not do? And even if the credit is deserved, bragging about it is frowned upon. It is seen as distasteful.

That is why, when Paul heard about people boasting or bragging in the churches he planted, he sternly admonished that behavior. For example, writing to the church in Corinth, Paul said plainly, "*Your boasting is not a good thing. Do you not know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough? Clean out the old yeast so that you may be a new batch, as you really are unleavened... let us celebrate the festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.*"⁴

³ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/boastful>

⁴ 1 Corinthians 5:6-8.

Paul chose a great metaphor here, comparing the good things that were happening in the community to yeast. It works because yeast is what makes bread rise, and the Corinthian church was on the rise. They were building in numbers and reach and respectability.⁵ Leaders were gaining recognition and renown, good buzz was building in the community, and everybody was feeling good about things. Perhaps a little too good. As Paul saw it, the Corinthians were getting cocky, and taking a little too much credit for what was happening.

That's where the yeast metaphor comes in. When the Corinthians gave credit to God for the good things that were happening, that was good yeast. That helped things rise and bake beautifully. But when they started boasting about their own efforts, taking credit for things they should not take credit for, the yeast turned bad. When the yeast is bad, the bread doesn't rise, and the loaf starts to stink. To summarize: good yeast gives off an aroma that is pleasing to God; old yeast, when it starts to turn in on itself, is just foul-smelling fungus.

The bottom line for Paul was this. If any of us see anything new and different and good in ourselves, God did it, and God gets the credit. "*What do you have that you did not receive?*" Paul asks. "*And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?*"⁶

So what does that mean for boasting? Paul concludes that boasting, bragging, taking too much credit for ourselves, has no place in the life of faith. As the famous 19th century preacher Charles Spurgeon put it, "faith excludes all boasting." In a famous sermon about God's grace, the preacher noted that someone who receives a generous gift would never dare to say to the donor, "You should thank me for accepting your gift." That, Spurgeon said, would be absurd. True faith does not claim any credit for itself. Instead, it gives all thanks and credit to the gracious God who is the giver of everything that is good. Spurgeon's conclusion says it all. "Faith," he wrote, "sets the crown upon the right head."⁷

That's all that Paul is saying. Give the credit where it is due. Yes, we once were dead in sin. Yes, we now have new life, new purpose, new energy. But that didn't happen because of anything we did. We do not crown ourselves with glory. We have to remember to put the crown on the right head.

One final point to make. With all the warnings Paul gives about boasting, it is interesting that he does leave room for some. Again, it all depends on the credit. If we are trying to puff ourselves up... if we are selfishly seeking credit or recognition for ourselves... then that is the funky fungus, the bad yeast that turns the loaf sour. But if we are giving credit to God, or giving credit to other people in Christ, then that is the good yeast that makes good bread, healthy bread, the bread of life. That is a kind of boasting that the world could use a lot more of.

So, if we are going to boast, we should boast about the amazing things that God has done for us, and is doing for us. If we sense some good bread rising here at Larchmont Avenue Church, let's give credit where credit is due. Let's put the crown on the right head.

- Let's celebrate what God is doing in the in the lives of young families who are seeking a spiritual home for themselves and their children.

⁵ <https://sermons.logos.com/sermons/775934-get-rid-of-the-old-yeast>

⁶ 1 Corinthians 4:7.

⁷ Charles Spurgeon, "All of Grace," https://www.grace-ebooks.com/library/Charles%20Spurgeon/CHS_All%20of%20Grace.PDF

- Let's celebrate what God is doing in the lives of people who are seeking a second chance, or just a place to feel welcomed and known and loved.
- Let's celebrate how God is attracting and inspiring people who are looking for a place to serve God by serving others, feeding others, and clothing others.

In short, let's boast about what God's grace and love is up to in our midst.

Let's also boast about the people we know who are living and giving the full measure of faith – serving God and other people with generosity and joy. Let's lift them up; let's celebrate them, because Paul did that, too... even the Corinthians, who were known to be kind of braggy at times. "I often boast about you," Paul wrote to them. "I have great pride in you." When I think of you, he said, I am filled with consolation; I am filled with joy."⁸

And now, to close, let's go back to the beginning. I have a proposition for you. I think we should reclaim and reform the term "humble brag." Admittedly, if our purpose is to bestow credit upon ourselves, it doesn't matter how much we try to dress it up with false modesty. That's still bad yeast. But what if we kept the humble for ourselves, and gave the brag away? What if we humbly looked beyond self-interest, and chose instead to shine a light on the gracious deeds of God, or the selfless work of another person? Wouldn't this align perfectly with the teaching of Paul?

Let's give it a try. Let's do some real humble bragging – and hand the crown to the One who truly deserves the credit. ***Amen.***

⁸ 2 Corinthians 7:4.