

Paul's Foolish Boasting
2 Corinthians 11:21-22
Part One

When we come to Christ and accept Him as our Lord and Savior, the Scriptures tell us that we become new creatures in Christ.

This is what the Scriptures teach and if we through the power of the Spirit choose to live out this truth, it will become evident in every area of our lives including our speech.

So let me ask you this question. Before we accepted Christ as our Lord and Savior and became new creatures in Christ, what characterized our speech? I would think that all kinds of things characterized our speech, some good and some bad. But though this may be true, there would have been several things that would not have characterized our speech prior to our salvation, one of which would have been this: there would have been no Spirit-produced thanksgiving and praise prior to our salvation and therefore it could not have characterized our speech.

Hopefully this makes sense to you, for prior to our salvation we had not received the Spirit, and if we had not received the Spirit we could not be filled with the Spirit, and apart from the filling of the Spirit any Spirit-produced thanksgiving and praise would have been impossible for it is only through the presence of the Spirit and the filling of the Spirit that such a thing can happen.

And if there is any doubt about this let me read for you **Ephesians 5:18-20**. **“And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit, (19) speaking to one another [How?] in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord; (20) always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father.”** So where does Spirit-produced thanksgiving and praise come from? It comes from the filling of the Spirit. And how does one become filled with the Spirit? We become filled with the Spirit when we, in response to God and all that He has done for us through Christ, give up our lives completely to Him, or in other words when we, according to **Romans 12:1**, give our bodies up to Him as living

sacrifices. It is then and only then that our speech will become characterized by Spirit-produced thanksgiving and praise.

So let us say this morning that we are all Christians, and that not only are we all indwelt by the Spirit, but that we are all filled with the Spirit. If this is so, then let me ask you this question. Who would we want our lips to exalt if we in fact were not only indwelt by the Spirit but also filled with the Spirit? I believe the answer would be obvious. We would want our lips to exalt the Lord. This is what we would desire. That is what we would long for. That is what we would passionately pursue. For how could that not be our desire, our longing, our passion if we in fact through the filling of the Spirit are singing to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart (to whom?) to the Lord.

Would you agree with me? I hope that you would for this is the truth. So now let me ask you another question. If we being filled with the Spirit would want our lips to exalt the Lord and Him alone and this is what we would desire and this is what we would long for and are passionately pursuing, what would we just as passionately seek to avoid? And what is the answer? We would just as passionately want to avoid foolish boasting, or in other words we would just as passionately want to avoid any speech that might lead people to exalt us rather than the Lord. And this thought brings us back to our study of **2 Corinthians**.

So where are we in respect to our study of this great epistle? Paul in **2 Corinthians 10:12-18** had contrasted the improper boasting of his opponents with his own proper boasting. So, what made the boasting of his opponents improper and his boasting proper? The boasting of Paul's opponents was improper because their boasting focused on their credentials, accomplishments and experiences for the purpose of exalting themselves, whereas Paul's boasting focused on the gifts and the ministries that God had given him as an expression of God's grace toward him.

So after Paul had contrasted the improper boasting of his opponents with his own proper boasting, what did he do next?

Paul, surprisingly, in **2 Corinthians 11:1** announced his intention to engage in the same kind of foolish boasting as his opponents, or in other words that kind of boasting that would focus on his credentials, accomplishments, and

experiences rather than on the gifts and the ministries that God had given him as an expression of His grace toward him.

So why would Paul do such a thing in light of the fact that everything within him as a by-product of the filling of the Spirit would have been opposed to such a thing?

It was because he believed that this expression of foolish boasting that he intended to engage in, no matter how painful for him, was what God Himself wanted him to do in order to protect the Corinthians from the threat of his opponents, whom he believed were false apostles and deceitful workers.

But even though Paul had a clear conscience in this matter of engaging in the same kind of foolish boasting as his opponents at that particular time in the life of the Corinthian church, he did not want to proceed without first of all defending his intention or willingness to engage in such boasting to the Corinthians lest they would somehow misunderstand what he was about to do. And we saw that defense in **2 Corinthians 11:12-15**.

So after Paul's defense of his intention, or in other words his willingness to engage in foolish boasting we might have assumed that he would have launched into it. But he didn't, rather he hesitated once again.

And why was that? He was once again seeking to protect the Corinthians from any kind of misunderstanding concerning what he was about to do, which for him though very painful and abhorrent was also so very necessary in order to protect the Corinthian church.

So where did we see this additional attempt on Paul's part to protect the Corinthians from any misunderstanding about what he was about to do? We saw this additional attempt in **2 Corinthians 11:16-21a**, which was the last text that we examined when we were together.

So now let me read these verses for you. **“Again I say, let no one think me foolish; but if you do, receive me even as foolish, so that I also may boast a little. (17) What I am saying, I am not saying as the Lord would, but as in foolishness, in this confidence of boasting. (18) Since many boast according to the flesh, I will boast also. (19) For you, being so wise, tolerate the foolish gladly. (20) For you tolerate it if anyone enslaves**

you, anyone devours you, anyone takes advantage of you, anyone exalts himself, anyone hits you in the face. (21) To my shame I must say that we have been weak by comparison.” And this is where we left off in the middle of verse **21**.

But we are now ready to move on in our study of **2 Corinthians** as Paul, after having done all that he could to protect the Corinthians from any misunderstanding, now follows through on his stated intention, which was to engage in the same kind of boasting as his opponents had been engaging.

And what is the question that we will be seeking to answer as we move on in our study of **2 Corinthians** beginning with the second half of **verse 21** and which will continue all the way through **verse 13** of **2 Corinthians 12**? What did Paul’s foolish boasting focus on? This is the question that we will be seeking to answer. So, what first thing that Paul’s foolish boasting focused on?

Paul’s foolish boasting initially focused on three elements of his heritage (2 Corinthians 11:21-22). So where do we find Paul foolishly boasting of his heritage? We find Paul boasting of his heritage in **2 Corinthians 11:21-22**.

So now let me read those verses for you. **“But in whatever respect anyone else is bold—I speak in foolishness—I am just as bold myself. (22) Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they descendants of Abraham? So am I.”** So in these verses do we find Paul foolishly boasting of his heritage? And I believe that the answer would have to be yes!

Paul clearly in these verses is foolishly boasting of his heritage, or in other words his background. So why did Paul believe that when it came to him engaging in foolish boasting that it was important for him to boast of his heritage, or in other words his background?

Paul felt he needed to boast of his heritage, or in other words his background in order to counter the boasts of his opponents within the Corinthian church.

How do we know that? Let us go back to the latter half of **verse 21** and see if this is not so. And what does it say? **“But in whatever respect anyone else is bold.”**

So who is the “**anyone**” that Paul is referring to here? In light of the context of this epistle there should be no question that the “**anyone**” that Paul is speaking of here is not a generic “**anyone**,” but rather a very specific “**anyone**,” which of course would be his opponents in Corinth.

And what is Paul specifically highlighting in respect to his opponents in Corinth? He is highlighting their “**boldness**.” Isn’t that what the verse says? “**But in whatever respect anyone else is bold.**”

The opponents of Paul were not shy about putting forward so-called evidence from their lives that they believed supported their apostolic claim. And Paul is now acknowledging that boldness here in this verse.

But just because he acknowledged their boldness, he was not about to sit passively by and watch the church at Corinth being persuaded by their foolish boasting. Therefore he once again announces to the Corinthians his intent to engage in the same kind of foolish boasting as his opponents and to do so just as boldly.

And where do we see this? Let us continue to read the verse. And what does it say? “**But in whatever respect anyone else is bold—I speak in foolishness—I am just as bold myself.**” So was Paul going to sit passively by and watch the church at Corinth being persuaded by the foolish boasting of his opponents? No, he was going to be just as bold as his opponents in putting forth evidence from his life to support his apostolic claim, and that is what we see Paul saying in **verse 21**.

And would this be easy for Paul to be just as bold as his opponents? Absolutely not! How could Paul, a true and genuine apostle of Christ indwelt by the Spirit and filled with the Spirit, take any pleasure in boldly proclaiming evidence from his own life to support his apostolic claim? He couldn’t, but this is what he felt God would have him to do and therefore he pressed forward.

So how did he press forward? He initially pressed forward by focusing on three different elements of his heritage, or in other words background.

So, what was the first element of his heritage that Paul highlighted? The first element of Paul’s heritage that he highlighted was his ethnic identity (Philippians 3:5). So let us now begin reading **2 Corinthians 11:22** and see

if this is not so. **“Are they [referring to his opponents] Hebrews? So am I.”** Obviously Paul’s opponents in Corinth had been boasting to the Corinthians about their ethnic identify as **“Hebrews”** and they had been doing so boldly in order to provide evidence of their apostolic claim. Paul therefore now, in response to their boast, wanted to make sure that the Corinthians understood that he also, no less than they, could make the same boast.

In fact, how did Paul refer to himself in **Philippians 3:5**? He referred to himself as **“a Hebrew of Hebrews”** which meant that he was a full-blooded Jew, and more than that he was a Hebraic Jew, fluent both in Hebrew and Aramaic and thoroughly steeped in Hebrew culture.

So, what was the first element of his heritage that Paul highlighted? The first element of his heritage that Paul highlighted was his ethnic heritage. So, what was the second element of his heritage that Paul highlighted? The second element of Paul’s heritage that he highlighted was his religious identity (Romans 9:3-5). So now let us now continue to read **2 Corinthians 11:22** and see if this is not so. **“Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I.”**

As an Israelite he had full religious identity with the people of God with all rights and privileges thereof. Paul’s religious identify as an Israelite with the people of God I believe was made clear in **Romans 9:3-5**. Let me now read these verses for you and see if this is not so. **“For I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh, (4) who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons, and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and the promises, (5) whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ, according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.”**

So were Paul’s opponents boasting of their religious identity as Israelites? Apparently they were. And what was Paul’s response to their boast? His response was to be just as bold as they were in boasting of his religious identity, and what an awesome religious identity it was.

So, what was the second element of his heritage that Paul chose to highlight in his boasting? The second element of Paul’s heritage that he highlighted

was his religious identity. But Paul was still not yet done. There was still yet another element. So, what was it?

The third element of Paul's heritage that he highlighted was his covenantal identity as a true descendant of Abraham (Galatians 3:29). Let us now once again go back to **2 Corinthians 11:22** and finish reading the verse and see if this is not so. **“Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are the descendants of Abraham? So am I?”**

So, what were the opponents of Paul boasting of? They were boasting they were the descendants of Abraham. And did Paul respond to their boast here in **verse 22**? He responded by saying, **“So am I.”**

Based on these words alone we might think that Paul, in saying, “So am I,” in response to their boast that they were descendants of Abraham, saw no distinction between what they were saying and what he was saying, but this would not be so.

When Paul's opponents boasted of being the descendants of Abraham, Paul would have seen their boast as superficial compared to his. So why would that be? It is because though he may have seen them as the physical descendants of Abraham, he would not have seen them as the spiritual descendants of Abraham and thus heirs according to the promise, or in other words heirs according to the covenant God had made with Abraham like himself and all others that had or would exercise faith in Christ.

And if there is any doubt about this let me read for you what Paul said to the Galatians in **Galatians 3:29**. **“And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's descendants, heirs according to promise.”** This is what he told the Galatians.

Therefore how did Paul view the boast of his opponents? He would have seen their boast as superficial compared to his similar boast since their boast was based on the fact that they were the physical descendants of Abraham while his boast was based on the fact that he was both the physical and spiritual descendant of Abraham which identified him with the covenantal blessings of the Abrahamic covenant.

So did Paul have a rich and impressive heritage? Absolutely! And no one considering the evidence could possibly deny it. In fact, there were very few in the world that could equal it.

Listen to what Paul said to the Philippians in **Philippians 3:4-6**. **“Although I myself might have confidence even in the flesh. If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more: (5) circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless.”**

Paul’s fleshly superiority in terms of his heritage was irrefutable. And now Paul has very powerfully but reluctantly spelled out that superiority over his opponents for the Corinthians.

Was it easy for him to do this? Absolutely not! Why? It was not easy because Paul, as a Spirit-filled believer and an apostle of Christ, longed to exalt the Lord and the Lord alone. For him to boast in the way he was now boasting was extremely difficult for him, agonizingly difficult, but he for the Lord’s sake and the Corinthians’ sake felt that he, before the Lord, had to do this.

May we by God’s grace, ministered to us through the filling of the Spirit, be fully committed to using our speech to exalt the Lord rather than ourselves.