

Series B: Proper 9—Boasting in Weakness

Vicar Raymond Doubrava

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The text that serves as the focus for the sermon for today is the Epistle reading from 2 Corinthians 12, and especially these words of Paul in verse 9, **“I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me.”** (2 Co 12:9).

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

We all have fish stories. You know the ones I’m talking about: you catch a fish and it’s 6” long. But then you go to tell your friends about the fish, and the fish magically grew from 6” to 12”, and it grows until you end up having caught a 30lb fish on a 3lb line. We boast, we exaggerate, to make ourselves seem mightier than we are. We don’t just do it with fish though. You name it, we will exaggerate it. This is because we don’t like weaknesses, we don’t like smallness, but instead try to make ourselves seem as great as possible. We like to boast. We like to brag. We like to think that we’re the most important person in the room.

Sometimes, we actually have reason to boast. Michael Jordan could boast that he was a great basketball player. Katherine Hepburn could boast that she was a great film actress. Johann Sebastian Bach could boast that he was a great composer. In our Epistle reading for today, Paul certainly had much that he could boast about it. He says, **“I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows. And I know that this man was caught up into paradise—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know, God knows—and he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter.”** (2 Co 12:2–4.) Paul here is talking about himself. He’s talking about when Jesus called him on the Road to Damascus. He says that he was caught up to the third heaven either in body or out, and there heard things that man may not utter. He certainly has reason to boast in this. It is a unique experience that almost all do not get to experience in this life.

We likewise have things which we could boast about: a promotion at work, a good family, good grades, musical ability, sports ability, you name it. We, like Paul, could boast in these things. We could make these our claim to fame, put all our hope, all our trust in what we can do, what we have done. We could rely on these things to get us through life. And, they might carry us for a short time. But most of the time, these things that we boast in end up failing us. When we boast in our accomplishments, our family, our jobs, those things end up abandoning us. We end up like Norma Desmond in *Sunset Boulevard*: a once-famous actress trying to recapture her fame because it’s what she has put all of her hope in. She has turned her career into an idol. Ultimately, our boasting in our actions,

in our accomplishments, is our idolizing the things that we have done. It’s us looking at our actions and proclaiming them to god-like. In doing so, we try to turn ourselves into gods over the One, True God.

This is ultimately what sin does. It tries to get us to think that we can be gods. Go back to the Garden of Eden. The first temptation was that man could be like God. The serpent says to Eve, **“You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”** (Ge 3:4–5). Satan tempts them to think that they can be like God; he tempts us trying to convince us that because of our works, we are like God. And then he tries to tempt us to think that we can, with our actions, act like gods. He tries to convince us that we can slander the name of the true God, that we don’t need to rest and listen to the true God, that we don’t need to honor authorities. He tries to convince us that we can hate, that we can lust, that we can steal, lie, covet. After all, if we are gods, then we can do whatever we want. And if we are gods, then we have no use for a savior. If we are gods, then we can, by our own actions, work for our salvation, and thus have no need for the true God to work for our salvation.

But our works, no matter how awesome they may appear, are not able to save us. Our works end up amounting to nothing. Even Paul’s being taken up to paradise didn’t count for anything of his own working. Therefore, Paul says, **“On behalf of this man I will boast, but on my own behalf I will not boast, except of my weaknesses—though if I should wish to boast, I would not be a fool, for I would be speaking the truth; but I refrain from it, so that no one may think more of me than he sees in me or hears from me.”** (2 Co 12:5–6). Paul doesn’t want his boastings to get in the way of the Truth that he proclaims. He doesn’t want people to flock to him, but to flock to the One whom he proclaims.

And the Lord helps him with this. Paul writes, **“So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited.”** (2 Co 12:7). God allowed Paul to be tested by a messenger of Satan in order to keep him humble. He does the same for us. Certainly, as we learned in the Small Catechism’s explanation to the Sixth Petition, “God tempts no one.” However, He does allow us to be tested to keep us reliant upon Him. God gives to all of us “thorns in the flesh,” things which we will suffer on account of the message that we proclaim. These come in varying shapes and sizes: they may be illnesses of self or of a loved one, the death of a loved one, the betrayal of a friend, the loss of a job, additional work responsibilities being added because of downsizing, you name

it. Whatever they are, these thorns are given to us to test us, to humble us.

But we are not left to our own devices to try to survive these thorns in the flesh that we have. Paul told the Corinthians in his first letter to them, **"God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it."** (1 Co 10:13). He expounds upon what that means here in his second letter, where he tells them, **"Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'"** (2 Co 12:8–9). The escape that is provided for us is God's grace shown to us. This is the grace shown by God giving His Son to suffer and to die for us on the cross. There, He defeated sin, death, and Satan once and for all time. And because He did so, even though He allows the thorns to come from Satan, we also have the certainty that He has the victory over those thorns for He has the victory over the one who sent those thorns.

Therefore, we can say, as David did in our Introit for today, when he was facing a thorn in his flesh, **"Oh, taste and see that the LORD is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him!"** (Ps 34:8). David said this because he had the certainty that he was God's anointed and he knew that God's grace was shown to him. We can say it for the exact same reasons. When you were baptized, you were anointed with water and the Holy Spirit and there made God's precious child. As such, He continues to show grace to you each and every day—by giving you His Own Word to read in Holy Scripture, by forgiving you your sins each time you confess your sins (yes, including your boastings in your own works), by promising to always hear your prayers. He gives it to you every week you come and receive Christ's body and blood to eat and to drink in, with, and under the bread and wine in Holy Communion, there receiving His grace both to forgive your sins and to strengthen your faith to life everlasting. He gives His grace through sending faithful men to proclaim His word and deeds, as He sent twelve in our Gospel reading.

Thus, Paul's reaction should also be our reaction. Paul, responding to this grace that God had shown him says, **"Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my**

weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong." (2 Co 12:9–10). We do boast, but not in our greatness, not in our accomplishments. Instead, we are to boast in our weaknesses. We boast in the fact that we are weak, that we are unable to do anything for our salvation. And then we boast in Christ and what He has done. We do not boast in our faith, for that would be boasting in ourselves. Instead we boast in the fact that He has called us through the waters of Holy Baptism. We boast in the fact that in so doing He redeemed us from sin, death and the devil by His suffering and death on the cross and His resurrection. And when we boast in this weakness of ours and this strength of His, then we are strong for He is strong. Even when thorns come, even when we face insults, hardships, persecutions, calamities, we can be content, for the grace of Christ is sufficient in all circumstances. There is nothing that we will face for which His grace will not be sufficient.

In the first several centuries of the Church, while Christianity was still illegal in the Roman Empire, many Christians were martyred, killed because of their testimony. And there are stories from Roman officials that when the Christians were led to be killed, they were triumphant, even in the face of death. This was because they knew they had nothing to fear. Even death would not have the final victory. No. Because they boasted in the grace of Christ as their only means of salvation, they were able to face even death with peace.

And so, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ, boast! Do not in boast in your own works, for your works do nothing to gain for you salvation. And do not boast in your seemingly great faith, for you will have times when your faith feels weak. Instead, boast in your weakness. Boast in the fact you can do nothing for your salvation. And then boast in the Lord. Boast in what He has done for you, how He has worked for you salvation. Boast how He, through His grace, has strengthened you to life everlasting. Even in the hard times, even when you feel that thorn digging into your flesh, boast in the One who has secured your salvation. His grace is sufficient for you. May you always boast in God and the grace He has shown to you this day and every day to life everlasting. Amen.