

12.19.21

What's Worth Boasting About

Jeremiah 9.23-24

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I'd like to talk with you today about an ancient human practice that's found anywhere you find people – **boasting**. People will boast about anything including how smart, strong, rich, talented, or even how humble they are. Folks will go on about their achievements or status, their looks, their kids, don't even get them started on grandchildren – boasting is as old as humanity.

It's hard for me to believe that earlier this month, former Boston Celtic and Basketball Hall of Famer Larry Bird turned 65 years old. Bird was well known for his boasting or what is called "trash talking" on the court. In one memorable incident the Celtics were down a point against the Seattle Supersonics and the Celtics called a play for Bird to take the last shot. Coming out of the time out, Bird approached the man guarding him, Xavier McDaniel, a strong, big man known for his defense. McDaniel recalled that Bird said, *"I'm going to get the ball right over there, and I'm going to shoot it right in your face."* Sure enough, Larry got the ball exactly where he said, and hit the game winning shot with McDaniel all over him. Describing the incident later, McDaniel could only shake his head in amazement. Another athlete known for his boasting, baseball Hall of Famer Reggie Jackson said, *"It ain't bragging, if you can back it up."*

President Abraham Lincoln had a memorable line about boasting that Ken Burns included in his production *The Civil War*. After meeting with Union General Joseph Hooker who arrogantly pledged to thrash Robert E. Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia, Lincoln remarked that *"the hen is the wisest of all of the animal creation because she never cackles **until** the egg is laid."*

There are dozens of verses in the Bible that talk about boasting, David and Goliath's exchange sets the standard for biblical boasting and trash talking but it's hardly the only one. In 1 Kings 20, King Ben-hadad of Aram was threatening Israel and making all kinds of demands for plunder and treasure including the fairest wives and children belonging to King Ahab of Israel. As many people still do today, Ben-hadad really began to boast and get himself in trouble when he was drunk. Ahab's reply is a classic (1 Kings 20:11), *"Tell him: One who **puts on armor** should not brag like one*

who **takes it off.**" In other words, unless you're Larry Bird, don't boast about what you're **going** to do, wait until you've actually **done** it.

As we continue our journey through the Bible, today we hear from the prophet Jeremiah, who was not known for his boasting – a brief look at his background helps us understand why. Jeremiah was born 645 years before Christ, and began to be involved in public life at the age of twenty-two. His ministry and teaching reflect the influence of the prophets Isaiah, Hosea, and Amos. Forbidden by God to marry or have children, his truth-telling would make him enemies and he had only a few loyal friends. He spent more than a decade of his life in prison, and he died in exile in Egypt at the age of sixty. In just the first three verses of the Book of Jeremiah we learn a lot about him. Jeremiah was the *"son of Hilkiiah, of the priests who were in **Anathoth** in the land of **Benjamin**."* Nobel Peace Prize winner Elie Wiesel explains what is revealed in these brief words about Jeremiah's family background. *"Poverty and sadness dominate the homes of **Benjamin**, whose tribe fared the worst of all the twelve tribes during the partitioning of the land under Joshua. Their territory was narrow and long and dry; no fields, no trees, no fruit. Nothing but desert winds and heat waves. Even worse was the lot of those who dwelt in the village of **Anathoth**, some four miles outside of Jerusalem. Its inhabitants were priests of a special kind, notorious for the curse that lay upon them for some four hundred years: they were not allowed to officiate in the Temple. Without knowing why, they were forbidden to discharge their hereditary duties. Thus Jeremiah was a victim of injustice by virtue of his origin. He remained a victim. In fact, he became everybody's favorite victim: God's, Israel's, Babylon's – and Egypt's as well. There was no joy in his life, ever. No pleasant surprises, no warmth, no smiles, nothing but sorrow, anguish, and tears. Words of woe and anger – words he was made to speak against his will."*¹

Jeremiah was known for his unceasing complaining and crying not for boasting. He said (**Jeremiah 9.1**), *"O that my head were a spring of water, and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night for the slain of my poor people!"* Jeremiah was called and compelled to speak God's truth in a time of falsehood and that's a difficult job. I mentioned last week that no book of the Bible refers to "justice" more than Isaiah. Jeremiah is also known for a theme or word and that **word is**

¹ Elie Wiesel, *Five Biblical Portraits* (University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, 1981), pages 102-103.

“falsehood” which appears **72 times in the Bible, half of them in the Book of Jeremiah.**

The Book of Jeremiah begins with the prophet in Jerusalem proclaiming God’s unwavering faithfulness and the people’s unfaithfulness. From the least to the greatest, everyone was greedy for unjust gain, seeking to climb the economic ladder even if it meant lying, cheating, being unjust and taking advantage of the poor. Religious and political leaders declared it was a time of peace and prosperity, when the nation was in fact, in grave danger. Jeremiah said that the unwillingness of the leaders to face the truth of their nation’s situation would be devastating. Sadly, their failure led to an invasion that left the city of Jerusalem and the temple a pile of smoky ruins. God’s description of the unrepentant people uninterested in a relationship with their Creator is summed up in **Jeremiah 4:22, “For my people are foolish, they do not know me; they are stupid children, they have no understanding. They are skilled in doing evil, but do not know how to do good.”**

I doubt any of us would want God to describe us as foolish, not knowing the Lord, stupid, without understanding, skilled at evil, but ignorant of how to do good. Actually, we wouldn’t want anyone describing us that way! God provides people with a different option, an option described in today’s scripture, that tells you what’s truly worth boasting about. **Jeremiah 9:23-24, “Thus says the Lord: Do not let the wise boast in their wisdom, do not let the mighty boast in their might, do not let the wealthy boast in their wealth; but let those who boast boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am the Lord; I act with steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth for in these things I delight.”**

The Lord contrasts boasting in your own **wisdom, might, or riches** with boasting in understanding and knowing the Lord and the **love, justice, and righteousness that delight God**. You’re not to boast or glory in your wisdom, intellect, or education, nor your might, power or material riches. As God’s child you’re to glory or boast in the things that God delights in and loves. The roar of wisdom, might, and riches easily drowns out the softer tones of love, justice, and righteousness. This is especially true when wars are raging or threatening, it’s true around Christmas when commercials tell you the way to show you care is to buy someone a \$70,000 vehicle. True glory is not found where so

much of the world is looking - in wisdom, might, and wealth. True glory is found in knowing and serving the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth.

A great example of the type of boasting the Lord says you're to do is one we hear every year around Christmas. They're the words of boasting spoken by Mary, the mother of Jesus. Listen to how she boasts in the Lord in **Luke 1:46b-55** (NRSV) and listen for the things she lifts up and rejoices in.

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

Mary boasts and rejoices in the Lord, not in herself. She highlights God's favor, mercy, holiness, and strength. She says what God has done, not what she has done. Jeremiah highlighted the wise, mighty, and wealthy, and Mary declares that God has scattered the proud, brought down the powerful, and sent the rich away empty. I'm always challenged by these verses every Christmas. Mary and Jeremiah exhort you to look to God and to praise God who is faithful, trustworthy, and true, and who has done so much for you. Sadly, the people of Jeremiah's time would not follow his advice and they paid dearly for taking the wrong path. God's grace is so great that even when you're disobedient, God keeps trying to speak to you and to direct you on the right path.

When God's people failed to listen, God sent Jesus, born to Mary, to make the way plain. Jesus called people who didn't follow God's good path "lost." Jesus came to seek and to save the lost. He came to help us find and stay on God's good path that leads to joyful, abundant, eternal life.

In the Gospel of Matthew at two of the saddest and most anguished moments at the beginning and the end of Jesus' life, the Gospel writer turns to the words of Jeremiah, the prophet who was so well acquainted with heartache and tragedy. The first is in **Matthew 2:17**, in connection with King Herod ordering the death of all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old under. We'll hear more about that in two weeks.

Then just before Jesus' crucifixion, we read in **Matthew 27:3-4**, "*When Judas, who had betrayed him, saw that Jesus was condemned, **he repented** and brought back **the thirty pieces of silver** to the chief priests and the elders. 'I have sinned,' he said, 'for I have betrayed innocent blood.'*" Judas was so upset over what he had done he died by suicide and the chief priests used the money he returned to buy a field in which to bury foreigners. **Matthew 27:9** says, "Then was fulfilled what had been spoken **through the prophet Jeremiah**, "*And they took **the thirty pieces of silver**, the price of the one on whom a price had been set, on whom some of the people of Israel had set a price, and they gave them for the potter's field, as the Lord commanded.*"

There is more than a little resemblance between the life of Jesus and the life of Jeremiah. Matthew reports that some people even thought Jesus was Jeremiah come to life again (Matthew 16:14). Jeremiah and Jesus both taught that we shouldn't boast about our own wisdom, might or wealth. The apostle Paul repeatedly talks about the source of our boasting as followers of Jesus in Romans and 2 Corinthians. Paul heard the Lord say to him (**2 Corinthians 12.9-10**, ESV), "*My grace is sufficient for you, for my **power** is made perfect in weakness.*" *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.*" Rather than boasting in your own strength, Paul encourages you to be open about your weaknesses and vulnerabilities so that the power of God in Christ can rest upon you and be displayed through you.

In Romans, Paul declares God's steadfast love for us is so great that Christ was willing to die for us when we were still sinners. In **Romans 5:10-11** Paul writes, "*For if while we were enemies, we were **reconciled to God through the death of his Son**, much more surely, **having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life**. But more than that, **we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ**, through whom we have now received **reconciliation**."*

We're reconciled to God through Jesus' death, and we are saved by his life. As followers of Jesus who have heard the truth spoken through the prophet Jeremiah and Mary the mother of Jesus, we learn that if we're to boast in anything, we boast in the Lord and in our relationship with God through grace, not in our own accomplishments or worthiness. We boast about knowing the Lord and the relationship of love we can have with Christ which is the greatest gift of Christmas.

Prayer: Eternal and gracious God, all year long we pursue power, money, and influence. Yet You come to us in the weakness of a baby in a manger. We covet material gifts. Yet You alone offer us the only everlasting gift: Your Son, Jesus Christ, God with us. We confess to You our pride, our faithlessness, and our reluctance to accept Your grace. Through the work of the Lord Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit, forgive us, heal us, correct us, and transform us. Then enable us to be still, to know Your presence, and to praise You with all our hearts this Christmas season. We ask this in the name of the one whose birth we celebrate, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Blessing: **Psalm 44:8, "*In God we have boasted continually, and we will give thanks to your name forever.*"**

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. When you hear the word "boasting" who or what comes to mind?
2. What are the things that Jeremiah says you *should not* boast about (Jeremiah 9.23-24)? Why do you think people tend to boast about these things?

3. What does Jeremiah say we *should* boast about (Jeremiah 9.23-24)? Why does God want us to boast about and focus on these things? What difference does it make?
4. How does Mary's boasting about the Lord God in Luke 1.46b-55, reflect the boasting that God tells Jeremiah, we should engage in?
5. How many attributes of God and actions of God can you identify in Mary's words?
6. Why does Paul say in 2 Corinthians 12, "*I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses?*" What does he say happens when he does this?
7. According to Romans 5.10-11, why do we "*boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ?*"