BOAST IN THE LORD

2 Corinthians 10:1–18

Key Verse: 10:17

“But, ‘Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.’”

How do you respond to criticism? Do you get angry? Depressed? Defensive? Some criticism we call “constructive,” but the other kind, honestly, is meant to harm us. We all should be willing to accept constructive criticism, but when it’s destructive, what do we do? In today’s passage Apostle Paul shows us. He says we should learn to “boast in the Lord.” What does it mean? How can we boast in the Lord? And why should we? May God open our hearts and speak to us through his living word today.

In chapters 1–7 Paul has been defending his apostleship to the Corinthians. In chapter 7 Paul writes that when he finally met Titus, who recently had visited them, he realized that they’d begun to have a change of heart about him, and that their relationship was being restored (7:6–13). Then he writes chapters 8 and 9 about collecting an offering. But evidently, since writing that first section of the letter Paul heard that his opponents were back in Corinth again, criticizing him while he wasn’t there in order to turn people against him. So Paul now adds chapters 10–13 to the letter. He writes this last section mainly to defend his apostleship further and to prepare the Corinthians for his upcoming visit. So in chapters 10–13 Paul mentions several times his plans to visit them soon (10:2; 12:14,20, 21; 13:1,2,10). He mentions his God-given authority twice (10:8; 13:10). And in chapter 10 alone, he refers to his critics four times specifically (2,7,10,11), and several other times generally.

In order to counteract the people criticizing his leadership, Paul reluctantly resorts to “boasting.” In 1 Corinthians he already taught us not to boast about human leaders or about ourselves, but to “boast in the Lord” (1Co1:29,31; 3:21; 4:7; 5:6). He also said that if we’re going to preach the gospel or suffer or love others, we should not “boast” (1Co9:16; 13:3,4). In 2 Corinthians 1–9 Paul repeats the words “boast” or “boasting” seven times, and now, in chapters 10–13, he repeats this word for “boast” another 23 times! It’s a strong emphasis. Paul describes something similar to boasting when he mentions people who “commend themselves” (10:12,18; cf. 3:1). So what’s his point in boasting? By boasting in the Lord Paul wants to put to an end, once and for all, the criticisms people were spreading against him.

Read verse 1. Here Paul says he’s appealing to them “by the humility and gentleness of Christ.” Some people interpreted this as Paul being “timid” or weak. But Paul saw the humility and gentleness of Christ as real strength, the strength of a true shepherd. He adds that they were criticizing him for being “timid” in person but “bold” when away. A little later he addresses this further. Read verses 9–11. Paul’s critics were saying he writes in tough terms, but in person he’s really a weak man. They were badly mistaken about Paul.

Read verse 2. What does he mean when he says, “…when I come I may have to be as bold as I expect to be”? He wrote in 1 Corinthians 4:21, “What do you prefer? Shall I come to you with a rod of discipline, or shall I come in love and with a gentle spirit?” Clearly Paul preferred the latter. Paul wanted to visit the Corinthians with a loving and gentle spirit. But because some people were still spreading misunderstandings and criticisms, he expected he would have to come and exercise some painful spiritual discipline again, not toward everyone, but toward “some.”

In verse 2 Paul mentions another criticism. He says people think “we live by the standards of this world.” When we read this phrase, it could mean so many things: by materialism, by worldly knowledge, by human success. But in Greek the phrase literally says, “by the flesh.” It implies, “instead of by the Spirit” (cf. Ro8:5). So really, people were criticizing Paul, thinking he didn’t have the Holy Spirit, that he was conducting his ministry only by his own willpower and ability. They were probably those in Corinth who thought they were the only ones full of the Holy Spirit, super-spiritual. Paul wrote about them back in 1 Corinthians 4:19,20: “But I will come to you very soon, if the Lord is willing, and then I will find out not only how these arrogant people are talking, but what power they have. For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power.” What power?

Paul goes on to explain. Read verses 3,4. Just as in verse 2, when Paul repeats the word “world,” in Greek he’s literally using the word “flesh.” He’s saying that he’s fighting a spiritual battle with spiritual weapons—in other words, with the power of the Holy Spirit. He mentioned these weapons back in 6:6,7: “…in the Holy Spirit and in sincere love; in truthful speech and in the power of God, with weapons of righteousness in the right hand and in the left…” The world fights its battles with hate, with lies, with human power, and with all kinds of wickedness. In sharp contrast, God’s people draw on the Holy Spirit in order to fight with love, with truth, with God’s power, and with God’s righteousness. In other places in the Bible Paul calls our weapons “the full armor of God,” meaning both defensive and offensive, “with faith and love as a breastplate and the hope of salvation as a helmet” (Eph6:13–18; 1Th5:8). In its essence, our real weapon is the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ himself. It’s the power of God for salvation (Ro1:16). Here in verse 4 he says our weapons “have divine power.” These weapons are not any kind of human power but an all-surpassing power that comes from God, not us (4:7). Like our Lord Jesus, we may be so weak humanly that it seems we’re being crucified by sinners, but, like him, we keep on living by God’s power (13:3,4). That’s why Paul writes later, “For when I am weak, then I am strong” (12:10). But when does the Holy Spirit give us these most powerful spiritual weapons to fight with? It’s only when we’re so weak, so broken, that we completely give up depending on anything or anyone else, including ourselves.

In verse 4b Paul says that we use these powerful weapons to “demolish strongholds.” What are these “strongholds”? In Ephesians 6:12 Paul writes, “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” The strongholds may refer generally to the world living in rebellion against God, ignoring him as if he were not there, trying to put human beings in his place. They may be strongholds of sinful desires and habits that people find so hard to escape. They may refer to the stronghold of unbelief which makes people perverse. Even our Lord Jesus lamented at the stronghold of unbelief and perversion all around him (Mt17:17). Unbelief may be the most stubborn stronghold in our world today. These strongholds are where the devil has gotten hold of people’s minds and hearts. Obviously his darkness and evil are way too powerful for us. But with the power of the Holy Spirit even weak sinners like us can struggle and fight against him. When we look at our world full of dark spiritual forces, rebellion, sinful desire and unbelief, we can feel helpless and that all our efforts are futile. But when we ask God for the Holy Spirit, he gives us his divine power to demolish these strongholds.

Yet Paul seems to have another stronghold in mind here. Read verse 5. The word “arguments” is literally “speculations.” It’s what philosophers do. “Pretention” literally means anything raised up in competition. It’s what humanly ambitious people do. It’s what so-called great Western thinkers did during the Enlightenment, elevating Reason above God himself. Paul is especially focused in this verse on the stronghold of human pride. The Corinthians were prone to it, which is why some of them so easily switched to criticizing Paul, thinking they were better than him. In fact, people today still think they’re so clever that they know better than God, that they can argue against him and even outsmart him. Paul isn’t just talking about the power to win arguments with atheists; he’s talking about the power of the Holy Spirit who exposes the foolish pride underneath all the human arguments and pretensions we may have against God. Only the power of the Holy Spirit can show us how foolish our pride is.

Paul adds in verse 5b, “…and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.” This is a very important Bible verse. It’s what real discipleship is all about. It tells us that our spiritual battle starts in our own thought world. Due to our inborn sinful nature, our thought world is susceptible to the devil. He deceives our minds and hearts and hardens them. He makes us think futile and useless things, and eventually, sinful things. Our minds form thinking habits that are godless. Our thought world is a stronghold where we really need the help of the Holy Spirit. So Paul wrote elsewhere, “The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life and peace” (Ro8:6). We also learn in verse 5 that the ultimate goal of our spiritual struggle is to be obedient to Christ, especially in our thought world. Read verse 6. Paul really wanted this church to be obedient to the gospel not just outwardly, but inwardly (cf. 2Th1:8).

In verse 7 Paul says his critics claimed to belong to Christ, but he counters that he belongs to Christ just as much as they did. Read verse 8. People were criticizing Paul for boasting about his apostolic authority. But here he says, “I will not be ashamed of it.” He says the Lord gave him this authority. And he says it was for building them up rather than tearing them down. Human boasting always lifts up one person but tears everyone else down. But boasting in the Lord, in what he’s done for us, what he’s given us, is so healthy that it builds others up.

Look at verse 12. Here Paul is basically describing people who boast in themselves. To do that, they compare themselves with others to some degree. But what they’re really doing is measuring themselves by themselves, meaning they’re so in love with themselves that they’re blind to see who they really are before God. It implies that to boast in the Lord, we first need to know what sinners we are.

Paul goes on to another aspect of boasting in the Lord. Look at verses 13,14. Here he’s basically talking about acknowledging the spiritual fruit God has given us through the gospel. For Paul, boasting in the Lord meant praising God for how God used him to lead the Corinthians to know the grace of Jesus. Look at verse 15a. Here Paul seems to be referring to his critics who’d come to Corinth and imagined that this ministry was now theirs, when actually it was Paul who’d worked so hard to build it. Look at verses 15,16. For Paul, boasting in the Lord is not just about what God *has* done, but also what God still wants to do *in the future*. God longs to bring the gospel of Jesus to people who still haven’t heard or understood it. Paul would later write the same thing in Romans 15:20. He had confidence that God who’d called and equipped him would keep on using him to spread this glorious gospel to more and more people, and this would bring thanksgiving and glory to God (4:15). This is what boasting in the Lord is about.

Read verse 17. This is a loose quotation from Jeremiah 9:23,24. God’s people don’t boast in their own wisdom, strength or riches, but in knowing who God is and how he is working in the world and in our lives. Paul himself may have best expressed what it means to boast in the Lord. He wrote in 1 Corinthians 15:9,10, “For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.” Despite his great background, knowledge and achievements, he only focused on knowing Christ and being found in him (Php3:4–14). He wrote in Galatians 6:14, “May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.” Later in this letter Paul writes that the Lord Jesus told him, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” And he goes on to say, “Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me” (2Co12:9). Most of all, to boast in the Lord means to meditate on what a terrible sinner I am and yet what amazing grace God has poured out on me in our Lord Jesus (1Ti1:15).

We live in a world full of boasting. People try to elevate themselves above others in many ways, through their appearance, wealth, achievements or in whom they know or what they can do. We really need the Holy Spirit to keep us from such empty and foolish boasting. We need the Holy Spirit to give us spiritual power to fight against all the godlessness and pride, both within us and around us. We need the Holy Spirit to help us really know God and his grace and how great he is. We need the Holy Spirit to see how God has been working in and through us, and to praise and thank him for it, even in the midst of criticism. Let’s read verse 17 again. May God help each one of us learn newly how to live a beautiful life of boasting in the Lord.