

What anyone else dares to boast about—I am speaking as a fool—I also dare to boast about. ²² *Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they Abraham’s descendants? So am I.* ²³ *Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again.* ²⁴ *Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one.* ²⁵ *Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea,* ²⁶ *I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers.* ²⁷ *I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked.* ²⁸ *Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.* ²⁹ *Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?* ³⁰ *If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness. (2 Corinthians 11:21b-30)*

When is a Public Minister at his Best?

Everybody hates boasting, right? So we all try not to do it. But does that ever make you struggle with a job interview? At a job interview you have to convince the interviewer that you are the best person for the job and for many Christians, that feels a lot like boasting. That’s probably even true for non-Christians. In the Lutheran church, we don’t get pastors and teachers through an interview process like that. But what if we did? What would you want to hear if you interviewed men to decide which one should be our next pastor or if you interviewed teacher candidates to determine which one we should call? Would you want that pastor or teacher candidate to list all their accomplishments? Would you want them to tell you why they would be a much better minister here at Peace than anyone else? Maybe that sounds OK at first. But I think you’d find that there would be an inherent conflict between a prospective pastor or teacher boasting about their accomplishments and being humble enough to serve you. From a spiritual perspective, a pastor or teacher listing his or her accomplishments doesn’t really show them at their best. In his second letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul wasn’t going through a job interview. Rather, he was defending his ministry against a whole host of people who had attacked it. And he did something very surprising: he boasted. But he did it to make a point about what it means to be a minister of the gospel. Through his words we want to ask ourselves, **when is a public minister at his best?**

I.

You all probably have opinions about how well we pastors and teachers do our jobs. You may even rank us in your own mind relative to other pastors and teachers who have served you. The congregation in Corinth was doing much the same thing. They had been served by a number of different people and it may surprise you to hear it, but Paul was not their favorite, at least, not for many of them. Worse, false teachers had begun to attack Paul’s ministry. His words should help us answer the question, **when is a public minister at his best? When he leans on Christ for strength.**

These false teachers were good speakers – better than St. Paul, as he himself admitted. They claimed to be far more qualified to talk about Jesus than Paul could ever hope to be. Paul launched into a defense of his ministry, not because his ego needed to be stroked, but because these false teachers were leading people astray with their big egos. So Paul says, **“What anyone else dares to boast about—I am speaking as a fool—I also dare to boast about.”** Notice, he says that he’s speaking like a fool. A pastor or a teacher who would try to win followers by boasting is a fool. Not just a silly or stupid person, but a person lacking in the wisdom that comes from faith. They can’t see what it is that makes a pastor or teacher truly worthy of serving God’s people. Paul was telling the congregation in Corinth that they were being foolish, too, if this is what they wanted.

So Paul ran through all the things those false teachers were boasting about to show that they had nothing on him. They pointed to their Jewish heritage and education. Paul pointed out three times that he was just as Jewish as they were. They pointed to their commitment to service. And Paul pointed to all the times he was flogged and beaten and imprisoned. If you had examined his body, you would have found ugly scars – as the Corinthians well knew. He pointed to the long, hard trips he had made for the gospel. Three different times, he

was shipwrecked. He was constant danger from bandits on the highway, from gentiles who didn't want to hear his message, from Jews who hated the gospel. And yet, he kept at the work.

But even when he spoke about working day and night for the gospel, he did not mention the one thing that you or I would probably mention first if we were defending our work. Paul didn't say one word about his success. Paul was probably the single most successful missionary in the history of the Christian church. He planted dozens of congregations. God only knows how many people heard the gospel from him first and how many pastors and teachers he trained. During his ministry, the Christian Church spread from a backwater corner of the Roman Empire to the entire Mediterranean world and beyond. And Paul was a huge part of that work.

But he didn't say one word about success. He didn't boast about anything he had done – he didn't even mention the epistles he wrote or his sermons or his Bible classes. He boasted that he was beaten and scourged and thrown in prison and in danger. As he said at the end of our text, **“If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.”** Is that any way to defend yourself against charges that you're not as good a preacher or not as capable an apostle? No. So why did he do this?

Because St. Paul knew that it doesn't matter how gifted we public ministers are. It doesn't matter how good we are at public speaking. It doesn't matter how many people like us. Those things aren't what keep you going. When persecution comes, when ministry is hard because people don't like you or because your computer keeps crashing or people don't listen when you talk or you're getting older and your joints hurt when you stand in front of your class all day, your smarts and your popularity are not what make you effective as a pastor or teacher. When members of your congregation attack you because they don't like the way you preach or teach, your gifts and your confidence are not going to carry you through. God sends those pains to us modern day called workers for the same reason he sent prison time and physical torture to Paul: to teach us that we can do nothing on our own. Only God can change hearts. Only God can give faith and make faith grow.

Pastors and teachers are at their best when they lean on Christ to give them strength to stand up in front of people who don't appreciate their efforts. We're at our best when we lean on Christ to get us through tough days and frustrating circumstances. We're at our best when we understand that only the power of God can heal a broken heart or change a rebellious heart or repair a damaged relationship. We're at our best when we understand that our job is to proclaim the gospel and we let God create faith and sustain faith and provide all those other wonderful changes.

What do you want from your pastors and teachers? When do you appreciate them most? The sin that Paul was addressing exists in the church today. It's not wrong to have a favorite pastor or teacher. But it is wrong to judge faithfulness on the basis of gifts. A good and faithful pastor may not be an impressive speaker. But if you listen to his words, he is proclaiming Christ to you. A good and faithful teacher may not be the most popular teacher with the kids. But he or she is dealing with them on the basis of God's law and gospel day in and day out to nurture their faith. What we should want is pastors and teachers who know the word of God and teach that word faithfully.

Do we want that? Or do we want all the things that this world thinks are important: magnetic personalities, great speaking voices, good people skills. Those things aren't sinful. They're gifts God gives. But the only reason he gives them in the Church is so that the men and women who have them can use them to present Christ. Is that what you want or do you have to admit that you're looking for something a little more entertaining? Do you send your kids to Lutheran elementary school or high school because you know it's good for their faith? Or are you looking for a private school to prep them for college? Would you send them even if you thought that the other subjects weren't as well taught as they would be in the public school? Do you see how easy it is to lose sight of what God says is important in the ministry?

Why does that happen? Because we're all sinners. We all have a part in our hearts that thinks we've heard it all before and that would rather be entertained. God sends sinners like us to hell. But the message that Paul was so concerned about us hearing, the message he was defending when he defended his ministry, is the message about Christ. Jesus died because we are sinners. He died because in our hearts, we always want something more entertaining. Jesus died because we give pastors and teachers a hard time when they don't measure up to what the world around us thinks they ought to be. Jesus died because it's so easy for us to judge them by the standards that unbelievers set. Jesus died and he paid for all that sin. God has forgiven us for judging our pastors and teachers by the standards of this world, for wanting something different than what he

gives us, for confusing faithfulness with charisma, for thinking that entertainment is the same as hearing the gospel. God has forgiven all that sin. We will not go to hell.

That's the gospel. That's the message we ministers are supposed to focus all our attention on. No pastor or teacher can do that on their own. And so it happens that sometimes, we lose sight of what we're supposed to be preaching and teaching. It happens that we get down over the opposition and over how hard it is to be a minister in this world. But that's when we need to hear the gospel, too. Christ died for us. He wiped away all our failings in ministry. When we are weak, that's when Jesus is strong. In love, he puts us ministers in situation after situation where we can't possibly carry the weight on our own to teach us that only in Jesus do we have the strength to do what he requires. When we understand that lesson, we serve you best.

II.

Only through the gospel can we ministers accomplish anything. The message about Jesus is the power of God. You members need to understand that your pastors and teachers are not at their best when they make the ministry look easy, but when they show you Jesus. And sometimes, God makes us ministers weak, God even withholds some gifts that you would like us to have – gifts that would make it a whole lot easier to listen to us talk – so that you understand where the real power lies.

Paul talks about that right at the end of his list of weaknesses. He says, **“Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?”** Being a pastor or a teacher means being invested in the life of your congregation. It means sleepless nights because you don't know how to solve people's problems or end their hurt. In a sinful world, faithful pastors and teachers wrestle with the burden of ministry. When you feel weak, it's supposed to hurt me. When you struggle to confess the truth, it should disturb me. When you wrestle with sin and temptation and fail, it does break my heart. And not just mine. Every faithful public minister experiences these things. I've seen teachers shed tears over the struggles of people they serve.

Does that seem like boasting? Paul considered it weakness. He couldn't carry all that congregation's burdens on his own. If you think you can find a pastor or a principal or a teacher whose shoulders are so broad that he or she can carry all of your burdens without being crushed and brokenhearted, then I submit to you that you don't know the reality of the ministry.

It hurts to see God's people struggle and fail and sin. But no pastor will ever convince you to live your life differently. No teacher can ever take away the hurt of a child's sin and guilt. Only God can do that. He does that through the message about Jesus. The miracle of Christ is that he does heal our hearts. And in his grace and mercy, he lets us pastors and teachers see that sometimes. And it is a tremendous joy. When you see it happen, when you see Christian people take comfort in the gospel at a funeral, when you see a child rejoice that he or she is forgiven and loved by God and by his or her teacher, when you see God's people take home the good news that Jesus loves them and try to make that the heart of their family life, then you know that you didn't do anything to make it happen. Jesus did it all. And all you can do as a public minister is thank God for what he has done. That's what you want from your pastors and teachers: men and women who know that the power is not in them. It's in God and his word. My friends, **when is a public minister at his best? When he trusts in Christ to overcome.** Amen.