

Let's All Boast
Romans 15:17-21
ABC 8/20/17

In 1984 Chan Gailey was the head coach of Alabama's Troy State football team who went 11-1 for the season & were playing for a Division 2 National Championship. In the week before the big game, interview requests were pouring in. A few days before the championship, Gailey was heading to the practice field when his secretary let him know he had a phone call back at the office. Somewhat irritated, he told her to take a message because he was on his way to practice. She responded, *Are you sure? It's Sports Illustrated.*

I'll be right there, he said. As Gailey made his way back to his office, he began to think about what SI might write. It would be great publicity for the football program. Coming even closer to his office, he started thinking he might even end up on the cover. *Should I pose or go with some kind of action shot*, he wondered. His head was spinning with all the possibilities.

When he picked up the phone & said, *Hello*, the person asked, *Is this Chan Gailey?*

Yes, it is, he replied with a measure of pride.

This is Sports Illustrated, & we're calling to let you know your subscription is running out ... do you want to renew?

Coach Gailey concludes this story by saying, *You are either humble or you will be humbled by life.*¹

That's is a good truth to remember. There's nothing more harmful to a believer than too much of himself. There's nothing more damaging to relationships & the work of Christ than the spirit of Diotrephes, who **loves to be first** or preeminent (3 Jn 1:9). John the Baptist, on the other hand, got it right when he said of Jesus, **He must increase, but I must decrease** (Jn 3:30). A basic biblical truth is that God hates pride. Haughty eyes or a proud look are 1st in the list of things God hates in Prov 6 (16-19). Js 4:6 & 1 Pt 5:6 tell us that God is opposed to or at war with the proud. So how can I title this sermon, *Let's All Boast?* Is there a kind of boasting or bragging or glorying that God would be okay with? & the answer is, *Yes! **17-21** PRAY*

Paul continues to explain his ministry to the Gentiles, giving the reasons why he could write so boldly to them & why he could glory in ministering as a priest the gospel of God, offering them up as an acceptable sacrifice (15:15, 16). So the *boast* of vs 17 refers back to vs 16. Paul's boasting or glorying in his role of preaching the gospel to the Gentiles & in offering up the Gentile Christians to God as an acceptable offering goes back to 12:1. There Paul said we're to

¹ www.preachingtoday.com 4/20/04

present our bodies as a living & holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is our spiritual service of worship. But why does Paul mention **boasting** at all? Back in 3:27 he said faith excludes all boasting. Boasting or pride is the root of all sins. So why is Paul boasting now? The answer is he's doing here what he wrote in 2 Cor, **He who boasts is to boast in the Lord** (10:17; Jer 9:24). It's wrong to boast in ourselves, but it's right to boast in the Lord, so He gets the glory for what He has done through weak human instruments (2 Cor 4:7). Paul's boast here is **in Christ Jesus ... in things pertaining to God** (17). Literally, it says, *I have therefore a boast in Christ Jesus*. He is glorying in what God has done through him, which is all **because of the grace that was given (him) from God** (15).

We cannot be obsessed with God's glory & our own glory at the same time. Boasting shows what we treasure. It's verbal venting of what we value. It's speaking of what we love & live for & rejoice over & delight in & pursue & want & worship. & note 2 phrases that frame up Paul's boasting in vs 17 that make it not only acceptable but desirable. The 1st is **in Christ Jesus** & the 2nd is **in things pertaining to God**. Paul was boasting **in Christ Jesus** because in Him Paul didn't get what he deserved. & **in Christ Jesus**, Paul's life wasn't defined by what he could do because he knew living a perfect life was impossible. That's us too; we're sinners & what we face is impossible to do with complete love for God & others. But if we are in Christ Jesus, then we can try & we have some measures of success & progress & fruitfulness. It's not that Paul went searching & found a reason to boast. It's that in the purpose Jesus gave him for his life, he had something to talk about & share. He had something to say. & that's an important thing about boasting, we boast about things we have something to say about. So ask: *What do you love to talk about? What does your heart overflow with & what drives your passions? Is it Jesus & things pertaining to God? Or is it in what you've done?* It's easy to take credit for our own accomplishments. Therefore, we must deliberately choose not to rob God of any of His glory. This means we must consciously seek to be out of step with our culture. Today, heroes in sports, entertainment, & politics promote themselves endlessly, yet, as believers, we're to be absolutely dependent on Christ. We can boast or glory in God's grace in Christ Jesus to bear any good fruit

through us. Our boasts should be in what God has done & in how great He is when He uses someone as bad & needy & flawed as we are to bless other people somehow. This is about being people who love to praise God, it's speaking of Him & His work because we are amazed & thrilled & thankful. Paul explains further in **18**.

He's only boasting of what Jesus has accomplished through him, **resulting in the obedience of the Gentiles**. Paul was the tool in Christ's hand to bring about blessing. & the right response is not to praise the tool, but to praise God for shaping & using the tool beautifully. Then Jesus is rightly the One who is thanked. Yes, we can thank each other & should encourage one another. But we do so best when we also say how we thank God for them & for His work through them.

Note that the salvation of Gentiles here is described as **the obedience of the Gentiles**. It's phrased that way in 1:5 as well because God commands all people to repent (Acts 17:30). & it's a command of God to trust Christ & to follow Him. So it's obedience to those initial commands when a person trusts Jesus to become a Christian. It's not obedience to earn or merit salvation, but it is obedience. But God is the One who effects it & who gives the gift of faith & the power to respond & He is the One we trust & the One we thank. So our boasting is important to show whom we trust & thank. Paul refuses to accept personal credit for spiritual fruit. Gentile masses are coming to faith in Christ & obeying the truth of the gospel & Paul is the signature spokesman. However, he writes, in effect, *Don't put me on a pedestal; elevate Christ instead. I wouldn't even presume to talk about anything I've done, without putting it in the context of Christ working through me.*

By word & deed is a summary of how God used Paul to bring about the **obedience of the Gentiles**. The Spirit of God saves people & transforms them into obedient followers **by word & deed**. God's Word is emphasized in this paragraph. Vs 19, **I have fully preached *the gospel* of Christ**. Vs 20: **I aspire to preach *the gospel***. Vs 21a: **They who had *no news* of Him**. Vs 21b: **They who have *not heard* shall understand**. So the Word, the gospel, gets a strong emphasis. That's because **faith comes from hearing, & hearing by *the word* of Christ** (Rom 10:17).

The **deeds** have a supporting role. They aren't the direct means of saving people the way the **word** is. Deeds can't tell the story of the death & resurrection of Jesus with all its meaning. Only words can. So the deeds have value as they confirm the word. That's the way Luke explained the relationship between **word** & **deed** in Acts 14:3. Paul & Barnabas were in Iconium, & Luke says, **they spent a long time there, *speaking boldly* (word) for the Lord, who *was testifying to the word of His grace, granting that signs & wonders be done by their hands* (deeds). God bore witness to the word of His grace. That was the function of the deeds. They witness to the truth & value of the word.**

The **deeds of signs & wonders** refer to miracles from different points of view. A sign simply points to something or someone. Rarely does a sign point to itself. Similarly, biblical signs point to a man & his message as coming from God. They highlighted that God was doing something through a person, usually giving new revelation to add to His Word. In Jn 2 at the wedding when Jesus turned water into wine, vs 11 calls that the beginning of Jesus' signs. Then in vs 23 many were superficially believing in Jesus because of the signs so in Jn 3:2 Nicodemus came admitting the obvious truth that no one could do Jesus' signs unless God was with Him. Signs were authenticating proofs of a servant of God. Simply put, signs signify something.

Wonders were simply that, they caused people to marvel. **Wonders** looks at the response that miracles produce in people, who recognize that God is behind them. Paul uses the phrase **signs & wonders** just 2 other times. In 2 Cor 12:12 he says, **The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs & wonders & miracles.** The miracles that God did through Paul authenticated him as a true apostle. But in 2 Thes 2:9, Paul uses the phrase to refer to the activity of the man of lawlessness, **whose coming is in accord with the activity of Satan, with all power & signs & false wonders.** With that being said, should we expect signs & wonders to accompany the preaching of the gospel today. Some say we should expect them as normal & if we aren't experiencing miraculous signs, we're stifling God's Spirit. must not be trusting God. While this isn't a main topic here, let me say a few things.

1st, we need to acknowledge that God is the Almighty Creator & He can do miracles if & when He chooses to do them. God can do anything at any time if He wants to. But we should expect Him to do what He said He would do & we should understand why & when He did signs & wonders & consider whether to expect them today. Don't misunderstand me, I'm not saying that God doesn't answer prayer & that He does so miraculously at times. We must not limit His power by our unbelief (Mk 6:5-6). At the same time, we should recognize that in the Bible, miracles tend to be clustered around the Exodus, the ministries of Elijah & Elisha, a few at the time of Daniel, & many during the ministries of Jesus & the apostles. The purpose of miracles in those situations was to authenticate the truth of God's spokesmen. In between these times, there are occasional miracles, but they don't seem to be the norm. Jesus Himself rebuked the people of His times for always asking for signs. Miracles don't convince people to believe (Lk 16:27-31). Signs happened rarely & that's what made them signs, that's what made them unique & striking & significant. Also, as the apostolic age wound down, the number of miracles seems to have dwindled sharply. In the early days of the gospel, both Peter & Paul saw frequent miracles (Acts 5:12-16; 9:36-42; 13:9-12; 19:11-12). But later, Paul didn't heal Epaphroditus, although God mercifully spared him (Phil 2:25-27). He didn't tell Timothy to claim healing for his frequent stomach problems, but rather to drink some wine (1 Tim 5:23). Paul didn't heal Trophimus, but left him sick at Miletus (2 Tim 4:20). &, writing to a 2nd generation church, the author of Hebrews explains how the Lord testified through the apostles with **signs & wonders & by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will** as confirmation of the gospel (Heb 2:3-4). If those things were still going on it seems likely he would've appealed to their current experience as proof of the gospel. But rather, he points them back to what God did through the apostles.

When Jesus returned to heaven & the apostles have laid the foundation of the church & wrote the NT & are taken off the scene, we have a centralized focus on the Word of God, the gospel, because all the central acts of salvation are now in history & it's the Word that connects us with these saving acts of God in the past. It's the teaching of the Bible that accomplishes the true miracles God & we desire. The miracles that need to be done today are not healing the sick or

raising the dead, but bringing dead souls to life to believe on Jesus Christ as Lord & Savior & then to be changed by Him. So it has always been. As Christ's people have taken the gospel to the farthest reaches of the world, pagans living in darkest spiritual night have been brought to gospel day, the despairing have been given a sure & lasting hope, liars have been turned into men & women of truth, people of loose morals have become righteous & upright, & those who have been lazy with no real goals in life have been captured for Jesus & have lived productive lives for His glory. This has fulfilled Jesus' words when He said, **Anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father** (Jn 14:12).

To confirm his apostleship to the Gentiles, Paul referred to the **signs & wonders** in his ministry. & that explained why Paul could write so boldly as an Apostle through whom Christ was giving Scripture. Do you see why Paul mentioned **signs & wonders** as a defense of his apostleship & his bold writing? It has to do with his letter being trusted as coming from God in that transition from a focus on Israel to the new era of the church. Viewed in that broad, foundational way, Paul's mention of **signs & wonders** here should point us to the trustworthiness & sufficiency of the Scriptures as God's Word. It should point us to treasure our Bibles as the proven Word of God & it should delight us that we have the full revelation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ revealed in our hands. In Paul's day, the NT didn't exist. Paul never heard the Sermon on the Mount, or read Jn 3:16. He could never pick up a copy of 1 Peter or Jude or James. He had never heard of the book of Revelation, because it hadn't been written yet. The badge of authenticity was Paul's ability to heal the sick & give sight to the blind & raise the dead. Without **signs & wonders**, before the Scriptures were completed, the apostles would have lacked any verifying evidence that they were truly of God. So God in His providence, gave to His apostles to some extent the same ability Christ had demonstrated. Today, we aren't laying the foundation of the apostles, we're building on their foundation. The verifying seal & sign of God's approval on any preacher or teacher today is their proclaiming the Word of God. The litmus test is true doctrine. Does it match with the Bible? The Word of God is sufficient to prepare every Christian for every good work (2 Tim 3:16-

17). Even though Paul refers to **signs & wonders**, he's taking no credit for it. He's saying, *It wasn't me, it was the Spirit of God at work in me & through me*. Paul was obsessed with the glory of God & didn't want to rob God of praise or glory. He delighted to elevate the person of Christ, he declined to be placed on a pedestal of human praise, & he directed the spotlight of attention on the person of the Holy Spirit.

Before we look at some principles for ministry, let me comment on the last half of vs 19, where Paul says that **from Jerusalem & round about as far as Illyricum** he has **fully preached the gospel of Christ**. Illyricum is in the area we know as the Balkans (Albania, Bosnia, Herzegovina, Croatia, former Yugoslavia). We don't know whether Paul went into that area (perhaps from Macedonia, just to the east) or whether he means to the border of Illyricum. We might say, *I traveled from Mexico to Canada*, but the meaning is ambiguous. Did I travel from Mexico City to the Northwest Territories, or did I travel from southern CA to northern WA? We don't know exactly what Paul means, except that he'd preached the gospel from its point of origin in Jerusalem to the Gentile areas far northwest of there. Also, by **fully preaching the gospel**, Paul doesn't mean he preached in every village & city or to every person in those regions. It means he'd planted strategic churches in those areas, so that from them the gospel could go out into the surrounding areas. For example, Paul spent 2 years teaching the disciples in Ephesus, with the result that **all who lived in Asia heard the gospel** (Acts 19:10). With the time we have left, let's draw out some principles for each of us in our ministries:

1. Boast about God & what He does (15, 17-18). It's always wrong to boast in ourselves, but it's good to boast in the Lord. Paul is at pains to make it clear that his ministry was **because of the grace that was given him from God** (15). His boast was **in Christ Jesus, in things pertaining to God** (17). In case we missed it, he clarifies, **For I will not presume to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me** (18). Paul never got over the wonder that God would save & use a sinful persecutor & blasphemer like him (1 Tim 1:12-16). Neither should we. If God uses you to do anything for His kingdom, it's all because of His grace. What should you do when someone comes up & gushes about something you did that helped them spiritually? It comes

across as false humility if you say, *Please, it wasn't me—it was the Lord!* Instead, say something like, *Thank you! It's encouraging to hear how the Lord worked in your life. Thanks for encouraging me.* & in your heart, no matter how much people may praise you, remember the wisdom of Winston Churchill. He was once sitting on an outside platform waiting to speak to crowds who had packed the streets to hear him. The woman next to him leaned over & said, *Doesn't it thrill you, Mr. Churchill, to see all those people out there who came to see you?*

Churchill replied, *It is quite flattering, but whenever I feel this way I always remember that if instead of making a political speech I was being hanged, the crowd would be twice as big.*²

2. Enjoy the satisfaction that comes from realizing that God has used you (17). Paul knew he was merely a servant of God by His grace. When the Corinthians were dividing into camps following Apollos or Paul, Paul wrote,

What then is Apollos? & what is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, even as the Lord gave *opportunity* to each one. I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth (1 Cor 3:5-6).

He always knew he was just a servant by God's grace. & yet, he also felt a sense of satisfaction at what God by His grace had accomplished through him. In 1 Cor 15:9-10, he wrote,

I am the least of the apostles, & not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, & His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me.

& in vs 18, Paul has a sense of satisfaction that God has used him to bring the Gentiles into obedience to Jesus Christ.

3. The goal of all ministry is to proclaim the gospel so as to produce genuinely converted, obedient disciples (18). Romans is all about **the gospel of God** (1:1; 15:16; **gospel of Christ**, 15:19; **gospel**, 15:20), which results in obedience to God of those who respond in faith. **The gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes** (1:16). So the gospel is central to all ministry. This means you need to be able to give the gospel in a clear, concise manner. How do you do it? It's as simple as saying,

The bad news is, we've all sinned & are under God's righteous judgment (Rom 3:23; 6:23). We can't be reconciled to a holy God by our good deeds. The penalty for our sins must be paid. The good news is, God sent His own Son to pay the penalty that we deserved. Jesus' death on the

² James Humes, *Churchill: Speaker of the Century*, p 289

cross satisfied God's justice. But He didn't pay the penalty for everyone, but only for those who will believe in Him (Jn 3:16). If you'll turn from your sin & self-righteousness & trust in Christ alone, God will be merciful to forgive your sins & freely give you eternal life (Eph 2:8-9). Will you trust in Christ right now?

Also, when you're dealing with someone, don't assume they're clear about the gospel or they've trusted in Jesus, even if they profess to be a Christian. Ask them, *If you were to die & stand before God & He asked you why He should let you into heaven, what would you say?* Their answer will tell you what they're trusting in for eternal life. Some give the right answer, but their lives contradict their profession. They need to know that saving faith is obedient faith. If someone isn't growing in obedience, his claim to believe is suspect (1 Jn 2:4; 3:4-10). 1) Boast about God. 2) Enjoy that God uses broke people like us. 3) Proclaim the gospel.

Then Paul continues in **20-21**.

Paul's aim in his mission was to preach the gospel where Christ had not yet been named, as Is 52:15 prophesied. David Livingston had the same mind-set. He was once asked where he wanted to go. He responded, *Anywhere, as long as it is forward.*³ Paul's ambition to preach where Jesus wasn't yet known so he wouldn't build on another man's foundation didn't prevent him from ministering to the church in Rome, which he hadn't founded. Rather, it reflects Paul's overall calling & his general philosophy of ministry. He was called to plant new churches & move on. He was a pioneer evangelist who felt crowded by too many Christians. Others were called to stay with those new churches & shepherd them. Both are needed. These vss lead to 3 more principles for ministry:

4. Understand that your ministry is a small part of what God is doing. 20

Some are called to pioneer, but others need to stay in one location & build the church there. Some are gifted evangelists who can't rest at night unless they've given the gospel to someone that day. Others see God use them more in encouraging & building up believers who are struggling. This doesn't mean the evangelist doesn't disciple Christians or that the guy who focuses on disciplining Christians doesn't evangelize. It only helps you to know where to focus. You can't do it all & you're most effective when you're doing what God has gifted you to do. If you're

³ William Barclay, *Romans*, p 203

wondering what God wants you to do with your life or where you should invest your resources or how to decide such things, don't make it more difficult than it needs to be. Be encouraged by the opportunities God has placed in your path & the needs He has made you aware of. Then act on what's in front of you & what you know. God is working all around the world, including in & through you as you obediently serve Him.

5. We all must pray, support, & work toward completing the Great Commission. 21

John Piper wrote, *Missions is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Missions exists because worship doesn't.*⁴ Our passion should be that God's glory would be known so He is worshipped around the globe. Piper also has said, *You're either a go-er, a sender, or disobedient.* Loving people by speaking the truth of God's Word & proclaiming the hope of the gospel isn't optional. We exist in this fallen world to rescue people from the wrath that is coming by leading them to Christ. God is either calling you to be a missionary or a supporter of missions. Whichever it is, we best be obedient!

6. Base your philosophy of ministry on Scripture. 21

Paul cites Is 52:15 to back his philosophy of taking the gospel to those who have yet to hear. That text comes out of one of Isaiah's passages which points to Jesus, the suffering Servant. This has future implications but it also has a principle of reaching the unreached that Paul was applying for the outreach of the church to all nations. Paul saw his ministry to the Gentiles as a part of fulfilling the OT prediction about the Gentiles coming to see & understand the good news about the Servant of the Lord. Paul based his ministry on Scripture. In our day, there's a strong appeal to build your ministry on the latest business or marketing techniques. But we have to ask, *Are they biblical methods? Is it a philosophy of ministry based on Scripture?* If not, we shouldn't follow it, even if it *works*. Be sure your actions are anchored in the Scriptures like Paul's were. What can you do for the people at your workplace or in other settings to be & give a Gospel witness there? Kids, as you think about what to do with your life, think about what matters to God & how you can reach God's goals. Does God want some of you to go to the unreached? Does

⁴ *Let the Nations be Glad*, p 17

God want others of you to be passionate about praying & sacrificially giving to send & support those who do go? As 1 Cor 3 says, some plant, some water, but God causes the growth & He uses all those who invest along the way.

If you know Christ, you are enrolled in a life-long class called *ministry*. You'll be graded on your performance. The final exam is coming. I pray that we'll take Paul's example & these principles for ministry to heart so we will one day hear, **Well done, good & faithful slave.... Enter into the joy of your master** (Mt 25:21).

A story is told about a well known Christian leader who was picked up by a seminary student at the airport. The student was awed to be in the car with this man & he offered compliments & then, plied him with questions. This leader refused to accept any accolade, almost distancing himself from his successful ministry. Finally, the young man said, *Surely you see yourself & your gifts as the primary factors in your ministry's success.*

The older gentleman paused & then, said, *Young man, when I was growing up on the farm, I had to walk to school & back every weekday. I'd walk along a pasture where there was a wooden fence with long wooden rails attached to fence posts every 10 feet or so.*

One day, I remember coming across a turtle perched up on top of one of those fence posts. I knew someone had put him there; a turtle can't climb a fence & get there by himself. Son, I am nothing more than a turtle on a fencepost.⁵

This is what is called refusing the pedestal of praise, redirecting the spotlight, magnifying the Master as a result of being captivated by & dedicated to the glory of God. God's glory is magnified when weak, simple, needy, ordinary Christians praise Him & refuse the pedestal; love Him & redirect the praise to Him; worship Him & elevate His name above all other names. We are ordinary Christians who are nothing more than turtles placed on fence posts, & when asked, we must brag about our Master.

⁵ <http://www.lightsource.com/ministry/insight-for-living/devotionals/todays-insight-from-chuck-swindoll/turtles-day-by-day-dec-18-2009-11623831.html>