

Lost in Pride; Found in Christ

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Do you start books by reading the back cover or inside jacket? Often you will find a picture of the author there with a short paragraph or two of praise. I found a book recently with an interesting blurb for its author. I was intrigued and decided to give the book a read. As I read through the first few pages the author introduced himself. He proceeded to list the reasons why he was the most qualified person in the world to write his commentary on the Bible. He had spent several decades teaching the Torah and the Hebrew Bible. He had fielded countless questions from students and was indeed a professor of professors. He listed the number of renowned authors and scholars he knew around the world. And that was all just the introduction. There was more. After his own introduction is a preface by an admirer of the author. That man asserts that he had the privilege of creating a preface for a book written by the smartest and greatest man he had ever known - a Hebrew scholar of Hebrew scholars. And in his book the author wasn't content to simply list his accolades in academics, profound professional ties, and prolific professorship positions. He had an even greater feat he wanted to boast about. He couldn't let us overlook his moral qualifications and religious zeal. He even boasts, "After I left home, I called my mother once a week every week until she died." You see, to him his moral attainments were his greatest achievement. He was not a Christian. But he believed that keeping the Ten Commandments was the highest achievement anyone could ever attain. So, as he wrote his prologue and had many things to boast about, he couldn't help but boasting about his moral character.

Should I have been impressed? I suppose many of his feats were remarkable. Maybe even his morality was notable. But the apostle Paul wouldn't have been impressed. The apostle considered every title, moral habit, and academic achievement a man could ever attain in the area of theology as worthless when it came to impressing God. And what good is impressing others if you don't impress God? One can get lost in pride. It was true for that Hebrew scholar and it is true for us. Today we are warned against falling into the same trap of getting lost in pride and falling away from Christ.

In his letter to the Philippian Christians, Paul warned against boasting about such things as religious observance or moral purity. He refers to all confidence in achievements and adherence to the law as "having confidence in the flesh." In Paul's day that often included those who kept the Ten Commandments and all the ceremonial and sacrificial regulations given to the Israelites. Taking pride in religious observance and zeal was a big problem in many of the early Christian churches.

Unless you're into theological commentaries and books by Hebrew scholars, you probably don't encounter too many people boasting about their religious fever. But you will still find many who being to "put confidence in the flesh." Some boast that their baptism was superior to other Christians. Some may boast about how they have kept the Ten Commandments. They may consider themselves better servants of God and with a better standing on the basis of religious days and Sabbath regulations given to ancient Israel. I've encountered some who try to knock down other churches based on their style of worship. They boast that their church has the Spirit while others do not. Or they are proud that their church has the historical rites while others do not. They deem their religious activity better because of their music style and its performance. They brag about their religious observation and zeal. Still others will go on and on about how they dedicated their lives to God through some type of decision they made to submit to the Lord. They will point out how they gave themselves to God to serve him. Others will boast about how they or their church body is making a difference in the world by fighting injustice, poverty, sickness or ignorance. All these boasts are what the apostle Paul refers to as "boasting in the flesh." Anytime anyone (regardless of whether they be Christian or not) begins to think highly of themselves based on something they have done; they are boasting in the flesh. Anytime a Christian or any other person puts down others and builds themselves up based on their own achievements they begin to "have confidence in the flesh." The actions they take pride in are often good things, but the pride never is.

If anyone could boast about "having confidence in the flesh" it would be the apostle Paul. He writes, "If anyone thinks they have reason to have confidence in the flesh, I have more!" He goes on to list the things that make him stand out above all his peers in the sphere of religious achievements. He was circumcised by believing parents who brought him to be circumcised on the eighth day after his birth. This made him a life-long disciple. And as a life-long servant of God he could claim to belong to Israel in ways that others couldn't. He was not only an Israelite, but of the tribe of Benjamin. All the other tribes, save remnants of Judah and Levi, had been mixed or scattered in centuries past. But not Paul's tribe. Paul was a true believer from a long line of faithful Israelites. And he wasn't just a Hebrew professor or student of Hebrew. He called himself a "Hebrew of Hebrews." At a time when many were no longer even able to speak Hebrew, the native language of Old Testament Scripture, Paul lived on the language of the Torah. He didn't have to study Hebrew like me or like the world-renowned author I mentioned. He understood the Torah better than anyone. Scripture's language was his own. And Paul bore the title "Pharisee." This group was known for holding so carefully to the law of God that they created additional laws just to make sure they had every base covered.

Paul was so zealous in his faith-life that he even became blind to the evil in himself. He took an active role in trying to stamp out the Christians who in his mind were deviating from the law. And all his religious peers regarded him as *outwardly* faultless in all his religious practices and observance. None could boast of religious zeal like Paul could.

But when he became a Christian, Paul regarded all his former life as garbage. The word he uses here can refer to the rubbish left over in the kitchen or the stuff left in the chamber pot. In other words, all the good religious practices and achievements were like rotten refuse. It wasn't just worthless. It was a harmful stench. He wouldn't for a moment consider holding onto any of his religious zeal any more than you would your trash. He gladly let it all go and tossed it.

That because the apostle Paul, boasting in zeal and lost in pride, met Jesus one day. The risen Lord appeared to him. And he had a surprise! Everything he had done met nothing without faith in Christ Jesus as his Lord. And after that revelation Paul was brought to faith in his Lord. Once he gained faith in Christ, he didn't want to place any confidence in the flesh and boast in it. He knew the danger of putting his eyes only on himself and being blinded in his pride. Paul knew that in the end he could never stand on his own righteousness. He knew that anyone who tried to stand before the judge of all on the basis of their own religious observance would be greatly surprised on the last day. He knew that on the last day the risen Jesus would come as judge and say to them, "away from me you who are cursed into the fire prepared for the devil and his angels." All those who in pride relied on their good deeds will say to him, "Lord, when did we not do good things in your name?" The judge in turn will say that even the least fault or failure would leave them condemned and guilty. Sadly in such blindness many have put so much focus on what they have done that they make it their source of confidence. Blinded in pride they have taken their eyes off of Christ Jesus as Lord and made themselves their own Savior.

Could this ever happen to us? Could we ever misplace our confidence and be lost in pride? The apostle Paul warns and writes here to one of the most faithful churches found in all the New Testament letters. The Philippian Christians were generous, supportive, and receptive to the gospel. Paul loves them dearly and is filled with joy because of their faith. Yet he must warn them against the dangers of "putting confidence in the flesh" and becoming lost in pride. In fact, it is often those who are most outwardly zealous and religious who are the first to fall into the trap of boasting in the flesh.

That's why this warning is needed also for us. If anyone can take pride in religious zeal many of you could probably boast more than others you know. As a member of the WELS you could claim to belong to a church that not only teaches the Word of God in truth and purity, but which practices it. You may not study Hebrew and Greek, but all the pastors in your church body do and take great care with the study of the Word. Do we dare to boast or take confidence in that fact? Does God love us more for achieving such academic feats with his Word? If any pastor could boast I could dare to boast that I was baptized around the eighth day. And as a life-long Christian I have studied the Word and would be regarded by everyone outwardly as faultless and blameless in keeping the law. Dare I boast in the flesh? You can look back on all the good you have done, the times you've attended worship and Bible class, confirmation class, and the times you've shared a Christian meme on social media. Dare you to boast in that? At a time when many are saying God's Word is not clear and attacking the truth of Scripture you dare to hold to it and read it. Dare you boast in that faithfulness to him? At a time when many are dishonoring marriage some of you are celebrating 30, 40, 50, even 60 years of faithful marriage. Dare you to boast in that? Does any sinner impress God with such things? In regard to salvation it all means nothing. Stinky trash.

Paul says that to put any confidence or pride in such things is not only foolish, it is dangerous. It causes us to take our eyes off Christ and join the rest of the world in looking at ourselves instead of Jesus. Don't misunderstand, keeping the law and living according to God's Word and practicing zeal in religion is a good thing. But it ceases to be good as soon as you put your confidence in it and boast about it before God. We become blind in our pride to our own condition as sinners.

Instead we must daily join with the apostle Paul and all saints saying, "*I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things.*" Christ Jesus is the only one we can ever put our confidence in. He was truly faultless. He kept the law of God outwardly and kept it perfectly from the heart. He was filled with zeal for the house of the Lord and honored every commandment all the time. He lived, taught, and died as the only one who could ever boast in the flesh. But he didn't take on human flesh to simply boast. The Son of God took on flesh to give it for the world's benefit. All his righteousness meant he deserved only life. But he traded that life for our death. He was cursed on the cross for us. And he freely gave us his own righteousness.

With Christ we are found righteous in God's eyes. Instead of being lost in pride we become found in Christ. We join with Paul is saying I want to "*be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.*" We will stand on the last day with bodies raised to life and restored. And we will boast in Jesus' who raised us to life not because of what we have done, but in mercy for those who trusted in him. So, we don't stand with our own righteousness. "Not my own righteousness" Paul says. But the righteousness of Jesus, who took our place. In him and in his perfect life we place our trust. He is our Lord.

That righteousness comes with the power of his resurrection. Paul was willing to share in whatever sufferings that meant knowing he would share in Jesus' resurrection in the end. He did not know how or when he might die, but he knew in some way he would attain to that resurrection. Why boast in the flesh when we can boast in the glorified body of Jesus Christ who will transform our lowly bodies to be like his own?

That, believers in Christ, is the highest achievement you could ever attain. And it was attained for you by Jesus Christ your Lord. Found in Christ we have something to boast about. Because there is a book written by him. Open that book and find there is no one who can boast, save Jesus the Christ. Toss all other things aside, not lost in pride, but found in Christ.