

THE END OF TRIVIAL PURSUIT 2 Corinthians 10:12-18

A few weeks ago Anna was out on the playground and was with Matthew and Nate Colbert. She was enjoying the playground equipment with them and that led to a noteworthy conversational exchange. I believe the way it went was that Matthew, seeing Anna playing with them, said, “A grownup playing on the playground? Really?” Nate piped up, “Oh, it’s okay because it’s Anna. Anna’s not a real grownup.”

There’s nothing quite so affirming as being judged to not be mature by a kindergarten aged kid. If you had a lot invested in your image as a very mature adult that could be a bit deflating. Of course, if you had a lot invested in being a mature adult you probably wouldn’t be out playing on the jungle gym with the kids in the first place.

What are you invested in when it comes to how you see yourself? The answer to that question is significant, for it can either severely limit what you do or it can set you free. It has a major effect on how fragile you are and on how antifragile you can become. Today I want you to think about that question as we look at some unusual words from the pen of the Apostle Paul. We will look at 2 Corinthians 10:12-18 and will find that question to be at issue.

WHY DID PAUL CARE ABOUT BOASTING?

Greek words built on the root idea of boasting are used 5 times in 7 verses, so clearly, boasting is a big theme here. But why did Paul make such a big deal about that? Ephesians 2:8-9 says, “It is by grace you have been saved, through faith, and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God, not by works so that no one can boast.” A big reason for God making his work of saving us by grace is so that we have no reason to boast. Isn’t it strange that Paul then would boast?

Boasting also seems weird to us because we don’t like boasting. Kadeem Carey, running back for the University of Arizona, had a bad off season. He had one bad incident after another, but the one that attracted the most attention happened at an Arizona basketball game. The game was sold out, but Carey insisted he should be given a seat for the game. He had a run-in with a security man that featured Carey yelling at him, “I’m an All-American!”

That statement fostered a storm of derision. No one likes a person who brags about who they are. So you're an All-American, does that make you more important than other people? Does that mean others have to cater to your whims? That makes us all gag. Or how about hip hop producer and rapper Kanye West. He said, "I bring up historical subjects in a way that makes kids want to learn about them. I'm an inspirational speaker. I changed the sound of music more than once. For all those reasons I should be a part of the Bible. I'm definitely in the history books already." Excuse me while I toss my cookies. No one likes people who boast so why the emphasis on boasting?

I'm going to serve up a little history here because it will help us understand why Paul was so focused on boasting. In his book, *Power Through Weakness*, Timothy Savage reveals that there was a change during Paul's era of history in the Greco-Roman world. Previously that culture had emphasized being a citizen and having corporate solidarity in the city-state. But this era was characterized by the rise of individualism. The people, Savage wrote, "began to focus on themselves and in particular on cultivating their self worth."

Does that sound familiar? There's more. In the society of that time and place there was a segment of the population called the *honestiores*. They were the nobility, people highly esteemed who had enormous power and wealth. They made up about 1% of the population. At the other end of the spectrum were slaves and the indigent who made up about a third of the population. They, of course, had no money, no power and no esteem whatsoever.

In the middle was about two thirds of the population. Savage says this middle majority were consumed with improving their status. The main way they could do that was by becoming wealthy, but that was hard to do. Philosophers said one could achieve honor by virtuous living, but no one notices that much nor does anyone ever reward it. So, according to Savage, most people chose other routes to cultivating their self worth and esteem such as their occupations, their talents, education, religion or athletic achievement. Paul's opponents in Corinth and many of the members of that church had chosen religion as the field in which they would compete for the status they coveted.

There were philosophers, teachers, and wannabe religious leaders trying to gain pupils or followers as part of their effort to vie for status, just like Paul's opponents in Corinth were. There was an aspect of that culture that is rather foreign to ours. It had to do with the way such people would attempt to get people to follow them. In

his commentary on 2, Corinthians David Garland wrote, “In the cutthroat competition for plaudits and pupils, one had to advertise oneself publicly with audacious praise while impugning the qualities of other contenders for honor...self-boasting was considered an act of honor.”

The Corinthians had bought in totally to their culture, so they wanted a leader to be proud and assertive, to boast of his exploits and abilities, to be a powerful and dynamic speaker who could mesmerize an audience, and to be wealthy and talk about it. Paul came along talking about being the chief of sinners and exhibiting humility. It didn't sell well in Corinth. They wanted a good show and they wanted some boasting!

At the heart of the wannabe religious leaders' motivation was this big desire for self-worth. They boasted as a way of getting an audience in order to boost their own self-worth. When one boasts, automatically, one must have something to compare with. Another theme in this passage is alluded to in verse 12 when Paul wrote, “they measure themselves by themselves.” Terms for measuring are also used 5 times in this passage.

Observe how Paul's opponents measured themselves. Verse 12 says they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves. They compare themselves to one another. They figure they just need to convince themselves and their potential audience that they are better than other people that they were competing with. That makes sense. Suppose you were going to have a singing contest to find singers who have something to boast about. You could call it *American Idol* or *The Voice* or something. You would have singers perform and compare them. The singers compare themselves with themselves.

This is as common among human beings as fingernails. We all try to create our sense of our identity and our value by comparing ourselves with other people. This is how the world works. When you graduated from high school there was likely a valedictorian in your class. How was that person chosen? Did all simply agree that this was a very wise person who ought to speak at graduation and share his or her wisdom? No, it was determined by comparing grades and the one with the highest grades was valedictorian.

WHY SHOULD THIS MATTER TO ME?

Because we all do it

We all boast, not in the sense of bragging about how wonderful we are or about our accomplishments. We all do a little of that to some extent. When we tell a story we usually come out looking a little better than we actually were in the reality. But we all boast in another way. We all have something, or usually a number of things, that we try to anchor our sense of worth in and we are always striving in some way to establish that sense. That anchor could be our character, our intelligence, our success, our wealth, our talents, our religious prowess, our superior knowledge, our looks, our fashion sense, our physical fitness. The list is actually quite long. We all feel like we must have some boast. We must have something that establishes our worth in our eyes and the eyes of others, and if we don't, we cannot bear to live.

Furthermore we all measure ourselves by comparing. I saw this when Laurie and I took a surfing lesson while we were on vacation a few years back. We were part of a class of about 6 people. The instructor got us all out on the beach and had us lie on our boards and practice the proper way to stand up. Instantly I found myself patting myself on the back for doing it properly and feeling good because some of the other people didn't do it right. Eventually they took us out into the water to catch some waves. The instructor helped us take off on waves one by one. The first one to go was a young girl who popped up but fell over almost immediately. Okay, good, I think I can do that well. Then a young couple went, the wife first. She did pretty well, the husband not so much. Then it was Laurie's turn. She popped right up and rode the wave all the way until it died out. Uh oh. She did great. Now it was my turn. I've got to do this so I can at least do as well as my wife. I tried to pop up but fell off. Oh no, I'm looking like a kook. Another man had his turn and he fell off instantly. My second turn and on subsequent turns I succeeded! It was great. I felt especially good because there was this other guy younger than me who absolutely couldn't get the idea that he was supposed to stand up sideways on the board. He kept trying to face forward, immediately lost balance and fell off. I was better than him and almost as good as my wife! My point is that I couldn't help measuring my success by the other people in the class. It's what humans do.

We are constantly comparing and competing with other people. I'm thinner than that guy, that guy's got more money than me, that couple's landscaping is a lot better than ours, that woman sings better than I do, so it goes - and it is deadly.

Because it makes us more fragile

Have you heard about Downton Abbey? It is a hugely popular BBC show that has been on PBS and has been a huge success. Carissa gave the DVD's of the show to Laurie so we've been watching them. My son and my brother have been

threatening to revoke my man card because of this, but I see it as a way to love my wife (and to rack up football points so I won't get in trouble for watching 5 football games on a weekend). Anyway, the show is about an English earl's family and their servants back in the early 20th century. I don't know if the writer, Julian Fellowes intended this, but the show demonstrates the artificiality and the ludicrous nature of our human "boasts." The noble family is aghast at the idea of one of them actually doing work, which is beneath their station. And the servants have their scheming and maneuvering and their system of importance. Footmen dream of the elevated status of valet or even butler. The scullery maid longs to rise to being the cook's assistant. The show makes it clear that what is important is not their station, but their character, no matter what they may do. Nobility is not about one's station. Our boasts make us more fragile because they tend to be about something artificial like that, something that has no real eternal value.

We must have a boast. It is drilled deep into our DNA and that's such a compulsion that we will always find something that we can take pride in and have as our "boast." There's a man in our neighborhood who has as his boast the nicest yard in the neighborhood. He tends it like it is a matter of life and death. He pays meticulous attention to it. My guess is the reason he has made that his boast is that he has some glaring deficits that he is trying to cover in other aspects of life. He does have maybe the nicest grass in our neighborhood. But do you see the problem? So what? Who cares if he has a nice lawn? He does. And I think it's nice to have nice yards in front of the houses, but honestly, this is pathetic. That's what our need to have a boast will do to us.

Our boasts also cause us to be more fragile because they make us vulnerable to threat. What if your boast is that you are incredibly smart, smarter than everyone else, but then one day you discover that on some matter what you think is wrong? Or what if you encounter someone who is smarter than you? Or what if you suffer some terrible head injury and your brain no longer functions the way it once did? What if your boast is in your wealth, but through unforeseen reversals you end up losing everything? What if your boast is in your magnificent body or your athletic ability and then you get old; your body doesn't look or operate like it once did?

Laurie and I recently did a foolish thing. We all know that if you get some extra money that you should be wise about what you do with it. Give it some thought, invest it, use it for the future. Don't just blow it all on the pleasure of the moment. That's the wise thing. But I confess we have been unwise. You all know that I have recently had a new novel out on Amazon and Barnes and Noble. Just a couple of

weeks ago we received the first royalties from the book. I know we should have put it away in a retirement fund or saved it for the future, but we didn't. We blew through all that money in one night of feasting. We went to Rubio's and spent all \$14 in one shot. You know what that means? It means if I make my boast in being a writer I have made myself very fragile, because that boast just got blown away by a \$14 royalty check.

In the movie *Battleship* there is a scene in which one character, Mick, has been wounded badly, losing both legs. He is in physical therapy and is not doing well. His therapist challenges him, saying "You've given up. It's like you've lost the will to live." He feels like he's only half a man. He says, "I'm a soldier. It's all I've ever known." His identity, his boast, is in being a soldier. But he can never be that again, so having lost his boast he feels he has no reason to live. That's what our boasting in the wrong things will always lead to eventually.

Our boasts in things we have or do just set us up for a letdown at some point. There was a slightly humorous example of this that occurred years ago and featured Microsoft billionaire Bill Gates. He apparently at one time made a comparison between the computer industry and the automotive industry. He said if automobile technology had improved at the pace of the computer industry we would all be driving cars that cost \$25 and get 1000 miles per gallon. General Motors apparently didn't think that a valid comparison. They responded, "Yes, but would you want your car to crash twice a day?"

We have all heard someone described as having a "fragile ego." In truth that's all of us. What it means is that we have put our boast in something and it turns out that something is easily threatened. We become fragile when we have that sort of boast.

Because it damages people and relationships

If we are going to boast we will have to compare ourselves with others. We have to be the best, or at least better than others in order to boast. That means we must compete with other people. They automatically become our competition. If we are competing with them we are not loving them and we are not drawing closer to them.

There was a touching story on ESPN a few years ago. Back in February of 2009 the mother of a high school senior named Johntell Franklin lost her battle with cancer and died. The evening of the day she died the basketball team of Madison High School in Milwaukee had a game against DeKalb High of DeKalb, Illinois.

Johntell was a forward on the Madison team. In view of what had happened that day the coach, Aaron Womack, knew he would be without his starting forward as Johntell would be grieving his mom. To the surprise of everyone midway through the second quarter Johntell walked into the gym, suited up and ready to play. But there was a problem. The coach had not entered his name into the scorebook on the assumption that he wouldn't be there. If he took the floor his team would be assessed a technical foul and the other team would be awarded two free throws. The coach from DeKalb, Dave Rohman, joined coach Womack in asking the referee to ignore the rule on this unusual occasion, but the ref, though sympathetic, insisted the rules had to be followed. Darius McNeal, a DeKalb player, had the solution. He volunteered to take the free throws when Franklin entered the game. He stepped to the free throw line and instead of shooting the ball into the basket he tossed it about two feet in front of him. It rolled out of bounds, the ref picked it up and handed it to him for the second shot and he did it again. The crowd responded with a standing ovation for McNeal.

Here's the thing: what if it were late in a hotly contested game that would determine who won the state championship? What if competition, winning, was foremost on everyone's mind? Do you think the same thing would have happened? It would be nice to think so, but in basketball terms I'd have to guess that's not a slam dunk. A human, kind act that communicated concern for a human being and drew people together, likely would be wiped out by competition.

When people compete someone wins and someone loses. If we are competing, comparing so that we can boast we have to be better than someone, which means someone has to be worse. Someone has to lose. And in a world where everyone is vying for his or her boast there are going to be people who lose big time.

Ten years ago Cuba Gooding, Jr. starred in a movie called *Radio*. I found it touching, but hard to watch. It was about a young mentally handicapped young man who is given the nickname Radio because he carries a radio with him everywhere he goes. This young man is one of the big losers in the competition and comparison game. He has nothing to boast of. He loves the high school football team, but he suffers the indignities so easily visited on those who have nothing to boast about. He is locked in a shed by players, mocked and bullied by some people. The hard part is the movie is based on the true story of James Robert Kennedy. Coach Harold Jones has compassion on Radio and tries to help him, to include him as a manager on the team. For his troubles he is criticized and

opposed, and eventually loses his job. The movie shows what happens to some people in a world where everyone needs to be able to boast so must compete.

Radio is an extreme example, but all of us know the hurt of being devalued because we don't fare well in the comparisons or the competitions we are continually subjected to. In my futile athletic days I remember the feeling of being not valued. Because of something as innocuous as a near total lack of athletic ability coaches didn't value me. So on teams I was on I didn't get the batting practice time, the repetitions in the field, the instruction. I got very clearly the message, "You don't matter." It didn't feel good. As we focus on our own need to have a boast and enter the competition so we can establish our boast we are automatically assigning some people to that position of hearing "you don't matter." That's what the compare-and-compete system has to do.

WE SHOULD MAKE OUR BOAST IN THE LORD

You gotta have a boast. You will have a boast. So boast in the Lord.

Have you seen the VW commercial in which a dad is teaching his son how to throw a baseball? The kid's throwing motion is atrocious. Then you see why. The dad throws the ball back to him and his motion is even worse. No wonder the kid can't throw. I sometimes feel like the dad. I'm supposed to teach you the proper boasting motion but mine is so bad I fear I'm teaching you poorly.

What does it mean to boast in the Lord? Boasting in the Lord has three aspects to it that are crucial. The ancient Hebrew concept of boasting came close to the idea of trusting. *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* says "to boast can be synonymous with 'to trust.'" You can see this in Psalm 49:6 which refers to "those who trust in their wealth and boast of their great riches." That's a Hebrew parallelism that shows boasting and trusting to essentially be the same thing. What are we going to trust in as the thing we hang our identity, our worth, even our eternal future on? Paul quoted Jeremiah 9:23-24, which says, "Let not the wise boast of their wisdom or the strong boast of their strength or the rich boast of their riches." Aren't those the things we tend to boast or trust in? I'm smarter or more clever at something than others, I'm stronger, more athletic than others, or I'm secure because I'm rich? Instead of those things we are to boast that we know God. Paul makes it clear how that happens in Galatians 6:14 where he said, "May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ."

To boast in the Lord is to say my identity is as a creature made in the image of God, of infinite worth to him. I am a child of God not because I'm so good, religious, smart or moral, but because Jesus Christ died for me so that I might be forgiven and loved. I am accepted by God not because I compare favorably with other people, but because of God's unconditional love and forgiveness.

To boast in the Lord is to be able to write my book and have only a handful of people read it, to even expose myself to the possibility of having people criticize it as awful and not be even the least bit threatened or devalued by that. It would also be to have the book become a best seller and be made into a successful movie and not feel any more worthwhile than I was before - because my boast isn't in my writing ability or in my "successful" book, but in the Lord. My writing and the result, just like my giftedness, looks, athletic ability, career success, personal charisma, have nothing to do with my worth. None of them are my boast. I repeat, none of those have anything to do with my boast.

There's a second aspect of boasting in the Lord that we can see in Psalm 34:1-2. I like the New American Standard translation of that passage. "I will bless the Lord at all times, his praise shall continually be in my mouth. My soul will make its boast in the Lord. The humble will hear it and rejoice."

To boast in the Lord is to bless him, to praise him. It is to say the thing my life is about is not securing my worth and identity or my glory, it is about continually giving praise to God. It is about letting people know how great *he* is. It is about seeking - in the way we live and the way we treat other people, in the choices we make - to honor God.

Did you note the comment that the humble will hear it and rejoice? The NIV says "the afflicted" will hear and rejoice. The point is that when we compare and compete and boast about ourselves there will be winners and losers. This verse tells us when we live with the Lord as our boast it brings hope for the humble, the afflicted, those who might lose in the competition. That's because they will be reminded that they too have such enormous value in his eyes. Instead of being put down they will be lifted up by us. When I boast in the Lord I no longer have to compare, I no longer have to compete, I no longer have to somehow prove how worthy I am. I become free!

The third aspect of boasting in the Lord you can see in Paul's discussion. Note in verse 14 Paul says, "We re not going too far in our boasting, as would be the case

if we had not come to you, for we did get as far as you with the gospel of Christ." Paul was able to feel good about the fact that he had done what God gave him to do and he had done it with commitment, diligence, enthusiasm and faithfulness. In other words a part of finding our boast in the Lord means finding satisfaction in being what God has made us to be and doing what he has given us to do. Again this sets us free. God doesn't expect Radio to be a successful businessman, a great performer, an athlete or a pastor. He just expects him to be the best Radio he can be. I don't have to be some dynamic powerful leader of some enormous mega church, I just need to be the best pastor of the Anchor that I can be. I need to be the best husband to Laurie I can be and the best neighbor on Camino Valencia I can be.

There is a game I miss. We used to play it some, but haven't played it in a long time. It was a hot game back 10 or 15 years ago, but not so much anymore. The game was Trivial Pursuit. I liked it because I was fairly good at it. For some reason I seem to have a lot of random trivia floating around in my head. So in my family I have a reputation at being good at the game. Now I have never boasted about that, but I will confess that when family members talk about how much Rick knows I kind of liked that.

Unfortunately Trivial Pursuit is appropriately named. Knowing a lot of trivia is totally without value. It is trivial, and it says nothing about my value in this world. Does it really matter that I know that the month that sees the most babies born in the US is August, that pigs were introduced to North America by none other than Christopher Columbus and that the towns of Frog, Only, and Sweet Lips are all in Tennessee? Definite no.

The reality is when we do our boasting in ourselves we get trapped in a game of obsession with the trivial. So what if one person can dribble a basketball better than another, or if he knows more about physics than another or if he has amassed a greater fortune than another? In a few short years it will all be forgotten. We so easily fool ourselves into thinking we're doing some big thing when in fact we're doing nothing.

Do you see the freedom we have if we will make our boast in the Lord? It sets us free from ourselves, from threat, vulnerability and the need to always compete. It frees us to focus on the most eternally important things, on bring honor to God, and on actually loving other people.

