

Romans 15:17-18

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A Right to Boast - Part 2

by Dr. Wayne A. Barber

What is it we have a right to boast about? Paul said it, but let's delve into it and go much deeper. Let's discover what it is that we have a right to boast about. Verse 17 reads, "Therefore in Christ Jesus I have found reason for boasting in things pertaining to God." Only of things pertaining to God. Now the specific context that Paul is going to be using here is his own ministry to the Gentiles, which God assigned to him, which God had given to him. He's going to talk about the fact that he only has a right to boast about the things that God is doing in that ministry. He's going to boast about what God is doing through him, not what he's doing for God. His boasting involved only what Christ could do.

Look at verse 18, and you really see the gist of what he's talking about. He says in verse 18, "For I will not presume to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me." I tell you, I love this! How many times have we talked about the received ministry and the achieved ministry? Well, here it is in the book of Romans as clear as I've ever seen it in any epistle in the

New Testament.

What he's saying is that God not only gave me the ministry, but He empowers the ministry and gives the results of the ministry, just like Paul told the Corinthian church in 1 Corinthians 12. It's all God. Paul is just the vessel through which God is able to work.

Paul says, "I will not presume." The word "presume" is the word *tolmao*. It means to dare. He says, "I wouldn't dare boast about anything that I could do for God. I only boast about what God has done or accomplished through me." That little phrase "accomplished through me" is very important. The word "accomplished," *kat'ergazomai*, means to be the author of, to bring about, to carry out a task until it's finished. Paul says, "I would not dare to speak about anything except that which God starts, that which God's doing, that which God brings to its accomplishment. I'm not about bragging in myself. I'm only about boasting in what the Lord can do."

The little word "through" is the exact, beautiful translation of *dia*. It means through me, not for me. He didn't go out and say, "God, this looks good to me. Will you bless it?" And God said, "I think I'll do something for old Paul. I think I'll bless Him." That's not what he says. He says, "What God did through me." "I didn't do it," Paul is saying. "God did it in and through me. That's the only thing I will brag about."

Do you know what Paul's responsibility was? Romans 12:1-2.

How many times have we seen that? You know, one of the things about this passage is that if you divorce it from the rest of Romans, it just doesn't seem to have the foundation. But go back to chapters 6, 7, and 8 and you find the grace of God in your life, the fact that God's life is in you. You get on over to chapter 12 and you see what the command and the responsibility to one who has received God's grace is. And that's to present his body a living sacrifice, not to be conformed to this world. Be transformed by the renewing of your mind. So Paul's main responsibility everyday was not the result. That's God's responsibility. Paul's responsibility was to be a vessel that was clean and pure which God could use, a vessel that was devoid of any fleshly strings, a vessel that was serving God in his spirit. When we live Romans 12:1-2 we can brag in the same things Paul bragged about because God will do ministry through us and we'll see it and know it.

Now folks, when you move aside from being empowered by the Holy Spirit of God, the outcome is going to be quite different than when you put God in the mix. Because what He does is directly different and contrasted to what you can do for Him. We must understand this. There are ministries everywhere boasting in themselves and what they've done for God. That's not it. It can't be it. The end result is going to burn when they stand before God one day.

Let's talk about that. In verse 18 he shows exactly what the difference is. He says, "For I will not presume to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me." Now watch the result, "resulting in the obedience of the Gentiles." The word "resulting" there really isn't the actual word. It's translated that way, but it's the word *eis*. There are three prepositions that are very important to understand. There's the word *en*, which means to rest and remain in something. The idea of rest is a part of that. There's the little preposition *ek*, which means motion out of something. But there's also the preposition *eis*, used here, which means motion into or towards something with an end result in mind. That's why he translates it resulting, toward the result of. If Christ is working through me what is the result? Transformed lives.

Now, folks, you've got to get this down. When God works through a person, a person's life is transformed, not reformed. That can externally happen in any kind of group and you won't need God to do it. I'm talking about transformed from within. That's what the end result is when God does it. Paul knew the difference. Paul knew the energy of flesh and what religion was all about. He was one of those kinds of folks for years. Now he understood that if it's going to be eternal, if it's going to be worth bragging about, then he was going to have to let God do it. What God does through me, that's what I'll give Him glory for.

Paul says it will result in "the obedience of a Gentiles." Now think of this for a second. Do you know who the Gentiles are? Hey, have you forgotten the context of our book? Go back to chapter 1. He described them. Folks, when you see the description of how they are, then you realize the miracle of what this little phrase, "obedience of the Gentiles," is trying to tell us. Go back to 1:19-32. Now remember, chapter 2 verse 1 starts off with the words, "Therefore, you are without excuse." Verse 17 of chapter 2 explains who you are if you bear the name, Jew. So in 2:1-3:20, he specifically talks about the religious Jewish people at that time. But in 1:19-32, he's specifically talking about the pagan Gentile world. Now watch this:

...because that which is known about God is evident within them: for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God, or give thanks; but

they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures. Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of their hearts to impurity [that's what they wanted; that's what He gave them], that their bodies might be dishonored among them. For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen. For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged the natural function for that which is unnatural [here's your homosexuality, which came right out of people not wanting to honor God], and in the same way also the men abandoned the natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error [and they still are]. And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved mind, to do those things which are not proper, being filled with all unrighteousness, wickedness, greed, evil; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice; they are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, without understanding, untrustworthy, unloving, unmerciful; and although they know the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same but also give hearty approval to those who practice them.

Now folks, that's a wicked bunch of folks right there. He's talking about the idolatrous, pagan, Gentile world. Obviously, the sin of the Jewish people is just the same. He says in Chapter 3:23, "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." The Jew's sin was their religious flesh. The Gentile's sin was their rebellious flesh. Paul did not have the power to get the Gentile world who didn't even want God in their vocabulary, who would rather worship idols than they would the true God, who professed themselves wise and became fools, to become obedient to God. Friend, write it down. Only God in Paul could turn people like that to become obedient to the Lord Jesus Christ. That's what he's talking about. That's how you know the difference. The difference in what man can do for God and what God can do through man isn't the results that God brings. It is the transformation of a person's like from within. Man can externally, as I said, reform a person, but only God can internally and eternally transform a person's life.

Paul was that surrendered vessel. His witness was seen in two ways. Look in Romans 15:18 at the first one. First of all, it is in what he said: "For I will not presume to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me, resulting in the obedience of the Gentiles by [the means of the] word." In other words, "In the things that I said, God has empowered me. He's given the message."

Not only that, but it was also in the things that he did. He backed it up with his life. Verse 18 continues, "and deed." Both in what he said and in what he did God was working through him to reach the Gentile world. That's the only witness we really have, what we say and what we do. Once we're surrendered to Christ, as Romans 12:1-2 says, God uses what we say and how we live to effect other people's lives, to bring them to the point of obedience unto Christ.

The example of how God was empowering him is found in verse 19. Any of us can live in light of the truth of what we say, but you've got to be real careful with this verse that we're coming up to. He says, "in the power of signs and wonders, in the power of the Spirit." Now I want to make something very crystal clear. The emphasis of verse 19 is not in the area of the signs and the wonders. The emphasis is in the power of the Holy Spirit. You must see that. Many people turn that thing upside down. The word for power is the word *dunamis*, the ability that can only come from God, the Holy Spirit.

As a matter of fact, look over in Ephesians 3:16 and remember this. This is ability we do not have, but Christ in us has. We're to be strengthened by that ability day by day. Verse 16 is very clearly a prayer that Paul prays for the church at Ephesus. Personally I don't think they heard it. I don't think they responded to what God was trying to do because one of the seven letters to the church of Asia Minor was to the church of Ephesus. What did he write to them? He said, "You have all these things right about, you but you've left your first love." The very thing that Paul was praying for they didn't respond properly unto God. Ephesians 3:16 says, "that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power [same word, *dunamis*] through his Spirit in the inner man." That's the secret to ministry. That's the secret to life. That's the secret to having something to boast about. It's when the power of the Holy Spirit is strengthening you. You're never going to be strengthened when you think you're strong enough apart from God. You've got to be weak enough to be strengthened by the Holy Spirit of God. Paul did what he did in word and deed in the power of the Holy Spirit accompanied with many times signs and wonders.

I go many places and speak, and a lot of people love to hear me talk about signs and wonders, which I don't talk about. It's amazing to me how I attract different people. I think, because I'm a little energetic and have joy in my life and had rather laugh than cry, do cry sometimes, they think I'm in a certain camp. They follow me around and say, "He has the blessing." I've had somebody walk up to me in just recent months in a meeting and said, "When did you get the blessing? I've got to know. Tell me when you got the blessing." I said, "When I got the Blesser." I'm not interested in the blessing. I'm interested in the Blesser. Boy, that messes people's theology up. There are people who would rather talk about the signs and wonders and not the ability of the Holy Spirit. Oh, they give it token attention. But their emphasis is not on the Holy Spirit, the spirit of Christ. Their emphasis is on a sign. Their

emphasis is on the wonders.

Now, how do you answer people? The power evangelism group is prominent today. They're everywhere. They say unless you're having signs and wonders, then you cannot have the revival that God wants to bring in the latter days. I say to them, as humbly as I know how, "That's bologna!" But how do you honestly handle something like that? Alright. Let's look at it.

The first thing you've got to do is just be honest within scripture. Did God do signs and wonders with Paul? Absolutely, He did. But was it the rule of his life? No sir! It was not. As a matter of fact, wasn't it Epaphroditis who he couldn't even heal? Paul couldn't even do anything for him. You see, there were many situations that came up when he just didn't have the power at that point. God didn't do that as a pattern or a rule in his life. But he did do it. We must be honest with scripture. Folks, don't skirt the issue.

Look over in Acts 14:10. Let me walk you through Acts and I'll show you where God did signs and wonders with the Apostle Paul. I'm not afraid of this kind of stuff. God's a miracle working God. Let's don't run away from it. If it's there it's there. But let's handle it biblically. In Acts 14:10 Paul was in Lystra on his first missionary journey and came across a man lame from birth. I don't have time to get into that context, but I challenge you to go back and read that. There's something Paul saw in that lame man that caused him to say what he said. In verse 10, here's a man who has never walked. He was in that meeting and something about the message grabbed the man's heart. Paul caught his eyes and "said with a loud voice, 'Stand upright on your feet.' And He leaped up and began to walk." Glory! Is that a sign and a wonder? Is that a miracle? I should say so. But I don't see Paul going home and putting a shingle on his door saying, "I'm open for healing meetings." God did that. Don't ever try to say He didn't do it. God's a miracle-working God.

In Acts 15:12 Paul is before the Jerusalem council, and he talked about these signs and wonders God had done through him. It says, "And all the multitude kept silent [they were interested in what Paul was saying] and they were listening to Barnabas and Paul as they were relating what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles."

Remember when he went over to Macedonia he went to the city of Philippi. In Acts 16:18 there was a woman who had been following him around who was demon-possessed. Do you want to talk about demon possession, about lost people being possessed? Don't talk to me about a Christian having a demon. Talk about lost people who are possessed by demons. That's where scripture anchors us. There was a woman who was lost, demon-possessed, following him around. It annoyed Paul. It says in Acts 16:18, "And she continued doing this for many days. But Paul was greatly annoyed." You know, it's one thing to annoy me. I'm kind of low-keyed. But don't annoy the Apostle Paul. As a matter of fact, if he were living today, I wouldn't want to make this guy mad. I picture him, if you could take the secular characteristics of man, with the cleric temperament. He would run over you to do what he's doing. He was greatly annoyed. She annoyed the wrong person. She annoyed the Apostle Paul, and evidently this had been going on for days. Why he didn't do something sooner? I don't know. But this tells you something about the signs and wonders. You don't determine them. God does them when He chooses to do them. He "turned and said to the spirit, 'I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her!' And it came out at that very moment."

Do you want to talk about signs and wonders, deliverance from demons? Look at Acts 19:11-12. This will really get you. They've even adopted this and put it on television these days. "And God was performing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, so that handkerchiefs or aprons were even carried from his body to the sick, and the diseases left them and the evil spirits went out." Have you seen any of that these days? People try to mimic the Apostle Paul, saying, "It happened to him. It can happen to me. Here's a little bottle of water from the Holy Land." It's supposed to heal you. Hey, I'm sorry. It says to always take in stride those who don't understand. But, I want to tell you something. It says to point out the people who cause division. Folks, get your theology straight. This happened to the Apostle Paul. That's where a lot of this stuff has come out of.

But how do you handle it? What do you do with it? Come on now. Think. What was the Apostle? What office did he have that not a single one of us will ever have? He had the office of what? An apostle. Romans 1:1 says, "Paul a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle." We looked at Galatians 1:1, 1 Timothy 1:1, all the way through. Paul, an apostle by the will of God. There are no apostles like Paul today. Yes, you can take the word "apostle" and use it for "send forth" and use it for a missionary or somebody else who goes out. Hey, that's fine. But when you're talking about the office of apostle, remember Ephesians 2:20 which says, "Our faith is built upon the foundation of the apostles and the prophets." Some folks are appointing themselves modern century, New Testament apostles.

Look in Hebrews 2:3-4. I'll show you why the signs and wonders were with Paul and why God used them with him. It says, "How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard." You've got a third generation here. You've got Jesus preaching it. Then you've got somebody conveying it to the "us"

there in that verse. The "us" refers to the apostles who penned it, who wrote it down, who confirmed what the Lord Jesus had said.

Verse 4 says, "God also bearing witness with them." When you're studying scripture look at those pronouns. "Them," not us. Look at the "them" there. He bore witness with them, those who confirmed the gospel, the apostles, "both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will." When Jesus Christ came, He many times would do miracles, although miracles were not what He was all about. The miracles were for a specific purpose. When He came to dwell in the hearts and lives of the apostle who carried forth the gospel and confirmed the gospel, He in them accompanied many of the things they did with signs and the wonders. The word "them" is very important, the apostles.

With that in mind, go to 2 Corinthians 12:12. I think we have a real pillar of truth here that will help us stabilize in a very unbalanced arena. When you start talking about signs and wonders, you get real shaky. Where's the balance in all of this? Now what is he doing here? First of all, the context is, he's defending his apostleship. There were those who said he was not even an apostle. Paul is defending his true apostleship. He says to them, "The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles." The signs of a what? What did he say? Of a true what? Apostle. Now, when you talk about the signs and wonders, if you start thinking, "Well, if I'm in the power of the Spirit, the signs and the wonders ought to be there." Listen to me. God still is in the miracle-working business. I do not agree that everything just completely disappeared. God can do what He wants to do when He wants to do it. But I'm trying to tell you something. Signs and wonders won't cut it, folks. When Jesus did the signs and wonders in John, the Gospel of John, He says, "These things are written that you might know that Jesus is the Son of God."

If I'm riding down the road and there's a big sign that says, "Curve," I'm not going to stop and praise the sign. I'm going to use the sign to point me where it's trying to tell me to go. You see, the sign is not there to be worshipped. It's what it's pointing to that's the key. How much of the signs and wonders today do not point to God, although token credit is given Him? It points to the man who does it. Paul said, "It was only there to validate the fact that I was truly in the office of a true apostle."

Hey, I've seen God do miracles. We've seen it in our church. Thank God that he does it. But the greatest miracle, friend, is not somebody getting healed. I'll tell you why. Because if Jesus doesn't come before they die, they're still going to have to die, folks. Whatever miracle you can come up with, just name them, you can't touch the miracle he's already told you that is the result of what the Holy Spirit of God does. Do you know what that is? It's to transform the human heart. Man, what's wrong with us? You know what it is? We have so cheapened salvation today, we're not awed anymore when somebody comes to know Christ. We don't realize the miracle that takes place.

My Uncle Jake didn't only curse, he made up curse words. That's all he could do was curse every other word. Uncle Jake was just such a natural, real guy. I guess that's why I like him. My Uncle Jake never wore a clean shirt. You never saw him kept up. His face had a three-day beard at all times. He fished, built his own boat. He taught me how to fish. I mean, he was a good uncle.

One day he came to know Christ. We got the word on the phone. I heard my Mama shout. My Mama was one of the dearest Christians I've ever known. She shouted. I said, "Mom, what's wrong?" She said, "Your Uncle Jake has come to know Christ." Well, we made the trip to the coast to visit with him. He lived in Port Smith, Virginia. We got there, and he met us at the door. Good night! Shaven, clean-cut. It had been months. Clean shirt on. Man, he just had such a pleasant look on his face. When I took his hand, I knew I took the hand of a man God had dealt with.

I want to tell you something. You can try from today until the day you drop dead to do that in somebody's life. Oh, you can get them in a group, and they'll stop drinking. You can get them in a group, and they can stop smoking. Anybody can do that by their own willpower. But you cannot transform the heart of a human being. That is the greatest miracle God can do in the power of His Holy Spirit. That's signs and wonders wrapped, sealed and delivered. It is the miracle that God does. We're living in a day everybody's looking the wrong direction. Hey, I love the miracle-working power of God. I want to live in it all my life. But I'll tell you, the greatest miracle that God ever does is transforming a human heart.

Well, how do we know if Christ is working in the choir? How do we know if Christ is working in the youth? How do we know if Christ is working in the counseling area? How do we know if Christ is working in the children's area? How do we know if Christ is working in the pulpit? By all the emotion that happens? By that kind of response? By numbers? By applause? No. By miracles and signs? Forget it. By the changed lives of people who have responded, not to a preacher, but to the Word of God and the power of the Holy Spirit in that person. That's when we know some-thing's working. Not even a preacher, a minister, or a person, or a Christian, whoever. All of us are ministers. That's how we know it, by changed lives of individuals.

You give me half a chance to boast, and I will. God is teaching me just to keep my mouth shut about what I can do or have done or

have. I would have nothing, could do nothing, and would know nothing spiritually if it were not for the working of the power of the Holy Spirit of God. The word "humility" in scripture is the word tapeinos. Do you know what that word means? It means to get down so flat that nobody can see you. Humble yourselves is what the scripture says, although God many times has to take the reins in his own hands and humble us. He says, "Humble yourselves." Paul says in Romans 12, "Don't think more of yourself more highly than you ought to think."

Watch the political scene these days and their agendas. "What's in it for us?" "What do we deserve?" What do we deserve? God looks down at this world and says, "Do you know what you deserve? Hell. But I love you so much, I sent my Son to this world to die for it, and I want you to have Heaven and eternal life." You see, the flesh wants to boast in what it knows, what it can do, and what it has. God says, "I will accept none of that. The only thing that I accept is when you boast in Me, who I am, and what I alone have done through you."

Well, I'm going to close with an illustration. I want to share some things that God has done that we can boast in. I'd never in my life heard of an illustration that happened in our church that just took the scripture from A to Z and just tells you about it. Our mission team went down to Honduras to a place that hadn't had a church. They were there for the first service. Somebody began to hang around them while they were there, curious as to who these people were, not realizing God was drawing him. His name was Junior. Junior, as I understand, literally sacrificed his firstborn to Satan. He had lived demon-possessed all these years. Satan had used him at will. He had scars. He had places where he had been shot and cut, but he said that Satan had protected him through all of this. As matter of fact, they found out that he had a list in his pocket of people he was contracted to kill in that area. He just sort of drifted in to this group.

Some of the guys were taken to him and the Lord lead them over to him. They began to share Christ with him during the week. To make a long story short, Junior bowed down and surrendered his life to Jesus Christ. They said that every time they mentioned Jesus around him, the demons in him would cause him to twitch, jerk. He couldn't stand even the casual mentioning of the name, Jesus. But because of the power of the Holy Spirit of God, that wall and stronghold was torn down. That precious man was able to receive Christ as his Lord and Savior.

Well, they didn't know it, but he had a brother in prison who was there because of something Junior had done. His brother hadn't done it. But after Junior got saved he came to one in the group and said, "You know, I've got to do something about this. That's not right. I've got to make this right." You know, you stand back and say, "What? A man who had given his first child to the devil? A man who was a murderer, a contract killer? A man who now has come to understand Christ and bowed down before Him?"

Now folks, listen. You and I do not have that kind of power. But when you live the Romans 12:1-2 life, He has that power through you. It's the power to transform a human life. That's the greatest miracle God can do. How's God using you these days? What are you bragging about these days? In the conversations you have with your family, what are you bragging about? What are you talking about? That which you have done? What is it? I'm telling you, listen to what you're saying. It'll tell you a whole lot about who's doing what in your life. When it comes down to when you're just surrendered to Christ, remember the level and degree of our surrender purifies the degree of our praise and our boasting in the Lord. Otherwise, it is just token. I know how to do it and so do you. "God, we give you the glory." I've heard that so many times I just want to throw up sometimes. Really? Do you really want Him to have it or do you want to take the credit?