

"Bragging Rights"

Text: Ephesians 2:4-10

May the suffering and death of our Lord Jesus Christ make you truly whole, in every conceivable way. Amen.

Dear Fellow Christians, Apparently it was Dizzy Dean, the Hall of Fame Cardinals right-hander, that is credited with first saying "*It ain't bragging if you done it.*"

Interesting quote if you stop to think about it, isn't it? It assumes something about bragging. It presupposes that bragging is unseemly; that it is a negative and undesirable character trait. It was, at best, bad manners to brag. The arrival of the self-love movement in our country a couple of decades ago did serious damage to that mindset. Even as a child I remember that the near-universal attitude toward bragging (boasting) was that polite folk didn't do it. They didn't brag – not about themselves and not about their children. Today that attitude seems to be as rare as honest politicians.

Yet imagine for a moment this morning that "bragging" is, in itself, neither good nor bad – that it is instead the thought or attitude behind the bragging that makes it good or bad. Think of the word "jealous." God described himself as "**a jealous God,**" thereby proving that jealousy could be a good or a bad thing. God is "jealous" in the sense that he requires every thought and action to be thoroughly righteous. When the glory or praise that belongs to God alone is given to anyone or anything else, God exhibits a pure and holy form of jealousy.

What if the same is true about bragging (boasting)? We explore the word in that context this morning – because our text for this morning takes us there. It labels one kind of boasting as always inappropriate, and yet alludes to another as holy and righteous. The text that forms the basis of our study this morning is found in the Second Chapter of Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians:

^{ESV} **Ephesians 2:4-10 But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ--by grace you have been saved-- ⁶ and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷ so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸ For by grace you have been saved through**

faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰ For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

So far the very words of God. Thank God in heaven for these words, for it is by these very words that we will one day be able to join him in his heaven, for these are the Words of Life. So also we pray, "**Sanctify us by Your truth, O Lord. Your word is truth.**" Amen.

If there is only one section of Scripture that you can memorize, if only one set of verses that you can bring to a dying sinner, if only one bit of Holy Writ to carry with you through life, this text from Paul's Letter to the saints in Ephesus would not be a bad choice.

We have seen time and again that Jesus spoke often in mysteries, parables, and other "coded" language that only believers could understand. From such words only those with faithful understanding could benefit. He spoke in this way not only so that his enemies could not use his own words to condemn him, but so that the very unbelief of the godless would prove to be their own undoing. In Jesus' own words, "**...so that *they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand, lest they should turn and be forgiven.***" (Mark 4:12) Again we read in 1 Corinthians 2:14, "**Natural man does not receive (understand) the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; neither can he know them, for they are understood spiritually.**"

Yet that is not the only way Jesus presented the facts of Life. With countless miracles and with the plainest of words (such as our Gospel Lesson for this morning from the Third Chapter of John) Jesus spoke so that the simplest child could understand. Those who did not come to trust in Jesus were not lost because of a lack of clarity, but because of unbelief. Though in our Bibles today many passages can only be understood by those who are spiritual-minded, that is not the only way God the Holy Spirit brought the message of the gospel. So that men everywhere might be "**without excuse,**" God the Holy Spirit also inspired some of the most simple and unmistakable explanations of Life and Death possible. Our text for this morning is one such section.

Can there be any doubt by anyone among us this morning *exactly* what the Holy Spirit, writing through Paul, meant in our text? In our society it has become fashionable to say only what you believe, never what you condemn. This method of miscommunication creates the

illusion that we are in agreement when in fact we are not. Here is an example: If I say that I believe that Jesus is the Son of God and Savior of the world, and say only that, a good Mormon would be perfectly willing to throw his arm around my shoulder and call me brother. Does that mean I am in agreement with the Mormon faith? Hardly. It is, in fact, usually only when I say what I *do not believe* that I really begin to communicate clearly. If, in speaking to a Mormon, I *also say*, "*I reject the notion that Satan is God's other son and that Jesus is our Savior only because he outlined a better plan than his brother Satan for man to earn his way to god-hood*" then I have said something. No Mormon will be left in doubt as to whether or not we agree.

This practice of stating both what we do not believe as well as what we do believe is something that used to be practiced by all, but is thriving now only among a dwindling few. Why? Few churches today recognize the true love demonstrated in speaking clearly. Few care to adhere strictly to God's Word because so few today still believe that there is *only one path to heaven*. Why is it necessary that we state both what we do and do not believe? First, because that is what God does in his Word; and, second, because it is the only way to communicate fully and clearly the facts of eternal life and to point sinners to the one and only path to heaven. Clarity is therefore an act of purest love.

Look at our text. Note well the clarity of God's position in verses 8-9 when God uses both positive and negative statements joined one to the other. Positive: "**For by grace you have been saved through faith.**" Negative: "**and this is not your own doing.**" Positive: "**It is the gift of God.**" Negative: "**Not a result of works, so that no one may boast.**" It is, in fact, the negatives that prevent any tinkering with the truth of this text.

When Luther, for example, presented his reformation statement that we are saved "*by grace through faith*," that statement was actually *accepted* by his opponents. Luther then added one simple word to clarify his position: "*alone*." "*We are saved by grace alone through faith.*" That one word clarified the difference. Luther's enemies cried foul. They pointed out that the passage does not say, "*Grace alone*." Only, "*Grace*." In fact if our text for this morning had not included the negative, "**Not of works...**" Luther would have had to recant his statement. Because of those three words "**Not of works...**" the defenders of work righteousness are without argument or excuse.

There are, after all, only three possibilities by which man can obtain eternal life: 1. It is by grace, 2. It is by works, or 3. It is by a combination of grace and works. No one disputes this fact. It must be one of the three. Our text

actually settles the question with those three short words: "**Not of works.**" This simple statement of fact tells us that since salvation cannot be earned, it is therefore *undeserved*. If it is *not* of works (is not earned) then it is a gift – which is exactly what our text call it - "**the gift of God.**"

In fact it is exactly here, at this very point, where our text introduces the negative form of bragging: "**...it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast.**" It is possible for man to boast without sinning, but not about something like this – at least not from the perspective of man's accomplishment or man's contribution. This is, in fact, exactly what makes the Christian faith what it is – a *gift* of forgiveness, earned in full by another and humbly received by unworthy, undeserving sinners. There simply can be no possibility of bragging in the reception of a gift that is earned and bequeathed to us by someone else.

The gospel is different because it is not from man. It is from God. Only a God of mercy, grace, and love could ever come up with such a plan. His plan was that the perfect, holy, righteous, Creator God would send his perfect, holy, righteous Son to become one of his own creation. God the Father would then heap upon his own dear Son the sins of all of mankind – the sum total of the guilt of every human being. A great and inexplicable exchange would be made. Man's sin was placed on Jesus; Jesus' perfection was credited to man. Mankind would have to *do nothing* to share in this plan for salvation. Believing that it is true (with a faith also freely given to him by his God) it is his. Though that old Adam in us would sorely love to take some credit for our own salvation, our text simply rules it out: "**Even when we were dead in trespasses, (God) made us alive together with Christ --by grace you have been saved -- and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus...**" Even our sinful flesh is smart enough to know that a dead man can't contribute to his own raising. The fact that we are now Christians and heirs of heaven says nothing at all about what was in us by nature. Instead it speaks volumes about the kindness and mercy of our God.

And it is just here that we find our text alluding to the other kind of boasting – a form of bragging that is anything but sinful or undesirable. Our text tells us that "**God...raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷ so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.**" What exactly does this mean? It means that, in heaven, you and I will exist as the greatest

evidence of God's bragging rights. We will, in other words, represent the single greatest testament to the grace and kindness of our God.

To understand what our God is here saying, we need to understand two immutable truths. The first is that there was absolutely nothing whatsoever that was desirable or worthy in any sinner. Not one single human being will be able to make the claim that he in any way deserved the heaven he nonetheless has been given. The second immutable truth will be the fact that such unrighteous souls as you and I nonetheless exist with God in his heaven. These two truths will combine to form the supreme testament to the greatness of our God. This will prove his **"immeasurable riches, grace (undeserved love), and kindness"** more than any other aspect or characteristic of heaven. You and I represent God's holy bragging rights, simply by virtue of the fact that he loved the unlovable and redeemed that which had absolutely no inherent value.

Isn't this what makes the gospel so unique? Our God did it all. That's exactly why there is no "however" attached to the good news of our salvation; no "except" or "but." It is not, *"Jesus died on the cross and took away all our sins, but... now you've got to live the right kind of life, or give money, or perform good works."* God did it all, which is why he alone deserves every possible form of glory and praise imaginable.

What a plan. What a message. What a God. Take a moment to consider where we once were, and to where we were once helplessly headed. Paul reminds us in the verse preceding our text: ***"And you were dead in the trespasses and sins² in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience--³ among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind."*** How desperately we needed *this* Savior and *this* plan for our salvation. No other plan would have or *could* have worked for us – certainly nothing that required us to contribute anything at all, because we were spiritually dead. Only such a plan could rescue sinners like us from an eternity in hell.

God be praised for the clarity of this message in our text for this morning, and for his love and mercy which planned our salvation from eternity. Even mine. If any human being feels the need to brag, brag about the Savior that is ours, and just what our God has done for us – as Paul wrote to the Corinthians: ***"Therefore, as it is written, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.'"*** Amen.

Scripture Readings

^{ESV} **Numbers 21:4-9** From Mount Hor they set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom. And the people became impatient on the way. ⁵ And the people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we loathe this worthless food." ⁶ Then the LORD sent fiery serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many people of Israel died. ⁷ And the people came to Moses and said, "We have sinned, for we have spoken against the LORD and against you. Pray to the LORD, that he take away the serpents from us." So Moses prayed for the people. ⁸ And the LORD said to Moses, "Make a fiery serpent and set it on a pole, and everyone who is bitten, when he sees it, shall live." ⁹ So Moses made a bronze serpent and set it on a pole. And if a serpent bit anyone, he would look at the bronze serpent and live.

^{ESV} **John 3:14-21** And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶ ¶ "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸ Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹ And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. ²⁰ For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. ²¹ But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God."

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The Fourth Sunday in Lent – March 11, 2018

The Opening Hymn – 158 *(Red Hymnal)*

"Glory Be to Jesus"

The Order of Service – Supplement page 12ff. *(Brown Hymnal)*

The Scripture Lessons: *(Printed on the back page of this bulletin)*

The First Lesson: (Numbers 21:4-9) This is the rather familiar account of the bronze serpent made by Moses during the days of Israel's wandering. It ought to be readily apparent to us that since just looking at a bronze statue does not provide medical treatment for a problem, so also the solution to Israel's problem was spiritual rather than physical. It is also clear to Christians that the statue was intended to be a type of Christ. Those who in faith look to Christ, who also hung on a tree, will be saved.

Psalms 51 (Supplement page 31)

The Gospel Lesson: (John 3:14-21) Jesus himself here teaches us that the true cure for our sin problem is looking in faith to Him alone as our Substitute. It is a profound and damning error to imagine that anything like our own good works or actions could ever substitute for Jesus' perfection. Those in whom the Holy Spirit has worked saving faith will naturally do good works, but such works flow naturally from justified believers as our way of saying thank you for what Christ has done.

The Confession of Faith -

Nicene Creed – *(Supplement page 5)*

The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 151 *(Stanzas 1-3, 7) (Red Hymnal)*

"Christ, the Life of All the Living"

The Sermon – Ephesians 2:4-10 *(Printed on the back page of this bulletin)*

"Bringing Rights"

The Offertory – (Supplement page 16 insert)

The Prayers

The Pre-Communion Hymn – 159 *(Red Hymnal)*

"Go to Dark Gethsemane"

The Preparation for Holy Communion *(Brown Hymnal page 17)*

The Distribution

The Nunc Dimittis and Thanksgiving *(Brown Hymnal page 20)*

The Benediction

The Closing Hymn – 47 *(Red Hymnal)*

"Savior, Again to Thy Dear Name We Raise"

Silent Prayer

Welcome! - We warmly welcome any visitors worshipping with us this morning and invite you to join us each Sunday at this time. We are glad you are here! **To our Visitors seeking an altar at which to commune** – Since we desire to follow the words of our Savior, we practice "Close Communion" – a practice that is not new to confessional Lutherans. This practice stresses both our concern for others, not wanting them to receive the sacrament to their harm (1 Cor. 11:27-30) and the importance of unity in confession and faith (1 Cor. 10:16-17). For this reason we ask that anyone who has not established this unity through membership in a CLC congregation please first meet with the pastor to discuss this Scriptural doctrine before communing. This is a practice that we follow out of love and concern for you, and out of obedience to God's Word.

Attendance - Sunday (39) Average (40) Wednesday (24)

This Week at St. Paul:

Today

-9:00 a.m.

– Sunday school and Bible Class

-10:00 a.m.

– Worship Service w/ Holy Communion

-11:15 a.m.

– Fellowship and coffee time

-11:30 a.m.

– Church Council Meeting

Wednesday

-5:45 p.m.

– Confirmation Class

-7:00 p.m.

– Midweek Lenten Service

-8:15 p.m.

– Choir Practice

Next Sunday

-9:00 a.m.

– Sunday school and Bible Class

-10:00 a.m.

– Sunday Worship Service

-11:00 a.m.

– Fellowship and coffee time

CLC News – Luther Memorial of Fond du Lac, WI has called Pastor Nathan Pfeiffer. Teacher Neal Bernthal has returned the call to Faith of Markesan, WI. Teacher Paul Tiefel is considering the call to St. John's of Okabena, MN. Brain Fox has accepted the call to St. John's School of Clarkston, WA. There is one teacher graduate this year from the Education Department of Immanuel College. There are no seminary graduates.

Lenten Service – This Wednesday we continue our midweek Lenten services. Please make use of this opportunity to be in the Lord's house to commemorate his passion.

Church Council Meeting – The Church Council is scheduled to meet this morning during the fellowship hour. Please bring agenda topics to the attention of President Mark Johnson.

Spring Luncheon – St. Paul is scheduled to host this year's Spring Luncheon, which is scheduled for May 5. All women of the congregation are invited.