

## Something to Boast About

### 2 Cor 1:12-14

This past week I've been catching up on movies and finally saw 'The Damned United', the story of English football manager Brian Clough. Clough was a true character, and also quite possibly a genius when it came to coaching soccer. The film covers a part of Clough's life where he was obsessed with another manager who had insulted him, and how his attempt to retaliate sent his career off course. Along the way we get a glimpse at Clough's personality—he was known for being annoyingly confident, often without understanding how other people saw him. In one TV interview he said: "I wouldn't say I was the best manager in the country, but I'm in the top 1."

The complexity here was that Clough wasn't just a braggart. The top league in England at that time was becoming known for its violence and brutal play. Clough believed that it was possible to play football at a higher, more honorable and beautiful level than he saw in the top league here. After watching the World Cup this summer, who could really argue with that?

We've been talking about the idea of the "active ingredient." The active ingredient is the substance in medicine that makes the drug work—that makes us feel better. Whatever else makes up the rest of the pill or liquid, it's the active ingredient that makes it work—the part of a drug that actually heals us, that makes us feel better, the part of the medicine that's designed to restore our health. To be an active ingredient is to live our faith in a way that make our communities better, healthier, more shalom-filled places. Active ingredients bring the message of the gospel—the message that heals us and restores health in authentic ways to the places where we live and work and study and shop. This is a journey through what it means to be missional people in a missional church. We find our missional habits and practices—we find our identities as Christian disciples—at the intersection of what we believe about God, and what we do about that belief.

*Now this is our boast: Our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves*

*in the world, and especially in our relations with you, in the holiness and sincerity that are from God. We have done so not according to worldly wisdom but according to God's grace. For we do not write you anything you cannot read or understand. And I hope that, as you have understood us in part, you will come to understand fully that you can boast of us just as we will boast of you in the day of the Lord Jesus.*

Second Corinthians is actually made up of a couple of letters Paul wrote to this important church. Paul had spent 18 months or so helping the church at Corinth get off the ground, and he'd continued to provide pastoral care for them through the post. If you read through this letter you'll see that Paul refers to other letters that he'd written in the past to address key issues or problems.

Both 1st and 2nd Corinthians give us a glimpse at what it was like for Paul to be a missionary and pastor in the 1st century. He teaches theology, describes what good church leadership looks like, argues with critics, and encourages healthy behavior in these letters. Paul also tries to teach his readers how to think for themselves—to take teaching from any source and evaluate it on their own to see if it was worth following.

One writer said that these letters of Paul were meant to teach 'the significance of Christ's death, the meaning of the Holy Spirit, how God shows his power in our weakness, and how the believer's life is both graced by God's love and claimed for obedience in service.'

You know, the easy stuff.

In our passage at the start of this letter, Paul is responding to some criticism about something he wrote in an earlier letter. You know that feeling when you've been irritated and written an email and regretted it as soon as you hit send? Maybe that's just me.

Paul isn't backing down, but he is reminding them that he has dealt with them with integrity in the past, and so they should listen to what he says.

Paul leads off with a line that is anything but an apology or even an explanation.

He says: 'Now here's our boast. Our consciences are clear. We have conducted ourselves in a way that is perfectly consistent with the way God himself has led us to act.'

It's as if Paul kicked off the letter by saying: 'I wouldn't say I'm the best apostle in the world, but I'm in the top 1.'

All that talk about boasting rubs our modern ears the wrong way, doesn't it? We've all been around people who are pretty impressed with themselves, right? We've all been around people who seem only too happy to tell you all of their accomplishments—what they've done on their own power and because of their own wisdom and ability.

That's not what Paul is talking about here at all. (OK, well maybe a little, but it's not his main point.)

It helps to get a 1st-century understanding of boasting and what it means in the Scriptures.

The word that translates to 'boasting' here has a rich meaning. The way it's used here it really means 'glorying in the acts of God'. It describes a mix of awe and wonder and delight in the way God works through his people—even when you might be talking about the way he works through yourself.

None of this is about announcing what we can do on our own power or wisdom or ability. 'The Christian can boast in him- or herself,' one writer put it, 'only in so far as his life is lived in dependence on God and in responsibility to him.'

That doesn't sound like the annoying kind of boasting or bragging at all. Paul is talking here about 'boasting' in the way he and his team lived in complete dependence on God, and how they interacted with the world and presented the gospel. He says that they did it with 'holiness and sincerity'."

Holiness and sincerity are two of the easiest words in the English language to dismiss or poke fun at or turn into a punch-line.

We dismiss Holiness because we associate it with being judgmental or holier than thou. The dictionary defines being 'holier than thou' as Self-righteousness (also called sententiousness), a feeling of smug moral superiority derived from a sense that one's beliefs, actions, or affiliations are of greater virtue than those of the average person.

Another describes it as "excessively or hypocritically pious; often with a sickening sanctimonious smile" Other words used are 'pharisaic, pharisaical, sanctimonious, self-righteous, pietistic'.

Well that doesn't sound very nice at all.

We do the same with sincerity because in this cynical age we simply don't believe it—there's far too much of the opposite in our culture, and so we don't trust sincerity when we see it or experience it. If you Google 'sincerity' you find that it's 'the virtue of one who speaks and acts truly about his or her own feelings, thoughts, and desires.' When people act that way toward us we have a hard time believing it, right?

But when Paul uses those words here he means something very different—he uses them without sarcasm or irony—he means them.

But what did he mean?

In the Scriptures only God is holy, but when it talks about people holiness describes the idea of somehow being set apart for a special purpose. It describes being ethically pure or free from sin, but it's more than that.

In the New Testament, holiness describes a type of faithfulness that isn't simply doing the right things, but rather living by the power of the Holy Spirit. It's not connected to places or things or rituals. It's the behavior that comes naturally out of true faith—out of a true relationship with the one who made us and redeemed us and loves us still.

In the Scriptures sincerity describes purity in relationships and other dealings. One dictionary defined it as 'ingenuousness', which gives you an idea of just how rare

this quality is. Think about that. I've heard disingenuousness before, but I never even knew there was a positive opposite to that word.

The sincerity Paul writes about to his friends in Corinth literally means, 'visible in the sunlight'. Out there in the open—honest—without guile or ulterior motives. This is about having integrity and a sense of honor in the way we deal with other people.

What does that mean for us as we learn to live as missional people in a missional church?

Being missional is as much about who we are as it is about what we do. Our text this morning hints at a character profile of what a mature Christian disciple is supposed to be like.

Part of it is vertical and part of it is horizontal. Part of it is about being connected to Jesus Christ, and part of it is about how we interact with other people.

The point here is that if we're going to be authentic, effective communicators of the gospel in our lives—if we're going to make our homes and jobs and schools and neighborhoods into healthier, more shalom-filled places, then we have to acknowledge our dependence on God, and we also have to live with integrity in the world.

Holiness and sincerity become a path for people to experience the gospel, which is the point of learning to live as missional people in a missional church. Holiness and sincerity become something we boast about—something we give God the credit for, something that draws others into experiencing what Christ is really about in this world.

This is really about what it means to be that active ingredient—that part of the culture around us that makes it better, healthier, more like God intended in the first place.

There's a section of the book *Deep Church* that talks about this. The author writes:

“We Christians should be known as people who create culture for the common good, for all people and not just for fellow believers, culture that makes life better, more whole, for the entire city. While we’re distinct from the surrounding culture, we also engage it. Add to this the mandate in the Bible to see the welfare of the city, and we get a powerful recipe for cultural transformation.”

That’s what holiness and sincerity look like in practice. Being set apart from the culture, but also involved in every part of it—depending on God, but also living as people who share God’s love and grace with our communities.

In the end, this whole idea of being missional people in a missional church really boils down to these two things—maintaining our relationship with God, and living our faith honestly in our homes and jobs and schools and neighborhoods.

My prayer for all of us is that we’ll have the faith and courage to live as Christ’s disciples here and wherever we go. We can boast a little about that.

Let’s pray together.