Captured by the Love of Christ
2 Cor 5:10-21

What do you boast about? What does anyone boast about? Now you might fire back, 'I don't boast' - which, of course, might just be a boast! But why do any of us even just occasionally drop a little humble brag into a conversation? We do it because it makes us feel good and think it'll make us look good. We don't boast or brag about what everyone can do - like hey, I put both socks on this morning. We boast about stuff we think gives us the edge over others, that makes us stand out, that others will look at and go, 'wow, good for you, kudos.' It could be stuff going on in your career, or something you've just bought, or something one of your kids has just done. Whatever it is, you bring it up in conversation, because it reflects well on you.

And it's nearly always something tangible, something that can be seen. If someone wants to brag about their great taste in art, they'll show you the expensive painting they've bought. If they want to brag about their intellectual sophistication, they'll impress you with the books they're reading.

And there's a group of leaders in the church in Corinth who are doing just this. They're bragging about external stuff: their great speaking ability, or the influential people they know, or the crowds they draw. Paul says in v12 they are 'those who boast about outward appearance.'

The problem is that Christianity is not about outward appearance. And what makes someone truly great or not is not the number of churches they've planted, or papers they've published, or organisations they've led, it's their character. It's not just what they do but why they do it. The stuff Paul calls in v12, 'what is in the heart'.

And so Paul wants to give these Christians in Corinth the ammo they need to defend genuine Christian ministry and, in the process, Paul, and critique these leaders. And Paul does it, not just by telling us what he does - his mission, and why he does it - his motivation, but why the Christian message matters at all, and why it alone can give you an inner confidence and sense of worth that kills your need to brag.

Mission - *What does Paul do?*
Look at v10, 'For we must all appear before the judgement seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.'

And as we saw last week, Paul's not suggesting that if you're a Christian you should live in fear that you're going to be condemned at the last judgment. Christ was condemned for us, and so as we put our trust in him, we don't appear before him for condemnation but to give an account for what we've done with all the good gifts and abilities he's given us. Because Resurrection Day will be Reward Day.

And yet, look at v11, 'Therefore, *knowing the fear of the Lord*…' Now, today, we've tended to reduce God down to a friend, who peps us up when we're feeling down. To a therapist or a counsellor, but a non-directive counsellor. A counsellor who listens and consoles but never tells us we're wrong. And yet, the Bible presents a very different picture: that God is high and lifted up and altogether different from us. That all power belongs to him. That he is in all places at all times and you can't escape him. That he knows and sees you to the bottom. And that you're to worship him and give him your allegiance as your heavenly king. And so the God of the Bible is a quite different

God from our 21st century pocket god. He's a God we rightly fear in awe and wonder. A God so worthy of love that we fear to sin against him. As Psalm 2 says, 'Serve the Lord with fear, and *rejoice with trembling*.'

But the Bible's also clear that for those who think 'There's no such thing as judgment, or if there is, I can get through it' then the final judgment really is something to be feared.

Which is why Paul says what he says, v11, 'Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, *we persuade others*.' Or as one Bible version puts it, 'Because we understand our fearful responsibility to the Lord, we work hard to persuade others.'

Now, as we saw on the retreat, leadership can often be self-serving, can't it. I mean, even seemingly good desires to grow in effectiveness as a leader, to maximise others' potential, if you dig deeper may be more about our own success than others'. And these new leaders in Corinth were also working hard to persuade others, but to persuade them of how amazing they were as leaders and how the Corinthians really ought to ditch Paul and follow them. But Paul and his team are trying to persuade people about the truth of the gospel.

And notice it's *persuade* them, not batter them. To persuade them, not manipulate them. Because he tells us two things about the way he does it. Firstly, he does it with integrity: v11 again, 'But what we are is known to God, and I hope it is known also to your conscience.' Now, one outcome of social media is that there have been a number of celebrities who have carefully cultivated their public image, but then the mask slips and they'll say or write something that shows what they really think or what they're really like, and they're left scrambling to undo the damage: 'That doesn't reflect the real me.' The problem is, it does.

And Paul is saying, 'look, as I seek to persuade you about Jesus, I'm not one thing in public and another in private. There's no hypocrisy, no carefully cultivated image. My life is open before the God to whom I'm going to give an account.' You see, Paul knows what Robert Murray McCheyne, the Scottish pastor knew, 'What a man is on his knees before God, that he is, and nothing more.'

So let me ask you, do you spend more time cultivating the external - how others see you, or the internal - your character, who you are in private, before God? And what would need to change to put that right?

But secondly, Paul seeks to persuade people by making a rational case for the gospel. Verse 13, 'For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; *if we are in our right mind, it is for you*.' Others might look at Paul and think, 'you're crazy to believe what you believe - that a man rose from the dead? You believe that?!' And Paul says, that's not crazy, it's God. And when we try and persuade you and show you how the gospel makes sense not just of life but of your heart, we are absolutely in our right minds.

Now maybe you're not yet a Christian, or maybe you are, and you have doubts about the faith. Do you leave those doubts hanging, or actively seek answers? You see, Paul is saying, that for those who humble themselves, who have ears to hear, the Gospel fundamentally makes sense. So seek its answers.

Ok, but if that's Paul's mission - what he does, why does he do it? Why try and persuade others of the truth of the gospel? And why do that from a position of integrity?

Motivation - *why does he do it?*
In another letter, in Philippians 3, Paul describes what he used to be proud of, what used to make him feel good about himself. And it was his racial and ethnic background as a Jew, and his moral record. He was just better than others.

But that's always the problem when you get your sense of worth from those kinds of things, isn't it? You inevitably end up thinking you're better than others and looking down at them. At those who, because of their politics, or race, or lifestyle, you think are less worthy than you. And, if you see them as a threat to where you get your significance from, as pre-Christian Paul saw the original Christians as a threat to his Jewish world, it makes you hostile to them.

So it would be no exaggeration to say that before Paul became a Christian, his life was increasingly dominated by the kind of hostility that flows out of moral and racial pride, even when that was clothed in respectable religion. But when Paul came face to face with the One he was really persecuting on the road to Damascus, all that changed. And now, he says, v14, 'The love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all.'

Think for a moment about what controls you. You see, what was it that drove Paul to study hard as a young man and excel in rabbi school, and come out top of the class? It was exactly the same as what enabled him to see the murder of Stephen, a fellow Jew and the first Christian martyr, as a good thing, and what drove him to persecute Christians. It was ethnic and moral pride.

But what is it for you? What drives your desire for academic or career success? What's the engine behind your pursuit of friendships or relationships? What drives you wanting your kids to do well? And if part of your job entails persuading others, bringing them to see what you see, what drives that? Or when you find yourself getting angry at people, what's behind that anger, what's being threatened?

You see, *now* Paul says, his entire motivation for life has changed. And his willingness to try and persuade others of the faith he once tried to destroy, and do it with integrity, is the love of Christ. That the one he was persecuting loves him. Loves him, the proud, religious hater.

I once took part in a joint service with another church where the other minister described how we know Jesus loves us because he came as the Lamb of God and lambs are lovely and white and fluffy, and wouldn't ever hurt anyone.

But that's not the kind of love that overturned Paul's pride is it? Sentimentalism can never overturn pride. Jesus did come as the Lamb of God, not to be fluffy, but to be the perfect sacrifice for our sins. Verse 14 again, 'One has died for all'. And from the moment Paul realised, 'You, the One I'm persecuting, loved me enough to die for me' his life was never the same.

Now, children who grow up in families where there's authoritative parenting, where they know the boundaries, *and* where they know they're loved, come out more confident than those with either authoritarian or care-less parents, with little love. Because knowing you're loved deeply by one you

respect deeply just has this power to make you confident, doesn't it? But knowing you are loved like that when you also know you don't deserve it also humbles you deeply.

And when Christ's love gets a hold of you like that, that confidence combined with humility, has the power to radically influence every area of life.

Transformation - *why the gospel matters for you*
In his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor and martyr, criticised what he called Cheap Grace. The idea that God loves me, so I can pretty much live how I want.

And in an individualistic culture like ours, that's an attractive argument, isn't it? God loves me, so he'd never challenge the way I see life or want to do life. That just like people used to think the sun revolved round the earth, we can think life revolves around me and how I see things, and God's a satellite planet, orbiting around me, to do my will.

But being captured by Christ's love totally upended that way of seeing life for Paul: v14-15: 'For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, *that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised*.'

In other words, when it dawns on you, 'Christ loves me so much he died for me', his death becomes your death. Not only that he died the death you deserve, but that you die to your old life and your old way of seeing life. And instead of living for yourself, you live for him. Instead of thinking life revolves around you, you realise he's the gravitational centre and your life is to revolve around him.

You see, if we're honest, we really don't like people interfering in our lives, and telling us what to do, do we? It's the default of our fallen natures - we see any outside imposition upon us as restrictive. And Paul says, 'but when you are captured by Christ's love for you, you gladly surrender to him.' Because you know that if he loves you enough to die for you, everything he asks of you is for your good. So no area of obedience is off limits. There's no area of your life where you say, 'you can't go there, Jesus'. Instead, you gladly submit your agenda to his.

But secondly, it changes how you see others *and* yourself. Verse 16, 'From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer.'

Now, just think how pre-Christian Paul would have viewed Jesus. He would have regarded him through the lens of his moral and racial pride, as one born in sin, born out of wedlock. An untrained, uneducated rabbi who mixed with undesirables and untouchables. A deceiver and blasphemer who rightly died the death of one cursed by God.

But how much of that way of seeing Jesus was left after Paul's encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus? It was all left in the dust of the road: 'We once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer'!

But it's not just the old Paul who had this habit of regarding people according to external stuff. These new leaders at Corinth were doing it and, if we're honest, we all do it. We evaluate people as worthy of our time, or not, based on their appearance, or academic level, or position, or wealth.

And Paul is saying, when Christ's love takes a hold of you it radically changes how you see others. You stop assessing Jesus on the purely human level and you stop assessing others on the purely external level. You stop seeing them either as someone unworthy of your time, or as someone who might be useful to you, or as a threat to your significance. Instead, you begin to see them as Christ sees them, and being to treat them as he treated you - with kindness and grace.

But knowing you are loved by Christ will also change the way you see yourself. Verse 17, 'Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away, behold, the new has come.' So when you put your trust in Christ, you're united by faith with him. You're in Christ. Jesus described it as like being born again. You come alive as part of God's new creation.

Which means, you're not part of the old world order any more. That list of sins and failures that leaves you crippled with guilt? That's the old you, and it's gone. That old way of seeing the world, and you're better than those people over there? That's the old you, and that's gone. You're a new creation. With a new heart and new desires and new loves.

But that doesn't mean your old desires aren't going to rear their ugly heads. They will. But your old life is not what defines you anymore. You're in Christ, and he has made you new and is making you new. So when, like a celebrity you mess up and say or do something you shouldn't, unlike them you really can say, that's not the real me. Not because you're a hypocrite, but because it's the old you, and Christ loves you and has, and is, changing you.

But the third and final thing being captured by Christ's love does for you is it takes you to the depths of what Christ has done for you. Verses 18-19, 'All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them.'

Now, imagine a couple going for marriage counselling. And they're sat at opposite ends of the counsellors couch and can hardly look at each other. What do they need? They need to be reconciled, don't they? Why? Because they're alienated. Because reconciliation is the mending of broken relationships.

And the Bible tells us alienation is humanity's fundamental problem. That all the horizontal stuff - all the discord, all the conflict, is all a result of the break down in our vertical relationship with our heavenly king. And that breakdown is a result of our trespasses, our crossing his good lines, our rebellion against him.

But that breakdown is also at the root of all our personal problems: like the insecurity and pride that's behind our boasting.

You see, we boast or brag because we need to know that we're loved and approved of, that we're ok. But cut off from the love of our heavenly Father, we go looking to things like career or relationships or family to give that to us. And they never can. If things go well, they might make us proud, or if they don't they'll make us insecure. What they can't give you is that confidence combined with humility that knowing you are loved by Christ can give you.

And despite the fact that that breakdown in our relationship with God is 100% our fault, God initiates the reconciliation. But he doesn't just make the first move. Though he is 100% innocent, in Christ he takes 100% of the fault upon himself. Verse 21, 'For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.'

And at the cross, the One who lived the perfect life we always fail to live, the One who never sinned, took our sin upon himself and became sin for us, that we might take and become his righteousness. And Jesus was alienated from God that we might be reconciled. He bore the wrath of God, that we might be captured by the love of God. As the English reformer, Richard Hooker said, 'Man hath sinned, and God hath suffered.'

And because we have been reconciled Paul says, we're to be reconcilers. Verse 20, 'Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.'

You see, these Corinthian Christians are drifting. Because when you're assessing yourself and others through the lens of external stuff like image, or success, or race, or morality, you're sliding from the gospel of God's grace, and you'll end up boasting about yourself and being hostile to others. Instead, Paul says, we've been reconciled to God through Christ, so live as those reconciled. Live knowing you are loved by Christ and live for him.