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Title: Virtue or Vice

Scripture: 2 Corinthians

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Well, good morning. It's great to be together. First weekend of the new year. And I just want to just say a couple of things before we jump into the teaching. First, thank you to all of you who served, invited, and participated in Christmas Eve. If you've been around Orchard Hill for any time, you know that it's something that we do in a way to really try to welcome as many people in the community as we can.

This year, over 15,000 people attended here in Wexford and over 16,000 people in total with the different campuses. And if you're returning, Christmas Eve was one of your first experiences at Orchard Hill. Welcome. What you're experiencing here today is typical. We sing and we look at the Bible and it's pretty simple what we do here in terms of just trying to take those steps, but really glad that you are a part of that. So again, thank you to so many of you who I saw bring people and serve in different ways just to make that time possible.

Let's pray together. God as we're gathered here today in Wexford, Butler, Strip District, Southpointe, and Beaver, I pray that you would speak to each of us. God, I ask that my words would reflect your word in content, tone, and emphasis. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

Today we're beginning a series that we're calling *Virtue or Vice*. The idea is the last few chapters of Second Corinthians which we're going to study and look at over these next few weeks, have these words that are used. Boasting, weakness, foolishness, jealousy, and then the idea of skepticism are used, but they're not used the way that we typically use them.

And so, you could say, is this a virtue or a vice? Maybe a way to think about this is if I were to say, is anger a virtue or a vice? Well, the correct answer would be, well, it depends, because, on one hand, anger can be a vice if you blow up and use your anger in inappropriate ways. But if you're angry because somebody is trying to sell your child drugs at school, that's good anger. So, anger can be positive or negative. Or if we said, is niceness a virtue or a vice? Well, again, in some ways it depends. You could say, well, niceness is always good, but sometimes we can use niceness to avoid confrontation, to avoid speaking the truth, or to avoid difficulty.

Today we're going to talk about boasting. Now, you may say, well, boasting, isn't that always bad? Isn't that clearly something that is wrong? Well, the Apostle Paul uses the word boasting, and here in a way, he talks about boasting in the Lord versus boasting in something else. In the Bible, the phrase boasting, if you look it up in a Bible dictionary and try to study its uses, you see that boasting is basically whenever we praise something, celebrate something, or take glory in something. That's what boasting is.

We see this in our day, our age. Everywhere you turn on the TV you see an athlete who you know gets the first down and he does a dance because he's like, I got a first down. You see it when you go to the theater and people come out on stage afterward for the curtain call and maybe it's appropriate or maybe they're like yeah, nailed it. You see it when people drop something on social media as if to say I made the world's best Christmas dinner ever. And you say yes, I'm sure you did. And chances are we don't just see it out there, but at times we

see it in ourselves. We see the ways that we say I really want praise. I want to be celebrated. I want glory for something.

In Second Corinthians, the Apostle Paul quotes Jeremiah nine, and he's quoting in a shorter version in Second Corinthians, a longer passage in Jeremiah nine. Here is what is in Jeremiah nine. This is verses 23 and 24. It says, "This is what the LORD says: 'Let not the wise boast of their wisdom or the strong boast of their strength or the rich boast of their riches, but let the one who boasts boast about this: that they have the understanding to know me, that I am the LORD, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight,' declares the LORD." And then Paul quotes these verses 17 and 18 of Second Corinthians ten. It says, "But, 'Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.' For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends."

So, let me just simply ask you, what is it that you feel best about in your life? What is it that you glory? And what is it that you say this gives me value because that is what a boast is? Now, Jeremiah gives us a couple of things, a couple of parts of the category. He basically says it's wisdom, strength, and wealth. But certainly, that list is bigger. That's not intended to be exhaustive. Some of us will boast about our appearance, academic achievement, how hard we work, parenting, our spouse, style, or we'll boast about something where we say this is why I have glory.

If you read through Second Corinthians, what you'll see, especially in chapter ten, is Paul is being criticized. In fact, we know this because in verse one he says you say that I'm basically bold in person, but timid when I'm away. And what he's doing is he's responding in part to criticism. And I would say when you understand this, what that tells us is that when you're criticized and it affects you, that actually tells you something about what you boast about. In other words, if somebody can criticize you in an area and you're like yeah, whatever, then it probably isn't a thing you boast about. But if they criticize you for something and you're like, oh, no, no, that's not fair, then that's a clue that's something you boast about.

Okay, so let me just give you an example. And I don't want this to be about my boast, so this will be my only personal example. But if somebody were to say, you know, Kurt, you have not really crushed the investment world, it would be like yeah, you're right, I have not. You know, money goes in the market, and it sits there, I do the best I can, but I have not picked penny stocks that have gone crazy.

But if somebody were to say, Kurt, you're really, you know, lazy and ineffective at church, I'd be like what are you talking about? Because for me, that's something that I feel like I show up and I do what I can day after day. And so, what it is that is criticized and bothers you is probably something that is a boast in your life.

Here's what I'd like to do. I'd simply like to ask the question, and that is what is the problem with boasting that isn't in the Lord as Paul talks about? And then what is the way to boast in the Lord? Or what is the solution? So, a problem and a solution, very simple.

First, what is the problem with boasting? And the first reason this is a problem is because whatever you boast about will never fully satisfy you. Again, here are the words of Jeremiah chapter nine, when he says, "Let not the wise boast of their wisdom or the strong boast of

their strength or the rich boast of their riches..." Well, why not? What's the problem with saying I take some satisfaction from being wise, from being strong, from having resources, from being attractive, from being productive, from being moral, and from being spiritual?

You see, what some people will do is they will say, okay, I get that I shouldn't boast in wisdom, strength, riches, or whatever categories you have. But what they'll do is they'll say well, I'm moral, I'm spiritual, I understand things. Other people don't understand. And it's still borrowing a sense of satisfaction from something. But the problem with it is that ultimately there's always more wisdom, more strength, more something that you want, meaning you'll always say, I need more of it.

You see that sometimes in the way that people parent. Sometimes parents will decide that what they need to do is help their child find something that they're good at so that they can feel good about themselves. And so, what they'll do when their kids are little is they'll say okay, why don't we try this? Why don't we try this? Why don't we try this? And that all makes good sense. And their idea is that if we can find something that our child's good at, then they'll thrive. But what often happens is they simply go through life teaching their child that there's always something that they need from the outside to give them validation. They set them up for a lifetime of saying I've never found the thing that brings me deep satisfaction.

So why is this a problem? In part because it will never fully satisfy. Secondly, because your pursuit of your boast may crush you when I say this because in verse 12 of Second Corinthians ten. Here's what it says, "We do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some who commend themselves. When they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise." What I think Paul is saying here is this, and that is he's saying when you measure yourself by yourself or by the people around you, there's a sense in which your life will always have a little bit of a lack of measuring up.

In verse 15, he says this. He says, "Neither do we go beyond our limits by boasting of work done by others. Our hope is that, as your faith continues to grow, our sphere of activity among you will greatly expand..." Now, you hear that and you say, okay, what is he driving at? Again, Corinth was an ancient city, a cosmopolitan city. It was a city that in many ways mirrors kind of our current culture. In the church at Corinth, many people would say it was compromised. So, Paul wrote First Corinthians as a corrective. Second Corinthians, another letter was written in some ways as an encouragement. But now he's dealing with this critique that he's getting, and what he's doing is he's saying, if I measure myself by myself and measure myself by my effectiveness, I will ultimately find myself not wise.

Here's how C.S. Lewis put it. He said, "Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man... It is the comparison that makes you proud, the pleasure of being above the rest. Once the element of competition has gone, pride has gone." Here's what he's saying. He's saying when you compare yourself with yourself, with others, what you're doing is you're not saying I'm satisfied because I'm wise or I have resources or I'm attractive, productive, moral, spiritual, or whatever. Whatever you try to put there, he says, what ends up happening is you end up looking at others and comparing yourself and saying well, the reason I feel good is because I'm better than somebody else. And here's why this isn't ultimately wise. If that's my approach, your approach, what will happen is when you're successful and you feel better, then you will be proud and prideful.

And when you're not, you'll feel defeated.

I remember, years ago, when we went with one of my sons to a birthday party of one of his friends, and it was, you know, one of these parties where the kids all get together and the host brought out helium balloons. I still remember he got that helium balloon, and he was so happy. It was like he almost did one of those little boy dances where it's like, I got a helium balloon. This thing's awesome. And he was just twirling around, having a good time with his balloon. And then suddenly, one of the other little boys got a second balloon, and he came with two balloons. And you could see my son's delight in his one balloon turn into irritation that this other boy had two. It was how does he have two?

Now, what happens when we get older is the balloons get more complicated. But the reason the weight of boasting in something crushes us is because we say it's not enough. It's not enough. And that leads to one other problem with boasting. And when I say problem, I don't mean that it's wrong to pursue wisdom, wealth, strength, attractiveness, productivity, morality, spirituality. Certainly, that's not the case. But what I'm referring to here is why this isn't ultimately healthy for your soul. And it really doesn't matter whether you've been a Christian for 30 years, whether this is new for you and you're beginning your journey, or you're still trying to decide. What happens to any of us when we say this is the thing that brings us joy, satisfaction, fulfillment, and glory is we find that it doesn't fully satisfy. It may crush us.

Here's the other thing that happens, and that is you will be elevating a good thing to an ultimate thing. Notice again, that verse 18 says, "For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends." The reason that we elevate something good to the ultimate is because we think it will give us what we need. But what we're doing is we're giving that thing power.

Have you ever watched a hockey game? And especially if you're a fan who's been around a while and some of you say I've not watched a hockey game, but you live in Pittsburgh, so there's a good chance you've seen a hockey game. It used to be that every team had an enforcer. The enforcer was a guy you'd send on the ice to basically knock people around and pick fights so that you would get the other team's better players in fights and into the penalty box. Now, today, that's a little less common. Fighting has decreased a little, but maybe not. But what the enforcer would do would be to get the other players to focus on something that may even be a good thing. Like you're not going to rough up my teammates, you're not going to take a cheap shot at me. I'm standing up for this and getting them to end up in the penalty box and lose focus on winning the game.

What happens when we all take something that's good and make it ultimate is we take something that is intended to be a gift from God, something intended to be good in our lives, and we make it the thing that we need to get validation. We've given that thing too much power and that is exactly the problem with this kind of boasting.

So, what's the solution or how do we boast in the Lord? Three ways that we can do this from this passage. The first I'm just going to say is to prioritize the attitudes of Jesus. This is in verse one. It says this, "By the humility and gentleness of Christ, I appeal to you—I, Paul, who am "timid" when face to face with you, but "bold" toward you when away!" He basically went

away. He's basically saying now, here's your criticism of me. He says your criticism of me is that when I'm away, I speak really strongly, but when I'm here, I'm timid.

Notice what he does. He says by the humility and gentleness of Christ. Now, you may hear this and say this just simply means niceness. That's how we kind of hear humility and gentleness as words. It just means be nice. But there's actually a lot more going on with these words. Jesus was not afraid, by the way, to challenge religious Pharisees. Who did he have his strongest words for? It was the people who thought they were super spiritual and looked down on other people for not being spiritual enough. And Jesus wasn't, quote-unquote, gentle or nice to them if you take it in just the simple English meaning of these words.

Now, these two Greek words, humility and gentleness, have some specific meanings. Humility here means meekness or forbearance. And what that means is that there's a sense of saying the humility of Christ is the forbearance to say, I can tolerate when somebody else is doing their boasting without having to put my boasting into it. Because here's what happens. Our boasting is activated by other people's boasting. And what I mean by that is there's a little piece of us that says oh, yeah, you got that on sale for that little. I got it on a sale that's better than you got it on. Your kid is in the gifted program at three years old. Mine was in it at two. And so, forbearance says, I can let you have your boast. That's the humility he's talking about.

Gentleness. Here's a word that's only used twice in this exact form, and it means mildness and reasonableness. The other place that it's used is in Acts 24:4. It's a place where what he's talking about is a sense of mindfulness to say I understand what's going on. His kindness here is not just to be nice as much as it is a reasonableness to say what I'm understanding in terms of Jesus and who He is, that what we're talking about here isn't the whole horizon. And so, part of what we need to boast in the Lord is the attitude of Jesus.

Secondly, we need to change the scale. Verse two and following, "I beg you that when I come I may not have to be as bold as I expect to be toward some people who think that we live by the standards of this world. For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds." I'll come back to that word strongholds in just a moment.

But here is the point, and that is he says there are two ways to evaluate things the way the world does, which are the weapons of the world and then a divine perspective. When your scale is the scale that everybody else uses, then you are susceptible to the same kind of boasting. Again, verse 18, "For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends." And so, what that ultimately means is that our ultimate satisfaction comes from the commendation that we get from God about our lives, from Jesus, not from what it is that we've done. And you can be a follower of Jesus, or you can be a long-time Christian and still end up in this game of saying what really matters is what commendation I get from other people about whatever it is that's most important to me instead of saying I get my real commendation from God.

Phillip Keller. Not Tim Keller. Philip Keller, who wrote several things years ago, wrote this. He says, "It's the very nature of things we soon discover in life that in order to be loved either in a

physical or filial dimension we must show ourselves lovable. Somehow we have to demonstrate to others that we are worth loving. We have to prove that we are worthy of their love. And, sad to say, in most cases, the moment we fail to do this we discover that we are being cut off. . . Now, amazing as it may sound, and incredible as it may seem, there is none of this in the love of God. The simple truth is that His love for me does not in any way depend on my worthiness of it. In other words, I do not have to merit His love. I do not, so to speak, have to earn His love. Scripture repeats this theme again and again. For example, in that most poignant of all the stories told by Jesus, the account of the prodigal son, we see clearly portrayed for us what the love of God is like. No doubt the dear old man had died a thousand deaths after his son's departure. Yet his attitude of devotion, affection, and utter selflessness never altered. It mattered not what happened to himself as long as his son could be restored and redeemed and remade. His care and concern for this one's welfare never abated. This is the love of God."

And then the final thing here is that we need to change the narrative, verses four and five. "The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ."

Now this word stronghold is used in some circles of Christianity to refer to something that you have no power over unless you somehow call down the power of God to give you power over this. Usually, it refers to some kind of addiction or some kind of behavior pattern that we don't actually want to give up. So, we call it a stronghold. And so, people would be like I have a stronghold of gambling. I have a stronghold of pornography. I have a stronghold of anger. And what can I do? It's a stronghold. I need divine intervention, and without it, I can't have it. This is the only time the word stronghold is used in the New Testament.

William Mounce, Greek scholar, says this about it. He says this word means a bulwark of error or vice. So, what is this stronghold? What does it say right here? It is that we are fighting with the weapons of the world. His answer is to demolish the arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God and to take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. Translation - what we need is to believe the right things about Jesus, about God, because that is what demolishes the strongholds that actually keep us from truth and life. You see when we believe in error, then we live in error, and when we live in error, then we end up reaping the results of that error.

So, how do you destroy a stronghold? What you do is stop saying I need some outside intervention, but I take every thought captive meaning I'm in the word, I'm worshipping, and I'm in a community group where people can speak truth to me so that my thoughts are aligned with the thoughts of God regularly. One of the reasons that public worship matters, coming and singing matters, is because it's a time of affirmation and public affirmation. One of the reasons that listening to teaching matters and speaking matters is because it's a time to hear the Word of God taught so that it can come into your house, into your life, and your heart. One of the reasons groups matter is it's a chance for you to confess sins to one another, to talk about what's real, and to be challenged in your way of thinking. Your mind won't take every thought captive if you're doing it in isolation and you will have strongholds, but not the kind of stronghold that you can't do anything about.

And so, there's a changing of the narrative saying I'm going to take every thought captive, meaning I am going to come to say what matters is the commendation of the Lord. Again, verse 18, "For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends." By the way, this idea of being commended by God is not just simply the kind of sentimental idea that God says everyone's good no matter what this is. This is the commendation that comes from acknowledging our sinfulness and our inability to meet the demands, commending ourselves, and being commended by Jesus because of what Jesus Christ has done on our behalf. And when we understand that, what happens is we start to move to a place where we say you know what, I can live with the idea that these other parts of my life are a gift. They're a good thing, but they're not ultimate because I have a commendation. That's big.

John Ortberg told a story in one of his books about growing up. He had a sister named Barbie who had a doll that she loved called Pandy. Here's how he writes about it. He says, When Pandy was young and a looker, Barbie loved her. She loved her with a love that was too strong for Pandy's own good. When Barbie went to bed at night, Pandy lay next to her. When Barbie had lunch, Pandy ate beside her at the table. When Barbie could get away with it, Pandy took a bath with her. Barbie's love for that doll, from Pandy's point of view, was a nearly fatal attraction. By the time I knew Pandy, she was not a particularly attractive doll. In fact, to tell you the truth, she was a mess. She had lost a good deal of her hair. One of her arms was missing, and generally speaking, she had the stuffing knocked out of her. But for reasons that no one could ever quite figure out, in a way that kids sometimes do, my sister Barbie loved that rag doll. Still, she loved her strongly in the days of Pandy's raggedness as she ever had in the days of her great beauty. Other dolls came and went, but Pandy was family. Love Barbie. Love her rag doll. It was a package deal.

Once we took a vacation from our home in Rockford, Illinois, to Canada. And when we returned almost all the way home, we realized at the Illinois border that Pandy had not come back with us. She had remained behind at the hotel in Canada. No other option was thinkable. My father turned the car around and drove from Illinois all the way back to Canada. We rushed into the hotel and checked with the desk clerk in the lobby. No, Pandy. We ran back to our room. No, Pandy. We ran downstairs and found the laundry room. And there we found Pandy wrapped up in the sheets about to be washed to death. And then John Ortberg makes this observation. He says the measure of my sister's love for that doll was that she would travel all the way from a distant country to save her. Even though Pandy was more of a rag doll, Barbie loved her with a love that made Pandy beautiful."

You see, the commendation that our soul really craves, your soul craves, whether you're a long-time believer, follower of Jesus, new to faith, or still thinking about faith, is not the fickle commendation of people in your life saying you're smart, you're rich, you're wise, you're attractive, you're kids are great, you're moral, you're spiritual, or you're successful. It's the commendation of a God who says, I love you not because you're beautiful, but because I love you. And that will let you live with the other boasts of your life without them being a boast. But instead, you will have something greater inside of you.

And so, today my simple challenge is this, and that is to find a way to get your commendation from God. If you're in a group that meets, a small group regularly talks about the messages, I

encourage you to just talk about what are your boasts besides the Lord to confess them to one another and then to commit to just saying how do I push myself to change the scale, to change the narrative, to have the character of Jesus, of the meekness and the gentleness so that I don't live on that other scale.

Let's pray. God, today we ask that you would help us to see the futility of trying to get our commendation from things that can be physical and see the infinite beauty of a commendation from you that we so often walk right past. God, I ask today that you would help each of us to understand what it is, to see ourselves through your eyes, and to live with the accompanying freedom. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Thanks for being here. Have a great day.