

BOASTING ABOUT SIN  
ROMANS 12: 9-21

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University Church of Chicago  
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The church was in the midst of a major capital funds campaign, and it was not going well. The longtime members were refusing to pledge, the richest members were pledging less than the middle-class people, and the pastor doubted whether the congregation could accomplish all it wanted in the way of renewal and redecoration.

Both the village and the church seemed to be controlled by two brothers. They were wealthy, mean-spirited, controlling and greedy. Nobody liked them but almost everybody was either beholden to them or afraid of them. One day one of the brothers died, so the other one went to the pastor and said, "I know the church's capital funds campaign is in trouble, so here's my deal: I will give you \$500,000 toward your goal if during my brother's funeral, you will call him a saint."

The pastor thought for a minute and replied, "OK. Write out the check now, and I guarantee you that I will call your brother a saint during Friday's funeral."

Came the day of the funeral. The pastor went through the prayers and Scripture readings. Now it was time for the sermon. He began, "Our brother who has died was one of the most despicable people I have ever met. He tried to control our village and our church. He was greedy, an adulterer, mean-spirited, a glutton, a thief, and he was definitely not in any way a Christian."

He paused and pointed toward the surviving brother. "But compared to his brother, he was a saint!"

The pastor was preaching directly from the theology of Paul the Apostle when that peripatetic evangelist/church organizer/polemicist/writer extraordinaire declares: "For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God...Then what becomes of boasting? It is excluded. By what law? By that of works?...For...a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law."

In sixteen of William Faulkner's novels he constructed a mythical county, town and its surrounding environs he called "my own little postage stamp of soil." He named it Yoknapatawpha County, and its county seat was the mythical town of Jefferson.

According to Faulkner, soon after Jefferson was named in the early 1830s, a mysterious stranger named Thomas Sutpen arrived in town, causing some local stir because of his silence regarding his past and the wagonload of twenty wild French-speaking Blacks and the dapper little architect who accompanied him. He bought or bartered from a local Indian chief a hundred square miles of fertile bottom land near the Tallahatchie river and

then spent two years clearing the land and building his plantation house, the grandest structure in the county, perhaps in the state. It was known as Frenchman's Bend.

A few years later there arrived a man named Ab Snopes, a horse and mule thief who profited from both the Yankees and the Rebels during the Civil War. The Snopeses were from a different subset of American life. They were poor, ambitious, conniving and clever. They lived by violence, intimidation and bribery. In less than five years Ab's son Flem had risen from a clerkship in a small country store to become an owner of cattle and a barn, a party to various quick and profitable sales and a petty usurer—turning his hand, in short, to any reasonably lawful money-getting enterprise. As a kind of climax to his career, he took over the ownership of Frenchman's Bend through an arranged marriage.

In a way that mythical history is quintessentially Southern, rural, isolated. But in another sense it tells your story and mine. It's about gluttony and greed. Not about eating too much. Not about a culture in which the average American eats more than half of her or his meals away from home. Our real sin, the sin all of us indulge in every day, constantly and without remission is self-deception. Our self-absorption, our obsession with getting and spending and hoarding leads to that time that St. Paul describes, when we shall "reap what we have sown."

Paul admonishes the Romans and us to deal gently with those who do wrong, for all go wrong at times. Yet this is more than a charge to be nice. Being nice is not the same as being Christian. Paul puts it in terms of our having received the Spirit of God and the "law of Christ," which on its face seems a contradiction in terms. But what he means is that we fulfill Christ's standards as the Spirit empowers and moves us to deal with those who are in error.

I know churches where you will never be asked to say a prayer of confession, because they want worship to be a positive experience. Similarly, I know churches where there is no pastoral prayer, because the pastor thinks the language of prayer has been lost. We want to go straight for the grace. The story of the prodigal son is one of our favorites because it assures us that no matter how far we have gone from God and no matter what we have done, we are always welcome home. What we forget, however, is that the prodigal had to "come to himself," had to recognize his sin before he could be forgiven.

Paul declares that to commit our lives to Christ is to be done with the self-deception of arrogance. Whatever pride Christians have should be in our obedience, not in our capacities, for our obedience is merely our yielding to the Spirit, not acting from our own initiative. We cannot fool God, Paul says. When we focus on ourselves, even in God's name, we have the wrong focus and we stand condemned. We all know how hard it is at times to do the right thing, but when we focus on God's will instead of our own, we are ensured the right results.

Over the years I have undoubtedly quarreled with Paul more than any other Biblical writer and personality. Even now I cannot honestly say that I have reached a détente with

him. Perhaps I have mellowed—although anybody who knows me would find that hard to believe, because I am convinced that most of us simply become more of what we were in the first place as we age—or perhaps the Spirit has enlightened me more about Paul’s obsessive/compulsive personality and has given me more insight into his mood swings.

Thus, when he declares to the Christians in Rome, to those struggling faithful followers of Jesus who were submerged in an even more secular culture than we are: “A person is justified by faith apart from works,” he penetrates to the heart of our vanity: that all our efforts to prove how good we are, all our attempts at doing things just right and feeling so self-righteous when we compare our lives to others are truly vain acts in the context of God’s new creation. For the new creation is a reality brought into being through God’s work in Jesus Christ and in God’s continuing labors by the Spirit. God’s true people are those who obey God’s will, not merely those who vaunt themselves and their own goodness.

“Whose end is destruction, whose god is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame, who mind earthly things,” runs the King James Version of Paul’s judgment on the greedy. “Who mind earthly things.” Our twenty-first century problem is fully characterized in that phrase. Our problem is not eating too much, drinking too much, smoking too much, living as if we are unaware of health hazards. Rather our immoderate and gluttonous desire for things—commodities, goods, luxuries constitutes one of our basic and basest sins.

Our lives get sapped of life’s meaning when our preoccupation is with that which we are not doing because we are doing what we are doing. Because I’m reading a book, I can’t be painting my house. Because I’m writing a sermon, I can’t be at a meeting. Because I am busy with the tasks at hand, I can’t go out to eat with friends. There is a pressure in some of us to be taking in more experience than it is possible to consume. We cannot enjoy what we’re doing because the culture tells us we should be doing more. One reaches a certain age and she begins to think, “I’ve got to make up for lost time. There are so many things I have denied myself. I have to be free to do all those things my parents told me were sinful.” Thanks to Gail Sheehy, the term that popularized that syndrome and has become a vital part of our vocabulary is “mid-life crisis.” But the truth is that that crisis can happen at any time in our chronological existence.

The deeper, more important question is about life’s meaning. On this Labor Day weekend when we honor those women and men who work in the mills, hotels, shops, restaurants, hospitals, government offices, many of them doing work so menial and unrecognized that we ignore them, we are called up short by Paul’s admonition to “Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them.”

The reason that Christians are not to “repay anyone evil for evil” or avenge themselves is that God alone has the right to vengeance. Judgment is reserved for God, and so is vengeance. Christians have no need to see revenge or repayment of wrong. That is God’s prerogative, and God’s alone!

With the use of Proverbs 25: 21-21 in Romans 12:20, however, Paul does offer a solution for the short term: “If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads.” Rather than seeking revenge, Paul wisely encourages the doing of good to the enemy, for the impact of that good promises to be far more humiliating—for more effective!—than sheer repayment of evil. To “overcome evil with good” does not mean we lie down before evil so that it simply has its own way, but to conquer it by the skillful use of good.

That is exactly what Gandhi in India, Martin King in America and Nelson Mandela (to name three) and their followers have done with such effectiveness. God gives us wake-up calls in many different disguises and forms and deformations.

Schopenhauer said that our lives are like a cat playing with a doomed mouse. Our lives are only briefly secure. Death plays with each of us. “It is clear that as our walking is admittedly nothing but a constantly prevented falling, so the life of our bodies is nothing but a constantly prevented dying, an ever postponed death.”

Death and rebirth are a painful process. Yet when we die to the old, new life comes. Thomas Merton had everything most of us covet: he was a *bon vivant* in New York City, a literary critic with a wide circle of friends, the good life with all its rewards of position, power and money. But something was missing. Meaning itself. He describes his death and new life:

Such was the death of the hero, the great man I had wanted to be. Externally (I thought) I was a big success. Everybody knew who I was at Columbia. Those who had not yet found out, soon did when the yearbook came out, full of pictures of myself. They did not have to be very acute to see through the dumb self-satisfied expression in all those portraits. The only thing that surprises me is that no one openly reproached or mocked me for such ignominious vanity. No one threw eggs at me, nobody said a word. The wounds within me were, I suppose, enough. I was bleeding to death. I had come very far, to find myself in this blind-alley: but the very anguish and helplessness of my position was something to which I rapidly succumbed. And it was my defeat that was to be the occasion of my rescue.

On a summer night many years ago at Camp Egan, near Tahlequah, Oklahoma, the choir sang “Are Ye Able?” That wonderful hymn written by Earl Marlatt:

“Are ye able, said the Master, to be crucified with me?  
Yea, the sturdy dreamers answered, to the death we follow thee.  
Lord, we are able. Our spirits are thine.  
Remold us, make us like thee, divine.  
Thy guiding radiance above us shall be,  
A beacon to God, to love and loyalty.”

After a week with some of the most inspiring pastors, missionaries and church workers I have ever known, I answered, “Yes, Lord, I am able.” Ronnie Morris, Walter Wink, Lavena Monger, Estelle Labadie and I went to the altar rail and committed our lives to the service of the church.

I thought, my life will count for something. As Fred Craddock has put it, I thought, I will write a big check with whatever talents God has given me. I will do great things for Christ and the Church. I will make a huge difference in the world.

But you know what happened? I have never written that big check for thousands of dollars. Instead, I have given two dollars here, twenty dollars there, a few hundred to that cause. So, here I am late in my life figuring out that life is not about the big, important things but about living faithfully every day. Success is not about publicity but purpose, not about having but giving, not about owning and going places and possessing all the signs of success but about the cup of cold water and making sacrifices for others.

It is not by works but by faith that we are saved. And it is in faith that we spend our lives, our money, our time, our talents in Christ’s service.