

# Two Contrasting Boastings

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[ 0 : 00 ] Prophecy of Jeremiah in chapter 9. We're going to consider a few verses there in chapter 9, verses 23 and 24.

So it's Jeremiah chapter 9 and at verse 23. Thus says the Lord, Well, we know from the likes of Deuteronomy and other passages that the Lord gave certain warnings to Israel before they actually entered into the land of Canaan.

God was concerned that they would always keep that in mind.

And that follows through, of course, right through into our own circumstances today as well.

Because that same emphasis we find here in our generation as well.

There are two types of boasting, as you can see from these verses. Two types of boasting in these two verses. There's first of all the boasting of those who boast in their wisdom, in their strength, in their riches.

[ 2 : 13 ] And then there are those who boast in the Lord as the one who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness. So they're not just two types of boasting.

They're two contrasting boastings. They're in contrast with each other quite deliberately in these verses. Now, Judah here was facing disaster. Disaster, they had refused to listen to the prophets that the Lord had sent to them.

All the many warnings and promises, indeed, that he had given them. And they were facing disaster now as Jeremiah carried through his ministry. Facing the disaster of exile, which eventually, of course, came to pass as the Lord had, in fact, said.

And they were seeing their security, as many people are today. Seeing their security in what you might call the trinity of worldliness. And you'll find that in verse 23.

That trinity of worldliness, wisdom, might, riches. These are the essence of worldliness. And it makes this passage, makes these verses so incredibly important and relevant to the age in which we live.

[ 3 : 25 ] They're just as relevant tonight to us in Stornoway or in Scotland in our age as they were in Jeremiah's day to the people of Judah. Because these will always be the trinity of worldliness.

They will always be the things that men's and women's hearts yearn for instead of God. And here is Jeremiah, the Lord saying to Jeremiah, that this is the message he's to keep presenting.

That the person who boasts, let him boast in this. That he understands the Lord, not in the things of worldliness. And that's why we find these two types of boasting are so important for us to keep in contrast and bear in mind.

There's first of all the boasting, as we see, based on what might say self-confidence, the boasting of worldliness, the boasting of sinful arrogance, sinful trusting in oneself.

That's what he says here. Boasting, of course, means, as it often does in the Bible, the New Testament as well. Paul uses the word boast quite a number of times.

[ 4 : 34 ] And it carries with it the idea of actually trusting or having confidence in something. When Paul says, let me not glory or boast in anything except in the cross of Christ.

What he's really saying is, I don't want to boast in anything else. I don't want to boast in myself. I want to boast in this. I want to have the confidence, my confidence placed entirely in the cross of Christ.

And so that element of boasting carries with it the element of trusting or confidence. There's a sinful boasting. There's a righteous boasting, if you like, where your confidence is on the ability of another, of Jesus, of God himself.

This is the contrast that he's bringing out here in these three elements. First of all, wisdom. Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom. By wisdom there, he means human thought.

Mere human thought. Human planning. Human application. By the wisdom that people we think have ourselves naturally, applying that to the world and to our own circumstances.

[ 5 : 49 ] Well, he's saying here, let not the wise man boast in that. Let's not trust in that. Let's not place our confidence in that, is what he means. Now, we read in 1 Corinthians, in chapter 1 into chapter 2, and I think that these two passages are so closely connected.

You might say that almost that 1 Corinthians, that part of 1 Corinthians we read, is almost a commentary on these verses in Jeremiah. Because you remember there that Paul is saying that the word of the cross, the preaching of the cross, is foolishness to those who are perishing.

Who are those who are perishing? Those who are trusting in the wisdom of the world. But he says, we are not trusting in that. We are actually preaching Christ crucified, a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles.

For the foolishness of God is wiser than men. And, of course, then he went on to speak about Jesus being our wisdom, our righteousness. So, there are two passages that are many, many hundreds of years apart when they were written.

And yet, they are very much focused in on what is wisdom and what are we to boast in? Where is our confidence to be? And there is Jeremiah, long before the apostle Paul was born, and yet coming to speak out the same truth of God.

[ 7 : 12 ] And in that passage, of course, we read in 1 Corinthians 2, as we went on, verses 4 and 5, he says that his speech and his message, as he came to Corinth with the message of the gospel, they were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God.

That is the rationale of the gospel. That is the end result of preaching the gospel. That is what preachers of the gospel aim at. That is what God calls us to be as preachers of the gospel, to preach the wisdom of God in Christ and in the death of Christ and the person of Christ.

And what is the end result we pray for? It's that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God. And this is what Jeremiah was lamenting.

This is a chapter, as many of the chapters in Jeremiah are laments, where he's pleading with the Lord, where he's pouring out his heart before God. And as that chapter begins, here is his great complaint.

Oh, that my head were water, and my eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people. And he goes on to, as he does often, to bring before God the departure on the part of the people from the ways of God.

[ 8 : 43 ] And we're in the same position, are we not, today? As we see so much departure from the ways of God, not just in the world, because that's what you expect in the world, but also among confessing churches, confessing Christians, who are actually now sadly moving apart away from the core elements of Scripture and denying some of the things that God has said are essential features of the gospel.

Well, that's what Paul was dealing with in Corinthians as well. This is the end for which he preached. This is the purpose he had in preaching. This is so that he would actually bring people to see, through the blessing of God, that their faith, their confidence, their boasting would not be, in the words of Jeremiah, the wisdom of men, but in the wisdom of God in Christ.

That's what, of course, we've countered in our own generation. The ideology that's out there, the ideology that dismisses the gospel, that dismisses God, the secularist, humanist, atheistic ideologies of our age, that's what is countered by the likes of these passages of Scripture.

Let me just read to you from something that Professor Peter Atkins, he's a retired professor nowadays, he's in his 80s, I believe. He was a professor of chemistry at Oxford University, but he's also a prominent atheist and humanist, and has spoken quite a bit along on those issues as well.

This is what he said at one time. I regard teaching religion as purveying lies. To assert God did it is no more than an admission of ignorance, dressed deceitfully as an explanation.

[ 10 : 36 ] To say that God made the world is simply a more or less sophisticated way of saying that we don't understand how the universe originated.

A God, in as far as it is anything, is an admission of ignorance. There's the atheistic mind. There's the unbelieving mind.

There's the antagonistic mind to the gospel, to the things of God. There is the wisdom of this world. There is the wisdom that the foolishness of preaching and of the word of God actually seeks, as

Paul put it, to counter.

And we could actually say, in response to that statement, this statement is an intended proof, an unintended proof of ignorance.

He speaks about that it's ignorance dressed deceitfully that claims that God is the creator of the universe. Well, in response to that, we can say that this very statement is itself an unintended proof of ignorance, very unconsciously on the speaker's part.

[ 11 : 43 ] But that's the world we face. That's the world that's always been faced by the church, but it's much more sophisticated in our day than it has been, I suppose, ever in the history of the world. So that's the first thing he says in terms of this trinity of worldliness.

Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom. Secondly, let not the mighty man boast in his might.

Power. People crave power. Power. It isn't just in politics or in financial matters.

Power is something that every human being, to a sense, in a sense, craves. Power is something that if we're left to ourselves, we will actually crave as well. Power is something the gospel delivers us from.

Because when you come to know the Lord, then you come to know that your power is in him, not in your own ability, not in yourself. It can be physical or mental or status or financial.

All the things that give influence over other people, especially, the word power covers all of that.

And you know very well that our generation, as much as any other, is actually marked by power.

[ 12 : 47 ] People taking control. People have the power to manipulate. And especially people having the power to keep others under their control, to take over their lives.

You'll see it all the time. In big business, you'll see it all the time in politics. You'll see it in every single aspect, every single stratum of human society.

Here is God's counter to that. Let not the mighty man boast in his might. Indeed, if you went through, again, to 2 Corinthians chapter 12, where Paul was given this thorn in the flesh to assault him, this messenger of Satan, as he called it.

Why was that? It was to keep him from being overexalted. He had been taken up to the third heaven. Saw things which he couldn't put into human language.

And heard things, rather, which he couldn't put into human language. And then the Lord gave him this thorn in the flesh. Whatever it was, we're not told. But it was painful. And he pleaded with the Lord three times that he might take it away.

[ 13 : 57 ] Paul was a man who was used to pain. And this must have been excruciatingly painful. But the Lord said, my grace is sufficient for you. For my strength is made perfect.

Where? In weakness. In other words, we hand over our strength when we hand over ourselves to the Lord by faith. When we actually, by the grace of God, are enabled to deliver ourselves into the hands of Christ.

What are you doing? You're actually presenting yourself to him. And you're saying, Lord, take away my might and give me yours. Take away my power and let me have yours.

Because I read in your word that your power, your strength is made perfect. It comes into its own in my weakness. There are two things that come together in an amazing way.

There's no such thing with God as weakness. He's the almighty one. And yet he's saying, in our weakness, his almightiness comes into its own, as it were.

[ 15 : 07 ] It's made perfect in our weakness. And therefore, Paul went on to speak of saying and say, therefore, I will actually boast in my infirmities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

There's the Christian way of looking at life. There is the believer's way of defining strength. Defining wisdom in terms of strength.

It's not in our strength. It's not in human power. It's not in human ability. It's not in human control over other people. It's in the Lord's strength made perfect in our weakness.

So there's wisdom and power. Let not the rich man, wise man boast in his wisdom. Let not the mighty man boast in his might. Let not the rich man boast in his riches.

There's the third element of this trinity of wordiness, isn't it? You've got the wisdom of human beings, their own ingenuity, the sense that we can, as human beings, actually take control and look after things and have everything in the right order.

[ 16 : 18 ] There's a power that we seek for ourselves and seek to control others by. There's the third one, riches. How did Jesus describe the seed that fell among the thorns?

Well, he said, it took root, grew for a while, till the thorns choked it. And what did the thorns represent? The cares of this life and the deceitfulness of riches.

They choke the word and it becomes unprofitable. And all the way through the New Testament, following on from these writings of the Old Testament and Jeremiah and in the book of Proverbs, especially, that has so much to say about wisdom and practical wisdom.

You have the same emphasis. Let not a rich man trust in his riches. What did Jesus say about the possession of riches? He didn't say that was wrong. Abraham was rich.

He was a man of God. Job was rich. He was a man of God. A man singularly godly in his generation. Nowhere does the Bible tell us that the possession of riches, that the blessing of God by giving us riches is itself wrong.

[ 17 : 32 ] But it does say that the love of riches is disastrous. And it does say that, as Jesus himself put it, that finding riches and having riches is a great stumbling block to entering the kingdom of God.

It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. And, of course, Peter then said, well, who then can be saved? And, of course, Jesus said, well, with human beings it's impossible, but not with God.

I think it was Spurgeon who once said, we have seen rich men going through the eye of a needle, baggage and all. In other words, what he was saying was, we have seen rich people saved by the grace of God, the same as poor people.

But we have to actually take the warnings of Scripture and say, let not the rich man boast in his riches. We're told that in the days of Jeremiah, the people of Judah, and you'll find, of course, materialism so, so often by the prophets denounced, especially when those who did have riches exploited the poor.

What's going on there all the way through history, of course, has been going on, and it is today. And you'll find that we're told that 3 to 5% of the people of Judah owned 50 to 70% of the land.

[ 19 : 09 ] Of course, the land was ultimately the Lord's, but in possessing it, a very small minority of the people, of the population, actually came to control the majority, the main part of the land, 50 to 70%.

And that itself, of course, tells us something about the society that Jeremiah actually belonged to and preached to. And he reaches the source of it, really, the problem in verses 12 to 14, where he says, Who is the man so wise that he can understand this?

To whom must the mouth of the Lord spoken that he may declare? Why is the land ruined and laid waste like a wilderness, so that no one passes through? And the Lord says, Because they have forsaken my law that I set before them, and have not obeyed my voice or walked with it, but have stubbornly followed their own hearts, and have gone after the Baals as their fathers taught them. There's the crux of the issue, you see. He's saying this is what the Lord is teaching him. This is what he's being given to say to the people, even though they're not listening. This is the crux of the issue.

Because they have forsaken my law, and have gone after the Baals in the stubbornness of their own hearts. You look out over society, I'm not saying that it's exactly the same as for Jeremiah's day.

[ 20 : 36 ] Judah was a theocratic society, which had God as its head. They were a covenant people of God. We can't say that that's true of our society, our people today.

But nevertheless, the same principles apply, don't they? When you put the word of God aside, what are you left with? You're left with human wisdom. When you actually put the power of God aside, what are you left with?

We're left with, very often, what comes to be tyrannous. And exploitation, when you come to actually put the riches of God's grace behind you, and aside, when you come to put the riches of salvation, the riches of God's word, the riches of God's kingdom, what are you left with?

You're left with a kingdom of human construction. And that's a disaster. Let not the rich man boast in his riches any more than the mighty man boast in his might, or the wise man boast in his wisdom. God and the gospel shows us the proper way, doesn't it? In Proverbs chapter 14, verse 34, words that we've been familiar with for so many years, most of us probably learned them in our youth.

[ 21 : 48 ] Righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people. It wasn't confining it just to Israel.

This is the Bible speaking about every nation. Righteousness exalts a nation. What is the opposite of righteousness? Sinfulness. Righteousness and sin are the opposites the Bible brings before us. Well, I didn't want to spend too much on this, but now that the time is passing, we'll need to move on. This is the boasting then based on self-confidence, the sinful boasting, the boasting of human beings in their own abilities, their own actions, their own riches.

But then he goes on to speak about the boasting that's based on knowing God. Let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and know me and knows me.

When he says understand, he means also have insights, a word that means having proper insight into things, to see things as they are, and to know the source of what is really true prosperity, or the source from where all blessings come from.

[ 23 : 00 ] All of that is really built into the meaning of this word that Jeremiah is using here, this word understanding. And he ties that up with knowing, that he understands and knows me.

And the idea of knowing carries in the Hebrew sense of it, also that the meaning of a commitment to something. That's what you find so often the marriage relationship in the Old Testament.

It talks about the man knowing his wife, and the product of that is a child. It's the intimate relationship of marriage that produces seed, produces children.

That's as God intended it. But that word know is used, and it's also used of our relationship spiritually with God, and God with us.

He knows us. We know him. We have an intimate relationship with him spiritually, where he has committed himself to his people, and his people to him.

[ 24 : 05 ] Remember the words of Jesus in John chapter 17, that usually called a high priestly prayer, that wonderful prayer that is recorded for us there before Jesus went out to face the cross, where he's saying to the Father, as he seeks that the Father will glorify him with his own self, with the glory he had with him before the world was, and that he had given his people his word.

But he says, this is eternal life. That they might know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.

He's defining eternal life in terms of knowing God, because this wonderful relationship with God that comes through the grace of God, and by our exercise of faith, and of trust, and confidence in God, that is knowing God.

Knowing in that personal, intimate way. And he says, that's eternal life, to have that, to know God in that way. But he says here, to know that I am the Lord, who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth.

Now, I find it interesting that that the Lord here, to Jeremiah, is countering the trinity of worldliness, if you like, by this great triad of qualities that belong to God himself, where he says, I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, and justice, and righteousness in the earth.

[ 25 : 43 ] Steadfast love, words we've seen before so often, the loving kindness, as it is in the older translations, and both the steadfastness of God's love, and the kindness of God's love, are actually built into this word in Hebrew.

And you need both, in a sense, you need both, the older translation, and this one, to bring out the full meaning of it. Because it is steadfast love, it's love that's unflinching, and will not be moved from its objective.

But it's also loving kindness. It's love that does good to people. It's love that showers gifts on his people. It's kindness love.

That's the love of God. Greatest gift of all, as we are reminded in prayer, is, of course, the Lord Jesus Christ himself, who was given by God the Father, as the great gift of love to his people. And here is the very emphasis he says here, the steadfast love. Boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love.

[ 26 : 51 ] In other words, our worship of God, our commitment to God, our service for God, in a sense, these are all responses, by the grace of God, to his steadfast love.

Why do we worship him? Because we value his love, because he has revealed himself to us, and we come to treasure his love. And we treasure his love in such a way that we come before him, as we do tonight, to worship him, to give thanks for it, and to say that we indeed come to boast in him. And our confidence and trust is here. And also justice. Let him know that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love and justice.

You know, the more often I go on in life, the more I believe that justice is such a crucial element in the whole spectrum of human life, and indeed in God's government as well.

If you take justice out of things altogether, what are you left with? Well, you're left with inequity and untruth.

[ 28 : 06 ] If you take justice out, then everything falls to bits, doesn't it? You know, some people, you'll hear them saying, those who have committed horrendous crimes, and have either taken their own life, or else have come to be put to death in some way or other, in the perpetration of these crimes, or whatever.

And people, people say like the great dictator, let's just say Hitler, for example, you'll find some people saying, well, well, he got off with it. He didn't face justice. He didn't appear before any human court.

He wasn't actually given any verdict over him by a human judiciary, so as to sentence him for his crimes. He didn't escape justice. He went to face justice, like you and I will have to face justice, because here is the justice of God, the justice of God's government, and every aspect of God's government is just.

There's nothing unfair about it. There's nothing unjust about it. There's nothing imbalanced about it. God's justice is justice that's towards the righteous and towards the wicked, towards the saved, towards the lost, but that justice is justice through and through.

It is not deflected. It is not in any way marred. It's not to be called into question. It is our most precious thing for us, that the God we worship is a just God.

[ 29 : 30 ] You know, Christ's death, so Catechism reminds us that his death, the purpose of it, or part of the purpose of it, was this, to satisfy divine justice.

God's eternal justice, God's perfect justice, which demanded from us for our sins an atonement adequate or sufficient to actually satisfy God, and God knew we could never do it.

Our sin prevented it, our lostness, our corruption. What did God do? He gave his son over to the death of the cross and died a death that is of God's hand just, so that he might be just, as Romans put it, and the justifier of the one who believes in Jesus.

Such a precious, precious thing, justice. And when you remove it out of a society or get it in any society where justice begins to be corrupted and cease to be justice, then so many problems will actually follow from that.

Here is God saying, this, if you're going to boast, he says, let the one who boasts, boasts in me that I am the Lord who practices justice. And of course, righteousness is the third one, God's own standard.

[ 31 : 05 ] The standard he conforms to, the very essence of his being, is righteous. Everything he does in seeing, he sees righteously, he actually speaks righteously, he acts righteously.

It's a standard of perfection. The opposite, as we said, of righteousness is sin. Remember that great text in 2 Corinthians 5, verse 21, talking there about the great exchange that took place on the cross.

He says, for God, the Father, he means especially, made him, that's Jesus, to be sin for us. The one who knew no sin to be made sin for us who are sinners.

Why? So that the righteousness of God, that we might become the righteousness of God in him. See, there's the, there's the opposites.

Sin, righteousness. We, sin, God, righteous. Jesus, in himself, sinless, became sin, was made sin.

[ 32 : 19 ] Why? So that we, who are sinful, be made righteous. That's the core of the gospel. That's the essence of atonement. And it follows on from God himself being the righteous God.

So these three things, let him who boasts, boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord, who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth.

There's one more thing. For in these things, I delight, says the Lord. You see, this is not just something that's true about God in some sort of mechanical, unfeeling sort of way, you might say. These are things the Lord says that I delight in. He delights in these three things. In practices, steadfast love, and justice, and righteousness.

And not only that, but the meaning here really carries over surely into the whole idea that he delights in finding these things in us too.

[ 33 : 27 ] That we are committed as Christian people by the grace of God as far as is possible for us to practice steadfast love.

Love that's committed. Love that is true. Love that is real. And justice. And righteousness. And our relationships with each other, with the world out there.

All of these, these three are so important. It's the essence of the Christian life as it is the essence of God himself and what he's like.

I remember another of the minor prophets, the prophet Micah and how he actually came to, in chapter 6, to ask these questions.

He knew, of course, the answer to them. This was the Lord himself actually saying to him as he again accused his people rightly of their sins and their abandonment and turning away from the Lord.

[ 34 : 35 ] Well, he says, with what shall I come before the Lord? Shall I bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?

Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?

You see, there is God through the prophet really saying, what is it you're going to do as a basis of finding acceptance with me? He has told you, O man, what is good and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice and to love kindness, steadfast love that means, and to walk humbly with your God.

Or in the words of Jeremiah as we've seen, he has told you, O man, what is good to boast in steadfast love and in justice and in righteousness.

For the Lord says, in these I delight and we say, Amen, Lord, we delight in them also. Let's pray.

[ 35 : 56 ] Our gracious God, we give thanks tonight for the steadfast love and the power and the righteousness, the justice that is yours and we give thanks that these have been revealed to us through the gospel and especially in the person of your Son, O Lord Jesus Christ.

Lord, we give thanks for him tonight as he came to stand between us and the holy God and for the way that he is himself, our righteousness, our peace, all the things that we required but could never create for ourselves.

O Lord, help us, we pray, to walk humbly before you and to walk in such a way that seeks like the apostle to know of your strength made perfect in our weakness.

Help us, we pray, to detach ourselves more and more from the ways of the world and forgive us, we pray, when we fall into these ways as we so often do.

help us in our thoughts and in our actions to follow the example of the Lord himself and in such a way that would indeed find these great qualities that your word speaks of to be true of us also.

[ 37 : 13 ] Hear the prayers of your people. Be with us now and pardon our sin for Christ's sake. Amen.