

UNEDITED DRAFT

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

When it comes to discussions about God, a person's relationship with him, and even morality, speaking with boldness, certainty and in absolutes are strongly frowned upon in our world today.

The popular notion is that if there is a god, then every religion has a little bit of the truth. All paths lead to god as you understand him. We cannot be critical of anyone else's beliefs because all are equally valid and equally valuable. Morality is subjective and you get to choose for yourself what you believe is right and wrong. I've noticed that whenever a Christian takes a stand on an issue that God's has definitively revealed to us, they immediately get attacked. We live in a society that demands tolerance for every viewpoint, but at the same time is completely, impatiently and rudely intolerant of a viewpoint that claims to be absolute and true.

God calls us to be bold in our actions and bold in our words. Especially when it comes to fellow Christians who have placed themselves under the authority of Christ, God calls us to encourage one another, hold each other accountable, correct one another, rebuke each other when needed, help one another.

In the verse we look at today, the apostle Paul is wrapping up the great epistle to the Romans. In this epistle, Paul has spoken boldly, with certainty and in absolutes. Now in these verses Paul explains and defends his right to do so... and we too learn we have both the right and the responsibility to speak unequivocally, unapologetically, uncompromisingly, boldly about Christ and his truth... especially to fellow believers! And, in fact, not only do we speak that way, we live that way as well. And that brings us the theme of our message today: We serve in word and deed boldly... because of grace.

So we start the epilogue to this great epistle. It essentially ended in verse 13. Now he's wrapping things up. Here: why do I speak so boldly? Why do I have the right? In defending his boldness, he gives us the defense for our boldness in proclaiming Christ and his truth.

¹⁴ I myself am convinced, my brothers and sisters, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with knowledge and competent to instruct one another.

Paul has said a lot that they may misconstrued as critical. He has spoken many words of correction. He instructs them in how to better serve the Lord. Paul is afraid that perhaps they have begun to think that they must be a pretty rotten congregation. "Wow, we must have blown it as Christians. Look at all that Paul has written to us!" But here Paul encourages them that they are actually a great congregation. Three things he commends them for. He tells them they are *full of goodness*. That is, they had good moral judgment enlightened by God and his word, and they practiced it as well. He says they are *filled with knowledge*. Of course, he's not talking about knowledge of the natural world... but knowledge of God's Word. They had received and taken to heart God's truth. They weren't ignorant about God's Word or God's ways. And finally, he says they are *competent to instruct* one another. That is, instruction as to what is right and wrong. Another way to translate the word is to admonish or rebuke one another. In other words, they could counsel one another. When someone veers from God's will, they could correct each other.

Please not carefully that Paul did not speak these words to the pastors of the congregation, nor just to the spiritual leaders. He doesn't say: "Pastors, you are full of goodness, filled with knowledge and competent to instruct." No, he was talking to the members of the church!

If I may be so bold, I would say the same about you, Good Shepherd! You are full of goodness. You know what God says is right. You know what God says is wrong. Your moral compass has been aligned by God's Word.

You are filled with knowledge. That knowledge for some of you has come through life long study and application of God's Word. Some of you are going or have gone in the past to our grade school and you received a thorough training and knowledge of God's Word. Some of you have attended our Bible information class. You know!

And listen: You are competent to instruct, counsel, and admonish one another. This is huge. If another member comes to you with a problem, I hope your first step is not to refer them to the pastor. You are competent to instruct and counsel. God's design for his church was never that only the pastor does all the instructing and counseling of all the members. You are well equipped to instruct and counsel each other. If you're not sure what to say, come talk to me! That happened just a few weeks ago. A member came and talked to me about what to say to a friend who was caught in a sin. This person didn't ask me to go talk to the person who was caught in a sin, but wanted to know how best to handle the situation. Perfect! You are competent to instruct and counsel one another, and that is in fact what God has called you to do. If you hit a situation where you're not sure what God says, or how it should be handled, we'll work through that together.

¹⁵ Yet I have written you quite boldly on some points to remind you of them again, [so Paul doesn't say you're getting this all wrong, he's saying that you're backsliding a bit. You're forgetting. Regular review, encouragement, instruction and correction are needed by God's people!] because of the grace God gave me ¹⁶ to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles.

Why boldly? Why does he have the right? Why can he speak to them like this in the name of God? Because of the grace God gave him... not saving grace. Here he's talking about a special grace given to him. Grace simply means the undeserved kindness of God. Specifically here, he is talking about the undeserved kindness of God in making him a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles

When we hear the word "minister" we usually think "pastor". But the word minister simple means one who serves: a servant. Paul considers himself a servant of Christ to the Gentiles. His call was specifically to take the good news of Jesus to those who are not Jewish.

And what did his service entail?

He gave me the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.

So Paul describes the nature of his service as priest. Now, he is not saying he is a priest as in the Old Testament. Paul did not believe and we don't either that there is a New Testament priestly system. A priest was an intercessor between God and man. We believe that Jesus Christ is our perfect High Priest and the only intercessor we truly need. He clarifies how he is using the term. Paul proclaims the gospel of God to the Gentiles. He is God's servant in sharing that good news with them. He speaks on God's behalf as he shares it and is in that sense a priest. Priests also would offer offerings and sacrifices to God. Paul sees himself as a priest in that the non-Jewish converts he led to Christ would be an offering to God. They were the fruits or results of his Gospel proclamation. "God, you entrusted a powerful, life-changing message to me. I faithfully shared it. Here is what I bring back to your throne: A harvest of Gentiles, purified by the blood of Jesus, made holy by the Holy Spirit."

What else could Paul say about being a minister of Christ to the Gentile: Paul boasts of his service.

¹⁷ Therefore I glory in Christ Jesus in my service to God. ¹⁸ I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me in leading the Gentiles to obey God by what I have said and done—¹⁹ by the power of signs and wonders, through the power of the Spirit of God.

If it sounds a little like Paul is boasting here, well... he is! All boasting is not wrong. Boasting in yourself always is. Boasting in your God, in his salvation, in what he accomplishes through you... giving all glory, attention and credit to him? Boast about that all day long, loud and proud! Your God is an awesome God.

So Paul says, he glories in his service to God in Christ Jesus. All that he accomplishes is only because he is in Christ and empowered by Christ. He puts strict limits on his boasting: **“¹⁸ I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me in leading the Gentiles to obey God by what I have said and done—¹⁹ by the power of signs and wonders, through the power of the Spirit of God.** Paul won't speak about his personal accomplishments outside of Christ. He won't speak about the accomplishments of others who are serving Christ. He won't give credit or glory to himself. What he does do is speak about what Christ has accomplished through Paul. Through Paul, that former persecutor of Christians, who was weak, who was not overly eloquent, who was a fragile clay vessel, yes, he will boast of what CHRIST has done through him because it shows how great and powerful Christ is.

Through Paul's preaching (which was God's message) and Paul's example (which was empowered by the Holy Spirit), Paul led many Gentiles to obey God... to believe in his Word. Paul even performed signs and wonders, and these too were by the power of the Spirit of God. All of this to the praise and glory of Christ.

By the way, note how Paul said he led the Gentiles to obey God by what he said AND DID. Paul was genuine. Paul was authentic. Paul practiced what he preached.

Was Paul boasting? You bet he was. But not in himself, but about the God who used him (of all people) to do the great work that was done.

ILLUSTRATION: Imagine a boy admires the woodworking skills of his Grandpa. He asks his Grandpa if they might make a wooden box for his baseball cards. The boy has never made anything with wood before, but of course grandpa is ready to work with his grandson on this project. They work on it for weeks. When it is done, it's beautiful, custom designed, engraved with baseball symbols... a true work of art. The grandson shows it off to all of his friends saying, "This is what my Grandpa and I made! He's a master wood-worker!" Clearly, the boy knows it was not his own skills that made the beautiful box, but his Grandfather's. And he is eager to boast in his grandfather's abilities. This was Paul's approach. He was saying, "Let's look at what God is doing through me, a sorry, inadequate instrument. Isn't it amazing?!"

So from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ. ²⁰ It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else's foundation.

Paul was a faithful servant who worked hard and suffered much for the Lord. Here he reminds them of how far and wide he has fully proclaimed the gospel. Jerusalem is toward the southern part of Palestine. Illyricum is northwest of Greece! That's a distance of some 1,400 miles, and Paul preached throughout that area. And when he preached, he did a thorough job of it. He didn't leave out parts. He fully proclaimed.

And note his ambition!!! To preach the gospel where Christ is not known. Paul was an evangelist. He led people to Christ who didn't know Christ before. Paul likes to plant the seed

where it had never been planted. Then others came in and watered the seed to help it grow. Paul laid a foundation. Others came and would finish building. This is part of God's plan to spread the Kingdom throughout the world.

Now let's take all of these points Paul made and make some practical applications. God has given you special grace. Not only has he shown undeserved kindness in calling you into his Kingdom, he has also given you the special grace of being his ambassador. Your calling is not as specific as Paul's, but it is just as real and valid. You are called to represent Christ and proclaim Christ in your personal sphere of influence. In your home, among your relatives, in your neighborhood, in your place of employment or school... you are called by God to be a minister / a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ.

You are also a priest. You speak God's truth to those you know. And imagine they believe and are saved: you bring them to God as an offering to him. Imagine his pleasure as you need another soul to him for eternal salvation!

Like Paul, you can boast about your God and all that he does through you. Don't boast about you, but God and what he does through you. Give all glory, attention and credit to him, just as Paul did.

Finally, from Paul, have a heart for those who don't yet know Jesus. Be an evangelist in your personal sphere to those around you to lead them to Christ.

Have you gotten this wrong sometimes? Have you been a missing ambassador for Christ? Or a poor ambassador? Or a meek ambassador? Repent. Turn to Jesus. And know that he forgives you through his perfect life and innocent death on the cross! He doesn't fire you, he changes you!

So, boldly serve others with the Word of God. Boldly serve others in your actions that line up with God's Word. Do this because of God's grace!