

In recent years, there has been a great deal of criticism of the Academy Awards. The criticism, which has always been there to one degree or another but has intensified in recent years, has to do with the fact that so many of the Academy Awards are awarded to relatively obscure films that attract so little popular attention. There is a reason for this: The Oscars are little more than a self-congratulating value system by which the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences compares its own denizens with each other and awards according to its own standards and values. The consumers who actually drive movie ticket sales have little say in which films receive awards. The Academy exists within its own little bubble as the veritable centre of the universe where members compare and contrast themselves with each other in a highly self-congratulatory way.

In the text before us, Paul addresses the super-apostles, who were guilty of pretty much the same thing. It is as if the super-apostles all belonged to an Academy of Professional Preachers and Miracle-Workers and themselves to each other in the Academy to see who was biggest and best. Nobody outside of the Academy was worth anything.

Paul was not interested in being a part of the Academy, because what the Academy valued was not in line with what God truly valued.

“The folly of the self-appointed apostles is that they had set up their own subjective standards of excellence (training in rhetoric, speaking fees, ecstatic experiences, commendations, awards, and so on) and then judged themselves by conformity to those standards! These false apostles had no desire to measure themselves by the objective criteria used by Paul—allegiance to the gospel, conformity to Christ’s character, and participation in Christ’s sufferings.”

(R. Kent Hughes)

Proper Commendation (vv. 12, 18)

Verses 12 and 18 sandwich this section in language of commendation. There is a wrong form of commendation (v. 12) and a right form of commendation (v. 17). The super-apostles were commending themselves by comparing themselves with each other, while Paul allowed the Lord’s work through his ministry to serve as his commendation.

TO THINK ABOUT

Throughout 2 Corinthians, when Paul has spoken of the evidence of God’s work through his ministry, he has pointed to two realities: fruitful evangelism and the fruit of changed lives in the church. At no point does he point to supernatural miracles and healing as evidence of his ministry. Why do you think this was so? Why are converted sinners and changed lives a far more powerful evidence of God’s power than miracles and healing?

As we saw previously, one of the accusations that the super-apostles levelled against Paul was that he was timid in person, even if he was bold in letter. In a deliberate display of irony, Paul admits that he is timid—too timid to compare himself with the self-congratulating super-apostles. Their boasting was so bold, and their ministerial influence so exaggerated, that he could not possibly compare to the claims they made for themselves. He would rather be content to let the Lord’s commendation of his ministry suffice.

To claim apostolic authority by self-creating criteria was ignorance. It was to be “without understanding.” Supposing themselves to be so wise, the false apostles in Corinth boasted in folly.

Proper Boasting (vv. 13–15a)

Paul could not compare himself to the exaggerated claims of the super-apostles, but there was an area in which he could “boast”: his divinely appointed sphere of service. There seems to be a hint here that the super-apostles were into the numbers game—that they boasted about how many converts they had, and how widespread their influence was, and how far they had travelled (all the way from Judea!) to come to Corinth and minister among the people. Could Paul boast of such a widespread ministry? If not, could he claim the same authority they claimed?

Paul answers by drawing attention to his apostolic sphere of ministry. The word translated “limits” was originally applied to carefully specified areas in which local communities were obliged to provide services to Roman officials passing through. Their area of responsibility was “limited” by royal authority.

God had likewise assigned Paul a limited “area of influence”—specifically when the Twelve had agreed to go to the Jews and Paul and his companions to the Gentiles (Galatians 2:7–9). The super-apostles boasted of their great sphere of influence—both in Judea and in Gentile territories—while Paul reminds the Corinthians that he worked in the “area of influence” that God had assigned to him, which included Corinth. He did not overextend himself (v. 14), thereby minimising the positive influence he could have in Corinth; and he did not boast in the work that others had accomplished (v. 15a), unlike the super-apostles.

TO THINK ABOUT

Is there a danger of overextending ourselves in ministry? How do we guard against that danger? In what ways can we be tempted to boast in the work of others? How do we avoid falling to that temptation?

It was difficult for Paul to even address this matter. He was content, and even rejoiced, when others built on his foundation (1 Corinthians 3:10), but the super-apostles were actually destroying the church by trying to discredit him and claim his ministry as their own. As Don Carson notes, “Little men can be dangerous, especially when they position themselves in such a way as to capture some stolen glory from great men.”

Proper Hope (vv. 15b–16)

There is a repeated theme in Paul’s writings by which he expresses his desire to head westward to unreached peoples (cf. Romans 15:14). If the Corinthians responded to Paul by rejecting the super-apostles (cf. 6:14–7:1) and by participating in the Jerusalem collection (chapters 8–9), their growth in faith would be evidenced, which would allow Paul the liberty to move westward.

TO THINK ABOUT

Any church that takes the Great Commission seriously wants to see the gospel go beyond itself. It wants its people to be influential in gospel ministry. Are there times, however, when the church needs to focus, for a time, inward instead of lurching forward with gospel ministry? How do we discern when it is time to consolidate and when it is time to move forward?

Proper Principle (v. 17)

There is only one proper ground for boasting, and that is to boast in the Lord. To boast is human. We are wired to boast about our own accomplishments, but it takes a work of the Spirit for humans to boast in the Lord rather than in their own achievements.

To boast in the Lord is to manifest a heavenly mindset (see Revelation 4:11; 5:9–10; 7:9–10). Those who understand something of God’s glory realise that they have no reason for boasting, and instead boast in who the Lord is and what he does and gives.

TO THINK ABOUT

In this verse, Paul quotes Jeremiah 29:23–24. In Jeremiah, the exhortation is to boast in what the Lord does and provides, but Paul shortens that list to simply say “boast in the Lord.” Why do you think he does this? What is the connection between who the Lord is and what the Lord does and provides?

Paul understood what the super-apostles didn’t, and what the Corinthians were tempted to forget: that what ultimately matters in life and ministry is divine approval.

*“Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast,
save in the death of Christ, my God;
all the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to his blood.”*

(Isaac Watts)
