

Add -“est” to an adjective, a descriptive word, and you have the grounds for boasting.

It's not only a big fish, it's the biggest fish.

It's not merely a fast car, it's the fastest car!

It's not only a tall building, it's the tallest building.

Pride and hubris in history staged a competition for “world's tallest building” in the late 1920s in New York City, known as the “Race into the Sky.” It pitted the “Bank of Manhattan” at 40 Wall Street versus the Chrysler building, 405 Lexington Avenue. Pride laced the shoes of each builder to win the distinction as “tallest.” 40 Wall Street surpassed the Woolworth building in April, 1930, at 283 m (927 ft) and opened May 26. The next day, May 27, 1930, the Chrysler Building surpassed 40 Wall Street as tallest building in the world. It was built to 319 m (1,046 ft). But these both were eclipsed May 1, 1931, by the 381 m (1250 ft) Empire State Building. Canada itself boasted the honours of world's tallest with Toronto's CN Tower at the architectural height of 553.3 m (1,815 ft), steeling top honours from Ostankino Tower, Moscow, in 1975. That lasted until 2007, when it was surpassed by current tallest, Burj Khalifa, Dubai, United Arab Emirates. It spikes to a total height of 829.8 m (2,722 ft, just over half a mile). Compare 40 Wall Street, New York's, month-and-a-half claim then as tallest, to today, 92 ½ years later, and it's but one-third as tall. By the way, did you know that 40 Wall Street since 1995 is known as the Trump Building?

Bragging rights, tied in closely to pride in accomplishment. This is human nature illustrated.

Enter the world of relationships, and adjectives like pretty, handsome, and rich fuel egos hoping to be, or *to be with* the prettiest or most handsome companion. We see plenty of extravagance on television and online. Perhaps you watched “Life-styles of the Rich and Famous” trace the extravagant mystique of pride and money and worldly wealth.

Perhaps your pride and mine is in thinking, *I'm not crazy like that!* Yet, so much of our ideas of ourselves and the values of our culture typically tie in to the pursuit of finding adjectives and adding -er and -est to them. You know, big, bigger, biggest. fast, faster, fastest; tall, taller, tallest. I not only want good, but I'd rather have better, and sometimes best. Now and then, it's fun to boast a bit, isn't it? Especially when we've done something we're proud of, or when we are with people we think stand out and are special--and we want to grab their attention.

In contrast to self-aggrandizing boasting, the Scriptures state: **“godliness with contentment is great gain.”** (1 Timothy 6:6)

And that points us to spiritual values. **“Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness; for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.”** (1 Timothy 4:7-8)

“³If anyone teaches a different doctrine and does not agree with the sound words of our Lord Jesus Christ and the teaching that accords with godliness, ⁴he is puffed up with conceit and understands nothing. He has an unhealthy craving for controversy and for quarrels about words, which produce envy, dissension, slander, evil suspicions, ⁵and constant friction among people who are depraved in mind and deprived of the truth, imagining that godliness is a means of gain. (1 Timothy 6:3-5)

Yet, there is a deeper distinction necessary, for faith to be grounded, *rock solid*.

“Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory.” (1 Timothy 3:16)

Note that we’ve just jumped from adjectives describing a lifestyle to a unique *Person*. Godliness becomes more than a characteristic someone strives for, more than a race, a competition, when the Truth enters our lives. Jesus Christ, God in the Flesh, is God's superlative gift. He delivers us from the empty, fallen, strife-filled world our boastful nature collapses into.

When it comes to the nitty gritty of our relationship with the Holy God, our Creator, we enter a realm **“Where Boasting Is Excluded,”** where human efforts and aspirations and works don't cut it. Enter the reality of the distinction between spiritual life and death.

This is the focal point of this Epistle selected for this Reformation Day observance. God's Holy Spirit has moved St. Paul to distinguish Law and Gospel clearly, and with greatest impact. This distinction reveals the core teaching of the Faith revealed in Jesus Christ. The living Jesus is the Truth recovered for the Church in the Reformation. He is the living Truth that alone can rescue you and me from futility, indeed, from spiritual and eternal death!

“Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God.” (Romans 3:19)

What does the Law say? What stops every mouth? What holds you and me and all the world accountable to God? Paul collects six verses, five from Psalms and one from Isaiah, in what's called a *catena*. These are the verses that precede this verse: “. . .as it is written:

“None is righteous, no, not one;

¹¹ **no one understands;
no one seeks for God.**

¹² **All have turned aside; together they have become worthless;
no one does good,
not even one.”**

¹³ **“Their throat is an open grave;
they use their tongues to deceive.”**

“The venom of asps is under their lips.”

¹⁴ **“Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.”**

¹⁵ **“Their feet are swift to shed blood;**

¹⁶ **in their paths are ruin and misery,**

¹⁷ **and the way of peace they have not known.”**

¹⁸ **“There is no fear of God before their eyes.”** (Romans 3:10-18)

This is sobering truth! We are stuck under the Law, without a way around it. We are riddled through and through, steeped in guilt and punishment and death -- all deserved, all inevitable. The Law crushes our spirits--and so it must, to render us speechless and silent, accountable before God.

God's purpose for you and every hearer of this Word of Law is that we not be deluded by pride and boasting in our own accomplishments and works, indeed, our own “karma,” but rather recognize our shortcoming, our sin, to flee to the faith which clings to Jesus for salvation.

Recall where Paul takes our pride? He writes: **“Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded.”** (Romans 3:27)

Instead, look how *God* has accomplished His purpose in you and me. He has worked through this very same silencing Law to present His perfect rescue in the gift of His Son, Jesus. The sign that sets us free and blots out our imperfect record and every smudge of sin is God's Son, Jesus Christ's, shed blood. He was offered for our lost world by being crucified on the cross to ransom us. There He paid the price for our sins, including our deluded pride and boasting. All Jesus has done, including by His perfect faith for us, we now receive by God's gift of faith to trust this saving Word: **“For it is by grace that you have been saved, through faith! And this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God, not of works, lest any person should boast.”** (Ephesians 2:8-9)

So through faith God opens our lives to join *His* new future. In His presence, by what Jesus has accomplished, we stand justified and righteous before Him forever. How valuable our heavenly Father considered us to be. **“While [we] were dead in the trespasses and sins in which [we] once walked, following the course of this world,”** (Ephesians 2:1-2a) God took on the burden of loving us. Our lives are bought at no less than the price of *God's own life* given for us. For this is the miracle of Jesus' incarnation. He, God from eternity, took on our human flesh and blood. He became one of us, only without sin. In the realm of our redemption, all our boasting of ourselves and our works is excluded. Our faith holds to Christ.

If we are to boast, it is not in our pride and striving, thinking we're doing such good things, but rather in the fullness of God's goodness for us in Christ Jesus. **“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.”** (2 Corinthians 10:17-18)

Here is the Central Thought, the thought that takes us to heaven in the joy of Jesus Christ with the Father and the Holy Spirit: The Law kills our boasting pride and shows our damning sin and powerlessness to get rid of its black and evil blot on our hearts and lives. But God makes us clean and right before Him, in His sight. The Holy Spirit creates us anew, through the gift of faith, so all who trust Jesus, the Faithful Son, receive the redemption His suffering and death accomplished for us. This is the Gospel good news. It's a message so wonderful it fills us with joy and worship and praise of God. For **“[we] are justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation (an atoning sacrifice) by his blood, to be received by faith.”** (Ro.3:24-25)

“Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law.” (Romans 3:27-28)

Praise be to God, who fills us with the joy and peace of faith in our living Saviour. In Him we live forever!