

## ***BEWARE of BOASTING and BLAMING!***

by Ralph Blair

***BEWARE of BOASTING and BLAMING!*** is Dr. Ralph Blair's Keynote at the 79<sup>th</sup> EC Summer ConnEction, May 31 – June 2, 2019 at The Kirkridge Retreat Center atop the Appalachian Trail in Pennsylvania.

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Three weeks ago, 150 years ago, a single word was telegraphed all across America. That one word was, “Done”. Transcontinental travel by rail would now be a *reality*, four years after the tragedies of our Civil War. A gold spike linked the two tracks that met from east and west. It was engraved with a prayer: “May God continue the *unity* of our Country as this Railroad *unites* the two great Oceans of the world.”

Unsurprisingly, *self-righteous divisiveness* is still *with us* and *within us* – *the primary symptom of fallen humanity* and our *fiercely favored excuse* for sinning.

Luke, a Gentile Christian, wrote more of the New Testament than any other writer. Here's his account of a parable Jesus told to self-righteous people who looked down, with disdain, on others.

“Jesus said, ‘Two men went up to The Temple – one was a Pharisee, the other, a tax collector. The Pharisee boasted: ‘Thank God, *I'm not* like all those *others* — the greedy, unjust, liars, adulterers, cheats. And I'm certainly not like this here tax collector. *I fast twice* a week. *I give away a tenth* of all I get.’ But, the tax collector was bent down, over there in a corner, painfully aware of *his sin* and *so ashamed of himself*, he couldn't even *glance toward* heaven. Blaming nobody but himself, he sighed, ‘O, My God, please have mercy on me, a sinner.’

“Jesus said: ‘I tell you *the truth*, *this man*, *not the other*, went home *forgiven by God*. *All who boast in themselves will be brought low*. But *all who humble themselves, will be lifted up*.” (Luke 18:9-14)

Jesus uses the *active and passive voices* – *active*, for *human acts*, *passive*, for the acts of God. All who boast in *self* (claiming *self-righteousness*) “*will*

*be brought low*” (by *God’s action* in omniscient and omnipotent *justice*). All who *humble themselves, so very aware* of *their own sin* and *guilt* that they *repent* in deep sorrow “*will be lifted up*” (by *God’s action* in *mercy* and *justice*).

In *our self-righteousness*, we *refuse* to *identify* with Pharisees, aware of *their* bad reputation. But, in our denial, we *do*, what Pharisees *did*. Aware of *our own* guilt, we try to *distract ourselves*, and *others*, from *our* awareness of what’s too close *for our comfort*.

So, let’s put this old parable into our own times and terms. “God, I’m glad I’m not like all those *others* — the greedy, the unjust, adulterers, cheats, homophobes, faggots, white privileged racist Right-wingers, lunatic Leftists, toxic masculine misogynists, that Trump crowd, that *anti-Trump* crowd.”  
*Ugh!*

We *claim* we’re not like our scapegoats. So, *why* are they, *our own specially selected* scapegoats?

Ancient scapegoats were *real goats!* They were *loaded up* with *sins* and sent away to deserts to die. Of course, *sins* loaded *onto* scapegoats were *not* the *sins of the goats*. These sins were the sins of *sinners*.

These days, *our* scapegoats *aren’t* goats. They’re *people*, loaded with sin. But the sin, we *insist*, isn’t *ours*. We *claim* that *our* scapegoats are loaded with *their own* sins. Isn’t that *weird?*

No. It’s called *psychopathological projection* and *denial*. *Our blaming them reflects our own unwanted sense of not measuring up*. That’s *why they’re our selected* scapegoats, and *why we can’t stand them*.

Inside our own dark dens of denial, we *see* lots of evidence of our sin and guilt. So, we *try* to hide this by *boasting* and *blaming*. A *guilty* conscience boasts and blames; a conscience *at peace with God* does not.

We’re *aware*, but won’t *admit* it, that *our sins don’t stick* to the scapegoats we pick to pick on. Thus, our *fury* at *them!* We’re still *stuck* with *our* sin and guilt! And, with *no better* “scapegoats” available, and no awe of awareness of a sin-bearing Savior – we’re *still stuck* with *our sin* and *guilt*, *frustrated* and *angry*.

*Projection* by self-righteous *propaganda* that’s *self-addressed to ourselves*, fails to rid us of our troubling sense of sin and guilt. We *refuse* to

see that *this sense of sin and guilt is God's gracious gift of His presence and purpose* to save us from a self-righteous demise.

And, you know, it's really not *hard* to find a sinner or two, on whom to pin our own damned sins, since, as Paul said: "*All have sinned and all fall short of the glory of God.*" (Rom 3:23) But, in *denial*, we *exempt us* from the "all", and disdain all *them* as, "the other".

What many readers fail to see in this parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector is this fact: *Each* of these men *knows full well* that he, *himself*, is a *sinner*. One, in utter futility, tries to refute this *gift* of a God-given *self-awareness*. Thus, in effect, not by intent, he *verifies* his sense of his sin by his resorting to *self-righteous boasting* and *self-righteous blaming*.

And, he has the gall to do this, as he struts his way through a sanctimonious "prayer" in the presence of the *All-Knowing, All-Seeing, Almighty YHWH*. It's but another sad case of *religiously dedicated delusion* – a quite *common* mode of *denial* throughout history.

*All* self-righteous boasting and blaming is a *self-defeating self-defense* in *self-delusional depravity*.

We do take after our *first* parents. *After* their self-obsessive refusal to heed God's *gracious warning*, and yielding to delusions *as wannabe gods*, God mercifully gave them *awareness* of their *sin* and their *shame*. Yet, in their *self-deceiving* and *self-defeating denial*, they tried their damndest to *cover up* their sin and shame with a few flimsy fig leaves – first of all the many *self-help* schemes that their descendants would contrive for cover-ups down through the ages.

When God came calling, to share, again, His *peace* for which He'd given them *life*, *they were in pieces*.

God asked a question to *touch* their *self-awareness*. "*Where are you now?*" The man muttered, "*Hiding*", for he *knew* he was *now "naked"*. God asked how he knew he was now naked. He ducked the question and blamed "that woman" and God, too – griping about God's gift of this woman, whom he'd received with such joy, finding in her, companionship that none of the animals had provided or could provide.

Then, the woman tried to escape her guilt in this mess by blaming a snake whose poisonous venom she'd so willingly and self-indulgently swallowed.

And, so it is, with us. We know we're naked. We can't, not know, we're naked. The raw evidence is there in all the effort put into self-righteous cover-ups by boasting and blaming that are no better cover than those old flimsy fig leaves.

Today, most of us know better than to use fig leaves for cover-up. To even the least biblically literate, fig leaves would be a dead giveaway. Today's cover-ups include a preening presence on social media, postured selfies, name-dropping, false modesty, padded curricula vitae, virtue signaling, identity politics, cosmetic surgery, et al., ad nauseam.

Worth is a glossy quarterly for elegant millionaires. It promises that, well-chosen men's "shoes represent integrity and character." This, under the heading: "A Man's Sole" – s-o-l-e. If a man wants to make the best impression, he should "move with a certain quiet swagger that behooves unimpeachable authority" and wear "wrist candy", i.e., fine analog timepieces. The ideal woman should aim for a body mass index of 16 to match the models on high fashion runways. But a BMI of 16 is medically considered dangerously low. Yet, by following these foolish, even health risking, tips, we will, we're eager to believe, "stand out by making a statement [of] integrity and character"! Ah, yes. "Integrity" by deceit! "Character" in a cover-up! And we claim we're not lost?

Our pretentious efforts to hide our disturbing self-awareness hide nothing from our view, except the stupidity of our schemes. Others can't experience our sense of self, but we see right through our cover-ups, for, trying to cover up, we can't not still see all we're trying to cover up. And, with all the attention we must pay to try to keep our sense of self, covered up, we obsess over seeing what's still there in our sight. Seeing it blinds us to the fact that others can't see it, don't see it, never have seen it and never will see it. But we see it! So, we assume they do, too.

Ours may be more expensive and more fashionable than fig leaves, but high-end cover-ups hide no more than those old fig leaves hid.

Yet, in all our *self-righteous* efforts to hide what's simply *superficially* "wrong", we *ruthlessly refuse to beware of awareness* of how *truly* we fail to measure up. We repress and repudiate what is, in *blessed* fact, a *gracious* first step, offered by God toward the *healing* that we really do *need*, but stubbornly *resist*.

*Nothing* is hidden from God – not *our sense of self*, not *our posturing*, not *God's* knowledge of us and of our rebellion against Him or how we *need to be redeemed* and *can be redeemed* in Christ Jesus.

Instead of falling for the foolishness of Pharisaical *boasting and blaming*, we, in God's gift of a *true self-awareness*, may *beware* of *who we are* and *who we aren't*. And, *aware*, we may then, *beware*.

Blessed *assurance begins* in blessed *awareness*. *Aware* of our sin, we may *beware* of it. *Aware* of the Savior we may *be assured* of God's gift of His grace.

Then, we, too, may do, as a *self-consciously guilty* tax collector *did*, and take grateful notice of God's *gift of self-awareness to beware*. *Honest* to God and *honest* with ourselves, we, too, may *plead* God's mercy and stop trying to hide what can't be hidden, either from *us*, or, even from some others, and certainly not from God's omniscience.

But, troublingly aware we're *not* righteous, we *try* to *mislead* others into thinking we're *quite all right*. We *perform our shtick*, but we can't *buy* our shtick. So, we can't *buy* that *others* buy it. So, we're *stuck* with a *useless* shtick, with no *useful* shtick in sight.

We use *false display, posturing, affectation*. But we'd better *beware* of *showing off!* Others see show-offs as *turn-offs*. And, if *we* and *others*, *so easily see right through* all of our *showing off*, why in Heaven's Name, would we think that *God fails to see straight through* all of our sinfully stupid showing off?

Jesus gave wise counsel against such *boasting and blaming*. He cautioned that, in giving to the needy, for instance, it would be well not to let even our own *left hand* know what our own *right hand* is doing. *Do right*, without a *fuss*. *Do right*, for it's *right to do right*. But, ignoring Jesus' words, we *trap* ourselves in a *self-righteously foolish fatality*. (Matt 6:1f)

Jesus also said: "When you fast, don't call attention to any dreary evidence of it." (Matt 6:16) Fasting *is between us, and God*; it's *not* for praise from people. Besides, who *praises* the *self-righteous* – except, *under pressure*, to *suck up* to those in power?

*All virtue signaling* reveals *awareness* of one's *not* measuring up, even while *refusing to beware* of what he or she *is aware* of. Boasting tries to

flush our *self-awareness* down our drains of denial. But, our drains of denial are already clogged up with all of our many failed flushes. As Jesus warned, *selfish self-seeking* already *has gotten* all the *alleged* “reward” *there is to be gotten* from what’s only *emptiness*. (Matt 6:2)

Of the pretentiously pious, parading around in flowing robes of *self-importance*, grabbing at perks of presumed privilege, Jesus again used the *divine passive*: “*They will be punished* most severely.” (Mark 12:38ff) And even, most *immediately*, for, they set themselves up for *unavailable fantasies*. All who boast of *saving themselves by themselves* have no savior in their *self-blinkered sight* – *and know it*.

Frustrated, thus, furious, they can be *maliciously intent on finding fault* in others. One Sabbath, when Jesus entered a synagogue, he noticed a man with a *deformed* hand. (Mark 3:1ff) Self-righteous men were there, intently, but not receptively, spying on Jesus. They assumed that he’d likely *work* a merciful healing, right there, *in synagogue on the Sabbath*. Jesus detected their *evil* intent to trap *him* as “guilty”.

He *graciously* asked them a simple question to give them a moment to *reconsider* their *malignant motive*. “Is it right, on the Sabbath, to do *good* or to do *evil*?” Caught, in *their evil*, they *refused* to reply. *Grieving* for *them*, Jesus scanned their hard hearts in *disgust*. Then, turning to the man with the *deformed* hand, he gave *him* an invitation: “Hold out your hand.” Immediately, that hand was *made whole*. And, just as immediately, that *deformed mob* of Herod’s political lackeys *filled themselves with fury*. In their self-righteous indignation, they began a plot to *kill* Jesus. *Unrepentant guilty consciences* are *lethal weapons*. And, their *haughty animosity* *reveals the self-awareness* of the *guilt* in the guilty.

So, let’s *all*, ask *ourselves*, privately, talking only *within ourselves*, *inside our own minds* and *hearts open to God*: “Have *I, myself*, here, this weekend, *blamed anybody* or *boasted in myself*?”

Perhaps we had a self-defensive presence of mind not to *label* it “*blaming*” or “*boasting*” at the time. That would have felt *too* uncomfortable. But, let’s each, ask *ourselves*, “Since arriving *up here*, “Have I *faulted anyone* – in *thought*, in *word*, or in *deed*? Am I *now* worried that someone *heard* me say something snarky about someone? Am I now

distracted that he's *recalling* what he *heard me say*? Well, for him to be affirmed *by you*, there, on the spot, *he probably smiled knowingly* and rolled *his eyes with* your eye-roll. So, now *he's* distracted with *his* thinking that *you're* thinking of *his* complicity in that interchange of *blaming* or *boasting*, or *both*. Hmm.

Have we tried to drop hints about how “*woke*” we are, and how “*un-woke*” *others* are? That's *boasting*; that's *blaming*. That's *self-righteous*. But *aware* of *our* self-righteousness, we *get to beware* of it, we *get to repent* of it, we *get to turn* from it. Thank God!

We *get to tap into* our *God-given self-awareness*, recall a fault or two – or three, or more – of *our own*, even since arriving on this mountaintop, for another retreat of *connections* for *Christian awakening*.

But, *beware*, for we might try to *rationalize, self-righteously, to defend ourselves to ourselves*, over what *we said*, or *thought*, and surely knew better than to *say out loud* – especially at a *Christian retreat*?

What shall we *do* with a *useful self-awareness*? Shall we *protest*, “*Well, others do it, too!*” That's *blaming*. “*I only thought it. I kept my mouth shut.*” That's *boasting*. *But aware*, we *get to beware* of it!

And, thank God, *recognizing* our *self-righteousness* is nothing to *boast* about. Such *awareness* is *God's gift to grab hold of*, and *use* in our *life in Him* and in *His priorities for our good* and for the *good of others*. We *get to thank God* for a *true self-awareness, asking for guidance to stay tuned* to Him, to be *ever more self-aware*, that we might *ever beware* of falling into selfish, self-justifying habits of *boasting of self* and *blaming others*.

Jesus taught us a *daily prayer* to remind us of our *grounding in reality*, over against all the *spin* that can keep us reeling around in *circles*. We're to pray to “*Our Father* in Heaven”. That reminds us that *our relationship with God* is with our *Father!* And He's *our Father* – along with *our sisters and brothers in faith!* Jesus' urges us to *affirm*, “*Holy is Your Name, i.e., “Your authority is holy*”. We're *not informing God* of His authority. We're *reminding us* that our Heavenly Father's authority *is holy, wise and just*. When we ask that our Father's *reign* on Earth be as it is in Heaven, we look forward to the *truest* answer to all the problems of our *fallen* world. We

don't have to wish in vain for these problems to be solved by *fallen humanity*, though we're called to play *our* part.

And when we ask for *daily basics*, we focus on what we *need*, not on what we, in fantasies, *mislead* ourselves into *imagining* we need. When we ask that, *forgiveness* for *our* mistreatment of *others*, match the way *we* forgive *those* who mistreat *us*, we ask for a *practical* compassion that can give more *gracious* meaning to life *with* them. When we ask for rescue from *our* temptations, we ask for *our Father's* help to stay *faithful* to Him and to His high calling of us.

In *prayer*, it makes no sense to *boast in self* or to *blame others*. "Prayerful" *boasting* or "prayerful" *blaming*, without awareness of God's overview and sovereign grace, is squatting in a temple to *self*.

But, what about *imprecatory* prayers like David's: "May my enemies be erased from the Book of Life!" (Ps 69:28) Hey, God *hears* the *heavy heart*, however *inarticulate* the *grief*. Few, if any among us, suffer scorn that *others suffer for God*. David did. Many still do. And David knew, in *this* Psalm, that, it was for *God's sake* he'd borne reproach. (69:7) Can we honestly say *that* about any of the scorn *we* face?

Jesus, fully faithful to his Father, suffered horrible agony *for us*. And, on the cross, *he* alluded to this very Psalm, identifying with *all* who endure *such scorn*. (69:9) He *prayed* for *his tormentors*: "*Father, forgive them, they don't know what they're doing.*" (Lk 23:34)

Aware that *none* could *take* his life from him, he *willingly* and *lovingly* *laid down his life for us* – not only, there and then, at Golgotha, where and when he pronounced, "*It is finished!*" and bowed his head and *gave up* his spirit (John 19:30) – but, even *before the foundation* of the world, *from* all eternity and *for* all eternity – our reconciliation to God was "*Done!*" (John 10:18; Eph 1:4)

Jesus warned that *we'd* be *scorned* for *identifying with him*. (Matt 10:16) But, is *all* the scorn we get, due to *identification with him*? And, whatever *their* reason for abusing us, do *we* forgive *them*? We'd more readily forgive them, if we'd learn to *cope* with *our recognizing our self-righteous blaming*, in *theirs*.



Given God's gift of a *self-awareness* against all our efforts at *suppressing reality*, we yet try to smother God's gift under still more *self-righteousness*.

But *we can't avoid awareness* of what we're doing. We're lying! And *this awareness*, too, is God's gift.

So, with which of the two in the Temple parable, *do we, too readily, try to identify?* With which of the two, *might we, more frankly, identify?* By God's grace, we may *move, in honest awareness of self*, from *hubris* to *humility*, from *self-righteousness* to *God's gift of Christ's righteousness*. (Cf. Gal 2:20)

*Honest to God and honest with ourselves*, we'd see that *our motivations* and *others' motivations* for *boasting* and *blaming* are the same. *They, too*, trip up over their self-centered frustrations, in a God-given *awareness* that they, too, *don't measure up* to God's deep desire for us all. Yet, as it is with us, it is with them – we *all* distract ourselves, worrying over not measuring up in stuff that's all so *superficial*, while denying a *deep self-righteous rebellion* against God.

Recognizing this as the sin of us all, we'd not be so *touchy* when *they blame us* or *boast in themselves*.

Can't we *know* where they're *coming from* in *their boasting of self* and *blaming us*? Don't we have *their number*? We *should!* *They and we all* share the *same wrong number!* *They're* obsessed with *self*; *we're* obsessed with *self*. So, we're *fellow* boasters, *fellow* blamers, so *similarly* tempted to *self-righteousness*.

Talk about a *recognizable* and *relatable* "identity group"! Our *entire human race* has been and still is, *one fallen people*, each one falling over a *sense of self*, a *sense of sin*, and *falling all over each other*. *Daydreams* of "diversity" descend into frighteningly factious *nightmares*, when we fail to see what we all have in common, created in God's Image, but fallen.

We, and "they" *suppress* our God-given awareness of *God's best* for *our flourishing together*. And, on both levels – *superficially egotistical* and *spiritually estranged* – we're *all guilty as sin*, tripping up in our pretentious pride, instead of living the *true life* we're offered, to daily *thrive in God's Image* and in the righteousness of *Christ, the Savior* of the world.

So, in practical terms, *we know something* of what it's *like to be them*, for *we misbehave as they do*, in our common, selfish *motivations to boast and blame*.

Why, then, in *this world-on-edge*, would *we boast to them or blame them*? Isn't it predictable that, *our defensive boasting at them* will trigger *their defensive blaming of us*, and, *their defensive blaming of us*, will trigger *our defensive blaming of them*? All such self-righteousness spins out of control and into a crash, as if none had a clue. But, we have *more* than a clue.

Playing around with fantasies, we find it impossible to *rid ourselves* of *jealous* notions that, those whom we self-righteously blame, are *somehow, better off* than we. It may help to realize that *our versions* of them are *not their experience* of them, for they cope under fantasies of their own. But, if we *can't escape our fantasies* of their "*advantages*", we're *stuck in self-pity*, and can't *empathize* with *their mixed-bag lives of disappointments* that, indeed, *match*, in *their way*, *our mixed-bag lives of disappointments*. So, we're *all stuck* in our own pointless, *self-penalizing needs for revenge* – *but against what, against whom?*

We hold *ourselves* hostage to *fantasies* of what we *think we're missing*, and, what we *think, they're not missing*. But, *thinking we're missing out* on what is, *in fact, fantasy*, we're missing *nothing at all* – except *that big fat fact* that, *fantasies are fantasies*. *Every fantasy goes missing as soon as we think we've found it*. But, then when we don't *get* what we *fantasized getting*, we yet, once again, don't *get it!*

We mislead ourselves, obsessing over *images* we but *imagine we're missing*. What we *miss* is the *fact* that *imaginary images exist only in imagination*. But chasing after every wild goose, we *miss out on even any consideration of* what we're *truly missing at far, far deeper depths* of *reality and real need* for *far, far more serious meaning* in God's *eternal purpose* for all created in *His Image*.

*Freed by God's grace*, we're *freed* from what we'd thought *it all was all about*. Now, without a need to boast and blame, we may still readily *relate to* and *commiserate with others*, aware that, they can no more get away with *their boasting and blaming* than we. Would that, *they could* let go of their own *self-centered boasts and blame games*, but, hey, maybe they're *without faith in Christ*. What's *our excuse?*

*Recognizing ourselves in each other, as kindred screw-ups, we see we're all so very much in need of mercy. As kindred spirits of the lost, yet, now more aware of God's grace, we may beware of temptations to boast and to blame, and instead, may more readily share with others, the mercy we've already received.*

But, if we continue to blame *all but us*, and boast *only of us*, we demonstrate our *ingratitude* for God's grace to us, by which we *claim to live* as Christians, and, thus, we have no *credible* witness to others.

Waiting for others to change *their* minds or *their* ways with us, we may, indeed, have a very *long* wait. Meanwhile, we *miss our* chances to change *our* minds and *our* ways of dealing *with them*, for a worthy *witness* that may, by God's grace, *help* them.

Besides, *none of us can* ever buy our own boasts, can we? That's *why* we boast. We boast *against our own* sense of *inferiority*. So, we *assume others can't* buy our boasts. But, of course, *they're not fixated on our* sense of our inferiority, for *our* self-centered sense of *inferiority* isn't in *their* brains. It's in *ours*. They have *their own self-centered* sense of inferiority in *their* brains. So, they just *might buy into our* boasts. And *if* they do, they'll *hate* us. But, *that's* not why we wanted them to buy into our boasts!

*All can* relate to *envy*. But *not to what* is envied. The one who's "without" whatever he *envies*, holds himself hostage to *unmixed fantasies* of whatever he *thinks* he's *missing out on* that he *thinks* is *actually* in the *possession* of another, while, that *other* person who's "in possession", as it were, *cannot experience her actual* possession, as the *unmixed fantasy* that's inside the mind of the one who *envies* her.

So, so-called "social justice theory" doesn't help to *bridge* this imaginary gap. Indeed, it actually *feeds resentment* in the so-called "advantaged" that mirrors resentment in the so-called "disadvantaged", for it's our *fallen human nature to complain of our supposed "disadvantages"* and to *envy imagined "advantages"* of *others*. This shouldn't surprise us, for we're *all* so *self-centered*, no matter what the case may be in terms of a seemingly objective assessment of what's, after all, *relative*, in so many more ways than one.

"Social justice theory" can *fuel more blaming and boasting* between *recently favored "outsiders"* and *recently disfavored "insiders"*. All *remain*

“the other” *to each other*, by race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, or however else we defensively *divide* and *isolate* as, “us-not-them”.

Contrary to today’s elitist fictions and fashions, the best lessons for *reality testing* of all *self-righteous boasting and blaming* are lessons that *our fallen race* has *always resented, resisted* and even *refused* to recognize in *self-righteous reliance* on fantasies. Whatever the era, the lingo, alleged “logic” or however “woke” the rationalization, nothing’s new.

Lessons of ancient wisdom have stood the *tests of time* and *tests of truth*. Among the many lessons of wisdom, have been and still are these: *Beware* of blaming others and *beware* of boasting in self.

From blatant lies of a snake in the grass of Eden (Gen 3), to the “loud noises” of Pharaoh, mocked by the prophets (Jer 46:17), from the chaos of “big mouths” in the era of the Judges (Judges 9:38), to the boisterous, but bereft prophets of Baal (I Kings 18:25ff), from the arrogant boasts, noted by James (James 4:16) to Peter’s boast that he’d *never* desert Jesus, until he so very soon did, (Matt 26:31; 69:75) there’s a very long history of baseless boasting in self.

Here’s Paul’s refutation: “It’s by *God’s grace* that you’re *saved*, by *faith*, it’s *not* by yourselves. It’s *God’s gift* – lest anyone *boast*.” (Eph 2:8f) So, as he counseled: “Let’s behave with decency as in daylight ... not in dark dissension, rivalry and jealousy.” (Rom 13:13f)

But humanity succumbed to *absurdity* in Eden, in a lie that promised that, *without* God, *we’d* be God. (Gen 3:5) *Without* God, *we’d* not even *be!* It was a perverted “power trip” pushed by an *already fallen loser*, destined for doom. And those who *fell* for that lie, in delusions of *grand jour*, *fell* thereby, into ruin.

Nietzsche extolled this “will to power” as our *basic drive*. But, it’s our *fallen* nature. (Gen 3) From *Eden’s first grasp* at boasting and blaming, to *Evil’s last gasp* of boasting and blaming, boasting and blaming always betray. So, *beware*.

Blaming, even if in *innocent ignorance*, is mainly motivated by *willed* ignorance, envy, prejudice, and hostility. It’s motivated by *self-serving*

agendas. So, it's easily *exaggerated* and *elaborated* with lies, half-truths, innuendo, and angry, even deadly, violence.

The Proverbs tell of six things the Lord hates, and a full measure of a rounded seven that summarize what is abominable to the Lord: *haughty* eyes, a *lying* tongue, hands that shed *innocent* blood, a heart that devises *wicked* plans, feet that are quick to *do evil*, a *false* witness who breathes out *lies*, and all who stir up *strife*. (Prov 6:16ff) What *is* all of this, but a *summary* of humanity's *angry self-centered boasting* and *self-centered blaming*, spread these days, 24/7.

Gallup says we're *stressing* more than ever. Suicide rates are climbing. But, we're not in a *hot war* and our economy is *booming*. So, let's learn from what holocaust survivors learned in the camps and what cognitive research reveals: *Our stress* is *not* caused by *circumstances*, but by our *interpretations*. We can hold ourselves hostage to our *otherwise* scenarios that tie us up into frustration and fear that we express in hostility by *blaming any but us*. Hate crimes in New York City are souring with an 82 percent surge in *anti-Semitic* crimes accounting for more than half of *all* hate crimes. Over 42 percent who identify with political parties accuse the *opposition* party of being "downright evil". One person in five blames all who *disagree* as "lacking the traits to be considered *fully human*". They're blamed for "behaving like *animals*." Sixteen to 20 percent in the two major political parties believe that we'd all be better off if *millions* in the *other* party would just *die*. Some 14 to 18 percent say *violence* is *justified* if *their* party *loses* in 2020. Counting on politics to give them respite from their own irrationalities is hopeless.

Yet *secular self-righteousness* is now being framed in "*holy war*" and *theological* terms, e.g., *orthodoxy*, *heresy*, *sanctimony*, *demonization*, etc. Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker, an atheist, sees this trend as, "*moralistic condemnation* of designated enemies ... condemning, demonizing, or scapegoating designated *sinner[s]*." Use of this *spiritual* language in the *secular sphere* reveals a *visceral awareness* of a *primeval abyss* beneath the *outrage*. People don't get themselves *this fanatically offended* unless, what they fear *needs not* to be true of *them*, they fear, *is true*

of *them*. So, they resort to today's self-serving, but feeble, trope: "It's *my* truth! So, you, shut up!"

In the wisdom of the ages, *self*-righteousness is, of course, as old as the hills. As the Proverbs inform: "People *call* themselves pure, but the Lord looks *deeper* into the *motives* of their hiding." (Prov 16:2) "They *pretend* that they're clean, but they're filthy." (Prov 30:12) Paul notes: "Disregarding the way God puts people right, people set up schemes of their own. They've refused to submit to God's way of putting people right." (Rom 10:3) Paul knew this truth, in recalling his own *self*-righteous years as a Pharisee.

In the 4<sup>th</sup>-century, Augustine was transformed by *God's* righteousness. He turned from his rebellion *against* God and saw, all *around* and deeply *within*, evidence that, as he said to God, "You made us for Yourself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in You".

There's this *deepest human longing for belonging* to the One in whose Image we're made to be at Home with Him. And *nothing* else can meet this *deepest* human need. No identity politics, material comforts, pretense to *self*-importance, postured piety, not a thing *in and of ourselves*, can ever address our God-given *awareness of our rebellion and lonely exile in self* – except *God*. With Him, we're at Home.

This *Good News*, the *very best* news ever given or received, begins *for us*, in *our awareness* of rebellion *against* God. Aware, we may *beware* of our sin and *repent* and *receive God's forgiveness in Christ*.

No people group, no matter how remote, has ever been found *without* what the historian, Philip Schaff, noted: "We find, everywhere in the world, the traces of a *revealed* God." A thousand years before Christ, YAHWEH cautioned His Chosen People against *their self*-righteousness: "I will record Rahab and Babylon among those who acknowledge me – Philistia, too, and Tyre, along with Cush – and I will say, 'This one was born in Zion'." (Psalm 87:4) Five centuries before Christ, the last book of the Hebrew prophets declared to Malachi's *smugly indifferent* people: "Across the world, from sunrise to sunset, says the Lord of hosts, my authority is glorified among the nations. In every place, incense is offered to my authority." (Mal 1:11) Paul

revealed to Athenian pagans, the *true identity* of a god they'd been revering as "unknown". (Acts 17:16ff)

Said Calvin: "The door to the *true God* is *opened* [even] by *pagan* thinkers." Goethe observed: "The *conflict of faith and unbelief* remains the proper, the only and deepest theme of the history of the world."

Today, the awareness remains – *there*, under denial in the New Atheists' version of Eden's old *Garden variety*. It's *there* in the arrogant assumptions and ignorance of self-professing "nones". It's *there* in the sloganeering of sanctimonious secularism. It's *there*.

In spite of the nonsense, *that deep need is there, as it's always been there, that deep awareness is there, as it's always been there, in one gracious clue or in another, under this boasted claim or foisted blame* – it's humanity's *lonely lingering in sin and unmet awe*.

Now – lest my *critique* be *mistaken* as the *blaming* I'm *critiquing*, let's all take note of the undeniably significant *difference* between *defensively self-righteous blaming* on the one hand, and, on the other hand, *vital diagnosis, discernment, evaluation, debate and rational analysis*.

Without *rational analysis*, accurate understanding is blocked. Yet, PC scolds slander *rational analysis, critical thinking, logic and objective truth* as clichés of Western Culture's allegedly *racist "whiteness"*. *Politically correct* revisionists celebrate *their own systemic racial prejudice* and ignore the *fact* that, *Western Cultural* ideals *aimed at, and achieved*, history's *highest* levels of liberty and justice for all.

*Undermining* others is the *aim* of *boasting* and *blaming*. *Understanding* others is the *aim* of *honest diagnosis*. In *boasting* and *blaming*, one tries to *impose* one's *preferred reputation*, and at *others' expense*. *Rational analysis* allows any and all to have his or her *opinions* about any and all. But, *opinions* must be subjected to *rational analysis* and *debate*.

*Blame* seeks *revenge*. *Discernment* seeks *resolve*. *Blame* wants to *punish*. *Discernment* wants to *empathize*. In *blaming*, both *blamers* and the *blamed* are *victims* of *vindictiveness* and even *violence*. There's no *vindication*, only *retribution, retaliation*. The *blamed* blame the *blamers*, who can't resist returning the favor with *more* *blaming*. *Nothing gets resolved*. *Everything's made worse*.

*Rational discernment interrupts irrational tit-for-tat games, allowing for some reasoned interpretation, verification, clarification and insight and, perhaps, even some changing of minds and attitudes for a more loving understanding all around.*

As Paul put it to Christians: “I pray that your *love* may abound in *knowledge* and in *profound insight*, so that you can *discern* what’s *best*, that you may be pure and blameless in the day of Christ.” (Phil 1:9f)

In *this* sin-disordered world, there’s a *constant need to understand*, to be aware of *who we are, who we aren’t, who we’re called to be, and what we face*.

Without *awareness* of danger, we *can’t beware* of danger. We can’t *function*, as we need to function, without *awareness* of our *assumptions* and *beliefs* and *behaviors based* in our *assumptions*. We must *accurately assess our assumptions, our agendas, prejudices, ignorance, as well as those of others*. We must identify and challenge these aspects of inquiry into truth, to *find* what may be *in us and in them*, and *assess rationally, act accordingly in well-grounded understanding and insight*. Failing to do this, we’ll fail to do the good we’re called to do.

Socrates’ advice, “Know *thyself!*” is *good* advice. But, *knowing one’s self*, can be *disturbing* and lead to defensive *boasting* and *blaming*. But, our *boasting* and *blaming* are clues that we need to get to *know ourselves much better*. We’re *habituated* *boasters* and *blamers for a reason*. And here it is: We *know* we’re *not right*. But, thank God, *knowing ourselves aright*, we *know* we’re *not right*. If *honest* and *humble*, we *get* to face this *fact* in the light of God’s *grace*, with well-based *remorse*, not with *artifice* and *alibis*.

Paul expressed the great truth on this matter when he wrote: “*In Christ, God was reconciling the world to Himself, not counting people’s sins against them.*” (II Cor 5:19) We are to blame for *our sins*. But, Jesus took *our sins* and *our blame, into himself*, on the cross, and *he paid our penalty* in full.

So, we do have *one* in whom to *boast* with *humble* and *thankful* hearts. As Paul put it, “*May I never boast* except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ”. (Gal 6:14) What a *blessed* boast – to *boast* in the truest meaning of that *cruel instrument of public shame* and *execution* on which *God, in flesh*, was *crucified* in *our* place!



When Paul preached that, “Christ Jesus *is*, himself, *our righteousness, our holiness, our redemption*”, he cited Jeremiah, “Therefore, let the one who boasts, *boast in the Lord.*” (I Cor 1:30; Jer 9:24)

Does this begin to suggest how *seriously* we *sin* and how *seriously* we’re *saved*? Again, the *active* and *passive* voices: our action and God’s. *We sin, on our own. We are saved by God.*

Boasters and blamers have always *resisted* this Good News. So, Jesus warned: “I’m sending you out as sheep among wolves. Be *shrewd* as serpents and *harmless* as doves.” (Matt 10:16) And Paul urged: “Keep on *sharpening* your *awareness* of the truth, *deepening* your *discernment* and *insight.*” (Phil 1:9)

We’ve all changed our minds at times. And, surely, we’re not done changing our minds.

But, only in *awe* of God’s grace in Christ, can we be *motivated* to bid all our vainglorious *boasting* and *blaming, good riddance, for good* – for *our good* and for the *good of all* we’re called to love as we love ourselves, for *we’re* loved by God, in Christ. Amen.