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# 1 Corinthians

**For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, *are called*. 1 Corinthians 1:26**

For the past 8 verses, Paul has been speaking about the perceived foolishness of the message of the cross. Because it is something the intellectual can't grasp apart from God's divine revelation, it is considered foolish. Surely if there is a way to be saved, God would have revealed in creation itself, right? And because the religious man can't understand it apart from being viewed through the lens of Christ, it seems foolish. Likewise, because the philosopher can't figure out how to be saved through mental ruminations, it seems foolish.

However, these types of people are generally the mighty, the noble, and the wealthy. They are the ones who have the smarts to make things happen. Despite this, they don't have the ability to perceive that God may actually be smarter than they are; that the depths of His wisdom can never be fully sought out.

And so, based on these things, Paul says, "For you see your calling, brethren..." He is speaking those who have heard the calling of God through the message of the cross and have received it. This is certain because he calls them "brethren." To them, he continues with "that not many wise according to the flesh, not many noble, are called." This doesn't mean that the wise can't be saved. Nor does it mean that a great number of them won't be saved. But in comparison to the vast majority who are saved, they are few in number.

Some people are "too smart" to be saved. Some are certain God must favor them because of their bloodline. The thought is, "If I was born into a great and wealthy family, then God must really like me." Such thoughts about self obscure the message of the cross which says that we must die to self and put on the garment of Christ - having a righteousness that is not our own. Mental ability, wealth, position, good looks, fame, etc. are all roadblocks to that right and personal relationship with God that can only come through calling on the name of the Lord and being saved by Him - apart from any personal merit.

Life application: When you see the rich, famous, and wealthy making a mockery of God, pity them. They have a short life of ease and notoriety and an eternity of regret ahead of them. Pray that they will turn, humble themselves, and call out to Christ for salvation.

**But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; 1 Corinthians 1:27**

Verse 27 begins with "but" to show support for what he just stated in the preceding verse which said, "For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, *are called*."

Though many of the "brethren" aren't wise, mighty, or noble, all they need to do is reflect on the fact that they are of the called despite their worldly state. Instead of skipping over them for those others, "God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise." How many out there with doctoral degrees think ever-so highly of themselves? Professors teach in colleges and seminaries with impressive insights into academic matters and yet they are devoid of any personal relationship with God through Christ. And yet, there are millions of high-school dropouts who have called on Christ and are of the redeemed. Though they are looked down on by those of high learning, they are in fact the ones who have been granted the grace of eternal life.

In addition to them, "God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty." There are many great athletes who boast in their strength. Because they are so exceptional by worldly standards, they often have great wealth and even move into politics or business later in life. But the puny weaklings who are overlooked have had time to reflect on the more important matters of life. While the athlete is exercising, the weakling is home reading the Bible.

The same is true with the mighty in military, political, or financial power in comparison to the average person who works a regular job and quietly lives his life. Might of any sort is an opiate which replaces one's instinctive need for God with feelings of self-worth and greatness. Instead of such sorts, God has revealed Himself to those who simply and humbly live their lives and take time to seek Him out.

Life application: Just because someone is prettier, stronger, more intellectual, or more powerful than you, there is no reason to be envious of them. In the end, beauty fades, the strong tire and age, the intellectual become forgetful, and the mighty go to the same grave as the rest. Those who have called on Jesus though have the sure promise that the grave isn't the end of the story. By the power of Christ, we shall be raised to eternal life. What more could we hope for!

**...and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are,...**  
1 Corinthians 1:28

Continuing on in the same line of thought as the previous verse, Paul shows that the things God decides upon and uses can be the least of all. And this is for a reason. If He chose the great things of the world, then the world could boast of their greatness before God. But by choosing those things which are weak and foolish, then God is exalted when He uses them to put to shame the mighty and the wise. Such is also true when He chooses "the base things of the world."

The "base things" are exactly the opposite of those things which are considered noble. Instead of choosing the blue-blooded, He goes to the uneducated and the lowly. Such people know how they are accounted to those in the world around them. But when they find that God has a purpose for them and that He loves them, they become the greatest example of His tender-mercies. Those who were once drug addicts or prostitutes realize the magnitude of the riches of Jesus Christ and so their hearts will be radically changed in turning to Him. The gratitude will never cease throughout the eternal ages.

This is also true with "the things which are despised." These "God has chosen" according to His wisdom. This is true with His original selection of Israel. We read of it in Deuteronomy 7:7 -

"The LORD did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any other people, for you were the least of all peoples."

Surely, the surrounding nations looked upon them with contempt and thought they could snuff them out in a moment. And the Bible bears this out. Great nations came against Israel and yet Israel prevailed. Gideon and 300 men triumphed over 120,000 Midianites - a number like the sand of the seashore. And how could this have been conceived of? Even Gideon, when given his commission responded to the Lord with incredulity -

"O my Lord, how can I save Israel? Indeed my clan *is* the weakest in Manasseh, and I *am* the least in my father's house." Judges 6:15

However, God used him - the least of his father's house, from the weakest clan of Manasseh - and he was victorious. Such is the case, time and time again in the Bible. And such is the case again in the world today. Little Israel is hemmed in by enemies and even her "friends" are working to tear her apart. And yes, she again will prevail over the nations. You, like Israel and those who are despised and weak, can too prevail when the Lord is at your right hand. Be encouraged by this.

Finally, Paul adds in, that God also uses "the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are." The Pulpit Commentary notes that "The *not* is the Greek subjective negative; things of which men conceived as not existing - 'nonentities.'" In other words, that which appears to be absolutely nothing can be used by God as if it is something. John the Baptist spoke this way to those who came to him -

"Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not think to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as *our* father.' For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones." Matthew 3:8, 9

God can raise up children from mere stones and He can raise you up and use you as well. This is the marvelous working of God in redemptive history. From the very dust of the earth, God formed the majestic being known as man - intricately woven together and capable of amazing feats of intelligence and strength. From one man who was old and childless came a group of people who have lasted and endured for 4000 years. And from that line of people, which included some of the worst sort, came the human genealogy of the Messiah of the world.

With God, nothing is impossible. If you are the called of the Lord, He may have chosen something weak, foolish, base, despised, or even considered as "nothing." But if He has called you, then you are of more value than all of the high-minded, noble, and powerful people who have rejected Him. Think of your position of honor in His eternal home and be satisfied with what the future holds.

Life application: In Christ, you are a glorious jewel within heaven's treasure box, radiant and precious.

**...that no flesh should glory in His presence.** 1 Corinthians 1:29

For several verses, Paul has been explaining how God chooses the weak, the foolish, and the despised to shame the mighty, the intellectual, and the noble.

Because of this, there is no boasting before Him. If such as these are chosen and not the others, then they are obviously considered lesser in any given category than those others and so they can't boast that they were somehow great.

But there is also the fact that some nobles are Christians, some mighty are Christians, and some highly intellectual people are as well. How then can this statement be considered an all-encompassing truth? The reason is that those who are in such positions had to step down from where they were - away from those around them, and humble themselves just like those of lesser status. The ground is level at the foot of the cross. All are bound under sin and so no one can reach higher than any other in expectation of being saved. Therefore, those who are of the higher position on earth were actually more humbled in their status before being saved than those of lower position.

As Paul tells us in Romans 3:27 - "Where *is* boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? Of works? No, but by the law of faith." In his ever-consistent way of explaining theology, Paul shows that it is faith which saves and so regardless of status, or works of the law, or any other thing, all must ultimately and completely credit God for their salvation.

For this reason, "no flesh should glory in His presence." The term "flesh" is being used to consider the whole man. All who stand before God have nothing in and of themselves which they can glory (or boast) in. When the redeemed stand in His presence, we will not glory in ourselves, we will give the glory to God. As this is absolutely truthful for us now and certain for us at that time, then let us endeavor to live as if it is true. In all things, let us give glory to God.

Life application: If you feel that you somehow merit your salvation (because of who you are), or if you feel that you must somehow merit your salvation (through works), then you probably aren't saved. Salvation is a gift bestowed upon one who does not deserve it. Accept the gift and rest in the work of Christ alone.

**But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God—and righteousness and sanctification and redemption— 1 Corinthians 1:30**

In the past four verses, Paul has written about the workings of God, specifically mentioning "God" three times:

- 1) God has chosen the foolish things of the world
- 2) God has chosen the weak things of the world
- 3) The base things of the world and the things which are despised, God has chosen

After that, he noted that because of God's efforts "no flesh should glory in His presence." Because all was a work of God, then we come before Him with empty hands. There can be no boasting in self because of the work of another.

And so in verse 30, he begins with "But of Him." This is speaking of God who has been noted as the One who has accomplished the work of reconciliation which began with His selection of us. It is "of Him," meaning God, that "you are in Christ Jesus." God selected us and God did the work for us through His Son. Because we have received the work of Christ, we are "in" Christ. We move from Adam to Christ, from death to life, from condemnation to salvation.

We have moved into a positional relationship with God by being in Christ Jesus "who became for us wisdom from God." As seen in the previous verses, the calling of God is predominantly among the weak, the base, the despised, and etc., according to the world's standards. And even those who are highly intellectual, mighty, or noble had to let go of self and humble themselves before God. This is because the great attribute they possess is actually nothing before Him. Rather than our own wisdom, we find the wisdom from God when we find Christ. All things make sense: life has purpose, the reason why we are here suddenly becomes clear, the Scriptures with their unusual stories suddenly clear up and are understandable. It is in Christ, and only in Him, that such wisdom can be obtained.

And along with the wisdom, we also receive more. In Christ there is:

- 1) "Righteousness." Before coming to Christ, we were unrighteous. As humans we bear sin, both inherited and committed. Sin is an offense to God and thus we are born in and continue in unrighteousness until it is removed in Christ. At the cross, a transfer is made. Our unrighteousness is transferred to Him to be removed at His death and His righteousness is imputed to us (2 Corinthians 5:21).
- 2) "Sanctification." Because of our position in Christ, we are sanctified by His Spirit. Prior to Christ, we were deemed unholy and unclean before God. But our position in Him means that we are considered holy and pure. This doesn't mean that we have actually attained this state, but that we are regarded as such because of Christ. In position, we are sanctified.
- 3) "Redemption." Jesus said that the one who sins is a slave to sin (John 8:34). John confirms that he who sins is of the devil (1 John 3:8). Because we are born into sin and continue in a life of sin, the devil is our master. But Christ Jesus can redeem us from this through His work. When we receive Him by faith, we are redeemed from the power of the devil. Because we are so redeemed, we are in Christ and can never lose this position. This truth is noted in 2 Corinthians 5:19 -

"For God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, no longer counting people's sins against them. And he gave us this wonderful message of reconciliation."

If we falter, it doesn't change our position because God is "no longer counting" our sins against us. The doctrine of eternal salvation is written all over this concept. What kind of a Savior would come only to provide eternal insecurity? Rather, in Him we are declared righteous, we are sanctified, and we are redeemed. This is the marvelous work of God in Christ for us!

Life application: To be in Christ is the sweetest place to be.

**...that, as it is written, "He who glories, let him glory in the LORD."**

1 Corinthians 1:31

The last verse of Chapter 1 begins with, "as it is written." Thus Paul is going back to the only Scriptures of his day (the Old Testament) in order to make a summary point concerning his thoughts of the past 21 verses. His quote is a condensed citation of Jeremiah 9:23, 24 -

"Thus says the LORD:

'Let not the wise *man* glory in his wisdom,  
Let not the mighty *man* glory in his might,  
Nor let the rich *man* glory in his riches;  
But let him who glories glory in this,  
That he understands and knows Me,  
That I *am* the LORD, exercising lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness in the earth.

For in these I delight,' says the LORD.'"

In Christ alone is where our boasting is to lie. It does not belong to any given man:

- 1) There should be no divisions within the church, i.e. "I am of Paul" or "I am of Cephas." Etc.
- 2) There should be no following after the great and learned of the world - whether a pagan or a well-trained and faithful follower of Christ, i.e. "I follow Aristotle," or "I follow John Calvin," or "I follow Albert Einstein," or "I follow Billy Graham."
- 3) There should be no desire to emulate the mighty.

- 4) Our goal shouldn't be to seek after a nobleman, a politician, or a movie star.

Rather than these things, or any other potential division in our allegiance concerning our spiritual life in Christ, we should direct our hearts, our souls, our minds, and our attention to what God has done in Him. In essence, "He who glories, let him glory in the LORD." It is Christ who is the head of the church; it is Christ who demonstrates and reveals to us the wisdom of God; in Christ are found the otherwise unsearchable riches of knowledge and understanding - both in the created order and in Scripture; in Christ is all power and strength; and in Christ is all greatness and majesty. Surely then, if these things are true, let us boast in and glory in the Lord Jesus Christ alone.

Life application: Why trade your allegiances for something less than what is the greatest of all. As Jesus Christ is the epitome of perfection in all that is good and wonderful, let Him alone be your hope, desire, aspiration, and love.

**And I, brethren, when I came to you, did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God. 1 Corinthians 2:1**

Paul begins chapter 2 with a comparison of himself to what he had just given concerning the called in Christ. In 1:26-31, he showed that God chose the foolish, the weak, the base, and the despised as opposed to the high and lofty, mighty, noble, and etc. And the reason He did this was so that "He who glories, let him glory in the Lord." This is the basis for his words "And I..."

Instead of having come as a great orator, or a captivating persona, he reminds them of the type of person he is and was. "And I, brethren" then makes a double comparison. First is the "And I" which is the comparison to his previous words, and "brethren" is his way of demonstrating that he is just like they - brethren. They are not subjects or otherwise lesser in some way.

After so presenting himself he reminds them of "when I came to you." Paul is now in Ephesus and is calling to memory the manner in which he presented himself to the Corinthians. With his arrival, he "did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom" to declare to them "the testimony of God." The Greek word for "excellence" indicates elevation or superiority. His speech wasn't in such a self-authoritative manner. Instead, it was of the authority of the cross and the resurrection. Paul directed his listeners not to himself, but to the One he proclaimed. The Greek word for "declaring" implies an authoritative proclamation. In other words, the substance of his words, not the manner in which they were presented, was where the authority rested.

Unfortunately, the substance of the message had been forgotten, at least in part, as we will continue to see throughout the epistle. And unfortunately, it continues to be forgotten or disregarded in the world today. Congregations follow after exactly the opposite of what Paul states in this verse. Rather than the authority of the gospel, congregants look to the presentation of the messenger. Instead of the power of the message of cross, the eloquence of the preacher is of paramount importance. This is truly sad - that after 2000 years of holding the Bible open in churches for eyes to see and perceive, the preacher is valued more than the message.

Life application: Better a dispassionate speaker with the message of Christ, than the greatest orator with something else...

**For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. 1 Corinthians 2:2**

"For" builds upon what he has just said, that he "did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom..." In other words, when going to the Greeks who looked for polished speech and fine oratory skills, or when going to the Jews who looked for a competent evaluation of the Scriptures (and being a Pharisee, he could easily provide this), he determined that these wouldn't be his means of proclaiming Christ. Instead of being caught up in a flashy presentation or in a detailed and

hair-splitting study of scriptural subtleties, he would be consumed with the contents of the message itself.

It was Paul's determination "not to know anything among you." In this phrase, "to know" is the Greek *eidenai*. Based on verse 1, he is indicating that he wouldn't be engaged in or regard anything other than what he had predetermined to proclaim. There would be nothing flashy, there wouldn't be anything sensational, nor anything without one sole and determined purpose. And that purpose included nothing "except Jesus Christ and Him crucified."

In a world which looked for (and still looks for today) eloquence and a composure in oral delivery, Paul overlooked these things. He had a specific message which didn't need flash. Later in 2 Corinthians 10, it will be noted that his "bodily presence *is* weak, and *his* speech contemptible." To him, refining these things for his delivery could only subtract from, not add to, the message. His message was Jesus Christ - the Son of God and the fulfiller of the law. But even more specific, his message was "Him crucified."

The word "crucified" here is emphatic. The very thing which is "to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness" (1:23) is the same thing that he asserted above all else. Before the cross, all eloquence fades away; before the cross, all wisdom is weighed; before the cross - only before the cross, Scripture becomes clear. Without the cross, nothing can ultimately make sense because without it, sin remains. What Jews overlooked and what Greeks snubbed their minds at and turned their eyes from is the most excellent of all of God's workings. As Paul says in Philippians 3:8 -

"Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ."

Life application: What shames a church isn't the preacher's delivery, be he an eloquent orator or a monotone speaker. It isn't derived from a beautiful

presentation of music, order, and intriguing detail from life lessons, or a haphazardly put together gathering. A church's shame isn't realized in a small dirty building or a large exquisite cathedral. Instead, it is found in a message which fails to proclaim the cross of Jesus Christ. Every time a congregation meets as a church, if the Person of Jesus Christ isn't exalted and if the cross isn't highlighted, that church has failed to glorify God.

### **I was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling. 1 Corinthians 2:3**

Building on his last two sentences which said that he came to Corinth not with "excellence of speech or of wisdom," but he came only proclaiming "Jesus Christ and Him crucified," Paul will now add in a note concerning his own dependency on the Lord. As he came he states that he "was with you." Vincent's Word Studies says that this should rather be "I became" instead of "I was." In other words, what he will describe is something that either grew out of his time there or that was increased during his time there. As he was there for over one and one half years, this is not unlikely.

Regardless of the tense used to describe him, the facts were evident to his readers as he calls them to mind. He was "in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling." Paul, contrasting himself to the fine orators and bold proclaimers of the world, was a much more feeble and timid person.

His weakness was probably a defect of the eyes. He once stood in the same room with a group of people, including the High Priest, and the following exchange took place -

"Then Paul, looking earnestly at the council, said, 'Men *and* brethren, I have lived in all good conscience before God until this day.' And the high priest Ananias commanded those who stood by him to strike him on the mouth. Then Paul said to him, 'God will strike you, *you* whitewashed wall! For you sit to judge me according to the law, and do you command me to be struck contrary to the law?' And those who stood by said, 'Do you revile God's high priest?'

Then Paul said, 'I did not know, brethren, that he was the high priest; for it is written, 'You shall not speak evil of a ruler of your people.'" Acts 23:1-5

Also, in his letter to the Galatians, he made this statement - "For I bear you witness that, if possible, you would have plucked out your own eyes and given them to me." Galatians 4:15

Additionally, Paul was known to write with unusually large letters, a sign of bad eyesight (Galatians 6:11).

Finally, Paul notes in his second letter to the Corinthians that he had an affliction which he asked the Lord to remove. Three times he implored the Lord. However, Christ told Him that His grace would be sufficient for him; that His "strength is made perfect in weakness." 2 Corinthians 12:9

With this probable weakness of the eyes, or something which was comparable to it which he openly writes about, he preached the gospel to those in Corinth. But more - he did so "in fear." He was a man continuously targeted by those around him. Again, in his second letter to the Corinthians, he will describe some of those fears -

"From the Jews five times I received forty *stripes* minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; *in* journeys often, *in* perils of waters, *in* perils of robbers, *in* perils of *my own* countrymen, *in* perils of the Gentiles, *in* perils in the city, *in* perils in the wilderness, *in* perils in the sea, *in* perils among false brethren; in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness—besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches." 2 Corinthians 11:24-28

His troubles and fears become so great while he was at Corinth, that the Lord personally came to him to reassure him that He was being watched over. This is seen in Acts 18:9, 11 -

"Now the Lord spoke to Paul in the night by a vision, 'Do not be afraid, but speak, and do not keep silent; for I am with you, and no one will attack you to hurt you; for I have many people in this city.' And he continued *there* a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them."

And finally, Paul notes not only the "weakness" and the "fear," but also "much trembling." Above all, Paul was a man who trembled. This wasn't a result of the bodily harms which came his way, but in the thought that he would fail the Lord who called him and thus he would grieve the Spirit with whom he was sealed. It was his strongest passion to proclaim Christ, finish the race, and in whatever manner the Lord was so pleased for his end, to accept that end with confidence. If only he could be faithful, he would be pleased with the life he led. This constant battle against his own weakness caused him to tremble.

Life application: Have you determined to exalt the Lord at all costs and to never diminish His glory in the eyes of another? This is our highest calling in life. Let us not fail in this endeavor.

**And my speech and my preaching *were* not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power... 1 Corinthians 2:4**

Still building on his previous three verses, Paul continues with his manner of personal delivery of the message he brought to Corinth. The fact that he has spoken about himself and continues to in this verse in this way will be explained in the verses ahead, but it's obviously important that he reminds them of it in order to ensure that they mentally go back and see the truth of what he is saying.

And so, in his continued thought he says that "my speech and preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom." His "speech" would include his private conversations and his witnessing to individuals, etc. When he sat and spoke together with others, he didn't try to bamboozle them with a lot of overly-intellectual words. His "preaching" would be his public discourses. Whether preaching to an entire group, or standing on a street corner proclaiming Christ, he kept his message simple, concise, and clear.

In fact, in both his private and public speaking, it was "not with persuasive words of human wisdom." When wooing a potential spouse, we may use words we wouldn't use towards a general friend. When trying to sell a product, the salesman will talk in an excited manner about the product and not leave a chance for interruptions. When a politician speaks, it is unheard of for them to give negative impressions about themselves; instead they act as if they are the epitome of integrity and capability.

In these, and many other such instances, we use "human wisdom" to effect a change in those we are targeting. The silver-tongued young man wants to obtain the lovely bride; the industrious salesman wants to be promoted and get his commissions; and the politician desires to be in his position of authority. Because there are external motivators, crafty speech of human design is employed. But Paul rejected this method when presenting the gospel to others.

Instead, he came to them "in demonstration of the Spirit and of power." His words, unlike the eager lover, may have had words directly cutting to the heart of the listener - "You have violated God's law." His words, unlike the salesman, may have had words which would normally blow a sale - "Without Jesus, you cannot be saved." And, his words unlike the politician, may have had thoughts which were self-debasing - "I too am a sinner, like you. I rely solely on the merits of Jesus Christ my Lord."

In any words he spoke, his thoughts would have been contrary to what one would expect to obtain the desired results when dealing in non-spiritual related matters. But in the case of the gospel, it is the Spirit who authored Scripture; it is the Spirit

who gives the plan of salvation; and it is the Spirit who calls the lost soul to come and be saved. Paul's words were in line with the Spirit's intent for those who would hear and believe and they were filled with the power to save.

As he writes in Romans 1:16 - " For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek."

Life application: Marilyn McCoo, once a member of the pop band the Fifth Dimension, had been presented the message of Jesus on several occasions, but to no avail. Then someone brought the Bible along when they talked to her. In showing her the Word of God and allowing her to look at it directly, she saw in it the wisdom of God and the power of God; she was converted. When witnessing, stick to the gospel and stick to what the Spirit has provided. He will affect His purposes without us getting in the way.