

Challenges Christians Face

Boasting Only in the Lord

1 Corinthians 1:26-31

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Scripture

Today we continue studying *The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians* in a series I am calling *Challenges Christians Face*.

Christians in the church at Corinth had misunderstood the nature of wisdom with regard to salvation. From Paul's perspective human wisdom opposes God's wisdom that is revealed in the gospel. Human wisdom is based on human knowledge and leads to destruction. God's wisdom is based on the gospel and leads to eternal life. Let's see how Paul expresses the difference between human wisdom and the wisdom of the gospel with respect to its recipients in 1 Corinthians 1:26-31.

Let's read 1 Corinthians 1:26-31:

²⁶ For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; ²⁸ God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, ²⁹ so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. ³⁰ And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, ³¹ so that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord." (1 Corinthians 1:26–31)

Introduction

Almost twenty years ago I interviewed for the position of pastor at the Oakwood Presbyterian Church in State College, PA. I can still remember meeting with the Pulpit Committee and Session on a Saturday morning at the church. They asked me the usual questions that one would expect to be asked as a candidate. Then,

at one point, someone made the observation that State College was the home of Penn State University. In fact, Penn State was by far the largest employer in the region, and I think that something like 1 in 3 people in State College were either students, faculty, staff, or somehow connected to the university.

I was asked, “Because of the presence of Penn State, our church has a large number of intellectuals who attend our church. How do you feel about that?”

I vividly remember walking into the adult Sunday school class the next day, and of the twenty people in attendance, twelve of them either had Ph.D. degrees or were working on their Ph.D.s!

I answered the question that had been put to me as follows, “First, the ground at the foot of the cross is level. In other words, all people come to salvation in the same way—through the cross of Christ. Second, having worked in the area of evangelism for several years at the University of Cape Town, I can assure you that intellectuals have no advantage over so-called “non-intellectuals” when it comes to understanding the gospel. And the reason is that God by his grace gives faith to whomever he pleases, whether they are intellectual or not.”

The Pulpit Committee and Session must have been satisfied with my answer because they recommended me to the congregation, and I was subsequently elected to be their pastor, and served there for eleven years.

Sometimes educated people have a certain arrogance about spiritual things. And frankly, we who are Reformed in our doctrine, can be especially prone to that because we love accurate and carefully articulated theology. Now, I don’t want to be misunderstood. Every Christian ought to strive for an accurate understanding of theology. However, we must not think that because we have a growing and deepening understanding of theology that we are somehow better than others who are not as far along as we are.

And this is something of the challenge that the apostle Paul faced at Corinth.

Review

Let me briefly review what we have covered so far in *The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians*.

After the introductory salutation (1:1-3) and thanksgiving (1:4-9) of the letter, Paul immediately addressed the issue of divisions in the church in Corinth (1:10-17). Paul urged the Christians in Corinth to heal the divisions in the church because they are contrary to the unity that exists in Christ's body.

The reason for the division in the church at Corinth was due to a misunderstanding of human wisdom versus the wisdom of the gospel. In a series of three paragraphs, Paul shows how utterly incompatible human wisdom is in relation to the gospel.

First, he says in effect, "So you think the gospel is a form of wisdom? How foolish can you get? Look at its *message*; it is based on the story of a crucified Christ. Who in the name of wisdom would have dreamed that up? Only God is so wise as to be so foolish" (1:18-25).

Next, Paul says, "Furthermore, look at its *recipients*. Yourself! Who in the name of wisdom would have chosen you to be the new people of God?" (1:26-31).¹

Paul urged the Christians in Corinth to remember their condition when God first called them, and that from the world's point of view, they had been utterly foolish to believe in Christ as the way of salvation.

Lesson

Similarly, in today's lesson we are urged to remember our condition when God first called us, and that from the world's point of view, we have been utterly foolish to believe in Christ as the way of salvation.

Let's use the following outline for today's lesson:

¹ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), 67.

1. The Possession of Salvation (1:26-28)
2. The Praise in Salvation (1:29-31)

I. The Possession of Salvation (1:26-28a)

First, let's look at the possession of salvation. Here Paul notes the response to the gospel.

A. *The Character of the Response (1:26)*

First, let's see the character of the response.

Paul says in verse 26: **“For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth.”**

Paul wanted the Corinthian Christians to **consider** their **calling**. He is not talking about their vocational calling but rather their **calling** to salvation. They needed to remember something about their status in the world when they were called to salvation.

Showing his affection for them by calling them **brothers**, Paul reminded the Corinthians of several facts.

When they had first received the gospel, most of them were not **wise according to worldly standards**. Furthermore, **not many were powerful**, and **not many were of noble birth**. Now, I want you to notice that Paul did not say that none of them were wise, powerful, and of noble birth. The fact is that some of them were wise, powerful, and of noble birth, such as Crispus, Gaius, Erastus, and Stephanas. Paul's point, however, is that **not many** were wise, powerful, and of noble birth.

When they were called, they had no basis from which to assert superiority over one another or to boast because they had no wisdom, no power, and no status. Yet, when God called them, they believed the simple gospel and were saved.

People are being saved today from every strata of society. I know that we tend to flock to our own kind. We find it easier to get along with people who are similar to us in terms of education,

wealth, and status. But the fact is that the gospel does not necessarily have a greater appeal to those who are wise, powerful, and noble. The gospel is for all people regardless of education, wealth, and status.

B. The Cause for the Response (1:27-28a)

And second, let's see the cause for the response to the gospel.

Paul says in verses 27-28a: **“But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not. . . .”**

The Corinthian experience of the gospel made God's outlook on the world's wisdom clear. **God chose** as his people those whom the world did not respect. Most Corinthian believers represented the **foolish, weak, low, and despised in the world**. Paul even described the Corinthians as **things** in order to indicate how little the world thought of their condition.

Even so, there was a divine purpose in all of this. God planned **to shame** those whom the world considered **wise and strong**. Although the Corinthians appeared foolish and weak to the unbelieving world when they trusted in Christ, they were not foolish for believing the gospel. Instead, the world was shown to be foolish and weak.

We live in a time when it is “politically incorrect” to make comments about virtually any group in society. You cannot make comments about different ethnic groups, homosexuals, people with different disabilities, political groups, even various religious groups, and so on. However, the one group that it is okay to pick on and bash is Christians. Christians are most often shown in a derogatory light in the various media. However, we should never become discouraged because God chose the gospel as the only way of salvation, and try as they might, the wise and the strong and the noble will never devise a plan that supersedes the gospel.

Paul did not use these unflattering descriptions of the Corin-

thians to belittle them, but to remind them that they had no basis for boasting. When the Corinthians first experienced the gospel in their lives, they did not feel superior to one another and they were not divided. From God's perspective, nothing had changed between that time and the time Paul wrote—they still had no reason to boast, to divide, or to quarrel. Paul reminded them of this so they would abandon those things that caused them to treat one another disdainfully (see 1 Corinthians 1:10–12).

II. The Praise in Salvation (1:28b-31)

And second, let's look at the praise in salvation.

Here Paul notes that the gospel message brings honor to God.

A. *The Curtailment of Praise (1:28b-29)*

First, notice the curtailment of praise.

Paul says in verses 28b-29: **“. . . to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.”**

God selected lowly people for a remarkable reason: **to bring to nothing things that are**. In other words, God filled the church at Corinth with people who amounted to very little by human standards in order to demonstrate that these standards were wrong. The goal of this demonstration was plain. God wanted to make certain **that no human being might boast in the presence of God**.

When I was at seminary I took a summer class with Dr. Don Carson, who is one of the foremost New Testament scholars today. I don't remember what Scripture text we were looking at that particular day, but one of the students started debating with Dr. Carson that he was responsible for his own salvation. The student believed that the reason he was going to heaven is that he was smart enough to choose to believe the gospel. I can still remember Dr. Carson saying that if he did that then he was boasting about his ability. The student didn't have a problem with that because he was

in fact boasting about his ability to choose to believe the gospel. Dr. Carson simply reminded the student—and the rest of the class—that God chose us **so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.**

The wise, powerful, and sophisticated of the world tend to boast that they become Christians because they deserve to be the people of God. The elect become elite in their own minds. In the same way, the Corinthians' boast of being "of Paul" or "of Apollos"—the source of the divisions in the church—demonstrated forgetfulness that their salvation never depended upon their own merit. But the lowly of the world understand that they have nothing in themselves of which to boast. They know they do not deserve to be in Christ's kingdom. Therefore, God chooses these kinds of people **so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.**

B. The Christ for the Praise (1:30)

Second, notice the Christ for the praise.

Paul says in verse 30: **“And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption. . . .”**

To dispel any pride remaining in the Corinthians, Paul reminded them why they believed the gospel. It was not because they were wise or powerful enough to receive salvation. It was **because of God** that they were **in Christ Jesus**. God himself is the ultimate force behind the salvation of those who believe. Although salvation is “by grace through faith,” even faith itself is “a gift from God” (Ephesians 2:8–9). No credit belongs to the humans who have come to Christ. All credit belongs to God.

Paul described salvation in poignant terms. He said that believers are **in Christ**. In theology we refer to this as “union with Christ.” This phrase describes the saving relationship that all believers have with Christ. Believers are joined to him in baptism and become members of his body. For this reason, the judgment that Christ bore on the cross applies to all who are in him. Moreover,

believers share in his resurrection life both now and in the final resurrection of their bodies (Romans 6:3–8). Paul emphasized this unity in Christ to reconcile the divided factions of the Corinthian church.

Because of believers' union with Christ, Christ has become **wisdom from God** to them. This union with Christ should make believers value Christ as the greatest wisdom of all. The Corinthians needed to stop following the wisdom of the world and to recognize that Christ embodies divine wisdom.

Finally, the apostle delineated the nature of this wisdom that believers identify with Christ. He is our **righteousness and sanctification and redemption**. These three terms are very meaningful.

1. Christ Is Our Righteousness

First, Christ is our **righteousness**.

This is the first time in his letter that Paul uses the word **righteousness**. This word means *justification*.

Christ bore the sins of his people on the cross so they might receive his right standing before God (Romans 10:4; Philippians 3:9). It is the righteousness of Christ that God accepts.

2. Christ Is Our Sanctification

Second, Christ is our **sanctification**.

In Paul's vocabulary "**sanctification**" often describes the purity which should characterize the daily lifestyles of believers (Romans 6:19, 22; 1 Thessalonians 4:3–4, 7; 1 Timothy 2:15). The Corinthians had seen their practical lives changed by the power of the gospel of Christ. He had become the source of their holiness.

3. Christ Is Our Redemption

And third, Christ is our **redemption**.

Christ also purchased believers with the price of his own

blood (Romans 3:24–25). All believers have been “bought at a price” (1 Corinthians 6:20). Paul reminded the Corinthians that Christ had become the most important thing in their lives. They owed to him every dimension of their salvation.

C. The Command for the Praise (1:31)

And finally, notice the command for the praise.

Paul says in verse 31: “. . . so that, as it is written, ‘**Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.**’”

The purpose of Christ’s exclusive role as the wisdom of God bringing salvation is that all boasting will be done to the glory of God. Paul paraphrased Jeremiah 9:24. The prophet Jeremiah warned Judah not to boast in their own wisdom and ability. They were to put their confidence in the Lord to deliver them from trouble.

Paul recalled this verse to apply this Old Testament principle to his readers. Those who understand rightly will not be so foolish as to boast in themselves or in any other human being. They will take confidence only in the Lord. Paul hoped that when the Corinthians ceased to boast in themselves, they would be reconciled to one another.

Conclusion

A recent advertisement by Cars.com tells the fictional story of a wonder child named Timothy Richman. From his earliest years, Timothy displayed an amazing level of confidence, and his confidence came from knowledge.

As a toddler in his high chair, he saw a pan of food cooking on the stove catch fire. Knowing somehow that baking soda puts out fires, Timothy calmly threw his rattle at a box of baking soda located on a shelf above the flaming pan, knocking over the box, which poured the soda into the pan and extinguished the flames.

As a boy about to learn to ride a bike, Timothy stands strad-

dling the bike as his dad prepares to put on the training wheels. Timothy says, “Balance, momentum, and a low center of gravity,” and with that knowledge fully absorbed, before Timothy’s dad can get the training wheels on, Timothy pedals the bike away.

In junior high, Timothy confidently walks up to a teen on an Italian beach who has been stung on the leg by a jellyfish and acting on his knowledge of first aid he pours vinegar on the inflamed skin. He explains in perfect Italian that vinegar can neutralize jellyfish stings.

As a high school student on safari in Africa, he uses his knowledge of veterinary obstetrics to deliver a baby Bengal tiger that was breeched.

As an adult, Timothy gets out of his car on a highway as a tornado approaches a bus full of cheerleaders. Using his knowledge of storm cells and tornadoes, he explains to the cheerleaders that they will be safe if they exit the bus and lie in a low-lying depression beside the road. Just as the cheerleaders and Timothy jump safely into the ditch, the bus rises in the air and is carried away by the tornado.

The narrator explains, however, as Timothy stands with a scared look on his face in a new car lot, “When it came time to buy a new car, he was just as nervous as the rest of us.”

Then Timothy sees a Cars.com sign and pulls out his cell phone. The narrator concludes, “So Timothy Richman got his knowledge at Cars.com, regained his confidence, and got the perfect car at the perfect price.”

This commercial entertainingly illustrates the fact that no matter how much knowledge and confidence we have in many areas of life, we can still be clueless in another important area of living. The fact is, no matter how smart we are, apart from God’s help we are clueless about important spiritual truths.

Let us remember our condition when God first called us, and that from the world’s point of view, we have been utterly foolish to believe in Christ as the way of salvation. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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PRAAYER:

Our Father, we remember our condition when you first called us, and that from the world's point of view, we have been utterly foolish to believe in Christ as the way of salvation.

And yet we do not boast in ourselves or in our ability. We boast simply in you and in your amazing grace that saved. How grateful we are to you for saving us.

And for this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

CHARGE:

Now, brothers and sisters, go and live as those who embrace the wisdom of the gospel!