

1 Corinthians 1:26-31
(Deuteronomy 7:6-8; 9:6; Luke 6:20-26)
“That No One Might Boast”

Introduction

Paul is writing to a church he knows well and loves dearly, a church going through a time of quarreling and division caused by spiritual pride. It seems clear that the congregation sought to understand and explain the gospel as a form of *sophia* (wisdom), and thus to remove anything that might cause it to be despised and rejected by the surrounding Greco-Roman culture. So Paul sets out to bring them back to earth, to ground them in the gospel and to remind them that the One we call Lord was despised and rejected by his people.

He does this by making three moves: first (as we saw last week), Paul argues that the gospel appears weak and foolish to the surrounding world because of the message itself, what he calls “the word of the cross.” Now, in the verses before us this morning, Paul argues that the gospel also appears weak and foolish because of those who believe and receive its message. Finally, in the opening verses of chapter two, he argues that the gospel appears weak and foolish to the world because of those who proclaim its message: people like Paul and Apollos and Cephas.

If you are wondering what this has to do with us today, let me remind you of the typical evangelical *modus operandi*: If we are having a public meeting, we try to bring in a star, someone known and respected for his intelligence or her athletic prowess or professional success. The church has done this since the days of Emperor Constantine in the third century after Jesus. What started as the church of the despised and rejected, the poor and oppressed, became within a few centuries the church of the rich and brilliant and powerful.

Does God not love them as well? Of course he does. Do the wise and strong not also need the gospel? Of course they do. Are intelligent people who are greatly gifted in explaining the Scriptures or in defending the faith, not a gift to us all? Yes, they are wonderful gifts. Are those in places of authority who use their power for good and godly ends not a gift to God’s people? Yes, of course they are. Are those who have great wealth and use it in compassionate gospel work not pleasing to the Lord and good for us all? Yes, yes, a thousand times yes!

But here is what we must never forget: the gospel is not true because it is believed by the wise and strong and successful. When the wise and strong believe it, they believe it because it is true.

Paul will make his case by asking the Corinthian Christians to consider three things. He writes: First, consider the reality of your calling. Second, consider why God chose you. And thirdly, consider why this is so good.

Body

1. Consider the reality of your calling (1:26).

Not many wise

Paul does not mean to imply that among the first Christians were no scholars. Clearly, he himself had received a high-level rabbinic education, as he had studied the Law, “at the feet of Gamaliel” (Acts 22:30). Gamaliel was the President of the Sanhedrin (the Jewish ruling council), grandson of the great teacher Hillel, and venerated in the Talmud. Paul’s friend and associate, Apollos, was known for his eloquent speaking (Acts 18:24). Another of Paul’s friends and occasional traveling companion, Luke, was a medical doctor who wrote with vigor and eloquence – as proved by his two volume Gospel and Acts of the Apostles.

Even the fishermen, Peter and John, spoke before the Sanhedrin with such boldness that the religious leaders wondered how they could speak with such power when they were not highly educated men. The only reason they could give was that “they had been with Jesus” (Acts 4:13). Add to that Matthew’s gospel, John’s gospel and letters, the Revelation: No collection of writings in all of history has been read as often or claimed as many followers – today reaching over 2.2 billion, a third of the world’s population.

So, what was Paul’s point? Just this: that the gospel is not the work of philosophers, that it is not the result of a rational line of inquiry, that it is not something that any human being would come up with. It is – as we saw last week – counterintuitive, and profoundly humbling to human pride.

Not many powerful

The gospel is entirely unlike religions devised by rulers to keep people oppressed. What do I mean? I hope my Hindu friends will forgive me, but historically it seems clear that Hinduism, for example, was designed by the Brahmin caste of Indo-Aryans to keep the lower castes of dark-skinned native peoples submissive to high-caste rule. The structure of most eastern religions was intended to stabilize family and society and keep people obediently in their place.

The gospel, on the other hand – again, as we saw last week – was subversive to the structures of political and social power that kept people in their place. The cross was Rome’s means of terrifying the populace into submission. But Christians held up the cross as a “taunt” (Robert Barron) to Roman power. “Is this the best you can do? If so, you have no more power to terrify us, because

the one you crucified, God raised up. Caesar is not Lord. Jesus is Lord! And we who are his have died in his death and been raised to new life in his victory.”

The gospel was not designed to attract the powerful, those on top, or to maintain the status quo, but to give hope to the weak and oppressed, those on the bottom, whom the world despised, and to turn the world upside down.

Not many high born

The Anglican revivalists John Wesley and George Whitefield were greatly helped in their ministries by an English noble woman, Lady Huntingdon, who famously said of this text, “I am only going to heaven through the letter ‘M.’ Thank God that Paul did not say, “Not *any* of noble birth,’ but ‘Not *many* of noble birth.’ I am saved by an ‘M.’”

Of course there were, even in Paul’s day, those of noble birth who came to new life through repentance and faith. But here is the point: this did not start among the high and mighty of the world, but among the poor and oppressed. We must never lose this authentic, foundational gospel note: Christ came to seek and save the lost, to call sinners, to gather a new community of those whom the world counted as nothing. It was ever so. Don’t miss that note in our Old Testament readings from Deuteronomy: God did not choose the children of Israel because they were the greatest nation or the most righteous people. Why then did he choose Israel? That takes us to our second consideration.

2. Consider why God chose you (1:27-29).

To shame the wise

I hope that by now it is obvious why God chooses those whom the world considers the least likely candidates to believe, receive and carry God’s message of salvation. The wise cannot recognize their folly and weakness before God until the cross humbles them. And so, in his mercy, God chooses those whom the world considers foolish in order to shame the wise into an honest view of their own spiritual poverty and complete inability to save them selves. It is not God’s contempt but his compassion for them. Until our pride is broken, we cannot see the cross of Christ in its life-giving power and glory.

To shame the strong

So, too, God mercifully chose those whom the world considers weak in order to shame the strong. Until one realizes his utter weakness ever to reconcile himself to God and to his neighbor, until he realizes the unbridgeable gulf that he cannot cross in his own strength, he is simply lost. So God does what

is needed to show the strong how weak they are and how desperately they need his grace and mercy.

To bring to nothing those who boast in themselves

So, too, those who pride themselves in their nobility: Paul knew all about that. He wrote on this theme to this same Corinthian church in his second extant letter to them: “Whatever anyone else dares to boast of – I am speaking as a fool – I also dare to boast of that. Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they offspring of Abraham? So am I.” (2 Corinthians 11:21f).

To the Philippian congregation, he wrote:

If anyone thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: Circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord (Philippians 3:4f).

Is this a good thing, the shaming of the wise and strong and noble of the world? And if so, why?

3. Consider why this is so good (1:30-31).

You are now in Christ

When we are reading Paul, we know that he will come back to this over and over again: union with Christ. Everything depends upon this. Everything flows from this. Every blessing of salvation is through our union with Christ. In Paul’s anthropology, all distinctions – between Jew and Gentile, rich and poor, slave and free, even the most basic human distinction between male and female – all are insignificant before God. The only thing that matters is whether one is still in Adam or is now in Christ, the second Adam, the one who restarts the human race as no longer strangers and aliens, but as reconciled to God and one another in Christ Jesus.

So, here Paul reminds us that because God has chosen us – the weak and foolish and ignoble of the world – we are “in Christ Jesus” (1:30). In fact, his whole point is that there is no other way to union with Christ except through the gospel that seems so foolish to the world, what he calls “the word of the cross.” Because we are in Christ, all things are ours – as he will go on to say at the end of chapter three: “Let no one boast in men. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the

present or the future – all are yours, and you are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s” (3:21f). In the verses before us, he makes this clear.

All that is Christ’s is yours

“You are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption” (1:30). Here we have the essence of his argument that we are wasting our time seeking human wisdom and power when we have been given all things in Christ. We can simply take these four gifts that are ours in Christ and contrast them with the actual poverty and weakness of this world’s vaunted wisdom and power, to make Paul’s point.

Do we long for the wisdom of this world that can never lead us to God, or do we want “wisdom from God,” which is given us in Christ?

Do we seek a righteousness of our own making, which can never hold up in the light of God’s holy presence, or do we want the perfect righteousness of Christ?

Do we want to seek Christ-likeness in our own strength, which is doomed from the start, or do we want Christ to dwell in our hearts by his Spirit, changing us from the inside out through the means of grace, so that all of life becomes for us a sacred space of knowing God and delighting in his life flowing through us to those around us?

Can we free ourselves from bondage to sin and death, or do we want the redemption that Christ has paid through his own sacrifice on our behalf?

God alone gets the glory

Here is the ultimate reason that the word of the cross and the people of the cross and the messengers of the cross must seem to worldly wisdom and power to be foolish and weak: Because only in this way does God alone get glory. And so, Paul concludes this section with the words, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord” (1:31). This is the great theme of Scripture, as it should be of all creation: “The heavens are telling the glory of God” and “the earth is full of his glory” and his servants cry out with Moses, “Show me your glory.” Paul writes in his second letter to this church, “And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another” (2 Corinthians 3:18).

Conclusion

The life of salvation is a life that sees in all things the glory of the Lord shining through, and that seeks, even in eating and drinking, to do all things for God’s glory. For this we were made. For this we were redeemed. This is our joy, our life and our salvation. Don’t miss the only thing that makes sense of all the rest, the one thing that finally matters: the glory of God alone.