

Boast in the Lord

1 Corinthians 1:17-31

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The city of Corinth was a wealthy city of approximately 200,000 people. The city was on a major trade route of the Roman Empire. The city was multi-cultural, filled with many temples to pagan gods and known for its sexual immorality.

Around 50 A.D. the Apostle Paul came to Corinth and shared the gospel, first with the Jews and then with the Gentiles. Persons of both groups had put their faith in Christ and a multi-cultural church had begun in Corinth. Though surrounded by a very immoral culture, they had put their faith in Jesus Christ. New Life in Christ had been confirmed by fruit in their lives, and they were now children of God.

The Apostle Paul, their spiritual father who had started the church, heard of their struggles while he was ministering in Ephesus and wrote 1 Corinthians as a letter to them. In 1 Corinthians 1:1-9, Paul reminded them of who they were in Christ. They had been made holy and were called as saints alongside all those in every place who call upon the name of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul reminded them of the grace that they had received in Christ. In every way they were enriched in Him, so much so that the testimony of Christ was confirmed among them. They were truly Christ followers and could be confident that Christ is faithful and would sustain them until the end.

Even though their spiritual identity was secure in Christ, they were now turning away from Christ, who truly united them, and were allowing themselves to be divided by their loyalties to different church leaders. They were quarreling among themselves, saying “I follow Paul”, or “I follow Apollos”, or “I follow Cephas”, or “I follow Christ”.

How could this be? Paul, Apollos and Cephas were mere men who were merely servants of Christ. Jesus Christ was the one who had *“emptied himself by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he had humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. God had highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth*

and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:5-11). Paul was horrified that Paul’s name and the names of his fellow ministers would ever be raised to the same plane as that of Christ.

Paul was not crucified for them. They were not baptized in the name of Paul. Paul was nothing more than the messenger of Christ who had been sent out to proclaim the message of salvation. It was the power of the cross of Christ that deserved all the credit and glory for their salvation.

In 1 Corinthians 1:17, Paul continues with these words:

¹⁷ For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

We must note that Paul was speaking in the midst of a Greek culture where philosophy and rhetoric were of greatest of importance. Their heroes were not football players, rock stars or actors in the movies. The superstars in Corinth and throughout Greece were the orators. They were the ones who would draw huge crowds of people who wanted to hear them speak in ways that stirred the hearts of man.

It was even told how one orator was so respected that, once it was known that he was about to speak, the people would leave the sports arenas and even the seats of government just to come and hear this man speak.

They competed to see who was wisest and most discerning. From this culture came famous philosophers such as Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. The Greeks were addicted to orators with fine words. To many in this culture, Paul’s simple message of the gospel must have seemed crude, uncultured and ignorant. It was something to be mocked and ridiculed, not listened to and believed.

It was not with beautiful words and flawless rhetoric that Paul called people to put their faith in Christ. First of all, that would have given the speaker too much credit, as if his power of argument and manipulation could somehow, without the work of the Holy Spirit, convince someone to put their faith in Jesus. We know that this is not possible.

We see in scripture how faith is a gift that depends on God. Scripture shows us time and again that we cannot believe in Jesus on our own. Without the Spirit’s leading, mankind will always view the gospel as foolishness. It is only through hearing the gospel and its truths being revealed that we are granted faith and come to believe.

Belief always starts with God. It is He who wills and acts in us according to His purposes (Philippians 2:13). John 6:44 tells us that, *“No one can come to Jesus unless the Father draws him.”* 1 Corinthians 12:3 says that, *“No one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord’ except in the Holy Spirit.”*

Matthew 16:15-17 are important verses as we seek to understand how one comes to salvation in Jesus Christ. At one point Jesus asked His disciples, *“Who do you say that I am?”* Simon Peter replied,

“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” And Jesus answered him, *“Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.”*

Only God can reveal Christ to mankind. Like Paul, we must present the gospel in a way that it is heard clearly and simply. But we must understand that we are merely playing a small role in the larger story of salvation as God works to draw people to Himself. Sharing the gospel is crucial, but it is the Holy Spirit who will in the end bring someone to faith in Christ.

Secondly, a dependence on words of eloquent wisdom would have incorrectly supposed that the listener had the goodness and capability within themselves to be convinced and choose to put their faith in Jesus, without any revelatory work of the Holy Spirit. We know that this is not possible.

Romans 3 tells us that all of us are under sin. No one is righteous. No one understands. No one seeks God on their own. In Ephesians 2, the Apostle Paul tells us that we are spiritually dead. James 4:4 tells us that all who are without Christ are enemies of God. So, how can someone who is not good, who is spiritually dead and is an enemy of God seek God? They can't.

God must work first. God must begin to draw them to Himself (John 6:44). It is the work of God, not the work of man. That takes many different forms. Some are raised in Christian homes and taught the Bible. God then uses this to draw them to Himself. Others are drawn to Christ through life circumstances, relationships with Christians, or by supernatural means such as dreams. Regardless of how it happens, God must awaken the darkened heart if it is to believe in Jesus.

Thirdly, if Paul had trusted in his own eloquence instead of trusting in the work of Christ to reveal the gospel to his listeners, that would have immediately quenched the work of the Holy Spirit in his preaching, and His preaching would have bore no fruit. But we see the work of the Holy Spirit throughout Paul's ministry. We see many putting their faith in Christ.

With this in mind, Paul did not come with impressive, eloquent wisdom, but merely with a clear presentation of the gospel in the simplest terms. He focused more on how to best communicate the truths of the gospel to his listeners, so that they would be willing to listen and then understand the concepts, always knowing that any saving work would have to be done by the Holy Spirit.

In the book of Acts we see that Paul presented the gospel in different ways, based on who his audience was. He did not just toss out the gospel seed haphazardly. He was mindful of the condition of the spiritual and intellectual soil to whom he was speaking and sought to communicate the concepts of the gospel in the way that they could best be “heard” and understood by the listener. This included presenting the gospel in a way that would remove any cultural stumbling blocks if possible, so that the person or persons would at least be willing to listen and come face to face with the gospel. If one was to be offended, it was only to be by the gospel itself, not by something that the messenger did that would cause the person to refuse to even listen to the messenger.

Like Jesus, Paul presented the timeless truths of the gospel in various ways, based on the context. Paul spoke one way to the philosophers at the Areopagus in Athens (Acts 17). He spoke another way to the

Jews in the synagogues. He spoke even another way to those of pagan backgrounds throughout the Roman world. Paul spoke as to present the gospel clearly. The Holy Spirit used these truths to change the heart of man.

Paul knew there were two parts to receiving the gospel. We find these words in Romans 10:14,17, *“How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching . . . So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.”* Faith in Christ was preceded by hearing the word of Christ. Paul preached the gospel and the Holy Spirit granted faith to believe.

It might be likened to the young boy who offered up his few loaves and fish to Jesus, as thousands of people waited in hunger. The boy’s part was to make the bread available. It was Christ’s work to use it supernaturally for His glory and the people’s good.

To decorate the gospel in rosy terms or cleverness turn people’s attention more towards the speaker and the style, not the content and Savior. Paul’s goal was to make little of himself and much of Christ, joining with the words of John the Baptist, in John 3:30, *“He (Christ) must increase, but I must decrease.”*

D.A. Carson tells a story of a man from the Middle East who came to Christ. He was a great man of rhetoric and an expert in the highest levels of Arabic. When he spoke, crowds would come just to hear him speak. At times, as many as 800 people would come to hear him speak of Christ. They loved to listen to the way that he spoke and the eloquence that he possessed. It was intriguing and even entertaining, and the people continued to come, but none put their faith in Jesus Christ. He then took hold of these truths in Paul’s writings and switched to Arabic that was used in the streets by the common man. The crowds decreased and fewer people came to hear him preach . . . but more and more people came to Christ. What was happening? It was this truth about which the Apostle Paul was speaking. It is reliance on the words of the cross accompanied by the Holy Spirit working in one’s heart that brings conversion.

We must remember that at this point Paul is still trying to speak into the issue of division in the church. He is continuing to heighten the purpose and power of Christ while describing the diminished but crucial role of preaching the gospel.

¹⁸ For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

We wear the cross as decoration, and cherish it in our hearts, and display it in our churches, but the people of Paul’s day would have never related to the cross in this way. The Romans used it to put fear in the hearts of the people to keep them in submission. Those crucified were put along the roads for the public to see. The cross was an object of horror. The cross was a brutal, grotesque tool of torture, intimidation and death. The kind that you shield your children’s eyes from when you pass by. That is why it was viewed as such foolishness to those who were perishing.

The perishing are defined in scripture in many different ways: the hard of heart, the unregenerate, the unbeliever, those living in darkness, the callous of heart, the slaves to sin, those who have not eyes to see and ears to hear.

The people in Corinth would likely have been divided into various groups. Free and slave. Jews and Gentiles. Roman citizens and not Roman citizens. Greeks and barbarians. Rich and poor. And even these would have been divided based on the world view or philosophers that they followed. Those in the church had now been made one in Christ, but many of them likely still related to these identities that the world had assigned to them in the past. This likely fed their felt need for divisions, but Paul writes and groups all of mankind into only two groups: the perishing and those being saved. Because of this all those in the faith should now be united in Christ. Regardless of financial status, ethnic group, history, they are united as brothers and sisters for eternity.

Those who had put their faith in Christ were now in the process of being made like Jesus Christ (Romans 8:29). The more they matured in the faith, the fewer similarities they had with unbelievers and the more they had in common with each other (Phil. 2:11-13). As they kept their focus on Christ, they not only grew closer to Christ, but they also grew more committed to each other. If they turned their focus away from Christ, then division would emerge, and unity would be lost.

¹⁹ For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart."²⁰ Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?²¹ For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.

The world seeks to give education and intelligence credit for changing mankind, but time and again history shows that an educated mind does not result in a regenerated heart. In today's world we have more education and learning than ever before, but yet immorality is still on the rise and contentment, holiness and peace are still as out of reach as they ever were.

Paul is clearly stating that the wisdom of God is so far above anything this world can achieve. What seems wisdom to this world will be shown as foolishness. Worldly accolades and pleasures will be shown to be empty and vain. Regardless of how intelligent or wise one may seem, without Christ as his point of reference one does not have access to true wisdom. How many people who were supposedly wise from the world's perspective will arrive at the end of their lives and have wasted it all?

In contrast, many believers who seem to be fools from the world's perspective will be vindicated as wise when their life comes to an end.

In God's wisdom salvation was not set aside only for the intelligent. If so, then they would glory in their brilliance and take credit for salvation. Also, then only the smartest of people would be reconciled to God. Instead, salvation is available to all mankind, regardless of intelligence, wealth or ability. It is a gift of God, so that men from every nation, tribe and tongue can have an opportunity to come to Christ.

Ephesians 2:8-9 affirms these truths with these words, *“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.”*

The Jews and the Greeks often saw themselves as entitled to God’s favor, but the cross of Christ was an obstacle to them.

²² For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

The Jews hungered for signs. They wanted startling miracles that would mark the true Messiah.

During this time in history, many false Messiahs promised wonders and drew people away to follow them. These supposed messiahs were flamboyant, charismatic, and brought great attention to themselves, but none delivered what they had promised. It is in this setting that Jesus came, but He was different. He was not a showman who manipulated the crowds. He was meek and lowly. He intentionally avoided the spotlight. He touched lepers, blessed children, spoke to Samaritans, washed feet, and disciplined uneducated fishermen. He humbly served and ushered in a heavenly kingdom. He did not carry a sword or lead a legion of warriors. The Jews had no use for a street preacher who died on a Roman cross.

For most of the Jews, the crucifixion was the final proof that Jesus was not the promised Messiah. They knew from their own law that, *“He that is hanged is accursed by God”* (Deuteronomy 21:23). If Jesus was hanged on a cross, then He must be accursed by God. They had no idea how true that verse was. Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, the son of the living God, took upon Himself the sinfulness of man so that we might receive the righteousness of God. He was accursed by God, not for His sin, but for ours.

Even with scriptures such as Isaiah 53:1-12, the Jews still never dreamed that the Messiah would have to suffer. It did not fit into what they expected, so they completely missed the visitation of the Son of God in their midst.

The Greeks refused the cross of Christ for other reasons. The first characteristic that many of the Greeks believed about God was that He was totally unable to feel. Their logic was that if God could feel emotion, then He could be hurt, controlled or influenced by another. This would mean that someone would be greater than He. So, for them God was void of feeling or emotion. Because of this a God who suffered was a contradiction in terms.

It got even worse. Plutarch, a famous first-century writer, declared that it was an insult for God to be involved in human affairs. Because of this, he reasoned that God was completely detached from the workings and events of this world. In light of this belief, the idea that God would become a man was revolting to the Greek mind.

It was inconceivable to the Greeks that God had come in the flesh, and this revulsion of Christianity grew worse as they heard claims that the God-man had also suffered the horror of the Roman cross. The cross of Christ was unthinkable.

Christ crucified was a stumbling block to both the Jews and the Greeks, but we must take note that to the Jews and the Greeks who are called, the Spirit can even override these vast obstacles to still bring them to Christ. Do not underestimate the wisdom and the power of God.

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.”

Paul’s simple explanation of the gospel had born most of its fruit amongst the simple people of Corinth. While we find in the New Testament references to some believers of status (Acts 17:34; Acts 13:6-12; Acts 17:4, 12; Romans 16:23), by and large those who were supposedly wise and influential had refused the gospel.

It was those who were most aware of their need that were most likely to listen to the claims of Christ. The wealthy and the well-educated trusted in themselves, but it was the slave and the servant, the manual laborers and illiterate who most easily trusted in the teachings of Christ.

In the gospel one is no longer a slave but a son. One is loved by God and adopted into His family. One is forgiven and given eternal life. One is valued and precious. One is free and chosen. One is given purpose and healed of past wounds. One is given the ability to forgive and serve others.

To the outsider the Christians seemed like an ignorant group of uncultured people, but to the insider they knew they had found the timeless wisdom of God. Paul again called them to the precious fact that God had called them to Himself and revealed to them the truth of the cross. They should bind themselves to each other for they were a “called out people”. By the world’s standards they should have been the last ones chosen, but by the grace of God they had been the first. Because of this, division should be put away and they should be reconciled one to another.

It has been said that, “It is only when we realize that we can do nothing, and that God can and will do everything, that real faith begins.” God has ordered our fallen world in such a way that He is our only hope. Salvation can only be found as we arrive at total surrender and realize there is not one thing we can do to earn or initiate salvation. We can only respond as truth is revealed and as faith is granted.

God presents a salvation in which no one else can take glory for, except Him. There is no room for any of us to boast of ourselves or to boast of another. None of the credit is ours. We are nothing more than

undeserving recipients of an exceedingly great gift. May we humble ourselves before Christ and before one another. He is our righteousness before God. He is the One who is making us holy. He is the One who paid our debt and bought us with His blood. So, may we fix our eyes on Jesus and draw near to one another.

Let us repent and believe, even though the world will call it foolishness. Let us admit and confess our sin, even though the world will call it foolishness. Let us love God with all our hearts, souls and minds, even though the world will call it foolishness. Let us love one another as He has loved us, even though the world will call it foolishness. Let us forgive others as we have been forgiven, even though the world will call it foolishness. Let us have compassion and be generous to each other, even though the world will call it foolishness. Let us share the gospel with urgency, even though the world will call it foolishness. Let us live for eternity, even though the world will call it foolishness.

We have been granted the wisdom of God. Now united, may we walk in it.

Discussion questions:

1. What from 1 Corinthians 1:17-31 do you find most meaningful?
2. How do you think Paul intended these verses to affect the problem of division with which the Corinthian church was struggling?
3. Why did the Apostle Paul not use eloquent words when preaching the gospel?
4. How would you paraphrase 1 Corinthians 1:18 in your own words?
5. Read 1 Corinthians 1:27-29, 31. These verses lead us to the purpose of this entire lesson. How does God want to use verse 29 to shape our understanding of salvation?
6. What do you think God wants you to remember from this study?