

1 Corinthians 1:26-31

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[0 : 00] Turn with me in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians chapter 1, page 952, if you are looking in a pew Bible. We are looking at 1 Corinthians chapter 1, verses 26 to the end of the chapter this morning.

These are Paul's words to the church in Corinth and God's words to us. 1 Corinthians 1, beginning at 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.

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, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.

[1 : 13] And because of him, you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption.

So that as it is written, let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord. What do you boast in? In other words, what do you take pride in?

What do you delight in? What do you sing about? What do you like to talk about? What would motivate you to throw a big party and invite all your friends to come? At one level, boasting is a very natural human activity.

When we're closely connected to someone or something that we deeply value, boasting is our natural human response. Think of sports fans boasting about the prospects or accomplishments of their team.

I'm originally from the Boston area, so we remember well the fall of 2004. The Red Sox came back from being down 3-0 in the ALCS against the Yankees, defeated them, and then defeated the Cardinals 4-0 and swept them in the World Series.

[2 : 25] Boston went crazy. If any city knows how to boast about their sports teams, it's Boston, if you've ever been there and ever lived there, right? But boasting isn't always loud and obnoxious, like it usually is in Boston.

Sometimes it's subtle and under the surface. It can take the form of name dropping. I studied with Professor So-and-so at Oxford or at Stanford.

And if you're in the academic world, everyone sort of knows where different schools and research institutes fit on the ladder. Parents boast about their kids and their achievements.

Patriotic citizens take pride in their nation and its leaders. Businesses boldly advertise their commitment to certain values, whether it's environmental sustainability or fair trade or providing tuition reimbursement for their employees.

Boasting is a very natural and very pervasive human activity, right? We're closely connected to someone or something. We deeply value. We boast about it. But on the other hand, boasting can also be very dangerous.

- [3 : 29] Particularly when the object of our boasting can't bear the weight of our claims about it. Often our boasting is hollow.
- It's sort of like a balloon. It inflates gradually. And then the moment someone pokes a hole in it, it collapses. Because it lacks real substance.
- At other times, boasting can lead to rivalry and resentment and even violence. The Corinthian Christians lived in a culture that was full of boasting. Highly concerned with honor and reputation.
- There were the sophists, the public speakers, the opinion columnists, the bloggers, the talk show hosts, the philosophers of the day. They boasted that they were wise, influential, and distinguished.
- And then there were patrons, political leaders, or heads of upper class families who had connections and money and power.
- [4 : 33] And if you didn't have a high position in society on your own, you would often try to attach yourselves to one of these sophists or patrons. So that you could share in and sort of derivatively benefit from their honorable status.
- So that you could have something to boast about too. I belong to that team. Right? I follow him. And we see that even the Christians in Corinth were doing this.
- Chapter one, some of them were saying, I'm of Paul. I'm of Apollos. I'm of Cephas. They were seeing these leaders in the church as people that they could attach themselves to and benefit from.
- Paul was very concerned about this pattern. He was concerned about his effects because it was promoting all kinds of rivalries and divisions in the church. So as we saw two weeks ago, he began with an appeal for unity.
- Chapter one, verse 10, I appeal to you by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ that all of you agree and that there'd be no divisions among you. But Paul wasn't just concerned about the social effects of boasting.
- [5 : 41] He was also concerned about its root cause. And that's what he addresses from chapter one, verse 18 to chapter two, verse five. And the main theme in this section that we're in the middle of is he says, you're defining yourselves according to your culture standards rather than defining yourselves according to God's standards.
- You're more attached to what he calls worldly wisdom than to God's wisdom. And that's the main contrast. If you last week, we looked at verse 18 through 25, where Paul says, remember the message of the cross itself, the message that defines you as believers in Jesus.
- It looked like weakness and foolishness to the world. The Messiah hanging on a Roman cross. But he says, no, but it's the power of God for salvation for you who believe.
- And chapter two, verse one through five, which we'll look at next week. Paul says, remember how I proclaim the message to you, not with fancy rhetoric in a way that the world would immediately be flattered by, but in demonstration of the spirit and power.
- And here in this middle section, 26 through 31, he says, remember who you were when you received the message. Consider your calling.
- [7 : 05] That is your calling to faith in Jesus. Now, the church in Corinth had only been around for about three years when Paul wrote this letter. He had spent time in Corinth in AD 52, probably wrote this letter right around AD 55.
- So all of them could first could remember when they were first called into the family of God, when they first came to faith in Jesus.

Paul says, think of what you were when you were called to faith. Not many of you were wise, according to worldly standards. Not many were powerful. Not many of you were of noble birth.

In other words, most of you weren't clever, influential, or distinguished. You weren't the cream of the crop in the eyes of the world. You weren't completely put together and competent in everything.

You didn't measure up to the Corinthian standards of success. Now, of course, that's a risky thing to say, especially in a city where people came to that city precisely in order to get ahead and climb the social ladder and gain a status they didn't have before.

[8 : 13] And Paul wanted to challenge them. You think, why are you competing with each other and defining yourself according to the world's standards when most of you wouldn't measure up to those standards anyway?

Both then and now, the majority of Christians have not been drawn from the intellectual elite, the politically powerful, or the socially prominent. And some people have criticized Christianity for just this reason.

In the second century, the Greek philosopher Kelsus wrote the first book that we know of, specifically attacking Christianity. And in it, he argued, no one who is educated or prudent or wise embraces the gospel.

Christians are able to win over only the silly, the poor, and the stupid, along with women and children. In other words, he's saying Christianity is for poor, ignorant people, but we well-educated men know better.

Now, a Christian scholar named Origen responded to Kelsus in part by referring to this passage. Origen said, the apostle did not say, not any of you were wise, but not many of you were wise.

[9 : 27] In fact, we know of a few people in the church at Corinth in particular who would have been socially prominent. Acts 18, verse 8, talks about Crispus, who is the ruler of the synagogue and the head of a household.

He came to believe in Jesus, and Paul baptized him. Romans 16, verse 23, the letter to the Romans was written from Corinth, refers to Erastus as the city treasurer, and to Gaius, host to me and to the whole church.

Priscilla and Aquila were business people who owned a house in which Paul stayed, Acts 18, 1 to 3. Phoebe was a deacon in the church at St. Crea, which was a port of Corinth.

She was a patron of many, Romans 16, 1 and 2. Likely, she was the one who carried Paul's letter to the Romans all the way from Corinth to Rome. So some Christians in the church at Corinth were well-educated and socially prominent.

And throughout church history, God has used, God has raised up well-educated scholars like Irenaeus and Athanasius in the early church, or Augustine and Anselm and Aquinas in the Middle Ages, or Calvin and Jonathan Edwards and many others in the modern era.

[10 : 42] God has turned the hearts of some well-connected political leaders to submit to the lordship of Jesus Christ and to rule with justice and mercy and wisdom. You might think of William Wilberforce and the so-called Clapham sect, a group of elite Christians in Britain in the 19th century who campaigned tirelessly for the end of the slave trade and a whole host of other social reforms.

But for the most part, the church throughout history, then and now, has been composed of ordinary, unremarkable people. Right?

The church in Corinth was not an upper-class social club for the ruling elites. It was not a comfortable place for the middle class to simply network with other people who are like themselves.

It included people from all across the spectrum. Some of the highest, but also many of the lowest. People who are low and despised.

Nobodies in the eyes of the world. Slaves. Manual laborers who lived on the edge of destitution and starvation. And that was challenging. As we'll see later in the letter, there were some tensions between these different social groups.

[11 : 53] Comes up in chapters 8 through 11. But we'll get to that later. But Paul begins with a simple reminder. Not many of you were clever, influential, and distinguished. But you might say, why does Paul care to point out that fact?

Why does it matter what social class or educational background the early Christians were from anyway? Wouldn't that be irrelevant? Well, not quite. Paul wanted to remind the Corinthians, and the Holy Spirit wants to remind us, that God does not operate on this world's terms.

God does not choose people because they are intellectually superior or politically influential or socially prominent. In fact, God chooses some of the most unlikely people to carry out his purposes in this world.

Verse 27, 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, to bring to nothing things that are so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.

See, God chooses the most unlikely people to belong to him and carry out his work in the world so that we can see the emptiness of boasting in our worldly wisdom and power and ancestry and accomplishments.

[13 : 16] You know, think about many of the people who are most prominent in the story of the Bible. Take the book of Genesis. In a patriarchal society where the oldest son was expected to receive the inheritance, God consistently chooses the younger son to be more prominent than the older.

God favored Abel over Cain, Isaac over Ishmael, Jacob over Esau, Judah over Reuben and Simeon and Levi. You might wonder what's going on.

Well, at the very least, God is turning social expectations upside down. Saying, I'm choosing to work with the people that you don't expect. Or take the book of Judges.

One of the darkest times in Israel's history, God raised up some of the most unlikely people to save his people from their enemies. He chose Gideon, the youngest in his family, from the weakest clan of his tribe, hiding in fear because of his enemies.

And he says, Gideon, I've chosen you to be a mighty warrior. Or he chose Jephthah. Jephthah was the son of a prostitute who became basically a gang leader.

[14 : 25] His older half-brothers kicked him out of the house. And so he went elsewhere and hung out with, as Judges says, some worthless fellows. Yeah.

But God raised him up to deliver his people from the Midianites. Again, not who you'd expect. Moses said to the people of Israel in Deuteronomy, he said, it was not because you were more in number than any other people that the Lord set his love on you and chose you.

You were the fewest of all peoples, but it's simply because the Lord loves you and is keeping his promise. In the New Testament, the same pattern continued.

Jesus Christ chose 12 disciples. He didn't choose them. He didn't choose the cream of the crop from the most advanced rabbinical schools of the day or the most powerful officials in Herod's court or leading men from prominent families in Jerusalem.

He chose fishermen. He chose a tax collector. He chose a revolutionary zealot. Now, to be sure, some of the rich and famous did come to follow Jesus as well.

[15 : 31] People like Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, who were Jewish ruling council members, or a Roman centurion who commanded hundreds of soldiers under him, or wealthy women, including one from Herod's household who supported Jesus out of their own means.

But Jesus didn't build his kingdom on the rich and famous or on the wise and influential. He didn't give them special preferential treatment. The apostle James said, Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him?

See, the point is this. Paul wanted the Corinthians to look around at each other when they were meeting together and be reminded, God didn't choose us because we were the greatest or the richest or the strongest or the smartest or the most athletic or the most artistic or the most funny or the most beautiful.

No, God acted through Jesus Christ on our behalf in his sovereign saving grace. And that's the only reason why we're here now together in Christ Jesus.

Verse 30, Because of him, you're in Christ Jesus. It's not because of anything that we've done or anything we can boast about. It's only God's saving power, God's life-giving intervention that has brought us from the kingdom of sin and darkness into the kingdom of light and peace in Jesus Christ our Lord.

[17 : 08] Salvation is by God's grace alone through the work of Jesus Christ and to the glory of God alone. Now, if you've come to Trinity, you'll probably think, Yeah, I seem to hear this message over and over.

And the reason is we think it's a message that the Bible teaches over and over. And so that's why we say it over and over. And because it's a message we need to hear over and over. Salvation is by grace and God's act.

And not by our accomplishments and our performance. One person put it this way, Salvation in Jesus Christ is not a human self-improvement scheme, but a radical rescue.

And therefore, grace is not only the great unifier, but also the great leveler. In other words, the ground is level at the foot of the cross.

You see, Paul's writing to the Corinthians. Who are vying for honor and status and who are upwardly mobile and ambitious to make it in the world.

[18 : 14] And he says, why are you envying one another? Why are you pulling each other down in order to get ahead? Why are you vying for prominence in the world's terms?

Consider your calling. Most of you weren't that successful in the world's eyes in the first place. God chose you. The foolish, the weak, the nobodies. In order to confound the world's expectations.

And now you are in Christ Jesus. You are part of God's new creation. His coming kingdom. You have something far better than intellectual expertise.

Or political power. Or social standing. In Christ Jesus, you have received from God righteousness. And sanctification. And redemption.

Now these are three very profound words. That all describe the reality of being in Christ Jesus. Righteousness means you are accepted in the heavenly law court.

[19 : 15] It means that your sins have been brought before God, the judge. And they have been paid for. Once and for all. By the death of Jesus Christ on the cross.

And therefore God has declared you free from condemnation. Free from the fear of future punishment. Your past, your present, and your future are defined by the divine verdict.

Bestowed upon you. In Jesus Christ, you are forgiven. In Jesus Christ, you are accepted.

In Jesus Christ, your status before God is secure. This is the righteousness that is ours in Jesus Christ. But we also have, but he also talks about sanctification.

Again, another angle on the same reality. Which means you have access into the heavenly temple. Now sometimes the word sanctification is used to describe our gradual growth in holiness.

[20 : 20] But in 1 Corinthians, it's more often used to describe our holy status. Our status as people set apart for God. We have access into God's presence.

We are God's people. Clothes in priestly garments. Equipped to enter into God's presence. And offer him acceptable worship.

We have been cleansed from the stain of sin. Our bodies are now members of Jesus Christ himself. We are one in spirit with him. We have access into his presence.

We can draw near to God in prayer. And we can worship him with our lips and our lives. Sanctification. Third, redemption.

We belong. We belong to our heavenly Lord. Now in the ancient world, to redeem someone was to buy them out of bondage.

[21 : 18] To set them free from slavery. To bring them into a position of dignity and freedom. Later on, Paul will say, you are not your own.

For you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body. Brothers and sisters, in Jesus Christ, we are redeemed. We are liberated from bondage and humiliation and despair.

And we are set free to belong to our heavenly Lord, Jesus Christ. Paul says, in Jesus Christ, you are accepted.

You have access. And you belong. To God himself. That's what it means to be in Christ Jesus.

And the ways that you experience those things now. Your acceptance before God. Your access to his presence. Your belonging to him. It's only the beginning.

[22 : 16] You've only begun to experience the first installment of a glorious inheritance. That will be revealed more and more throughout your life and into all eternity.

So brothers and sisters in Christ. Let me ask us the same questions that Paul was asking the Corinthians. Why are we setting our heart on getting ahead on the world's terms?

Why are you so concerned that people recognize you as a clever intellectual? Or a big player in politics? Or a member of a distinguished family? Why are you finding your identity and seeking your security in such things?

Don't we realize that what we already have in Jesus Christ is so much better? And if you're not a Christian, let me ask you this.

Don't you also see the futility of boasting in your cleverness or your clout or your genes? Do you long to know that you are accepted?

[23 : 23] That you have access? That you belong to the maker of all things? Maybe you're not yet convinced that Christianity is true. But is there something inside you that wishes it were?

You know, when we're closely connected to someone or something that we deeply value, boasting is our natural human response. And Paul wants to say, look at who you are. Look at who you are in Christ Jesus.

Isn't that more than enough to take pride in? Isn't that the bond that unites us as a church more than anything else? Isn't our righteousness and sanctification and redemption an unending source of joy?

Isn't that worth throwing a big party and inviting all your friends and even your enemies to come just because of who Jesus is and what he's done?

As it is written, let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord. Now let me conclude with some particular words of application about what that looks like.

[24 : 28] This passage mentions two basic groups of people. The not many who were wise, powerful, and noble birth. And the many who are not. So let me speak briefly to each group in turn.

First, to the not many. To those who are wise, powerful, or of noble birth. Now our church is a bit unusual. That's right.

If you look around, probably at least half of you would fit in one of those categories. Especially wise in the eyes of the world. Right? Well educated. Intellectuals.

What does it look like for you, if you're in one of those categories, to boast in the Lord? Two things. Number one, even if you're on your way up in the world, keep your eyes fixed on the kingdom of God.

Now this was the challenge that Daniel faced in Babylon. Before I came to college, my dad said to me, read the book of Daniel. Because Daniel also was enrolled in an elite training program.

[25 : 29] In a secular university of his day, basically. In the most powerful empire of his day. And he had great opportunity, but he also had great challenges. But he didn't forget who he was.

And most of all, he didn't forget who he belonged to. And if you read the book of Daniel, it's a picture of what it looks like to be loyal to God and his kingdom. While inhabiting a high position in this world.

A couple years ago, we had an Oxford math professor named John Lennox come and speak at this church. And there's one thing that he said that really stuck with me. He said something like this.

I'm not quoting exactly. But he basically said, if you're a PhD student in, say, applied physics. Devoting six years of your life to study the movements of microscopic particles.

And the possible implications for engineering and technology. Do you study the Bible with the same ambition and devotion and care and perseverance?

[26 : 32] He said, the Bible is God's word. Is that not worth our best efforts to study it and learn and delve into it and consider its implications for all of our lives?

So let me encourage you. Even if you're on your way up in the world, keep your eyes fixed on the kingdom of God. Second, delight in loving people who, as Paul says, are foolish, weak, low, and despised in the world.

Paul's using those terms a bit ironically. But, you know, there are many privileged people who are periodically motivated by feelings of duty and guilt to do something for people who aren't so well off in this world.

There are maybe a few people who are wise and powerful who just seem to be completely self-centered jerks and don't ever care about that at all. Right? But most people experience at least periodic pangs of feelings of guilt and duty.

And so the problem is duty and guilt will not get you very far in loving people who are not like yourselves. Right? You might give the guy five dollars on the street and at the same time you feel resentment that he has interrupted your walk to lunch.

[27 : 47] Or you will be happy that someone else in the church is serving those people because now you feel you're off the hook. But look at what this passage says about God.

It does not say that God showed mercy to sinners like us out of occasional feelings of duty and guilt. No. God chose what is foolish in the world, what is weak in the world, what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not.

In his love, God intentionally chose us to enter into lasting relationship with him. God, the king of the universe, chose us who compared to him are all weak and poor and foolish and despised and wouldn't exist without him.

God chose us in his love to belong to him. He bestowed upon us righteousness and sanctification and redemption at the cost of his very own life on the cross.

And so to those of us who are clever or influential or have high standing in the eyes of the world, God invites us to share in his delight in loving people who don't have that status in the world.

[29 : 08] Because our status in the world isn't really what matters anyway. God calls us not just to occasionally serve out of feelings of duty and guilt, but to delight in loving people who don't have a high status in the world.

And in the process, God humbles us because he shows us our own weaknesses. And he shows us how weak and lowly and poor and inadequate we are. And God also blesses us with the joy of understanding his grace and his more deeply.

Second, to those of you who are the many, who are not wise, powerful, or distinguished in the eyes of the world, let me say this. Develop a strong identity and sense of security in Jesus Christ and in his love for you.

You know, it's very common to feel a sense of shame and self-consciousness, especially in a competitive society, about your relative lack of worldly status and achievements.

Maybe you feel like you don't measure up to other people intellectually. And so you're scared to ever say anything in Bible study, even if you've been going for three years.

[30 : 29] Maybe you feel powerless because of your lack of educational background or because you have a criminal record. You'll never be qualified for a good job.

Maybe your family's a mess. It consumes a lot of your time. And other people don't even know about it. And you're ashamed to even share that.

You know, when we feel ashamed or insecure about ourselves for these or other reasons, what we often try to do is to compensate by finding something else that we can boast in.

So maybe it's our physical strength or maybe it's our ability to make people laugh or maybe it's our ability to talk on and on. Sometimes that can be an expression of our insecurity and shame.

We try to compensate for our undistinguished past by our present achievements. That's what people were trying to do back in Corinth. The city was full of people from undistinguished backgrounds.

[31 : 33] Slaves who had achieved their freedom. And they were trying to get ahead and trying to be successful and gain status in the world for the first time. But underneath, they were deeply anxious and insecure.

And that's why there was so much boasting and rivalry and competition within the church. And Paul says, brothers and sisters in Christ, don't live that way. Don't stake your identity on what you hope to accomplish in the future.

Stake your identity and find your security in Jesus Christ and in what he has accomplished for you. Righteousness, you are accepted.

Sanctification, you have access to the most privileged place in the universe, the presence of God. Redemption, you belong to Jesus. If you're not clever or influential or distinguished on the world's terms, rejoice.

That God has chosen you to be in Jesus Christ. You are included in the family of God. You are a living testimony that God is no respecter of persons. And that God willingly lavishes his grace on all who will call on him.

[32 : 41] When Jesus returns, you will participate in ruling over God's new world. Paul says in 1 Corinthians, we will even judge the angels. Imagine that. But you will be part of that.

You have much to boast about in Jesus Christ. And so go back to that Bible study where you feel ashamed to say a thing and remember who you are in Christ.

It's fine if you want to be quiet. The Bible says it's good to be quick to listen and slow to speak. It's a good example. But if you have a question or a comment that could help someone, say it.

Or even talk to someone afterwards and express your question or your comment and it will benefit them. Go back to your job. Even if you feel like quitting.

Even if it isn't at all impressive. And remember who you are in Christ. And do your work to the glory of God and not for the praise of men. Go back to your family if it's falling apart.

[33 : 43] And remember who you are in Christ. God has called you to be a peacemaker. And a truth speaker. And know that you have brothers and sisters in Christ.

A family in Christ. Who can pray for you. And walk alongside you. As you seek to minister to your family. Brothers and sisters, whatever your status in the world.

Whether the world would see you as low or high. Or anywhere in between. Remember your calling. Remember your identity in Jesus Christ.

And make your boast in him. Let's pray. Let's pray. God we thank you.

That in your mercy. You have chosen each one of us. And called us to belong to you. Not because of our own.

[34 : 51] Worldly accomplishments. And certainly not because of our own righteousness. For your word says that we have all sinned. And turned away from you.

But Lord we thank you that in your love. You have extended your grace and mercy to us. And we pray that that would transform our identities. We pray that we would find our security and our hope in you.

And we pray that we would be equipped. To do the good works that you have set before us. For us. To live. In the position of life. In which we are.

Or in which we may be in the future. To bring glory and honor to your name. And to testify. To the marvelous grace of Jesus.

In your name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.