

THE MAKEUP OF THE CHURCH

1 CORINTHIANS 1:26-31

Did you hear about the famous professor of Greek philosophy? The man was a scholar. He lived and breathed the classical writings of the Greek masters.

The prof had moved nearer to the university and was looking for a good laundry mat. He thought he'd found one, until they tore the suit pants he'd taken in to have dry cleaned. It was his favorite suit... *He was mad...*

He held up the torn trousers, and shouted at the launderer, "**Euripides?**" The owner was startled. He said, "**Well, if you say so.**" The professor shouted back, "**Then Eumenides...**" *Get it, "Euripides was an ancient Greek play-write - Eumenides was a Greek play."*

It's a little *Corinthian corniness* to open up our third study in Paul's letter to the Greek church at Corinth.

But it's more fitting than you think, for this is what the Corinthians had done to the Church... they'd ripped it apart... cliques formed, and tore the Body of Christ.

After his greeting, Paul dives right into the problem.

In 1:10-17 he holds up the church... people “called to be saints,” “enriched by Christ,” “gifted by the Holy Spirit,” “eagerly awaiting the return of their Lord” - now Paul points to them, and shouts, “*Euripedes...*”

People with an agenda had damaged the church.

Think of this church gathered together... rather than mixing and mingling, they huddle in clusters, each group is scowling at the others. The “we’re right and you’re wrong” mentality is so thick it makes you choke.

Celebrity culture had taken hold in Corinth. Believers were gravitating around their favorite teacher. Some were saying, “I am of Paul,’ or ‘I am of Apollos,’ or ‘I am of Cephas,’ or “I am of Christ.” And this was tragic.

Jesus died to bury our pride and bring us together.

His mission was to create for us fellowship with God, *AND* love for one another. To unify us, not divide us.

Yet pride and prejudice permeated Corinth. The church was like an emergency room. Everyone was hurt or sick, yet each group cared only for its own, nursing their own wounds - vying to see the doctor first.

Paul prays, “*Lord, Eumenides... Please, mend these divisions. Heal these hurts. Make us one again!*”

And the first step in that healing was to focus them on the cross! **The message of the cross** is powerful.

It *shocks our senses, blocks our pride, mocks our values*, and once we’re embraced it, *locks our hearts*.

The cross is the commonality that transcends all our differences. The trivialities that separated us disappear in the truth *that Jesus died in our place for our sins*.

At the cross our reasons to think too highly of ourselves get lost in the sight of the crucified Christ. Rather than pride, we feel shame - Jesus suffered what we deserved. The cross obliterates our boasts.

And the cross mocks the values that once supported our prejudice. In light of the cross wisdom and power are no longer badges of honor. So what if you’re the smartest girl in the class, or the strongest guy in the weight room - when Jesus saved us by means the world deems *feeble and foolish*. The cross is a slap in the face to wisdom, and a parody of human power.

And it's at the cross that we fall in love with God! For the cross teaches us that all God's blessings come not through human achievement, but through simple faith.

It's been said, "The only truly level ground in all the universe is at the foot of the cross." It's not *who you are*, or *what you've done*, that gains God's favor. It's what Christ did on that cross. And that applies to us all.

After we've been to the cross we no longer boast in ourselves, but in the love that drew Jesus to that cross.

Which is the love and grace and mercy we all share.

The first step to mending the divisions in Corinth was "*the message of the cross.*" The Corinthian Church was full of itself. It was haughty and arrogant, and in need of humility. So Paul takes them to the cross...

But the second step was to remind them of **the makeup of the church.** Paul says to the Corinthians, "*Look around. Have you looked in the mirror lately?*"

A quick inventory of the people who made up the church should've reminded them, "*they're not all that!*"

The Greek word translated “church” is “ekklesia.” It referred to a group of citizens who had been called from their homes and assembled in a public forum.

Literally, it could read, “the called out ones.”

And this was the church at Corinth. God had *called them out of the world*, and *called them together in Christ* to live as one family - to treat each other with the same love and grace and mercy as Christ treats them.

But look around at who God chose to call... It wasn't Corinth's elite it was the scum and scourge of society.

Paul tells them in verse 26, “For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called.”

Once a member of England's royal family, the Countess of Huntington, was asked how she was converted to Christ. She responded, “By an ‘M’.”

When asked what she meant, she explained, “I'm thankful God said ‘*Not many noble,*’ rather than ‘*not any noble*’.” She was referring to the “M” in our text.

Certainly, the early church had some distinguished and wealthy members... recall **Joseph of Arimathea**, the rich Jerusalem-ite who allowed the women to

lay the body of Jesus in his new tomb... and **Nicodemus**, also a member of the Sanhedrin... both *men of means*.

There was also **Sergius Paulus**, Roman governor on the island of Cyprus, Paul's first Gentile convert.

As well as, **Lydia** a businesswoman from Philippi...

And **Dionysius the Areopagite**, one of the resident philosophers Paul met on Mars Hill in Athens...

Even Corinth had a few members who the world would've considered "*mighty*" or "*noble*." Paul wrote to the Romans from Corinth, and at the end of his letter he sends greetings from, "**Gaius, my host and the host of the whole church... (and) Erastus, the treasurer of the city...**" It seems Gaius and Erastus were prominent Corinthians - two men from the ranks of *the well-to-do*.

Paul didn't say "**not any**," but there were "*not many*."

And this was not just true of the church in Corinth, all across the ancient world the first Christians usually came from the ranks of the poor and oppressed.

The Roman empire in the first century consisted of 60 million slaves. It was a common plight. Many of the first Christians were slaves, working off some debt.

And Paul writes a wake-up call to these proud Corinthians, “*see your calling, brethren...*” Look at where you came from... *And this is important for us!*

I always encourage people, there're two ways for us to see ourselves. First, we should never forget *who we are in Christ!* We're a new creation. We're accepted in the Beloved. We're forgiven. Redeemed. We're saints!

Never forget who you are in Christ, but also never lose sight of what you'd be without Him! On your own you're dead, and lost in your sins, and headed to hell.

Here Paul says to the Corinthians, *even according to worldly standards, they had nothing to brag about.*

He describes them, “*not many wise according to the flesh...*” That means few of the Corinthians made the dean's list, or even had a college education. Their parents didn't drive around with the bumper sticker on their chariot, “Proud Parent of an Honor Roll student.”

There may've been a few of these bumper stickers...

“Proud parent of a C average student.”

Or “Proud parent of a High School Dropout.”

Maybe, “Proud parent of the Inmate of the month.”

Those were the kind of bumper stickers you saw in the parking lot at the church in Corinth. There wasn't much there for Corinth's social scene to envy.

As far as the world without Christ was concerned, few of the Corinthian Christians had even risen to the heights of mediocrity. They were average at best.

Many of these Christians had failed at secular life. There were "*not many mighty,*" and "*not many noble.*" As for clout and celebrity these people had struck out.

They weren't *educated, or athletic, or political.*

Walk into this church and *the sisters weren't pretty, nor the brothers beefy.* If you'd hoped to meet a dreamboat in the singles group the pickings were slim.

And I think we need to admit that the Calvary Chapel in Stone Mountain is not a whole lot different than the Church in Corinth. "*See your calling, brethren...*"

I won't ask for a response, *but how many of us are have struggled in marriage / marriages?... How many of us have rolled up some credit card debt?... Or we're still on probation...* We've made mistakes, haven't we?

How many of us are praying our kids don't put their parents through what we put our parents through?...

*Hey, I've counseled enough of you to know if you've never been enslaved to something - boos, or drugs, or sex... **in this church**, you're an exception to the rule.*

Paul says to us, “**See your calling, brethren that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called.**” Like Corinth, our church doesn't have a lot of senators, or college presidents, or Fortune 500 CEOs, or professional athletes, or supermodels in attendance from week to week.

The First Church down the street might... but we're like Corinth. For the most part we're a working-class bunch. We draw from the other-side-of-the-tracks.

We've been scarred, and nicked, and stained. *We've got a past.* In fact, some of us - *no, most of us* - still struggle with something leftover from our foolish days.

Right now some of you are worried the tow-truck is going to pull up in the church parking lot and haul off your car, because you're late on a couple of payments.

This is why Paul is saying, “How can we be proud, and sport a holier-than-thou attitude? *Come on, man!*”

In light of our former life, even our current struggles - we got problems, *but pride shouldn't be one of them.*

Beware! Here's a truthful saying, “The person who gets too big for his britches will be exposed in the end.”

Yet, I love Paul's words, “**See your calling, brethren**” He knew their past, but he still calls them brothers!

Paul was confident that what Jesus did on the cross for us, more than makes up for what we lack in and of ourselves. **We're products of grace** - not our own goodness or wherewithal - *but grace and grace alone!*

I love this quote, “The Christian Church is the only society in the world in which membership is based upon the qualification that the candidate is not qualified to be a member.” Even the person the world calls wise, or mighty, or noble is nothing before a holy God.

None of us are worthy to be called “*brethren.*” Yet that's how grace addresses these Corinthians and us.

Paul continues explaining God's wisdom in verse 27, "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; 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..."

God chooses the simple not the smart - the weak not the strong - the humble not the noble - *and why?*

His answer is in verse 29, "that no flesh should glory in His presence." Don't you just hate it to be forced into a conversation with someone who only wants to talk about themselves? *I do! "I think this, and I think that... I did this, and I did that... I am this, and I am that..."*

It's like the recurring scene in the Charlie Brown comic strip, where cartoonist, Charles Schultz, has the teacher saying, "Wah, Wah, Wah, Wah, Wah..." After a while you turn the lady off and go to sleep. That's how I treat someone who only likes to talk about themselves.

Now imagine, having to put up with the person who's talking about themselves, for all eternity. "Wah, Wah, Wah... *forever!*" That's too much to even contemplate.

And that's how God feels about it as well! He'd rather spend eternity with humble, grateful, forgiven sinners saved by grace, than a bunch of self-righteous braggers who only want to talk about how good they were, and what all they did to save themselves.

God forbid, putting God through that kind of torture.

That's why He chooses people who have no room to boast. Who've *done nothing... who were nothing...*

Paul explains that God has made some unusual, even bizarre choices just to avoid “*men of God*” taking credit for “*the work of God.*” He chose “*the foolish...*”

The Greek word is “*moros,*” from which we get the word *moronic*. Notice this, God chooses *morons* to do His work. That way He avoids anyone crediting our *cleverness*, or our *ingenuity*, or our *charisma*.

Often today, you see churches, and ministries, built around a dynamic leader, and dependent on human acumen - *but that's not how God chooses to roll.*

He avoids that kind of scenario by choosing what appears foolish, even moronic. He calls a 22 year old kid to start a church in the living room of his duplex with no support, or promise of it - *and that kid was me!*

People thought I was nuts! If *the me today* was counseling *the me then*, I would've thought I was nuts.

But God used our meagerness, and our littleness, and our unpreparedness to show off what He could do!

He has used the foolish to confound the wise.

Remember the twelve disciples Jesus picked. There wasn't an athlete, or soldier, or governor, or rabbi in the crowd. To the contrary, Jesus chose a few fishermen, and a terrorist, and a despised tax collector. It was a strange, motley crew to send out to change the world.

In Acts 4:13 when Peter and John go on trial, the religious hierarchy marvel at their boldness. In fact, they referred to the disciples as “uneducated and untrained men.” But men who “had been with Jesus.”

And that's the key. To be great for God it's not *what you know*, it's *who you know*. It's spending time with Jesus... God works through the person who's quick to give Him glory - who'll keep *his* hands off the glory.

God uses foolish things, to spotlight His wisdom.

And He uses *“the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty...”* Recall the story of Gideon. God called him to lead the charge against the Midianites, but when he sent word for Israel to rally for battle only 32,000 showed up to fight against 135,000 Midianites. Israel was outnumbered 4 to 1.

Yet God tells Gideon, he has too many men, so he sends home those who weren't in the mood for war. That left him 10,000. His army had shrunk to 13 to 1.

But still Gideon had too many men. God tells him to take them to the spring and let them drink. The 9,700 ready soldiers are sent home, which leaves Gideon with just 300. And if it can't get any worse, the 300 are the sloppy soldiers, they lap up the water like a dog.

Gideon's army is now outnumbered 450 to 1.

And the reason God stacked the deck against his own general is because he knows the human heart, how easy it is for us to become glory grabbers.

Even when we know better, we're tempted to take a few bows for God. The Lord told Gideon, *“The people with you are too many... lest Israel claim glory for itself against Me, saying, ‘My own hand has saved me.’”* God dug a hole so deep that everyone would know it wasn't Gideon who climbed out, it was God who lifted him out.

And this is why God uses puny people - small people and undermanned churches - to do great things and demonstrate His power. Again, it spotlights His glory.

Recently, Kathy and I were at the CC Bible College in California, and my wife got to meet a lady that she has respected for a long time, Joni Eareckson Tada.

While a teenager, Joni broke her neck in a diving accident. Over the years she's become an example of faith, and an inspiration for the physically-challenged.

After the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, Joni showed up at the Red Cross Center to help counsel the survivors. She said as she wheeled into the crisis center she was met by a busy, female coordinator.

This lady gave her a warm welcome. She said, "Oh my, are we glad to see you here!" Joni asked, "*Why?*"

She answered, "*When people walk up to you in your wheelchair and see how you handle your personal crisis with that smile of yours, it speaks volumes. It assures them that they can handle their crisis too. We need people like you in here. Please, help us go out and find more individuals like you who can assist us.*"

And this is God's recruitment strategy. We think when He chooses servants, He's after skill and talent, strength and beauty. *Not so!* Imagine, God wants to sign up *the crippled, and the broken, and the limited.*

The weak are the folks to which other broken people can relate - who understand. *God chooses the weak!*

Remember, "It's not our lack of ability that limits us. God uses weak things. It's our lack of availability."

We're told God even chooses "the base things of the world and the things which are despised..." The Greek word "base" means "without family, without pedigree."

The ancient world held to a tight, restrictive caste system, much like India and other countries in the Far East do today. There was very little social mobility.

You lived where you were born - little changed in the way of privilege over the course of a person's life. You were stuck - *your destiny was determined for you.*

And Paul's words here must've boggled the brains of the Corinthians who read his letter... God chooses who no one else chooses! In fact, God picks the *despised* and *rejected* and *left out* and *forgotten* and *abandoned*.

The Church was the one place in the Roman world where the outcast could belong and find a purpose!

Listen to historian, Garret Fagan, describe how Rome treated people, especially the weak, "Ideas of human dignity were almost nonexistent and large swathes of the population were seen as inherently worthless. Weak members of society were objects not of compassion but of derision. Romans lionized strength over weakness, victory over defeat, dominion over obedience. Losers paid a harsh price. Roman politics became a ruthless game of total winners and abject losers." And it was the losers - *at least, those the society considered losers* - that flocked to Christianity.

In Christ they got a chance - a real opportunity to have a new life - to make a difference in the world.

And this is still true! The world we live in still has its winners and losers. But in Christ, it doesn't how much losing you've done, you can still be somebody for God!

The Church isn't for blue bloods and privileged folks. In the Kingdom of God it's the mutt that wins the dog show. God *chooses and uses* who the world despises.

Paul goes as far as to say, God uses “the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are...”

The word “*nothing*” could be translated, “what seems to be nothing or what's considered to be nothing.”

The world we live in likes to write people off - pen their obituary before they're dead. But God specializes in resurrection - *even of hopes, dreams, reputations*.

God finds the person the world cut from its team, and He gives him a spot on His roster. He gets them back in the game. Don't let the world around damper down your possibilities, before you find out what God can do!

You could say, God builds His team with un-drafted free agents. He signs players that nobody else wanted.

God wins championships with a roster full of scrubs!

This is why I think God loves the Atlanta Hawks.

The Hawks are not what I'd call "scrubs," but all the pundits will say they can't win the big game because they lack a superstar. Prior to this year, they were a squad of no-names - a team flying under the radar.

And this is how God constructs His team. His Son is the only superstar. The rest of us are role-players! And God is willing and able to use us if we defer to Jesus!

Yet here's a problem. We marvel at the thought of God using "the foolish, the weak, the base, the despised, the nothing..." Amazing grace! *Sign me up!*

But then I realize who'll be my teammates!

I'll be wearing the same uniform as *the base*, and be seen with *the despised*, and be working with *the foolish*, and depending on *the weak*, and hanging out with *the nothing*. This can pose a problem for my pride.

In the CS Lewis book, "The Screwtape Letters," a senior demon, Screwtape, writes to his apprentice demon, Wormwood. The novice demon is upset that the human to whom he's been assigned has become a Christian. But Screwtape is not so discouraged.

He points out the possibilities of the local church.

Basically he says, wait until your subject goes to church, and gets exposed to all its annoying people.

There's plenty in the church to bug him and distract him from his newfound faith. Being around *weak* and *base* and *foolish* and *despised* people - *even after they've been redeemed* - isn't as easy on the ego as hanging with the *strong* and *smart* and *sophisticated*. Even a church can be used to discourage a Christian.

Remember what Paul is telling us, the church isn't suppose to be the hip and happening place... It's not the social scene that'll stroke your ego... It's not the popular hang out you visit to see and be seen.

To the contrary, like the cross, the church is an affront to our pride. "*See your calling, brethren...*" Look around and see the misfits that are now your brothers!

Welcome to the Church! We're God's way of mocking the world's wise, and strong, and privileged.

I read of man and his wife who were waiting to board a flight and got bumped to first class. It was the only time they'd ever been pampered on a plane... *a warm towel, a meal, real silverware, plenty of elbow room.*

As they sat there, they played a little game between them. They looked around discreetly to figure out who else had gotten a bump *and didn't belong in first class*.

They notice one fellow. He walked around the cabin in his socks. When the flight attendant gave him his linen napkin he tucked it into his shirt like a bib. Twice he sneezed so loud the oxygen masks almost dropped.

Yes, there was no way he belonged in first class.

And here's the moral of the story... So often we're like the snooty couple on the plane playing the game.

We look around in the church at all the misfits. We have this air of superiority. We're embarrass by them.

Yet the truth is, we don't belong any more than they do. We're every bit the misfit in someone else's eyes.

Both *the cross* and *the church* were intended to humble us. Don't be ashamed of the church, recognize it's God's means of showing off His grace, and of challenging the world's values. *Understand the team we're own - realize God's purpose for the Church...*

Like the Greeks of old, people today admire **wisdom**, and **power**, and **privilege**. That's why God has chosen the cross as the means to our salvation - it's an affront to all three... *And this is why He's chooses the Church!*

The type of people God picks to be part of His kingdom, and to do His work on earth, *baffles our employment strategies - and undermines our notions of power - and turns upside down our concepts of rank.*

God chooses *not the smart, but the simple - not the mighty, but the frail - not the upper-crust, but the down-and-out.* He's making sure every knee will bow before Him. That **"no flesh should glory in His presence."**

He's made it so, no one can say, **"God uses only the slick, or smooth, or strong, or spotless."** God uses *the bottom of the barrel* to show He's *on top of the world!*

Understand what Christ is doing in and with His Church, Paul explains in verse 30, **"But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God - and righteousness and sanctification and redemption."**

Everything we lack, Christ more than makes up for.

We're the foolish, but He gives us wisdom... *We're the weak*, but He makes us righteous, or strong before God... *We're the base*, but in Christ He sets us apart

and makes us special... *We're the nothing* that He's redeems by the precious blood of His Son and in doing so has ascribed to us extreme worth and significance.

Remember, verse 22, “The Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom.” The Jews liked muscle, “so they said, show us a demonstration of power.” The Greeks were into philosophy, “so they said, speak to us a oration of wisdom.” Well, God did both in Jesus.

Here in verse 30, Paul tells us that Jesus Christ is God's sermon on wisdom. His life was a ballet of love, and truth, and grace, and judgment, and boldness.

He spoke *profoundly simple, and simply profound.*

And to *the person who is now in Christ... the person of Christ* is a resident and available source of wisdom.

And to the Jews, Christ is a source of strength and might. He brings the superpowers of “*righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption*” to ordinary people.

*Here's what that means... **Righteousness** - Jesus makes us *right before God*. **Sanctification** - He makes us *clean before men*. And **redemption** - He *reconciles our past and makes us ready for the future*...*

And when you're **right with God**, and **clean before men**, and **ready for the future** you are strong! Add God's wisdom, and there's nothing you can't tackle.

This is what we find *at the cross and in the church - the wisdom of God and the power of Jesus Christ*.

Thus, Paul concludes his thoughts on the church in verse 31 by quoting Jeremiah 9, "**That, as it is written...**" Paul actually summarizes the end of the Chapter 9, "**He who glories, let him glory in the LORD.**"

Let me read you the fuller version from Jeremiah...

Verses 23-24 tell us, "**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...**" Now it's pretty amazing that our study today, ends with the text that we'll be working through this evening. We're in Jeremiah 8-10 tonight.

I don't believe in coincidence, so apparently God really wants us to get this... If *you've been to the cross and are part of the church* you should think differently. Both the cross and the church rearrange our values.

Today, people are into *mind, muscle, money - brains, and brawn, and bucks - education, athleticism, affluence*. But *at the cross and in the church* what the world values has been exposed as nothing but vanity.

On the cross God mocks our *preoccupation with wisdom*, and our *glamorizing of power...* **In the church** He deliberately sidesteps the *wise*, and *strong*, and *rich* - choosing instead *the foolish, the weak, the base*.

And He does it *“that no flesh should glory in His presence.”* He's telling us that Jesus is all that matters!

When the Apostle Paul wrote Philippians he'd been a Christian for over 30 years. He'd planted churches all over the world. Seen thousands of people come to Christ. Raised up leaders. Worked miracles. Preached the Gospel. The man had written most of the NT.

But at the close of Philippians 3 he reveals his goal in life, *his passion*. Verse 10, *“that I may know Him.”*

After three decades of knowing Jesus, Paul desired to know Him more. Christ Himself was His motivation.

As Augustine wrote, “The soul of man was made with sweet tastes that only our Lord Jesus can satisfy.”

If you want to brag - *and from time to time we all like to* - then go for it, **but brag about Jesus...** *not your money - not your health, or buff body, or tan - not your fat wallet.* Those of us who've been to the cross and are part of the church are no longer impressed.

Let him who glories, glory in the Lord.