

The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

January 29, 2017

Prayer of the Day: Lord God, you know that we are surrounded by many dangers and that we often stumble and fall. Strengthen us in body and mind, and bring us safely through all temptations; through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Verse of the Day: Alleluia! The Spirit of the Lord is on me; he has anointed me to preach good news. Alleluia! (Luke 4:18)

Sermon Text: 1 Corinthians 1:26-31

“If everyone jumped off a cliff, would you do it too?” You may be standing with all of your friends at the edge of a cliff. They may believe putting their life at risk is acceptable, so they all jump off. You may not want to risk your life, so you are the only one left standing there. One of your friends might actually survive the fall and come back to call you a “coward” for not joining them. *“If everyone else jumped off a cliff, would you do it too?”* The point is clear: A majority might have an opinion, but you do not have to follow it.

If you are like me, you heard those words growing up. Because, when you are young, you want approval. You want to be viewed as “popular” or “cool”— or at the very least, “someone to respect.” You want people to take your advice. You want the group to follow your decisions. You want lots of people with this urge to talk to you. So, when you’re young, you do whatever the majority wants (even if means risking your health) so that you feel accepted by the group. If you are accepted, then you are valuable to someone; you feel a sense of self-worth.

So, do you have it? ... that feeling of self-worth? ... that feeling of approval? Maybe. If you share the same parenting style as the majority of your friends, then they will ask for your advice. If you are interested in the same sports as many of your friends, then they will ask your thoughts on the game. If you buy a car or house that many people consider expensive, then many will think you have an important job that pays well. You may feel important; you might feel accepted. Yet, you may also know that when it comes to your belief in a Savior who gave his life for you— well, you might find your faith is not widely-accepted. You may feel that you do not really fit in with others.

1 Corinthians 1:26-31

²⁶ Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. ²⁸ He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, ²⁹ so that no one may boast before him. ³⁰ It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. ³¹ Therefore, as it is written: “Let him who boasts boast in the Lord.”

Sometimes we may lose focus on where our true worth lies. Looking at our reading from 1 Corinthians, you get to direct your attention to the one thing that makes you truly valuable. **REMAIN FOCUSED... ON YOUR WORTH!** *Look past human standards and Boast about God's wisdom.*

You see that right away in our reading. If you notice, you immediately hear what you are not. **Brothers [and sisters], think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards.** When I go to the library I will probably not find your name next to ancient philosophers like Socrates, Plato, Aristotle or the more modern-day John Locke, Immanuel Kant, or Jean Paul-Sartre.

Not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. You did not stand up at the Oscars, give a speech on something you felt deeply about, and then watch your speech debated on all the morning talk shows. A few of you share the last name "Kennedy," but I'm pretty sure you are not related to the John or Bobby, Jackie or Caroline Kennedy. I don't believe any of you were born in the royal palace and given the name: "Queen Elizabeth" or "Prince William." The paparazzi probably doesn't flock outside your house, snap pictures of you, study your tweets, or comment on the designer clothes you wear. Your status does not command the attention of millions.

The Corinthian congregation did not have that status either. The congregation is made up of middle-class and lower-class people. No one is a celebrity. No one is a university-trained philosopher. No one is an elected official. That means no one will ask the Corinthians for their view on the "meaning of life" or "what happens after death." In fact, ancient leaders compared Christian teachings to what the human mind thinks makes sense and concluded: *"Christians show that they want and are able to convince only the foolish, dishonorable and stupid, and only slaves, women, and little children."*

I am not sure anything has changed over the last two thousand years. One website laid out the chief reason why you can be an atheist (that is, why you can believe God does not exist). The reason? Because a lot of celebrities are. The site listed off Hollywood "A-listers," company CEOs, Nobel Peace Prize winners, and world leaders. Even the well-known atheist Richard Dawkins says: *"Christianity is nonsense because there are more Nobel Peace Prize winners who are atheists than Christian Nobel Peace Prize winners."*

You might feel that you are the only one left standing at the edge of that cliff and the majority jumps off. You may feel that your Bible-based faith is not so widely accepted. That can create a tug-of-war inside of you. On the one hand, you desire to remain close to God, but on the other hand to be accepted by your peers might mean that you distance yourself from God. The easiest way to gain acceptance is to behave according to human standards.

If humans determine a church is "successful" by having lots of people in it, then you begin feeling the most important feature of your church must be the number of people in it (and not what is being taught). Perhaps your friends think that you, by coming to worship, are insecure. You might not be insecure, but you certainly do not want them thinking that way about you. Maybe you are the only one who follows the Bible's teachings

on marriage, birth, life, and death, while so many you know shape their views by what the media or celebrities have to say.

If you are trying to find self-worth in how the world views your faith or in what the world determines is important, then you will quickly turn away from the Word of God. You will gradually call God's wisdom "outdated." You will base your morality on majority approval. In the end, the influence God has in your life will fade away. If you find your worth in human standards, you will never be able to meet God's standard for eternal peace.

The truth is, the wisdom, the influence, the royalty the world exalts are the things that God chooses not to use. Instead, **God chose the foolish things** like Jesus. It sounds "foolish" that Jesus, the innocent Son of God, is sent down from heaven in order to rescue us. It makes much more sense that we must save ourselves by doing good things and by being the best kind of people as possible. Yet, God chooses to use Jesus to save us.

God chose the weak things like the son of a carpenter. That Jesus lives humble is astounding! Here is the Son of God, the Creator of the universe, the One who gives all things breath and life— and yet chief priests can slap their hands across his face. Soldiers are able to whip him with shards of metal and broken pottery. Centurions can hold God down while pounding nails through his wrists. This is the way God chooses to save the world? It seems more likely that God would send a king or some angel-army to destroy everyone who dared cross him!

Yet, **God chose the insignificant things and the despised things.** The tool which God chose as the altar of sacrifice is the cross. Yes, that is the ancient form of our modern-day lethal injection. It would be like looking to someone hidden away on death-row, watch the IV drip run into his vein, point at him and say: "That's my savior!" The world would laugh! Capital punishment is meant to remove life, not save it! Yet, God chooses to hang your Savior on a cross between two criminals **so that no one may boast before him.**

God purges away self-pride so that we rely on him more. God wipes away whatever the majority might think about his plan to save you so that you may *look past human standards* and *boast about God's wisdom.*

Do you see how truly valuable you are? In verses 26-29, Paul uses a past tense verb: "*At one time you were not wise, were not influential, were not of noble birth.*" You may not have come from these backgrounds; you might not possess these things. But Jesus did not come down from heaven to save only the best. He does not forgive only the most influential. He does not rescue only royalty. He comes for you: the blue collar worker, the high school educated, the middle class, the lower-class, the unknowns in your city, the young. He makes you sons and daughters of God Most High!

This is who you are now! In verses 30-31 the verb is present tense. **You are in Christ Jesus.** This is the sphere in which you now live. It means that God fills you up with the things he considers valuable.

Jesus is your **wisdom.** That means you know what life is all about. Each of us has a beginning; each of us will have an end. We are bound by time now; one day we will enter

eternity. The world might flock around philosophers, asking what the meaning of life is. Songwriters might preach how you should behave. Only Jesus tells you that he has satisfied the anger of God and has opened heaven.

You are wrapped in his **righteousness**. Jesus comes down for one reason only: to deposit his perfect life into your spiritual bank account. His death is not just a death; it is the act where he covers your every fault and clears it away from God. So, that means, you do not have to prove how good you are before God. Instead, you point at Jesus and say: “He is perfect for me!”

That is why Jesus is your **sanctification**. The word: “sanctify” means to “make holy” or “set apart as special.” If God sees you as perfect, then that means you are “holy,” innocent, blameless, guilt-free. Since you know this, you are different! The world seeks wisdom in education and celebrity-status; you find true wisdom for life in the things God teaches you from the Bible.

So, that means the little 2-year-old who says: “Jesus is my Savior” is wiser than the most-distinguished Harvard philosopher. Yes, the Harvard-educated might earn more money, win more awards, and gain more degrees, but that child knows he can stand before God, point at Jesus, and be confident he will spend eternity in heaven. That child knows Christ is his **redemption**. Jesus is your ticket to heaven. You are not at the pearly gates yet, but you know heaven is your eternal home— and it is all because Jesus gave you his perfection. *Boast about God’s wisdom.*

This is where your true self-worth lies. Yes, you have friends because you share things in common with them. Your family respects you because you share heritage with them. You may have the same house as your friends or same job as your co-workers. As a result, you will feel accepted by those groups. (And that’s good!)

Regardless of your education or influence or royalty, remember that you are priceless in the sight of God! Grow in that relationship. Take care that no human wisdom drowns out the wisdom of God! Guard yourself from following what people think is influential or popular. Listen to the Word of God, your royal King! **REMAIN FOCUSED... ON YOUR WORTH!** *Look past human standards and Boast about God’s wisdom.*