

Higher and Greater

**Week 2 in Our
Weekly Study of
Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians**

Orchard Park Wesleyan Church
Week of September 16, 2018

Jennifer L. Skinner

Day 1: Our Weakness

Notes

"I came to you in weakness—timid and trembling."

1 Corinthians 2:3

We jumped around the first and third chapters of 1 Corinthians pretty well last week; this week will be no different as we study portions of 1 Corinthians 1 and 2. Some of our topics will overlap a little, but I'm trusting that God works this out to make sense and, above all, glorify Himself. So as we begin this week and consider the wisdom of God—a most unattainable thing—let's pray that He will first humble our hearts before Him and open our minds to understand all that it pleases Him to reveal. *Lord, the secret things belong to You. Reveal what pleases You, and let us understand Your teaching. In Jesus' Name, Amen.*

This week, we'll find that Paul is adamant that it is not his (or anyone's) preaching that saves or grows God's people. Indeed, God is the only One who saves, grows, builds, or does anything of eternal consequence. It pleases and glorifies Him to manifest His power and wisdom in our human weakness.

Please read 1 Corinthians 1:17 and 2:1-5.

I brought 1:17 back into our reading this week because I think it provides good context for us and an important reminder of one of the battles Paul faced with this church: too great an importance placed on eloquence, wisdom, and rhetoric. As we saw last week, Paul was acutely aware of the pride and jealousy, division and quarreling that resulted from the Corinthian church's love affair with worldliness and human wisdom. So here, before he circles back around to the issues we talked about in chapter three last week, Paul sets out to correct this and return the church to a pure and humble heart for Christ and His Gospel. Let's discuss how he approaches that task.

First, Paul identifies two dangerous consequences that could result from showcasing eloquence and wisdom in preaching.

- Fill in the second half of 1 Corinthians 1:17.
"For Christ didn't send me to baptize, but to preach the Good News—and not with clever speech, _____
_____."
- What is the other possible outcome that Paul identifies in 2:5?

_____ to Your Son; Jesus, open his/her eyes; Holy Spirit, please convict _____ of his/her need for Christ. Thank You that You hear my prayers and that You give me whatever I ask according to Your will. I trust You, and I love You. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Paul was very aware that “clever speech” could distract from the power of the message itself. When our focus is on ourselves and our own talent, we shift from fully cooperating with God to competing for His glory. While our best efforts are certainly no match for the glory of God, it’s in our humility and complete surrender to His plans that He has the most room to shine forth in His fullness.

In other words, if Paul had gone to the Corinthians and preached the gospel in his best oratorical style, playing to the Corinthians’ love of eloquence in public speech, what would have happened? Who would they have been paying attention to—Paul or the message itself? Paul, in just this one verse, reminds the Corinthians of what the prize is in any preaching. It’s not the beauty of the speech but the splendor of the message.

Please note that I included the word “showcasing” as it pertains to eloquence and wisdom in preaching. Some of God’s teachers are naturally gifted speakers who choose to use their gifts to give glory to the Giver. Praise God; this is right! In fact, Paul had a lot of respect for Apollos, who, as we learned last week, was one of those who was naturally gifted in speech and reasoning. God gives us each gifts as it pleases and glorifies Him. Eloquence is not wrong—but focusing on it instead of the meat of the Gospel—namely, Jesus Christ—is.

Paul doesn’t merely point out that lofty speech could distract from the power of the Gospel. What else does 2:2 say that Paul did?

“For I _____ that while I was with you I would _____ everything except _____, the one who was crucified.”

He made a conscious choice to leave aside anything that could possibly vie for the Corinthians’ attention and love over and above Christ. He knew their culture and propensity to follow those who seemed wise by worldly standards. But Paul, knowing that Christ and His work on the cross stand in humble triumph over all human wisdom or effort, chose to let God’s power work on its own.

As we’ll see more on Day 5 this week, God wants to use His people in His work, but He doesn’t need us to come up with complicated strategies to win the lost. He wants us to cling to Christ, the Only Truth; He wants us to bring Him everything we have, whether talent or weakness; and He wants us to trust the power of His Spirit to reach out and convict lost hearts. When we embrace the reality of our weakness and choose to trust God to work even through brokenness and simplicity, I

believe we'll be lovingly humbled by Him as we see His power at work. Hallelujah and amen! That's what I want to see, don't you?

Consider: Do you sometimes feel weak or inferior when it comes to working for the Kingdom? What are some specific weaknesses you think you have? Now consider those weaknesses in light of what you read about Paul going to the Corinthians "timid and trembling." If Paul, one of the greatest evangelists in history, felt weak but realized that this was an opportunity for God to showcase His power, take comfort. Your weaknesses and shortcomings are just cracks in the jar of clay through which God's glory can shine.

Pray: Thank God that He knows you, inside and out. Thank Him for how much He loves you and that He created you with a purpose. "Everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made" (Isaiah 43:7). Your purpose is to glorify the God of creation; He wants to use even your weaknesses to do so. Ask Him to use every part of you to fulfill that purpose.

Day 2: God's Power

"Since God in his wisdom saw to it that the world would never know him through human wisdom, he has used our foolish preaching to save those who believe."

1 Corinthians 1:21

I'm really excited about today, so let's get right to it.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:18-25.

It comforts me to know how well God knows us, how far ahead of us He is, and how He plants spiritual safeguards for us all throughout His plans. God, in His wisdom, made certain that none of us would ever come to know Him through our own wisdom.

- What would be some possible outcomes if we were allowed to find God through our own efforts, reasoning, or wisdom?

The Bible I use most often is my ESV Study Bible. It's worth re-writing our verse for today in the ESV because the wording here caused

fore, it is something each one of us received if and when we trusted in Christ as our Savior. Since Father, Son and Spirit are all three Persons of the same God, this gentleness given to us in the Spirit is the same gentleness that we see in Christ in Matthew 11:29. His gentleness attracts, doesn't it? He is a place of rest and safety. So should we be if we are relying on His power and His Spirit as we emulate Him and proclaim the Good News.

God is the One who saves, and gentleness from us demonstrates trust in His ability. We've been reminded several times throughout these opening chapters of 1 Corinthians that we are not responsible for the salvation and spiritual growth of others. Yes, God gives us work, and we should obediently carry out all that He asks. However, He is the One who brings productivity from our work. We can't claim responsibility, so we can't boast. We need the Father to draw that person to His Son first (John 6:44); we need Jesus to open eyes and ears (Isaiah 35:5); and we need the Holy Spirit to convict our lost loved one of sin and the need for Christ (John 16:8). *Then and only then can he or she come to Christ and understand spiritual truths.*

When we stop struggling against those who are lost and know that God is the One who might "change those people's hearts, and that they will learn the truth" (2 Tim. 2:25), we demonstrate trust in God's ability--and we open ourselves up to blessing. We are blessed because God gives us the privilege of sharing His love without the looming responsibility of showing Him results. Our job is to proclaim the truth of the Good News, to treat those to oppose it with gentleness and love, and to pray for their salvation.

- What does 2 Peter 3:9 tell us about God's feelings toward the lost?
- What does 1 John 5:14-15 tell us about our prayers and God's response to them?

Friends, God wants our loved ones to come to salvation, too. So let's take heart, proclaim Christ, be gentle in action and fervent in prayer—and let's watch for God's transforming power and glory with expectation.

Consider: God gives us the privilege of spreading *good* news. Do you proclaim it? *How* do you proclaim it? We can't argue good news with bad attitudes and expect to see glorious results. If you have a loved one who needs Christ and you've been trying to argue against him or her in an effort to convince, fix your eyes on Christ and *His* power. Bring God your concerns about salvation, and let Him give you His peace and rest as you trust Him in prayer.

Pray: Father, thank You for sending your Son and loving me before I loved You—while I was still lost in sin. I know that You love _____ more than I do and that You are patient, longing to see all people come to repentance. I give _____'s salvation over to You. Please, Father, draw

of our own weaknesses and completely humble before the Lord, so that we can watch Him manifest His glory. So let's take a closer look at what Christ asked His disciples (us) to do—and what He did not ask them to do.

We are to proclaim the gospel to everyone. However, our responsibility ends there. Christ did not command us to argue and convince everyone of the Gospel. He didn't ask us to guilt or shame the lost into believing. He simply asked us to tell His story; the rest of the work belongs to Him, His Father, and the Holy Spirit.

We want to be obedient, and so we'll proclaim the Good News! But how, then, should we react when our husband or wife, brother, child, friend who we love and long to see come to Christ tells us that they don't believe and don't *want* to believe? How do we handle their inability to even understand the truth of what we're saying? How do we handle the opposition that sometimes accompanies?

Please read the following, and we'll draw a few conclusions:

2 Timothy 2:24-26

Galatians 5:22-23

Matthew 11:29

1 John 5:13-15

Glance at 1 Corinthians 3:6-7 again.

We handle unbelief and opposition with gentleness. Paul instructs Timothy to “gently instruct those who oppose the truth.” If you're anything like me, this is easier said than done! But God, in His grace and patience, has been teaching me this with utmost patience over the past 12-14 years. I won't get into specifics, but suffice it to say that I, along with many of you, have someone I love deeply who does not yet know the Lord. I made the mistake (repeatedly, I might add) of passionately engaging in arguments with the goal of convincing this person of the logic in following Christ and the indisputable necessity of doing so. Neither of the things I tried to prove were wrong, but what was wrong was that I forfeited gentleness when I chose to engage in an argument with someone who couldn't understand what I was saying. The conversation veered off-track from God and His love in Christ, and I became flustered, angry, and seriously discouraged. By relying on my ability to convince, I moved into a flesh-driven argument instead of a Spirit-filled sharing of the Good News. No matter how hard I tried, I could not argue enough to make this person understand—and that's just the way God designed it so that He has every opportunity to showcase His glory.

Gentleness is available to all of us. I said that God has been teaching me about gentleness over the past several years. In addition to convicting me of where I veered off course, God has encouraged me by reminding me that we all have access to *His* gentleness. We don't have to muster what we have on our own. Amen to that!

Gentleness is one of the attributes of the fruit of the Spirit, and there-

me to pause and question God's purposeful choice to make the message of the cross seem so foolish to the lost.

“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.”

Why on earth would it please God to save people through what seems like foolishness?! Does He take pleasure in our confusion? To the contrary, we know that our God delights in order and reason and brings hidden things to light. So I ask, *why?*

I think there are a few reasons that it pleased God to save humanity this way.

1. **It sets the order right.** God, as the God who delights in order, delights specifically in the *right* order. The “foolishness” in the message of salvation actually serves that purpose. When mankind first sinned, we tried to reverse the order of things, choosing rebellion against God because we thought we knew better than He did. We tried to exalt ourselves higher than the One who will forever be exalted highest. Salvation depends first and foremost upon us realizing that God is the only God. There is none but Him, and He needs to be acknowledged as the Most High. Our sin separates us from Him because, when mankind fell, we placed our own selfish desires of exaltation above the One who is and forever will be highest. Salvation is an act of repentance and humility, acknowledging Christ as the only One who can save. He is first. He is most. Always.
2. **It deals with our pride and unifies the church.** God made the world's wisdom foolish and chose to save this way so that our human nature, so prone to pride, can't rise up in boasting in our own righteousness. Our righteousness before God is like filthy rags. No one can claim absolute holiness before a holy God—and so not one of us is good enough to come to Him alone. The result is a heart that, once we do come to Him, is humble first before Him—and also before every other person who has come into the family of God. We are all set on an equal playing field before God and each other, reinforcing love, respect, and humility within the family of God. We can't serve each other and work together for God's Kingdom if we think we've done anything to contribute to or earn our own salvation. Humility perpetuates unity.

3. **It requires faith.** This one's my favorite.

Please read Romans 2:16-18 and Hebrews 11:1-6.

- *What is the one thing we need in order to please God?*

God was and is pleased to save people through “foolish” preaching because the Gospel, foolish by the world’s own puffed-up standards, requires faith from us. When we step out in faith and believe in the unseen God, we move forward in faith and trust by believing that He exists and taking the first step toward Him in relationship. From what we’re told in the parable of the Prodigal Son, when we take the first step toward God, our Father will run to us with a delighted heart and open arms.

Consider how God designed His plan of salvation. From the moment we take a first step of faith, we step out from under His wrath not just to a place of safety—but right into His *pleasure*. Let this rest on you for a few moments.

Pray: Thank God for His saving power and great wisdom. Thank Him that He delights in you. Ask Him to speak to your spirit through His own today about His fatherly heart for you.

Day 3: Called to More

“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.”
1 Corinthians 1:26

I want to start today by meditating on Isaiah 55:8-9.

“My thoughts are nothing like your thoughts,’ says the LORD. ‘And my ways are far beyond anything you could imagine. For just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so my ways are higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts.’”

- *Think of a time when God showed you just how far above your*

God actually delight when we boast in Him? Because boasting in Him confirms that we agree with God about who He says He is. Boasting in ourselves is wrong because it attempts to raise us above the Most High; boasting in God exalts God to His rightful place above all else.

Furthermore, boasting in God indicates our heart’s condition. When we really know God, love Him, and understand who He is, we can’t help but boast about Him! Our heart is smitten with the Truth, filled to overflowing with love for Him—and that overflow comes right out of our mouths in boasting and praise.

Consider: Pride is an area in which we all struggle. It stems from selfishness and lives at the center of human nature. But pride has a way of vanishing when we take a good look at ourselves before a Holy God. Where do you struggle with pride?

Pray: Ask God to show you the areas in your life that may tempt you toward pride, and ask Him to bring you humbly before His throne. Confess where you have fallen, and ask Him to guard you where you are weak.

Day 5: We Proclaim...Gently

“The message of the cross is foolish to those who are headed for destruction! But we who are being saved know it is the very power of God.”
1 Corinthians 1:18

Yesterday we discussed boasting before God as compared to boasting *in God*, and we considered God’s chosen method of salvation as prevention against any opportunity for human boasting. We can’t take pride in our own salvation, for we did nothing to deserve or earn it. Furthermore, we can’t lay claim to anyone else’s salvation, becoming inflated in the work we do to lead others into God’s kingdom (1 Cor. 3:7). This is an important starting point for us today as we try to understand how to be faithful in our calling to spread the Gospel to a lost world.

Please read Mark 16:15-16 and 1 Corinthians 2:14-16.

Jesus commanded His disciples to go proclaim the Gospel to the entire world so that people would be saved. But, in 1 Corinthians 1:18 and again in 2:14-16, Paul tells us that those who do not yet belong to God cannot understand spiritual truths. The gospel is foolishness to them! So how can we fulfill the mission Christ gives us if the lost can’t understand it anyway? This is maybe the greatest opportunity for us to step out in faith-filled obedience, fully aware

ing and division; it spills over into our perception of ourselves before God.

If you have time, look up the following verses. I will draw some conclusions below.

Genesis 3:4-6

Proverbs 8:13

Proverbs 9:10

Proverbs 16:18

Isaiah 14:13-15

Isaiah 44:24-25

Isaiah 64:6

James 3:13-15

James 4:6

Boasting of ourselves in the presence of God is the antithesis of wisdom. When we consider who God is--and who we are by comparison--boasting of ourselves is downright foolish! God, by Himself, created all things--including any of us who might dare think ourselves worthy before Him. He possesses and presides over all knowledge and wisdom, and His holiness is perfect and complete. Our attempts at great knowledge are foolishness to Him who "stretched out the heavens," and no matter how good we think we are, our righteousness before the One and Only is contaminated. Any puffed up opinion we have of ourselves just doesn't make sense, but real wisdom is based on a fear of the Lord (Proverbs 9:10).

Pride and boasting are indicators of a selfish heart. Are we a little desensitized to the problem of selfishness? I'll admit that I may be; it's a condition we see so regularly in ourselves and others that maybe we are a little numb to the severity of it. But from beginning to end, God's Word says selfishness is evil. James goes so far as to call it demonic. Selfishness is the motivator behind pride and boasting, and it is the source of "disorder and evil of every kind" (James 3:16).

Pride and boasting before God are dangerous. "Pride goes before destruction, and haughtiness before a fall" (Proverbs 16:18). Indeed, pride went before *the* Fall. The presence of sin and death that entered the world in Genesis 3 came as the result of the temptation to rise up to God's level. That pride and desire to be just like God are in direct rebellion to who He says He is as the Most High—and He cannot and will not tolerate it.

This leads us to the second and final "so that" (*ESV*) or "therefore" (*NLT*) in verse 1 Corinthians 1:31.

Please read Jeremiah 9:23-24.

This is the passage that Paul was quoting when he said, "If you want to boast, boast only in the Lord." Why is this kind of boasting OK? Why does

thoughts and ways His are.

We've looked at our weakness, God's power, God's wisdom, and His pleasure in saving the world through what seems like foolishness. Indeed, His wisdom, thoughts, and ways are unlike and far above our own. Today, we're going to consider how God's thoughts and ways actually work to bring forth more in each of us than we could ever imagine.

Please read 1 Corinthians 1:26-28, 2:6-13.

In these verses, Paul reminds many in the church of what they were before Christ called them. Basically, not many of them had anything to brag about! In addition to it reminding the church of its origins in order to correct the proud attitudes, division, and fighting that we encountered last week, these two short verses set us up to understand every believer's gift and calling from God.

"Not many of you were" is repeated three times in verse 26. Paul then lists some negative adjectives to describe what God uses to accomplish some pretty noble tasks. List those here:

-
-
-
-

Church, our God is in the business of calling us to far more than we can imagine. His purpose in turning our wisdom upside-down is first and foremost to display His own glory—but it is also to bring *us* glory, according to 2:7. Can you believe that?! I had to read it several times to make sure I had that right. Whatever we believe we once were or still are, *God sees us with eyes and purpose that are greater than our own.*

Paul urges the Corinthians to "consider [their] calling." at first read, I just assumed this consideration was part of Paul debunking excess pride. While that's still accomplished, the calling that he's urging the church to ponder is the calling that God made on the life of each person there; the calling He makes on you and me; the calling that goes far beyond what any of us deserve or can imagine. So let's do as Paul urged the Corinthians to do and consider *our calling*. We are called:

- To eternal life (John 3:16).
- to be God's children (Romans 8:15).

- To be heirs of His Kingdom (Romans 8:17).
- To purpose and good works (Romans 8:28 and Ephesians 2:10).
- To justification and glorification (Romans 8:30).
- To be saints (1 Corinthians 1:2).
- Into fellowship with Christ (1 Corinthians 1:9)
- To freedom (Galatians 5:13).
- To hope (Ephesians 4:4).
- To holiness and righteousness (2 Timothy 1:9).
- Out of darkness and into God’s light (1 Peter 2:9).
- Into intimacy in Spirit and thought with God (1 Corinthians 2:6-13).

I want to land on this last calling mentioned above for the rest of our time today. When we answer God’s call to us and accept Christ as our Savior, we receive God’s own Spirit within us. We talked a little about this last week as it relates to having the “mind of Christ.” No matter what we once were, God calls us to Himself and reveals even His own depths to us through His Spirit. He gives us understanding of His own “secret and hidden wisdom,” and then He gives us glory in that. All of His thoughts and ways are higher than ours, including the ones He has about us.

What God thinks of us and calls us to are so much more than we’re sometimes willing to accept. If we can believe that what God says is true about us; if we consider our calling; if we trust that God’s thoughts and ways are higher than our own even when we don’t understand what He could possibly see in us, we’ll start to see more of His wisdom and His power manifested in our weakness. We’ll praise Him as we see Him bring us, step by step, to be more of what He called us to be.

God never crushes the one who admits and surrenders his or her own weakness to His call; He is always interested in our redemption and renewal--always lifting us up in glory rather than keeping us low.

“For thus says the One who is high and lifted up,
 Who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy:
 I dwell in the high and holy place,
 And also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit,
 To revive the spirit of the lowly,
 And to revive the heart of the contrite.”
 (Isaiah 57:15)

Consider: Think of a few less-than-glamorous attributes that could have—or still do—describe you. Now consider a few heavenly purposes God has accomplished through you. How did He use you and lift you up to more?

Pray: Thank God that He doesn’t require perfection from us in order to use us for His perfect purposes. Thank Him for how He sees you, and ask Him to show you more of who you are in His eyes.

Day 4: So That....

“So that, as it is written ‘Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.’”
 1 Corinthians 1:31, ESV

Did you notice that we left off a little abruptly in verse 28 of 1 Corinthians yesterday? We left Paul mid-sentence because verses 29-31 are the meat of today.

Please read 1 Corinthians 1:29-31.

Verse 29 concludes what we studied yesterday. This is the reason behind Paul’s reminder: *“so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.”* We already talked a little about God being so wise in His way of salvation. He saved us through no effort or merit of our own.

Fill in the blanks:

“God saved you by _____ grace when you believed. And you _____ take credit for this; it is a gift _____.
 Salvation is not a reward for the good things _____ have _____,
 so _____ of us can boast about it.”
 (Ephesians 2:8-9, NLT)

Many of you probably have these verses memorized. They have often encouraged me when I am discouraged about what I am in my flesh. Praise God that I am not required to earn my own salvation!

In this context though, it’s the pride and boasting with which we’re concerned. Our salvation rests solely in God’s capable hands, so any pride, boasting, arrogance, quarrels with each other—all problems we’ve already encountered in the Corinthian church—have no place within the family of God. We are all equally unable to lay claim to anything but a willingness to accept God’s gift of grace.

Paul told the Corinthians to consider their former selves and that to which they were called in Christ so that none of them would be tempted in pride to boast before God. Why is this so important? *Because a haughty attitude before a holy God can bring disaster.* Not only does such an attitude affect our relationship and interactions with each other by breeding quarrel-