

“Humbled by Choice” (1 Corinthians 1:26-31)

This is a busy time for our high school seniors. Many of them are applying to different colleges and universities. This can be a very competitive process. Consequently, we tell our young people that before they apply to a particular school, they need to find out what the admissions committee is looking for when they evaluate prospective students. Is it grades? Test scores? Personal references? Work experience? Extracurricular activities? Creative ability? All of the above? Whatever it is, you'd better know what it is and you'd better make sure you've got what they want before you turn in your application.¹

What sort of people does God look for when He gets ready to populate heaven? If heaven has an admissions committee, what qualifications do committee members look for? God's admission committee is different than any other that we have ever considered, for God's thoughts are not like our thoughts, nor are His ways like our ways (Isa 55:8). What types of people does God choose for His family? *God chooses those that have nothing to brag about.* In 1 Cor 1:26-31,² Paul is going to pull the rug out from underneath us and turn our thinking upside down. First, he is going to tell us that...

1. God's choice eliminates self-esteem (1:26-29). In 1:26 Paul writes, “**For³ consider your calling, brethren, that there were⁴ not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble.**” Paul begins by taking the Corinthians back to their spiritual roots. He reminds them of who they were *not* when God saved them. The word “consider” is the first imperative in this book. Thus, this is a key verse. Paul commands the Corinthians to consider or contemplate their calling.⁵ The word “calling” refers to their position in the world when they first believed in Christ.⁶ This issue of calling is important to Paul (cf. 1:1, 2, 9, 24). He believes that in order to become a Christian you must respond to God's call. Likewise, if you are a Christian today, it is because you have answered God's call.

Two weeks ago, I met with Ryan Davis to talk to him about baptism. Ryan is an eight-year-old boy in our congregation. I asked him how he became a Christian. He told me that God called him. I said, “Excuse me?” I'm used to hearing a lot of things, but this isn't one of them. As I probed further it became clear that, like Samuel, Ryan heard the Lord calling him. As a result of God's call, Ryan believed in the One who was calling him. While this may sound peculiar to you, this is exactly what God does. He calls men, women, and children to Himself.

Since Paul will have some difficult things to say, he addresses the Corinthians as “brethren” (cf. 1:10). He then shares with his readers “that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble.”

- First of all, the Corinthians were not academically elite (“wise”). They were not wise according to a worldly standard. There were some from the educated classes in Corinth, but most of the people in the church were uneducated.
- Second, the Corinthians were not political movers and shakers (“mighty”). The word translated “mighty” referred to the ruling class of a society. There were some in the church who were politically involved in the city, but most of the church members in Corinth had no influence in Corinth's political power structure.
- Finally, the Corinthians were not from well-to-do families (“noble”). Not many had what the world calls “good breeding.” By and large, most of them were from the lower ranks of society, including the slave class.⁷

What Paul is saying to the Corinthians is, “You know what sort of people you were when God called you out of sinful darkness into the light of salvation. You know that He didn’t accept you as His child because you were brilliant or wealthy or powerful, because most of you weren’t at all. And those of you whose lives were defined that way were saved in spite of those positions, not because of them. If anything, they were obstacles between you and God’s grace.” The reality is that position and wealth and influence really can be hindrances, keeping people from the sense of need that leads to salvation.

In a sense, Paul holds up a mirror and says, “Take a good look. What do you see?” If the Corinthians were honest, they didn’t see many impressive people. They saw ordinary men and women from unimpressive backgrounds whose lives had been utterly transformed by Jesus Christ. There is an important message here if we care to receive it. God prefers losers. When God calls people to His family, He intentionally chooses those whom the world rejects. He prefers the weak over the strong, the forgotten over the famous, and the nobodies over the somebodies. He starts with the people the world chooses last. He actually prefers to choose the weak instead of the strong.

It’s not as if God intends to take equal numbers from every social class in the world. And it’s definitely not true that God populates the church from the upper classes but sprinkles in a few from the lower classes. The opposite is closer to the truth. God populates His church with the rejects of the world and then sprinkles in a few wealthy and powerful people. He prefers losers. God deliberately chooses the forgotten of the world and He prefers the company of the poor. He loves to save the uneducated, the foolish, the addicted, the broken, the downcast, and the imprisoned. In short, He specializes in saving those whom the world counts as nothing.⁸

Before we move to our final point this morning, I wonder if there might be someone here asking the question, “If God chooses down-and-outers, is there any place for the famous, the wealthy, or the brilliant in the family of God?” The answer is definitely, “Yes!” Notice carefully that 1:26 does not say, “Not any of you were wise, not any were influential, not any were of noble birth,” but rather not many. Thank God for the letter “M.” Thank God for the athletes, musicians, and actors who have become Christians, but God’s Word tells us we should never expect the Church to be filled with such people.

Have you forgotten your calling? Memory can be a blessing or a curse. In the spiritual life, it can be very healthy to remember what life was like before we met Jesus. If you remember where you started, you’ll appreciate much more the grace of God that has brought you to where you are today. Do you remember where you came from? Do you recall what you were doing when God saved you from yourself? *God chooses those that have nothing to brag about.*

[Now that Paul has reminded the Corinthians of who they were not, Paul goes on to inform them of who they were.]

In 1:27-29, Paul transitions with a strong contrast. He writes, “**but God has chosen the foolish things⁹ of the world¹⁰ to shame the wise,¹¹ and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not,¹² so that He may nullify the things that are, so that no man may boast¹³ before God.**”¹⁴ Three times in 1:27-28, Paul writes that “God has chosen.” This is the doctrine of sovereign choice—the biblical doctrine of election. These words mean exactly what they seem to mean. If we have a problem with them, the problem does not rest in the Greek text or the English translation. We may not like the idea that God chooses whom He will save, but that’s exactly the meaning of these words. There are no naturally born children of God; all are adopted. They are children by choice, never by accident. Ultimately, we do not become Christians because of an independent decision we have made; rather, even the initial part of our becoming believers comes as a result of an inner call from God, rooted in His love and undeserved grace (cf. also 7:20).¹⁵

Consider the implication of the text. When the world throws a party, the beautiful people are always invited. They rent a nightclub and hire a security team to keep the ordinary people out. Only the “in crowd” makes it past the rope line. Helicopters circle overhead and the paparazzi strain to get a picture they can sell to *People* magazine. It’s all about who shows up and who is wearing what kind of dress, and trying to match this man with that woman. That’s how the world throws a party. But God does it differently. *God chooses those that have nothing to brag about.*

God chooses people that no one would invite to a party. He includes those who would normally be excluded. He does this so that He can subvert, invert, and convert human values.¹⁶ He shames the wise, He shames the strong, and He “reduces to nothing” (NRSV) the things that are impressive to our world. Why does God do this? God chooses the despised so that no man or woman can boast before Him. God is a jealous God and will not share His glory with anyone (cf. Isa 42:8).

Mensa is an organization whose members have an IQ of 140 or higher. A few years ago, there was a Mensa convention in San Francisco, and several members lunched at a local café. While dining, they discovered that their saltshaker contained pepper and their peppershaker was full of salt. How could they swap the contents of the bottles without spilling, and using only the implements at hand? Clearly this was a job for Mensa! The group debated and presented ideas, and finally came up with a brilliant solution involving a napkin, a straw, and an empty saucer. They called the waitress over to dazzle her with their solution. “Ma’am,” they said, “we couldn’t help but notice that the peppershaker contains salt and the saltshaker pepper.” “Oh,” the waitress interrupted. “Sorry about that.” She unscrewed the caps of both bottles and switched them.¹⁷

This is how God works! He likes to shame those who are wise and strong. God used trumpets to bring down the walls of Jericho. He reduced Gideon’s army from 32,000 to 300 to rout the armies of Midian (Judges 7:1-25). He used an ox goad in the hand of Shamgar to defeat the Philistines. With the jawbone of a donkey He enabled Samson to defeat a whole army. And Jesus fed over 5,000 with nothing more than a few loaves and fishes.¹⁸

God does these types of miracles to humble humankind so that no one can take credit for anything! Augustine, when asked what were the three most important virtues, replied, “Humility, humility, humility.”¹⁹ Truly, that is God’s heart for you and me. He wants us to daily recognize that we have nothing to brag about before Him. Rather, we are completely indebted to Him.

[God’s choice eliminates self-esteem...but now we will also see that...]

2. God’s choice demands Christ-esteem (1:30-31). Paul closes chapter one with these words: **“But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God,²⁰ and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption,³¹ so that, just as it is written, ‘LET HIM WHO BOASTS, BOAST IN THE LORD’”**²¹ (1:30-31). It is “by His doing” (lit. “of Him”) that you are “in Christ Jesus.”²² He is both the source and the cause of the Corinthians being in Christ.²³ The believer is described here very simply as one who is “in Christ.” You know, you can’t be any closer to something than “in it.” That’s our position as born again believers.²⁴ God the Father sees you and me as a part of His Son. This is just one of many reasons a believer can’t lose his or her salvation—the believer is one with Christ.

This phrase (“But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus”) explains the previous verses: “If things that were not have now become something, it is due to God alone.” The crucified Christ becomes the manifestation of God’s wisdom, which here refers to God’s long-established plan for the world’s salvation (cf. 1:21; 2:7; Eph 3:10).²⁵ In Him, believers receive true wisdom: the wisdom of the cross and all its benefits—right standing before God (“righteousness”), moral cleansing (“holiness”), and rescue from slavery to sin (“redemption”).²⁶ These three words describe the fruit of God’s wisdom in Christ.²⁷ Let me explain.

- ***We've been given God's righteousness.*** God is perfectly righteous because He is totally as He should be. He can't vary from His rightness. And when we trust His Son, He shares His Son's righteousness with us. He makes us right with Him, right within ourselves, and right with other people.
- ***We've received God's sanctification.*** We've been set apart and made holy, both positionally and practically. This is the daily manifestation of the Christ-like character that has been placed into us. The character of Christ is gradually revealed in us more and more the longer we're in relationship with Him, as we learn how to handle life according to God's wisdom. We'll become more patient, more loving, more insightful, and more courageous. It's a wonderful lifelong process.
- ***We've received God's redemption.*** To redeem means to buy something back. God, through Christ, has purchased us from the power of sin. It's because of Christ's redeeming work on the cross that we have eternal life. *God chooses those that have nothing to brag about.*

Paul writes because of these wonderful gifts, we can boast.²⁸ Christians can properly boast, not in their own achievements, but in the Lord (1:31), as in Jer 9:24, the verse Paul quotes here.²⁹ This quote interestingly follows a verse that declares, "Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches" (Jer 9:23). And those are precisely the three categories Paul has enunciated in 1 Cor 1:26.⁴

However, please note that in Jer 9:23 the Lord is Yahweh, but in 1:31 it is Jesus. Paul is saying, "We can boast but we must boast in Christ." May our boast be not in what we do for Christ but in what Christ does for us. When it comes to salvation we contribute nothing but the sin that makes it necessary to be saved. God does the rest. God chooses whom He pleases, and He does so by choosing those whom the world overlooks. The reason God does what He does is to demonstrate that He alone is the source of our salvation. Thus, if we believe what this passage teaches it will change the way we look at ourselves, and it will change the way we talk about ourselves. Some of us talk so much about ourselves that we hardly talk about the Lord at all. Our real problem is the vast difference between our view and God's view.

Now, you may be thinking this is a nice sermon, but it further demonstrates that I will never amount to anything. Even though I am chosen by God and included in His plan, I still feel like a nobody. If you think you are too small to be effective, you have never been in bed with a mosquito.³⁰ I want to assure you that God has you right where He wants you. If you feel average, weak, and foolish, God can use you. Those people that He has used the most are those that have plenty of sin and weakness.

- **Noah:** Rejected from society. Built an ark for 120 years and had no converts.
- **Abraham:** Offered to share his own wife with another man, not once but twice.
- **Joseph:** Ostracized by his dysfunctional family; possesses a prison record.
- **Moses:** A modest and meek man, but poor communicator, even stuttering at times. Murderer.
- **David:** Affair with his neighbor's wife; murdered her husband to avoid charges.
- **Elijah:** Prone to depression—collapses under pressure.
- **Jeremiah:** Emotionally unstable, alarmist, negative, always lamenting things.
- **Hosea:** Wife became a prostitute.
- **Peter:** Aggressive, hot-tempered fisherman, loose cannon who denied Christ.

Ordinary people of faith can do extraordinary things for God if they eliminate self-esteem and put on Christ esteem. *God chooses those that have nothing to brag about but Him.*

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Scripture Reference

1 Corinthians 1:26-31

Jeremiah 9:23-24

Deuteronomy 7:1-11

Matthew 11:25-27

James 2:1-13

Ephesians 2:8-9

2 Corinthians 10:12-18

Study Questions

1. When did I first sense that I was being called by God (1:26)? How did I respond? What was my life like before I believed in Christ? How has God changed my life since that point? Is it easy to recall who I once was before Christ? How does this humble me today?
2. Why does God choose the members of His family (1:27-29)? Why does He choose the people He does? How does this make me feel? What should my natural response be to God's gracious choice?
3. Can I define the words "righteousness," "sanctification," and "redemption" (1:30)? If so, what do these words mean to me? How can I apply each of these terms to my own life experience? How would I explain them to my child?
4. What have I boasted in during the course of my life (1:29, 31)? How has this boasting brought displeasure to God? Why is it so difficult to boast in the Lord? In Jeremiah 9:23-24 the Lord declares, "If people want to boast, they should boast about this: They should boast that they understand and know me. They should boast that they know and understand that I, the LORD, act out of faithfulness, fairness, and justice in the earth and that I desire people to do these things" (NET). Who do I know who exemplifies this passage? What can I learn from him or her? How can I become a man or woman who boasts in the Lord? How can I avoid artificial spirituality and exude authentic humility?

Notes

¹ This idea came from Ray Pritchard, “How God Destroys Human Pride” (1 Cor 1:26-31):

http://www.keepbelieving.com/sermons/read_sermon.asp?id=362.

² The unit is marked off by an inclusio with an allusion to Jer 9:26 LXX in 1:26 and a citation of it in 1:31. David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*: Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 72.

³ The word “for” (*gar*) introduces a new topic. Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 179.

⁴ Paul uses a past tense “not many of you were.” He does not say, “Not many of you are...” Actually, once a person is saved he tends to improve his position in society. Michael Eaton, *Preaching Through the Bible: 1 Corinthians 1-9* (Kent, England, 1998), 25.

⁵ The word “consider” (*blepete*) is the first word of the Greek sentence for emphasis. It is from the Greek verb *blepo*: “to see” (cf. 1 Cor 10:18; 2 Cor 10:7; Phil 3:2; Col 4:17).

⁶ Contra Witherington who suggests that the Corinthians’ “calling” refers to their socioeconomic status. See Ben Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 113.

⁷ This is not to say, of course, that there were no upper-class people in the church in Corinth. We need only note Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue (Acts 18:8), and Erastus, “the city’s director of public works” (Rom 16:23). Moreover, some of the church members were rich enough to own homes in which the church could meet (e.g., Titius Justus, Acts 18:7, and probably Gaius, Rom 16:23). Verbrugge, *1 Corinthians*, 56.

⁸ Pritchard, “How God Destroys Human Pride.”

⁹ “The neuter concentrates attention of the quality of foolishness possessed by these people rather than on themselves as individuals.” Leon Morris, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*: Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, [1958] 1990), 48. It is not that they *are* fools, but that they lack the supposed sophistication which was prized by the Greeks. There is a proper simplicity to faith. “God is no human construct, called in to legitimate human power interests, but the very reverse. His love for the nobodies and the nothings discounted as nonentities and as insignificant in the value system of the world puts the world to shame by its reversal of judgment.” Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 184.

¹⁰ The threefold repetition of “of the world” means “in the world’s estimation.” C.K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*: Harper’s New Testament Commentaries (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 58.

¹¹ The contrast between putting to shame and boasting is found in other Pauline passages (Rom 5:2-5; 2 Cor 7:14; 9:2-4). Raymond F. Collins, *First Corinthians*: Sacra Pagina (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 111.

¹² “The things that are not” is the Greek phrase *ta me onta* (lit. “the nothings”). Morris writes, “God’s activity in men is creative. He takes that which is nothing at all and makes of it what he pleases.” Morris, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*, 48.

¹³ “The Corinthian people lived with an honour-shame orientation, where public recognition was often more important than facts, and where the worst thing that could happen was for one’s reputation to be publicly tarnished. In such a culture a personal sense of worth is based on recognition by others of one’s accomplishments, hence the self-promoting.” Witherington, *Conflict and Community in Corinth*, 116.

¹⁴ Paul stresses this same point in Romans 3 after having pointed out our justification as a gift from God: “Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded...on [the principle] of faith” (Rom 3:27).

¹⁵ Note in Rom 8:28-30 the unbroken chain from being predestined to being called to being justified to being glorified. Verlyn D. Verbrugge, “1 Corinthians” in the *Revised Expositors Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, awaiting publication), 56.

¹⁶ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 76.

¹⁷ Preaching today Citation: Found on MSN; submitted by Sherman Lee Burford, Tuskegee Institute, AL.

¹⁸ William MacDonald, *Believer’s Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995), 1751.

¹⁹ Richard L. Ganz, *20 Controversies that Almost Killed a Church: Paul’s Counsel to the Corinthians and the Church Today* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2003), 37.

²⁰ “The wisdom of God is embodied in Christ, who offered himself that men might be saved. He is the real wisdom, let the philosophers argue as they will.” Morris, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians*, 49.

²¹ Jeremiah 9:23-24, with its emphasis on boasting in one proper thing or another improper thing, lies behind this pericope. Hays suggests that Paul is also echoing 1 Kingdoms 2:10 LXX. See Hays, *First Corinthians*, 34-35.

²² The first two Greek words in 1:30 are *ek autou* (“of Him,” i.e., God the Father). This indicates that God is the source of salvation. This is why the ESV renders this phrase, “He [God] is the source of your life in Christ Jesus.”

Thiselton translates the phrase, “‘It is as a gift from him that you are in Christ Jesus.’ A double emphasis on the act of God and their status deriving solely from being ‘in Christ.’ ‘In Christ’ must be understood in terms of ‘objective status and corporate solidarity’... Its content now manifests itself in sharing the gifts of righteousness, sanctification and redemption.” Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 189.

²³ Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 79. For “source,” see NRSV; for cause, see NIV. (The Greek word *ek* is used to express cause in John 6:66.)

²⁴ Michael P. Andrus, “The Power Behind the Powerless” (1 Cor 1:18-2:5): Unpublished sermon, 9/25/2000.

²⁵ In 1 Cor 1:30 Paul refers to believers’ induction into Christ. Some understand Eph 1:4 to say that God chose Christ, and that those believers who choose to be part of Christ are thereby “elect.” Such a reading ignores the syntax of Eph 1:4, for the text does not actually say that God chose Christ, but that He chose ‘us’ to be ‘in Christ’. The reading also seems to ignore 1 Cor 1:30, which clearly teaches that believers are in Christ because of God’s work (*ex autou*, ‘of him’). No room is left for the idea that believers themselves are ultimately responsible for their faith. Paul, of course, does not teach election to provoke intellectual debates. In both Eph 1:3-14 and 1 Cor 1:26-31 he emphasizes that God elects His people in order to bring glory, praise, and honor to His name. God’s election is ‘to the praise of his glory’ (Eph 1:6, 12, 14). He chose some and not others so that no one would boast in human beings (1 Cor 1:29) and so that we would boast only in the Lord (1 Cor 1:31).

²⁶ All three words are only used here in the book of 1 Corinthians.

²⁷ The *te...kai...kai* construction that follows suggests that the next three words are epexegetic, i.e., they define further what this wisdom is: “righteousness, holiness and redemption.” Verbrugge, *1 Corinthians*, 59. “It is not that Christ is these things but that believers *have* these things in Christ.” Witherington, *Conflict and Community in Corinth*, 117.

²⁸ “Boasting” can be good or bad depending on the object of the boast (cf. 9:15-16) or the attitude behind the boasting. “Boasting” (*kauchaomai*) is not a common word in Greek literature, but the practice of praising oneself was quite familiar. The verb *kauchaomai* and the nouns *kauchema* and *kauchesis* appears predominantly in Paul’s letters in the NT, and the majority of those occurrences are in the Corinthian correspondence. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 78.

²⁹ Fee, *1 Corinthians*, 78-80, points out how this entire section (1:26-31) is based on Jer 9:23–24.

³⁰ Preaching Today Citation: Betty Reese. *Leadership*, Vol. 16, no. 2.