

Sermon 6: 1 Corinthians 1:26-31: Considering our Calling

OUTLINE

The credentials of the called
The purpose of the called
The benefits of the called

INTRODUCTION

The gospel is like a Swiss army knife that is a tool for any situation. So often when we are struggling with a particular situation merely going back to the gospel teaches us the truths we need to apply in that situation. Are you suffering in a situation and struggling with the love of God? Then go back to the cross and see that God is willing to love you when you were His enemy, by giving His beloved Son to pay for your sins, how much more will He love you now that you are His adopted child? Are you struggling to make sense of your difficult situation wondering whether God is good or has made a mistake? Go back to the cross and see in that terrible tragedy of the most innocent man suffering and the good that God had purposed to do through it from all eternity. Are you struggling to forgive someone, maybe you are the innocent party and your spouse has sinned against you? Think on Jesus as the innocent party who take the initiative to reconcile Himself to a bride who was unwilling; think upon His words, 'Father forgive them they know not what they do' and ponder His heart's desire for mercy not justice for those guilty of sinning against Him. Paul does something like this for the Corinthians as he calls them to go back to the way God saved them, to consider their calling.

The Corinthians have allowed worldly attitudes and patterns of behavior into the church and they need to get back to the gospel to see how foolish they have been. You will remember that the Corinthian context is dominated by certain ways of thinking. It is a very segregated society divided between the important and the nobodies; the rich and the poor; the slave and the free. There were pervasive attitudes that believed that people who were born poor were people of bad character and could not improve and those who were blue bloods, those of noble birth were just superior. The Corinthians like those with an inferiority complex and reacting with overcompensation were being seduced by those who were self-important, who were promoting themselves and a message that pretended to be wisdom in an atmosphere that cherished wisdom. These Corinthians because they were educated by the values of their age and not by the gospel were wide open to be taken advantage of as they latched onto a message and teachers that offered what the world said was important. Paul has to remind them of God's saving actions towards them to show them that they have all they need in Christ. The majority of the church were not from the upper classes and were vulnerable to ideas that promised them those things they missed out on in the world. But Paul reminds these people who are looking for status; and character and liberty that they have it all in Christ, 1:30, 'And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption.'

The Corinthians have been boasting in the wisdom of the world at the cost of diminishing the cross and the unity of the church. Last week we saw how Paul pushes back showing how God subverts the world's wisdom through the foolishness of the cross which they seem to be ashamed of. And now Paul is

going to through who God saves how His ways are not our ways once again. Paul is trying to disabuse these Corinthians of their worldly way of thinking through helping them to understand God's saving work in Christ better. Paul focuses on God's calling them to salvation, and we will be looking at three things he highlights. Firstly, the credentials of the called. These Corinthians are so obsessed with position and standing so Paul reminds them what type of people God saves. Secondly, we see the purpose of God calling us. Unlike the messages of worldly wisdom which exalt man's intellect and action, salvation glorifies God not us. Thirdly, Paul talks about the benefits of the called. These Corinthians were seeking status and character and liberty through the message of worldly wisdom, but God's wisdom in Christ delivers these very things but before God not the world.

The credentials of the called

V26, '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.' The word for here shows that Paul is tying what he is saying here to what he said about God's foolishness being better than the world's wisdom in v18-25. He has shown how the cross though hated and rejected by worldly standards is actually the thing that saved; he now gives another example of how God's ways are better than the world's. Paul tells the Corinthians to consider, to think deeply about to ponder their calling.

What does Paul mean by this word calling? Paul is using it as shorthand for our salvation. I find it very interesting that when describing the act of getting saved Paul uses a word that describes us as the responder not the initiator. It is a word that presumes a speaker and a message that we respond to. Paul has used this idea several times in the letter so far. V1, 'Paul, called by the will of God'; v2, 'To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints.'; v9, 'God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son.' V24, 'but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.' And now here again in v26. Paul has been preparing them to consider their calling showing how foundational it is in their salvation. He is not a self-appointed apostle but called; they are not self-appointed saints but called; God is the author of the call not us; this is a call that includes Jews and Gentiles. Now Paul says stop and think about it a bit more.

Paul is reminding them that we are all dead in trespasses and sins. The gospel is foolishness to us. We do not of ourselves seek God, nor do we even of ourselves respond positively to the gospel. Jesus taught that no one comes to the Father but they are drawn by the power of the Holy Spirit. The preacher preaches the word of God, but it is only as the Holy Spirit attends the external call of the gospel with the internal call of God that any sinner responds with faith in Christ. The sheep of God hear the voice of God through the preaching of the word of God as the Spirit of God draws them to faith in the Son of God. Paul puts it this way in Rom. 8:30, 'And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.' In other words, how did you get saved? Were you just more virtuous than others and deserved it? Were you more intelligent than others and you understood because your cleverer? Were you looking for God when other people aren't? Did you have a better intuition about it? Just you just happen to be at the right place at the right time, it was luck? No, we are saved because despite enemies of God; despite being dead in sin; despite our willful ignorance and rejection of the grace

of God, God in His sovereign grace came to us and by the power of the Holy Spirit opened our eyes to see and our ears to hear, and gave us hearts to receive Jesus as our Savior. Or as Paul put it to Timothy 2 Tim. 1:9, 'who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began.' How does that help the Corinthians? They were following teaching which reinforced ideas about highborn and lowborn; ideas about needing to be smart enough and belonging to the right type of people. Paul reminds them that they were saved by grace.

'Not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth.' Paul asks the Corinthians to take a look at themselves to see the truth of what he is saying. The majority of them were not smart; not high ranking officials; and not from blue blood families. Incidentally the word for noble birth is *eugeneis* from which we get the word *eugenics*. You do not qualify for inclusion in the church in the same way you qualify for inclusion in a country club. Paul is not insulting them, but reminding that God saves sinners. Paul is not implying that God does not save those from the upper classes, of course He does. His point is that here is a group of people who are not of the type of person the world values; and now like someone with an inferiority complex who is overcompensating is going after those things the world is telling them are important and as a result it is overshadowing the cross and dividing the church.

Class; race; gender; economic station; family background, whatever it may be. We cannot put a premium on these things and allow them to dictate to how the church is run because we are all equally sinners; we are all equally needy; we are all saved because of what God has done not because of anything we have done, and so we cannot allow these things to dominate our thinking and influence how we treat each other. Our credentials for salvation are ironically disqualifications, you need to be a needy sinner. And if you see that this is who God saves, then don't bring worldly distinctions and categories into the church that deny these realities.

The purpose of the called

V27-28, '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; ²⁸ God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are.' Paul outlines two key reasons why God saves the way that He does. The first reason God saves with what the world perceives as weakness and foolishness; and the reason why He saves sinners is to subvert this world's values. Paul emphasizes God as the sovereign gracious Savior as he says 'God chose' three times. Paul lists 5 objects of God's grace, the foolish in the eyes of the world; the weak in the eyes of the world; the low in the eyes of the world; the despised in the eyes of the world; and the nothings, the non-existent, the things that are not in the eyes of the world. Paul uses the word shame here. In an honor culture context public shaming was sometimes considered worse than death. Paul is likely referring to the fact that on judgement day, all that the world proffered to the gospel in the name of wisdom and strength and morality will be shamed. So right now things have a certain appearance where it looks like the dregs of society are the ones who become Christian. This has often happened in the history of the church, 'In a.d. 178 the philosopher Celsus mockingly wrote of Christians: Let no cultured person draw near, none wise and

none sensible, for all that kind of thing we count evil; but if any man is ignorant, if any man is wanting in sense and culture, if anybody is a fool, let him come boldly [to become a Christian].... We see them in their own houses, wool dresses, cobblers, the worst, the vulgarest, the most uneducated persons.... They are like a swarm of bats or ants creeping out of their nest, or frogs holding a symposium around a swamp, or worms convening in mud.’¹

This touches a nerve with us because we are quite addicted to appearances and having approval. How many times have we shouted loud the story of any celebrity who becomes a Christian? How many times has a celebrity made a few Christian noises and we are so desperate to have them on our side for our popularity campaign that we quickly put them forward as fellow believers? How many times have we forced someone with a ‘testimony’ that we think will appeal to the masses to begin sharing it publicly and exposing them to all the dangers and temptations of being a public person even when they were not ready for it because we wanted to use them as a token salvation? When the world puts us in the basket of Colonialism we can get embarrassed and want to bring in words and people and a presentation that makes us more appealing. When Christianity is seen as the religion associated with old white males that puts pressure on us to veer away from the Bible’s teaching on who should be an elder. New atheists have tried to push the lie that Christianity is only believed by stupid people who have not been tertiary educated. All of this can put a pressure to conform to what the world values and change what we believe and even make the church the enemy and the battleground. We cannot give in to this pressure. We must remember that God saves sinners, and we are all sinners. The truth of the gospel and the word of God is foolishness to the world, for spiritual things are spiritually discerned. Let me ask you where are you feeling the pressure right now? Where does Christianity feel embarrassing; who are the people whose approval you want and what are their criticisms against Christ or the Bible; what parts of your faith are you feeling tempted to hide because it does not conform to the spirit of the age; have you allowed any of these matters to turn you against the bible, soft pedal the offensive elements of the gospel, or to lower your opinion of your brothers and sisters in Christ?

God has deliberately revealed His truth in such a way that it shows us the truth that we are lost and He is the Savior. It is not the reward for the proud who turn their back on God and remake Him as an idol. Salvation is not the reward for those who reject His law; His Savior; His truth and make up their own path as their own little gods. God cannot reward such behavior with anything but judgement. So the gospel message is a message that saves sinners, failures, the broken, those who have made all sorts of promises to themselves about being better but cannot keep those promises. The church is filled with people who have accepted these truths not those who deny them.

Which leads to the second reason for why this is the case. V29, ‘so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.’ Now this should not be misinterpreted to be some kind of speciesism on God’s part as if He just has a vendetta against human beings. Technically, there is one human being that can boast in His sight, the Lord Jesus Christ. He has perfectly fulfilled God’s requirements and is to be worshipped as the Father is worshipped. Paul is referring here to sinful humanity. When it comes to matters of truth and

1 John F. MacArthur Jr., [1 Corinthians](#), MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984), 51.

salvation and goodness, we can take no credit, we do not deserve praise but judgement we deny God's truth; reject His holiness; and make up our own ways of salvation instead of receiving the one He has provided in Christ. All of Creation, and all of God's works in salvation have one purpose, it is the purpose for all that God does, to glorify Himself. Human learning, human morality, human achievement, it cannot save, it cannot resurrect from the dead, it cannot pay for sin, it cannot reconcile us to God, it cannot change our enslaved state to sin and Satan, only God can save, therefore Soli Deo Gloria, to God alone be the glory. The Corinthians are missing this. They are enamored with human learning and human accomplishments, and important human beings which has led to man-following, divisions, and the hiding of the cross of Christ.

Paul wants to pile it on thick.

The benefits of the called

V30, 'And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption.' God called you; God chose you; and now Paul adds, 'because of Him you are in Christ Jesus.' It is not because of anything in us, not because of any human teacher or teaching, but because of God's call, and choice. Ephesians 2:1-5 outlines this process, 'And you were dead in the trespasses and sins ² in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— ³ among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. ⁴ But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved.' We were dead, 'But God' because of His mercy and love, He united us to Christ and we experienced new birth. Externally the word of God was being preached inwardly we were being united to the resurrection power of Christ by the Spirit. And as a result of this we believed, v8-9, 'For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹ not a result of works, so that no one may boast.'

Saving sinners apart from works; saving criminals through Christ dying their death; saving those trapped in sin through the working of His power; saving through the act of one dying and overcoming our sin problem not reigning and overcoming our political problems. Saving by God punishing sin and yet being able to save the one who sinned, this is God's wisdom.

Paul then goes on to list the things that we receive in Christ. He could have listed several but he just settles on three. In Christ by God's wisdom through the gospel we receive righteousness. Our greatest need as sinners is to be righteous before the God who will judge all people. God in the gospel provides the righteousness we need in Christ. The gospel is not a way for us to provide our own righteousness through law keeping or good deeds. No we receive the free gift of a righteousness not our own, and we receive it with the empty hands of faith. In a culture obsessed with status here we see that we are given a new legal standing, we are counted as righteous before God's law because the righteousness of Christ has been credited to us. So much so, we are not the righteousness of God in Christ.

Secondly, we have sanctification. Now there are two ways to think of sanctification, there is the typical way that we think of it, a process of becoming more and more like Christ. But there is another sense as well, we call it positional not progressive sanctification. This has to do with the fact that we have been taken out of Satan's kingdom, out of our legal standing in Adam and we have been put in a new position as saint, as separated on, before God. For those obsessed with position here is a position where we are the Lord's, we have an identity and a purpose in Him. and it is from this new position of being set apart from sin that we now go out and pursue holiness. Being a saint is a major theme in 1 Corinthians and Paul is going to revisit this idea.

Thirdly, we experience redemption. Slaves in the Roman world could buy their freedom and become a freedman, this was a prestigious position. We as believers have been set free from the kingdom of darkness and belong to Christ. We are at liberty from sin, but we are now the Lord's bondslaves. We live in the paradox of true freedom being found in bondage to Christ. This too will be a theme Paul will return to later in the letter 6:19-20, 'Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, ²⁰ for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.'

Paul is trying to help these Corinthians see that they have been given so much in Christ. They don't need these false teachers with their worldly wisdom and worldly ways. God has saved us in such a way that all of these ways of thinking are exposed as folly for they rely on man in some way. God alone is our Savior and He has saved us in Christ, give Him the glory and stop going after human teachings and works and glory in all that God has given us in the gospel. When Christians do not know what they have in Christ; if they are not clear about the impotency of humanity to save itself, we will be vulnerable to deception and inferiority complexes and go after all these pseudo-gospels.