

1 Cor. 1:26-31

This passage is a continuation of the previous passage (1:18-25). It gives further explanation and application of the same contrast developed there, and first mentioned in v. 17. This is the contrast between human wisdom and the cross of Christ as the way of salvation and life. Paul argued that human wisdom is completely inadequate even to understand God's manner of salvation, let alone surpass it. Because the cross of Christ is the wisdom and power of God, which nullifies human wisdom and power. In this passage, Paul applies this same contrast to the topic of boasting – what we trust and delight in to the point of praising it. Boasting in human wisdom and accomplishment is equally empty compared with boasting only in Christ crucified.

I. Neg: God's salvation goes against human standards and boasting (26-29)

A. God chose and saved unimpressive people (26-28)

Paul began his explanation by drawing on the Corinthians' own experience of salvation. He pointed out what the Corinthians were *not* and why that mattered. Their own salvation proved that God chose and saved unimpressive people.

1. The Corinthians were (for the most part) not “impressive” by human standards (26)

a For brothers, notice your own calling (26a)

That is, notice your own situation in life when you were called, and the way in which you were called to Christ. This general statement is elaborated by the following specific descriptions of their status in life when they were called.

b You were not impressive by human standards (26b-d)

1) That not many were wise according to the flesh (26b)

“wise” means an expert in the human wisdom discussed in the previous passage.

“according to the flesh” means according to the worldly, merely human standards of that current culture, as opposed to God's standards.

2) Not many were powerful (26c)

That is powerful in terms of worldly influence and social/political status.

3) Not many were well-born (26d)

That is, born into upper class influence, clout and money, etc.

Their salvation proved that being those kinds of people is *not* a qualification for salvation.

Note that he wrote “not *many*.” He did not write “not *any*.” There were some rich and powerful among the Corinthian church. Being poor and uneducated does not make a person more qualified than being rich and educated. To think so would be to make the exact same mistake in the opposite direction. Our status according to human standards does not matter, one way or the other. And so, we should not pretend that it does. Therefore, we should not boast in our status.

2. God chose to use unimpressive people to put the “impressive” people to shame (27-28)

These verses give the theological reason why not many of them were impressive people. Because God chose unimpressive people with the expressed purpose of putting the impressive people to shame. God did this to humble people who thought they were impressive by human standards.

There is a chiasmic structure in each pair of lines, putting the word “God” at the center for emphasis.

God is the primary actor in this choosing and humbling of the impressive, because this is God's plan.

a God chose the foolish to shame the wise (27a-b)

1) But God selected the foolish ones of the world (27a)

The “foolish” may be those who literally lacked wisdom – the uneducated or unintelligent of that society. But Paul also may have meant this sarcastically, as he frequently did in the previous passage, to mean someone who was considered “foolish” by this world's standards, but who was really wise according to God's standards because they trusted in the crucified Messiah. God specifically chose these people for His purpose.

2) Purpose: in order to put the “wise” ones to shame (27b)

This means that God’s intention was to cause those who considered themselves to be wise to be ashamed of their pride in their own wisdom. His salvation of the “fools” is designed to (sooner or later) humble and/or humiliate those who considered themselves better, because their supposed inferiors had experienced salvation and true wisdom before and/or instead of them.

b God chose the weak to shame the strong (27c-d)

1) And God selected the weak ones of the world (27c)

“The weak” does not necessarily refer to physical weakness (though that is possible). More likely, in this context, it refers to being incapable or limited in some social or economic sense – not able to be effective in their life ambitions.

2) Purpose: in order to put the “strong” ones to shame (27d)

And “the strong” in this context probably refers to those who are socially and culturally influential and effective in carrying out their ambitions. And likewise, God’s purpose is to humble them by those they consider their inferiors experiencing salvation and true strength before and/or instead of them.

c God chose the nobodies to shame those who think they are somebody (28a-b)

1) And God selected the insignificant ones of the world and those of no account – those not being [anybody] (28a)

Literally, this last phrase is “those not being,” which could refer to things that don’t exist. But in this context, I have taken it to mean those who don’t exist in one of the categories of influence considered important in that culture. This is similar to the modern distinction between those who are considered to be “somebody” and those who are “nobodies.”

2) Purpose: in order to put those being [somebody] to shame (28b)

Literally, this is “those being/existing.” See the note on the previous proposition.

On “put to shame” see the notes on 27b and 27d.

God is purposely making a distinction between His way and humanity’s way in order to demonstrate that He is God and we are not. The things that we think are important are often not the same as the things that God demonstrates to be important. And in those cases, we are wrong and need to conform our standards to His.

B. Purpose: In order that all flesh would not boast before God (29)

In this verse, Paul tells us God’s ultimate purpose in choosing the insignificant over the significant – to completely cut off the possibility of human boasting.

Paul intentionally used the term “flesh” because it is the term that emphasizes both humanity’s sinfulness and our weakness when compared with God. See also 26b.

And the term “all” leaves no room for anyone to boast. Absolutely **no one** can boast before God. If we were chosen because we were rich or famous or smart or talented or nice or well behaved or a preacher’s kid, etc., then we would be tempted to boast. We would be tempted to think that it is somehow more appropriate that we experience salvation rather than those other people. If we were chosen because we made the right decision when confronted with the Gospel, then we would be tempted to boast. We would be tempted to think that we were saved solely because we believed when others did not, and therefore were more deserving of salvation. I like the way that Carson says it, “God is not impressed” and “If God accepted people on such ground, He would compromise Himself.” D. A. Carson, The Cross and Christian Ministry, p. 29. As we see in Ephesians 2:8-9, salvation is “by grace, through faith, and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God, not by works, so that no one can boast.”

God is not glorified when we think highly of ourselves or of one another. But God is glorified when human pride and achievement is humbled before His infinite greatness and worthiness. We are not saved because we are worthy, but because Christ is worthy on our behalf. We have no ground to boast in ourselves concerning our salvation, and that was God’s intention all along.

II. Pos: God's salvation leads to boasting only in Christ (30-31)

A. And because of Him, you are in Christ Jesus (30a)

Again, Paul used the Corinthians' own experience as proof. They were in Christ because of *Him*, or from Him. This obviously implied that it was not from themselves. Christ is the decisive factor of their salvation and continued Christian life and experience, as will be elaborated in the following verses.

B. Christ is the basis of all our salvation and boasting (30b-31)

1. Who became for us wisdom from God – righteousness and holiness & redemption (30b)

It is what He did and Who He is that mattered. He became wisdom for us from God. The wisdom that the Corinthians were so enamored with, that they sought, was not to be found in human speculation or tradition. It is to be found only in Christ, Who is the wisdom from God – the only source of true wisdom. And Paul elaborated on this by describing Christ as righteousness, and holiness, and redemption.

“Righteousness” means the state of judicial correctness. Christ is righteous in that He has perfectly kept all of God's commands. In our case it means the state of not being liable before God's righteous Law because this status has been given to us by Christ having paid the penalty for our lawlessness. We have been given the righteousness of Christ by being included in Him. So, He is righteousness to/for us.

“Holiness” means dedication to God and the corresponding consecration of lifestyle, often called sanctification, where our lives are consistently conformed to God's standards of purity. While we are continually being sanctified by our own actions in cooperation with the Holy Spirit working in our lives, this verse refers to the fact that we are already set apart and considered as completely holy and consecrated to God by being included in Christ. He has always been totally pure and dedicated to God, and His status has been given to us. So, He is holiness to/for us.

“Redemption” refers to a release from a captive condition – a deliverance from what held us captive by a payment of some ransom price, with the result of being free. We have been freed from the sin, guilt, and fear that held us captive by Christ paying the ransom price for our freedom. So, He is redemption to/for us.

And the phrase “to us” or “for us” modifies how all of these things are applied to our lives from God because of Who Christ is, and what He has done on our behalf. By Christ being the source of righteousness, holiness, and redemption, He personifies God's perfect wisdom. All of this (and more) describes how Christ is the Wisdom of God on our behalf. He gives to His people all those things that the Corinthians were seeking in human wisdom, but never could find there. What we so desperately need and desire, what we could never find in any merely human wisdom, power, speculation, or project, we have only in Christ. And we have it freely and abundantly in Christ. And so, we have absolutely no need for anything offered by merely human wisdom and achievement.

2. Purpose: So that we would only boast in the Lord (31)

a So that Just as it is written (31a)

Paul was quoting just a phrase from Jer. 9:23-24, but he was likely intending to imply all that these verses say. They say in full:

“Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom,

Or the strong man boast in his strength,

Or the rich man boast of his riches,

But let him who boasts, boast about this:

That he understands and knows me,

That I am the LORD, who exercises kindness, justice, and righteousness on earth

For in these I delight, declares the LORD” (NIV)

This obviously applied to the Corinthians, who were boasting in their wisdom and strength and riches, but Paul also highlighted that the righteousness in which the Lord delights is part of the very riches of wisdom given to the Corinthian believers in Christ.

b the one boasting, let him boast in the Lord (31b)

The obvious implication is that everyone boasts in something, but we should all boast only in the Lord. The word “boast” means more than just brag in a negative sense (though it can mean that). It means to have confidence and pride in something, to consider something to be exceptional to the point that we delight and glory in it, put our confidence in it, and speak to others as if it is worthy of our delight and confidence. It can be illegitimate, as when we boast in some ability, which we do not have, as if we had it. Or it can be legitimate, as when we tell our spouse (or others) how wonderful they are, or as when we praise God and tell others about Him. We all take delight and boast in many things. But we all also take ultimate delight and glory in only one thing above all others. Paul (quoting Jeremiah, who was quoting God) commands that we should take ultimate delight only in God.

God’s plan all along – in Jeremiah’s day, in Paul’s day, and in our day – is to teach people what is truly important. We often strive after merely human wisdom, but that is not worth boasting in compared to Christ. We strive after merely human strength and power, but that is not worth boasting in compared to Christ. We strive after riches and influence and fame, but all that is nothing compared to Christ – Who is the personification of all wisdom, righteousness, grace, love, power, etc. He is the infinite source of all that is good and great. And He is good to us by the cross because He is great. The crucified Messiah is all the wisdom we will ever need. So, why would we boast in anything else?