

Okay, open your Bible's to 1 Corinthians. And today we continue our study of this super practical book. If you remember, Paul is addressing these Corinthians believers on various ways the gospel should transform them. He is going to identify certain inconsistencies in their life and call them into alignment with the gospel.

And Paul begins with this issue of personality cults. I hear some of you are saying, "I am of Paul. I am of Apollos. I am of Cephas. This is not good. Listen Corinthians, the power is in the message not the messenger." It gave them a certain amount of pride to be associated with a person.

And because their admiration was misplaced their identity was misplaced and division was inevitable.

Now, I think this issue of personality cults and gathering our identity by being associated with particular groups is a BIGGER problem in our day than it was in Paul's day.

As a culture we are constantly programmed to marvel at men. Media has tremendous power in this regard. It slices out the moments of glory from the hum-drum of daily life, puts it together in a highlight reel and enraptures you with what appears to be feats of a demigod.'

Think about the show American idol (the name itself is so shameless. We are looking for someone to worship). The whole show is setup to idolize a human. Someone walks onto stage and we don't know any of the details of their normal life, the family problems, the fighting, the selfish attitudes, nothing. All we see is their 3 minute moment of glory. We do this with athletes, actors, celebrities.

And we take this mentality straight into the church. We have youtube clips that slice out the highlight reel of the best-of preaching moments, celebrate their books and blogs and podcasts, we paper over failures, hand out awards.

And of course it's good and right to appreciate someone who has helped you grow in Christ, but without any conscious effort, we begin to build our identity not upon the person of Jesus Christ, but with who we are associated with. It usually comes out in when we volunteer certain information about ourselves during introductions.

- I went to Church Swindoll's church for 20 years.
- I was saved at a Billy Graham crusade.
- I was personally disciplined by Gordon Fee.
- I graduated from John Piper's Seminary or John MacArthur's Seminary.
- I'm a classicist. I read all of C.S. Lewis' books, the J.R. Tolkien Books, the Dorothy Sayers, philosophies, that kind of stuff.
- I'm a disciple of dead guys, you know the hard core ones, the reformers: Martin Luther, John Calvin, Zwingli.

- I'm a creedal guy. I adhere to the apostles Creed, the Westminster Catechism, the Heidelberg Catechism, the London Baptist Confession.
- I'm a disciple of the apologetics guys: Gregg Kochl, Norm Geisler, William Lane Craig. In fact, I was personally trained by Ravi Zacharius' apologetics institute.
- Or I'm a creation science guy or intelligent design guy. I am of Henry Morris. I am of Ken Ham. Or an intelligent design guy.
- We teach exclusively from Wayne Grudem's Systematic Theology
- Or the secret sauce in the languages. You really need to trust the language guys.
- Man, Tim Keller knows how to plant churches. Wow.
- Or it's in the guys who are on the ground really doing the work of evangelism and reaching the poor.
- It's all about the missions guys.

And so whether you are attach yourself to a person or a party or a philosophy, what almost always happen is you end up feeling superior. My focus is better than your focus. My perspective has more merit than your perspective.

In one sense it's just lingo, they are linguistic shortcuts. But so often it is far more than that. It's name dropping. It raises the question: what do I choose to share about myself and why? When you introduce yourself and your background, are you trying to hold out party cards and align yourself with certain institutions and clubs within Christianity or are we trying to align ourself with the person and work of Jesus Christ!

We love labels because we acquire identity through them. Are you dispensational, cessationist, charismatic, reformed, armininean, covenantal, calvinist, complimentarian, eggalitarian, liberal, evangelical?

Often times just by saying, "I am of Calvin or I am of Grudem or I am of whatever..." will create division. These labels often, instead of being used to describe something, are used to make us feel like we are superior to someone else.

So this is a problem in our day, just as much as it was a problem in Paul's.

## **Paul's Method of Dealing with Camps and Love of Personalities**

Now here's how Paul is going to address this problem. We looked at the beginning of his argument last week. Last week we talked about how when we hold up our heroes and say, "Look, our guy is just as good looking as your guy. Our guy is just as smart." When we do that we empty the cross of it's power. Why?

Now in one sense, the cross, objectively speaking, has POWER regardless of what we do. It has objective power to save people that are doomed. The power of the cross is similar to the power of a surgeon to heal someone with an appendix that has exploded. The surgeon can fix that - easily. But without his intervention, the patient is done. The poisons released from that will almost certainly kill him. So in one sense, the surgeon has objective power.

But in another sense, the patient can strip away the power. How could he strip the doctor of his power? He can render all the doctor's aid useless by simply refusing to acknowledge he needs any help. I'm not sick. I'm just a bit disheveled today. I just need to take a shower, comb my hair and I'm good to go (and I don't need you for that).

Paul is trying to say, "If you hold up a man and say, 'I am of Paul because he is a super effective church planter, I am of Apollos because he is a dazzling speaker' you've emptied the cross of its power. Why? Because you've refused to admit you're sick. You think all you need is to become like Paul or align yourself with Apollos. You've confused people as to the destination. You make it sound like the goal is to become like Paul or Apollos. You don't need God for that. That's attainable by human means. Being like Paul or Apollos is not the goal. It's never the goal to be like any man.

We have to constantly remind ourselves that the goal, the destination of the Christian faith is impossible. We can't do it. Nobody is even close.

- Sometimes we see the Christian life as a bit of moral reform. Just clean up a few areas and we are good. Listen, we don't need to modify our thoughts and behavior. We need to die completely, and that's not a metaphor (that's the point of death by the way). Our sickness is so profound we need to die and then we need to be resurrected by the blood of Jesus Christ and be remade.
- How much power do you have to remake yourself once you've physically died. Zero. You need Jesus Christ to take over.
- We don't need to a change of heart. We need to die and have the heart of stone be replaced with a heart of flesh.

What we are trying to do is impossible. We aren't trying to become like some famous preacher. We are not trying to spiritually clean up. We are trying to become like Jesus which is absolutely impossible. We need the shed blood of Jesus Christ to atone for our sins, remake us and raise us up again at the resurrection to new life.

So Paul addresses this issue of personality cults by reminding people that human power can't save us. Now today, he's going to

build on that argument and we can summarize it in a sentence. I'll reveal half the sentence now and half later.

"God likes weak people..."

1. God likes weak people

Let's look at the passage itself:

1 Corinthians 1:26-29, 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.

So Paul begins by saying, "Not many of you had the ingredients needed to be noticed and admired by worldly standards." Now it's important to note that there were undoubtedly some who were wise and noble. It just says, not many of you were that way.

Now by way of contrast, if you look at world changing organizations, you would probably say exactly the opposite. Look at the people who participate in the United Nations Summit conferences. Consider their calling, many of them are wise according to worldly standards, many of them are powerful, many of them are of noble birth. It's obvious why they are in positions of great influence.

But here we have the opposite. Maybe there are few who are in the right places of influence. Paul himself would have been one of these. He was well-educated, had the right pedigree, knew the right people, was born in the right family (Roman). But not many were this way. Most were normal. Just briefly let's look at the three areas of distinguishment that Paul identifies:

## 1. Wisdom.

Most just had average intellects. Most had average educations. They were easily distracted by Facebook. They compare themselves to true intellectuals and they just get blown over in discouragement. I can't write a book. I can't even read this guys book. They couldn't keep up with Paul. They were like Peter who said, "Man this guy is hard to understand." He's just normal. Not eloquent.

## 2. Powerful

Not many were in positions of power. Humans can be powerful in different ways.

- Some have powerful personalities. They say things boldly and matter-of-factly and tend to bowl over more tender personalities.
- Others have power because of their beauty. They can control people and manipulate others because of the fact that they are attractive.
- Others have power because of their money. They can buy their way out of everything.
- Others have power because of their office. They are in a position where they control the strings. Their decisions actually influence people.

There can by definition only be a few powerful people. There can't be many powerful people because that would just reset everything back to average. There only a few of these treasured positions and not many in the Corinthian church held these positions.

## 3. Noble Birth

So not many were wise, not many were powerful and not many were



of noble birth. This was a big deal in Paul's day. If you were not born into the courts your chance of having a political career at the highest levels could be quickly calculated: 0%. You had no power to change it. It's the same thing as saying, "What chance do you have of becoming king in Saudi Arabia?" Zero. It's over the second you were born because you came out the wrong shoot.

Nobility gives you access to privilege. This phenomena very much exists in our society; it's just rearranged a bit. Your parents function as an umbilical chord that connects you to a certain vocabulary, a certain set of values, a certain education, a certain amount of money, a social group, a certain set of connections, a certain set of disciplines, that all feeds you and positions you in the world and you will either achieve those few and prized positions of power or get swallowed up into the masses. It's survival of the fittest and some are just not born into families that will enable them to be fit. Even if they have all the potential in the world, they will just end up in the gutter because they got shackled instead of nurtured.

Maybe you feel that. I could have been this. I could have done this. I have regrets because. If I could have started over life again and my parents had realized this talent in me early on and got me started down this path and connected me with the right people I could have really gone somewhere. But now, I'm just normal. I'm just average.

Paul is saying, listen my friend, that is a good thing. God likes weak people. Not only is it okay that you are that way, but God hand selected you because you were that way. Look at verse 27, he uses the word **CHOSE**, he chose you **BECAUSE** you were not wise or powerful or of noble birth. You were hand-selected because of your average weakness. You were chosen because you were born into a family that gave you no privilege. Picture a conveyor belt of

humanity. And zipping along on the conveyor belt is the masses of humanity. Millions of people are going by and God is looking for something very particular. He wants to build his church, but he needs certain key ingredients.

- Okay, there goes the American Idol winner, nope don't want her, too famous.
- There goes Tom Bradey, no he's too athletic.
- There goes the founder of Amazon, that Beezoes guy, nope, too rich.

Ah, there's a guy that lives in Boise, ID, just a normal guy, lives in a normal subdivision, middle class, just kind of average. Drives a normal car, has a normal job. Just what I'm looking for.

Okay, powerful politician - no thank you, famous actor - naw, talented artist - pass on that one.

Oh, look that guys is especially good. He's actually despised by the world. Oh check this out. Exactly what I was looking for.

- He's born the wrong race. He's a minority. That's great.
- He's a refugee! Perfect.
- Here's one that's got a birth defect. Just what I need.
- Here's one that's been born into a family that's totally dysfunctional. All these problems. She's been abused. He's been emotionally ground into powder by his father.
- Oh check this out. Here's one that was raised in the worst schools, didn't finish his degree and still struggles to read at the age of 35. That is exactly what I need.

Do you see that God is hand selecting weak people. Some are wise. Some are powerful. But most are normal. Many are weak and despised. Now Paul is going to explain why God did that.

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; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

"God likes weak people..."

"God likes weak people because they can only boast in the Lord."

Why did God do this? Because he wants to silence the mouths of men. He wants to remove their imagined reasons as to why they are fit for entrance into the kingdom of God.

God's goal in choosing the weak is that through the weak, he might remove the illusion, to allow them to experience their true inability and then to have them cast themselves upon his grace. He is so anxious to be gracious but we have to be weak to receive it. We have to come to the end of ourselves. We can't be proud. We can't be swollen in our own eyes.

Paul is quoting Jeremiah 9 which is a passage on judgment. Jeremiah is speaking to the nation of Israel in all their pride. Here you guys are all wise in your own eyes, powerful in your own eyes, but all I have to do is move a finger and all your assurances will be stripped away and there will be only one thing that matters.

Jeremiah 9:23-24, Thus says the LORD: "Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the LORD." (ESV)

What matters is that you know and understand the Lord. But both Paul's point and Jeremiah's point is that you can never know and understand him from that position of arrogance and boasting.

People that see themselves as powerful and wise will never experience the power of the cross. Never. It's actually impossible. The man who refuses to darken the door of the hospital will never be treated by the surgeon. It's voluntary. Jesus said, "It's not the healthy that need a physician, but the sick." He said this to the Pharisees not because they were healthy. They were sicker than anyone else. But they didn't see themselves as sick. They refused to admit it!

Jesus loved the weak, not because he wanted to see people suffer, but because he could help them. Any testimony of salvation you ever listen to will always be some version of this. I came to the end of myself. I realized I couldn't do it and then Jesus broke in and saved me. The testimony is I realized I was weak and needed a physician. And then the rest of the testimony is boasting in the

physician.

This is why Jesus warned of riches, again, not because riches are bad. Riches help us so much in life. They eliminate many of our physical problems. But they are so dangerous because they deceive into thinking we are powerful. Paul says to Timothy, "As for the rich, charge them not to be proud."

- Charge them not to think of themselves as better, more powerful.
- Charge them not to imagine that they have some worthiness over the beggar.
- Charge them not to think that they are somehow above the need for God.

That's the path of death because it isolates you from the physician.

The best thing for us, the absolute best thing for us is to stare at our weakness and let the horror of it reduce us. But it's so hard to do. We want to provide reasons why we are strong and powerful by the world's standards.

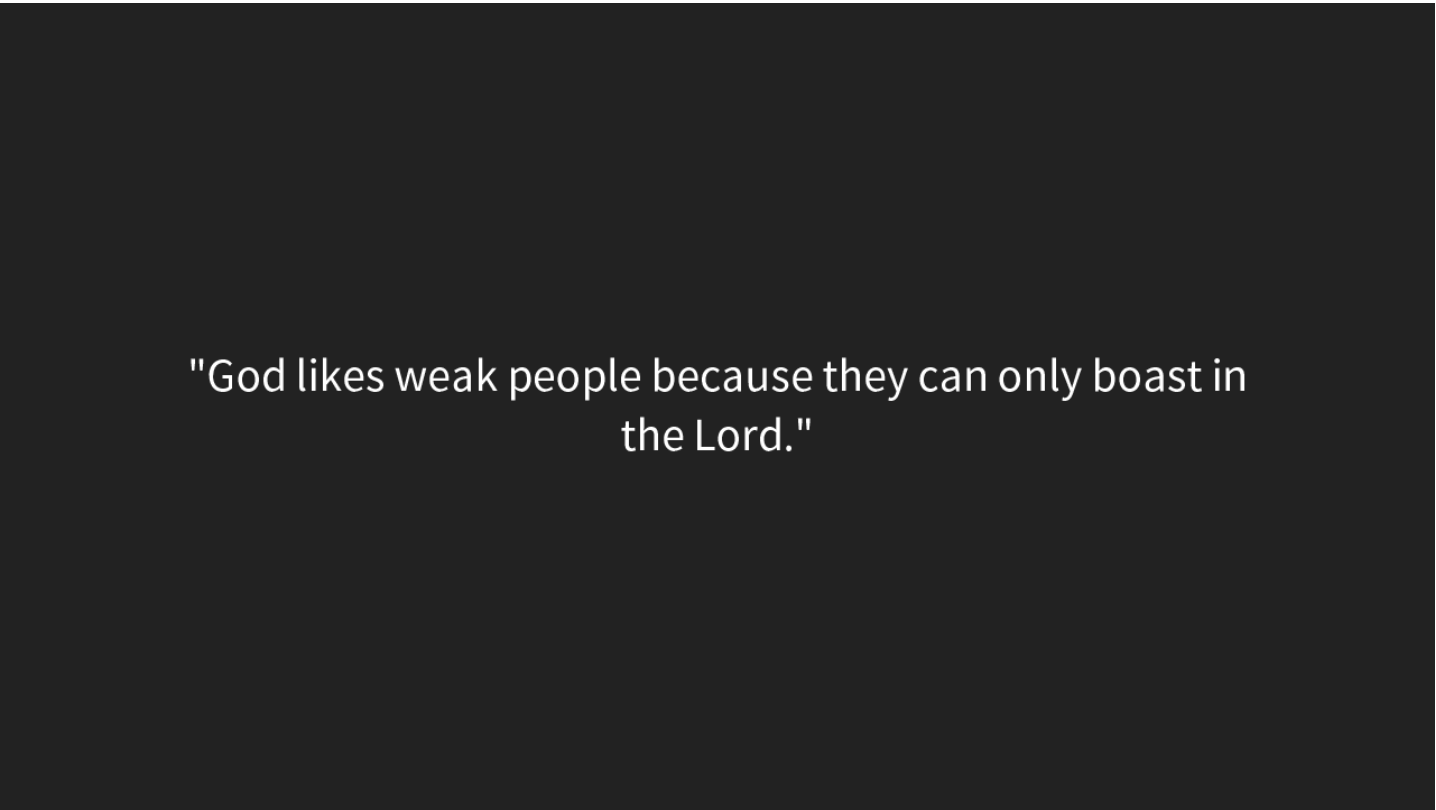
- Here is what separates me from the trash of the world and makes me worthy.
- Here's why I differ from that guy over there, that corrupt politician
- Or that guy whose swallowed up by substance abuse
- or that flithy rich corrupt businessman.

We are black holes just sucking and sucking for some reason to have value and worth. Why am I valuable? We are starving for metrics we can use to define ourself? But again, that's the path of death.

God is in the business of stripping us down, reducing us, exposing

our sin, exposing our inability to change who we really are so that all we can do is accept something that is absolutely free:

I can assure you that the most offensive about the gospel is that it is free. Because that free gift says something about you, doesn't it. It says you are weak. It says you are powerless to save yourself. You are signing on the bottom line that I give up because I can't do it and I am weak and unable to change myself. And this is such a good thing.



"God likes weak people because they can only boast in the Lord."

When we finally get to that point, we can finally begin the path to joy! Finally! I will never again try to find my identity in what I accomplish? Isn't that a relief? I was trying my whole life to explain why I was better than the next guy, how I was distinguished among others. And I could never do it. Look how much I accomplished without any education. I was self-taught. Look at how much better I am than my parents. And all this neck raising and boasting and when we finally come face to face with our ugliness, with our sin, with our pride and say, I can no more change my heart than a leper can change his

skin. God save me.

It's at that moment that we can begin our boast. And the boast is in God! God you saved me! You gave me righteousness! I couldn't earn it. It was totally free! There will not be a single person in heaven that can boast and say, "You know this is the reason I am here because I did this great thing or I have this intrinsic quality and this other person, well obviously they don't have it.

No, it's the opposite. My story, I am quite sure, is similar to many of yours is a story of failure and weakness. The longer you live as a Christian the more and more disenchanted you get with yourself. You see how ugly your motives are and how truly incapable you are of changing yourself. You see that the only good in you is the good God puts there. The more you try, the more weakness is revealed.

Most of my life is recording my repeated attempts and subsequent failures to achieve a righteousness of my own. And the failures are not pretty. But what do those failures do. They strip me of my grounds for boasting. I can't say, "This is the reason God loves me. This is the reason I have value above my peers."

In fact, I think this is one of the best explanations of why God continues, year after year, century after century to allow the church to be filled with such messed up people. You look back over church history and you just blush in shame. Why God, would you let your church be filled with such pathetic people.

- You look back at the crusades and you shake your head? What were they thinking?
- You have these serious blemishes on big names in the church. John Calvin approved of someone being burned at the stake? Are you kidding me? That's like the most horrible thing I can think of.



- You look back at early American history and many in the church were fighting for slavery and they were using their Bibles to defend it.
- In this building we have adulterers, cheaters, liars, people addicted to pornography, people who have substance abuse problems, people who are terrible fathers, terrible mothers, terrible husbands and wives, all of us our hypocrites, all of us claim to have Jesus as the most important thing in our lives and yet barely talk about him outside of church, all of are entertained by things we shouldn't be. All of us feel entitled, over-inflate our own worth, love the praises of men, are idol worshippers.

Why does God allow this to go on? Why? verse 29, "So that no human being might boast in the presence of God."

God is in the business of bringing men to nothing? Why? So that no human being might boast in the presence of God.

## **Communion Preparation**

Looking at your sin can be very discouraging. Coming face to face with it can disappoint. But in light of the gospel, I want you to be thankful that God allows you to see your sin. Looking honestly at yourself, means you realize you are weak. And God is near to the weak and brokenhearted (Psalm 34, 109, 147, Is 61).

Consider for a moment this quote from a 15th century preacher,

"May a merciful God preserve me from a Christian church in which everyone is a saint! I want to be a remain in the little flock and that church where there are the fainthearted, the feeble, and the ailing, who feel and recognize the wretchedness of their sins, who sigh and cry to God incessantly for comfort and help, who believe in the forgiveness of sin...Satan is a cunning rouse... "Greater effort is

necessary," they say. "We must lead a hard life, bear the cross, and endure persecution." By such a semblance of self-styled holiness which runs counter to the word of God, many a person is misled. But Christ is our righteousness and our holiness. In him, not in ourselves, we have perfection. I find comfort in and cling to the words of St. Paul in 1 Corinthians 1 that Christ became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption.

When we come to communion we often have a period of reflection. And we do that because it's commanded in 1 Corinthians and we will explain that more fully when we get there. What God is asking us to do is not, "Make sure your life is cleaned up before you come to communion."

My heart resonates with that 15th century preacher. "May a merciful God preserve me from a church where everyone is perfect."

We come here today to be forgiven for sins committed within the last 40 hours, last 40 minutes, last 40 seconds. We can hold up no account of why we should be found worthy. So the issue is not are you worthy, but are you willing to receive Christ's worthiness?

He's asking, "Are you willing to humble yourself and be forgiven and again admit your need? Are you willing to say, 'I am weak.'" I need forgiveness. I have no worth other than the worth that you give me. Lord, save me!

This is what communion is all about.