

CONSIDER YOUR CALLING

1 Corinthians 1:26-31

September 4, 2005 (AM) – Grace Covenant Baptist Church

We are a forgetful people. The very purpose for the Lord's Supper that we will partake of together in a few moments demonstrates the truth that we are forgetful as we are called to remember that which Christ has accomplished on behalf of His people, the Church. A very real demonstration of the sin nature of the believer is that we often forget or neglect those people or things that should be of highest importance to us. In His wisdom Christ thus instituted the Supper so that, along with the proclamation of His body and His blood, we would have our senses inflamed afresh for the passion of the gospel that saved us as individuals and brought us together in one Body with Christ as the Head.

In our text this morning, we see this forgetfulness of the gospel had shown itself in the church at Corinth. Paul has already demonstrated this in a practical way by revealing the quarreling and division that had come about because these at Corinth had neglected to keep everything focused on Christ and His gospel. This was the heart of the problem that Paul to address in this letter. He continually points them in the direction of the gospel to make things right. In the context of the baptism issue and the dissension it created, Paul reminded them that Christ did not send him to baptize, but to preach the gospel (1:10-17). Then, as we saw last week, he showed them that this gospel of Christ alone through faith alone by the power and wisdom of God alone would be deemed foolish by the unbeliever who had no interest in what he considered to be at best the speculative thoughts of those who had believed (1:18-25). So to this point, Paul's focus centered more on those who rejected the gospel. In our text this morning, he changes gears to those who had trusted the saving message of "Christ crucified" and I believe that, while he is addressing this group as a whole, he has the leaders of these little groups ('Paul' group, 'Apollos' group, 'Cephas' group, and 'Jesus' group) in his sights. Paul encourages these believers, these "**brethren,**" to "**consider** (literally, 'see') **their calling.**" This is important because Paul is reminding these at Corinth, and again, I believe particularly the leadership, that they were chosen by God for a reason, and that reason was *that He might be glorified and that they might magnify His glory.*

I. A Reminder of Their Calling (1:26-29)

Paul's call for them to "**consider their calling**" began with a reminder, as my mother used to remind me (though in a somewhat different context), to remember from whence you came. They needed to remember their status in life when Christ called them unto Himself, when they first received the gospel by faith.

1. Negatively (v. 26)

One of Paul's oft used literary devices in presenting an argument of contrast is to present the argument in the negative (for you less inclined English students like me, the "not") to reinforce the positive side of his argument. That is what Paul does here. In verse 26 Paul gives the negative side of his argument. He begins by reminding them that there were "**not many wise according to the flesh,**" that is, while he was with them in proclaiming the gospel and planting the church there were not many, by worldly standards, who passed muster intellectually or philosophically. Here again we see the Paul gently rebuking the Corinthians' for their inclination to elevate wisdom to an undue place of eternal significance.

In his sermon on this text entitled “God’s Strange Choice,” Spurgeon said,

“The *sophoi*, as the Greek calls them, the philosophers, the men who pretend to wisdom or to love wisdom, the cunning, the metaphysical, the great students, the keen observers, the rabbis, the doctors, the infallibles, the men who look down with profound scorn upon the illiterate and call them idiots, treat them as if they were dust beneath their feet; these are not chosen in any great number. Strange, is it not? and yet a good reason is given. If they were chosen, they would say, ‘Ah! how much the gospel owes to us! How our wisdom helps it!’ If the first twelve apostles had all been twelve doctors or sages, everybody would have said, ‘Why, of course the gospel was mighty; there were the twelve picked wise men of Judea, or of Greece, to support it.’ But instead of that God looks round the creeks and bays after twelve poor fishermen, who are as ignorant as any he can find, he takes them and they become apostles, they spread the gospel, and the gospel has the glory and not the apostles. The wise are passed by in the wisdom of God.” [Spurgeon, *MTP*, vol. 10, 491]

Paul further reminded them that there were “**not many mighty.**” While Paul mentions some men of prominence in the church (Sosthenes, 1:1; Crispus and Gaius, 1:14; Stephanas, 1:16; 16:17) there were not many men of any influence. Most were either slaves or freedmen.

Paul continued by reminding them that there were “**not many noble.**” There were not many of noble birth, not many from a pristine bloodline. These enjoy upper class social status by virtue of their birth. Paul said, “There is no royalty here.” Quite frankly, when Paul looked at the congregation, he saw a bunch of nobodies when judged by the world’s standards, “**according to the flesh.**”

Celsus (2nd cent. heretic) – Their (Christians) injunctions are like this. “Let no one educated, no one wise, no one sensible draw near. For these abilities are thought by us to be evils. But as for anyone ignorant, anyone stupid, anyone uneducated, anyone who is a child, let him come boldly.” By the fact that they themselves admit that these people are worthy of their God, they show that they want and are able to convince only the foolish, dishonourable and stupid, and only slaves, women, and children. [Origen, *Against Celsus*, 3.44]

Celsus’ sarcasm was fatalistic. Paul did not say that there were not *any* wise or not *any* mighty or not *any* noble. In the days of George Whitfield, the Countess of Huntingdon, herself a wealthy woman of nobility, used to say that she was saved by an *m*: there were “not many noble,” not “not any noble” [D. A. Carson, *The Cross and Christian Ministry*, 28]. The cross of Christ excludes no caste. Regardless of one’s standing in society, one’s status in this world, Christ died to save sinners from all walks of life. However, we are reminded in Scripture that wisdom and power and nobility are all sources of pride that are often a stumbling block to the gospel. You remember Jesus teaching in Matthew 19:23-24, immediately following His encounter with the rich young ruler. “*And Jesus said to His disciples, ‘Truly I say to you, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.’ Again I say to you, ‘It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.’*” The rich young ruler describes every negative characteristic that Paul shares in our text. He was undoubtedly a person of wisdom, influence and nobility according to the world’s wisdom, and yet Jesus warning is clear – It is hard, difficult for a person such as this to be saved. Did He say

impossible? No. There were a few of this pedigree at Corinth, but “**not many.**” The rich young ruler is a biblical example of the pitfall of pride that comes from wisdom, influence and nobility.

2. Positively (vv. 27-28)

In verses 27-28 Paul simply restates positively what he had just stated negatively. Whereas not many *wise* are called, God “**has chosen the foolish things of the world.**” Whereas not many *mighty* are called, God “**has chosen the weak things of the world.**” Whereas not many *noble* are called, God “**has chosen the base things of the world and the despised**” and “**the things that are not.**” In Greek thought this was the lowest of the lowest. This would not be the bottom of the barrel but under the barrel. These were looked upon by the elite as non-beings. Here again Paul reminds them not to be too quick to judge those around them. Again, they were to remember their station in life from which they were called. Simply put, they were sinners in need of a Savior!

2 Corinthians 6:9-11 – Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God. *Such were some of you*; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.

All of this Paul proclaims is within the sovereign mind of God. God chooses to use the things that the world in its wisdom deems foolish and weak to shame the wise and the strong. God chooses the lowest of the lowly to nullify, *render ineffective*, the things that are, according to the world. God’s ways are not our ways!

When we take the negative statement of Paul and the positive together, we see simply this: The Lord uses the humble! God desires humility. We see here Paul demonstrating the truth that the great will be brought low and the low shall be lifted up; the first shall be last, the last shall be first. The key to all of this is that when they were called, they had no basis from which to assert superiority over one another (1:12). Some had forgotten that these virtues of worldliness had nothing to do with salvation and therefore were a hindrance to the work of the gospel. As Charles Hodge wrote, “The things which elevate man in the world, knowledge, influence, rank, are not things which lead to God and salvation... Human distinctions are insignificant and inefficacious in the sight of God, who is sovereign in the distribution of grace” [Hodge, *1&2 Corinthians*, 25].

II. The Result of Their Calling (1:30)

We have been bombarded this week with reports and images of the devastation and havoc wreaked by Hurricane Kristina. Perhaps one of the most humbling lessons we take from a situation such as this is that disaster, particularly disaster on this scale, is no respecter of persons. We have heard stories of wealthy and poor, men of influence and men of no reputation, who are all in the same boat. This disaster has brought down the wall of division that existed socially between classes. That is exactly what the Cross does for those who know Christ savingly. It levels the playing field. It brings down the worldly divisions that exist as one stares at the reality of his sinfulness and need for salvation. Paul wrote, “**By His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God.**” As we have seen over the past couple of weeks, God’s wisdom is embodied in the person and work of Jesus Christ. In Colossians 2:2-3 Paul wrote, “a

true knowledge of God's mystery is Christ Himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." Again, while the world looks at this mystery, these hidden treasures as foolish, it is in Christ alone that God has displayed His wisdom as it relates to salvation. And it is to this wisdom, this Christ, that Paul again returns in his rebuke of these at Corinth. The result of their calling was their union with Christ.

Wisdom has its origin in God, who causes it to dwell in Christ Jesus. In turn, through Christ Jesus we have become recipients of this wisdom. Through our union with Christ, we possess spiritual wisdom to know God and to appropriate his work for our salvation... Paul writes that Christ is wisdom *for us*. [Simon Kistemaker, *NTC: 1 Corinthians*, 65]

Paul mentions three blessings of those who have this union with Christ.

1. Righteousness

"Righteousness" simply means to be right with God. It refers to the legal *standing* of the one who is in union with Christ. Through the meritorious work of Christ on their behalf and their faith in His finished work, the believer is declared right with God, not guilty in God's divine courtroom. God's wrath is satisfied and His justice is upheld through Christ's atoning work on the cross for all who believe. We read later in 2 Corinthians 5:21, "He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God." This is what happened at the cross. A divine transaction took place on the behalf of the believer. Our sins were put on Christ, and His righteousness was put on us. The reason God can look at the believer just as though he never sinned is because He sees him clothed in the righteousness of Christ.

There is a beautiful picture of this in the Old Testament immediately following the sin of our first parents, Adam and Eve. You remember that when they knew their sin and their guilt, they were ashamed and covered themselves with fig leaves. This was their attempt to cover things up and make themselves right with God. But God, by His grace, made garments of skin for Adam and Eve and clothed them. God was here demonstrating that righteousness could not be attained by man's works, but could only be attained through a substitutionary sacrifice. It is a picture of the righteousness that comes through the once for all sacrifice of Jesus Christ at the cross.

2. Sanctification

Whereas **"righteousness"** refers to one's *standing* before God when coming to faith in Christ, *declared* not guilty, **"sanctification"** is the process of being *made* right with God. From a legal standpoint, God looks at the believer just as though he never sinned. However, from a practical standpoint, because of our sin nature, we continue to sin in this life. As we grow in grace the frequency of sin decreases. **"Sanctification"** is the believer's progress in holiness. We are set apart for His holy purpose, and He grows us and shapes us and conforms us so that we sin less and are more devoted to Him. The *2000 Baptist Faith and Message* states:

Sanctification is the experience, beginning in regeneration, by which the believer is set apart to God's purposes, and is enabled to progress toward moral and spiritual maturity through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit dwelling in him. Growth in grace should continue throughout the regenerate person's life.

Before moving on, let me state that sanctification is not an option to take or leave in the life of a believer. If you are a child of God, you will grow in grace, you will be sanctified. The

believer more and more hates sin like God hates sin and seeks to live and walk in holiness to Christ according to His Word.

3. Redemption

“Redemption” means to be bought back. In theological terms, “redemption” refers to the believer’s freedom from sin, corruption and death. It is this “redemption” that we celebrate together at the Lord’s Table for Scripture states, “Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness” (Heb. 9:22). Paul wrote to the Ephesians, “In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace which He lavished on us” (Eph. 1:7-8). While this “redemption” was fully procured by Christ at the cross, we know that sin, corruption, and death continue and will not be finally eradicated until the Lord’s return. This appears to be what Paul has in mind here, our future redemption when Christ returns.

Calvin – “Redemption is the first gift of Christ that is begun in us, and the last that is completed. For the commencement of salvation consists in our being drawn out of the labyrinth of sin and death; yet in the meantime, until the final day of the resurrection, we groan with desire for redemption, (as we read in Rom. viii. 23).” [Calvin’s Commentaries, vol. xx, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 94]

III. The Reason for Their Calling (vv. 29 & 31)

That *He might demonstrate* and *they might magnify* His glory!

Isaiah 42:8 – I am the LORD; that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to carved idols.

Isaiah 48:11 – For my own sake, for my own sake, I do it, for how should my name be profaned? My glory I will not give to another.

Jeremiah 9:23-24 – Thus says the LORD, “Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the LORD who exercises lovingkindness, justice and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things,” declares the LORD.

Ephesians 2:8-9 – For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.

“But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus.” God is absolutely sovereign in salvation.