

# **How Fools Can Shame the Wise.**

An exegetical analysis of 1 Corinthians 1:26-31

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It is the deep longing of every true believer to be used by their Lord to accomplish His tasks. Yet, if most people are honest with themselves, it seems impossible that they could possibly ever bring anything to the table of the sovereign God of all creation. The task of this paper is to prove that it is generally speaking God's prerogative to work in and through the weak and ashamed people of this world to do his work, the primary reason is so that He alone will be glorified. The argument will be made using a passage of scripture from the first chapter of the first letter to the Corinthian Church.

Between his second and third missionary journeys the apostle Paul found himself in the city of Corinth. He stayed in that prosperous town for a total of eighteen months during which he planted what would become a successful, yet somewhat problematic church. They would go on to be the recipients of at least two letters from the apostle Paul, which are now found in the Christian Bible. In just a few years after his leaving multiple factions had grown in the church, as well as multiple erroneous views of important Biblical ideas. So, Paul wrote the first letter to the Corinthians to address some of these things. Peter Naylor provides a helpful reminder that “Although 1 Corinthians was originally written with the needs of the Corinthian congregation in mind, Paul aimed his words at “All who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ”<sup>1</sup>, meaning this letter and the truths it holds are for all who believe.

Though paper this paper focuses on the end of the first chapter of this book, it is important to note that this section is found in the context of the beginning of the chapter, in which Paul begins by addressing the Corinthians in verses one to three. Then giving thanks for their inclusion into the church of Jesus Christ in verses four through nine. He wastes no time in

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Naylor, *1 Corinthians: A Study Commentary*, (Webster New York, Evangelical Press, 2004), pp 13

addressing the main reason for his writing the letter with a scolding condemnation of their factionalization of the church in verses ten through seventeen. This scolding was because apparently many in the church had begun to see themselves more as followers of particular leaders than of Christ. On the heels of this scolding, he transitions to something different, but connected. In verses eighteen through twenty-five he turns his eyes to the Christ that he wants to unite the church by looking towards. Here Paul begins to introduce the idea that this paper is focusing on. In verse eighteen he explains that the cross is foolishness to the world, and yet is everything to those who are being saved.

Now in verse twenty-six we pick up the text of this paper. Paul writes:

“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.”<sup>2</sup>

Paul here introduces the idea that the almighty God who created the entire universe has called a certain group of people out of the world. The question as to whether God sovereignly called some and not others is the subject for another paper, here what is being examined is why he chose the ones that he did. Here Paul points out that God chose those who were not wise, powerful, or noble to make up his Corinthian church. Charles Hodges acknowledges this when he says, “The converts to Christianity were not in general from the higher ranks in society. The things which elevate man in the world, knowledge, influence, rank, are not the things which lead to God and salvation.”<sup>3</sup> Picture God creating a dodge ball team in gym class. One would assume that he would pick all the most athletic people to make up a team to dominate. Yet with his first,

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<sup>2</sup> The Holy Bible: English Standard Version (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016) 1 Corinthians 1:26

<sup>3</sup> Charles Hodge. *An exposition of the First epistle to the Corinthians*. (Grand Rapids Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974.) Pp 24-25

second and third round picks we see Him passing up the jocks and the athletes. Instead, he chooses those who are clearly in no way athletically gifted. In God's sovereign decree He calls the misfits. Of course, God will win the game, it's part of His almighty power, but He could win with any team. So why intentionally choose the weak and go as far as to point out that they are weak.

Maybe this is a subtle way of Paul checking the Corinthians pride to remind them that they are not inherently all that special. Or is Paul here hinting at a larger cosmic truth that God delights to use the weak, foolish, and common in His plans of salvation? A sure way to check that supposition is to turn to the rest of the pages of Scripture. Who did God use to accomplish His plans in the days gone by? If one looks to the earliest chapters of the Holy Scripture, we see God in Genesis chapter three accepting the sacrifice of the younger brother, while rejecting that of the elders. Then Genesis chapter twenty-five recounts the birth of Esau and Jacob, an event which Romans gives us provides a commentary for when it says in chapter nine verses ten and eleven that:

“When Rebekah had conceived children by one man, our forefather Isaac, though they were not yet born and had done nothing either good or bad—in order that God’s purpose of election might continue, not because of works but because of him who call she was told, “The older will serve the younger.” As it is written, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.”<sup>4</sup>

Here is one primary proof texts of the reformation doctrine of election. Hendriksen comments on election saying that, “In the final analysis the reason why some people accept, and others are rejected is that God so willed it. The divine, sovereign will be the source of both election and reprobation. Human responsibility is not cancelled but there is no such thing as

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<sup>4</sup> The Holy Bible: ESV. Romans 9:10-13

human merit. Gods eternal purpose is not ultimately based on human works.”<sup>5</sup> Yet God could have chosen the older more inherently powerful brother. In the early Hebrew culture, the inheritance, and therefore the family power and glory would go to the older brother. Yet it so pleased God to choose the younger to bear His covenant promise. Jacob illustrates this truth further in chapter forty-eight of Genesis when Joseph brings his two eldest sons to his father to receive a blessing from their grandpa. Joseph strategically places his older son Manasseh by the right hand of his father and his younger brother Ephraim by the left hand. It would have been assumed by everyone in this time period that the elder would receive the family blessing. Then Jacob prophetically, crosses his arms and shockingly gives the greater blessing to that of the younger son Ephraim, not his elder brother. Outside of the book of Genesis in First Samuel we see the prophet going to Jesse to look for the Lords anointed, after having all the sons of Jesse examined the man of God is not found until the youngest son is called from the field. In his commentary on the book, author Dale Davis adds “Hence we have another of Yahweh’s who-would-have-thought episodes. There was no need, so Jesse imagined, to invite the youngest; he could stay with the sheep. In fact, the youngest son is so obscure that we aren’t told his name until verse 13. Yet Yahweh insisted, this is the one.”<sup>6</sup> Then in Exodus chapter four God calls Moses to lead His people out of the land of Egypt and Moses tries to get out of it by pointing out that he has a speech impediment, while his brother is a fluent and eloquent speaker. Hamilton adds “God never healed Moses of his speech impediment, but what God did do was display his glory through a physically flawed instrument. Moses’ imperfections become the means through

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<sup>5</sup> William, Hendriksen. *Exposition of Paul’s epistle to the Romans*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1980.) Pp 320.

<sup>6</sup> Dale Davis, *1 Samuel: Looking on the Heart*. (Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 2008), Pp 172-173

which God's way and purpose will advance and come to completion."<sup>7</sup> God still chooses the weaker, less gifted brother to be his mouthpiece to pharaoh. Rather than go on and belabor the point it stands to reason that, not only in verse twenty-six of First Corinthians but the whole Old Testament He delighted to use the younger, weaker, and less gifted to accomplish his tasks.

In verses twenty-seven and eight Paul adds:

“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”<sup>8</sup>

Paul builds on his idea by moving on to more specifically what that calling looks like.

Using language here like using the foolish to shame the wise, and the weak to shame the strong.

Hinting at a by of the ‘Why’ answer John Calvin adds, “By choosing the poor, and the foolish, and the ignoble, he means, that God has preferred them before the great, and the wise, and the noble. For it would not have sufficed, for beating down the arrogance of the flesh, if God had placed them all upon a level.”<sup>9</sup> There are great examples of this all throughout the scriptures including that of the previously mentioned Moses. Here by the words of a nobody with a stumbling tongue, God led his people out from under the almost all-powerful reign of pharaoh. Thereby shaming the most powerful kingdom of the day and making a name for Himself that stretched throughout the known world. In the Gospel of John chapter seven we see Jesus confounding the rulers and Pharisees yet, showing the light and truth of His gospel to the regular people of the world. After Jesus's death, who does He choose to use mightily to establish His church? Was it men who valiantly stood by His side to the point of His death? No. It was men

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<sup>7</sup> Victor Hamilton *Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary*. (Grand Rapids Michigan: Baker Academic, 2011), Pp 74

<sup>8</sup> The Holy Bible: ESV. 1 Corinthians 1:27–28.

<sup>9</sup> John Calvin. *Calvin's commentaries 22 volume set*. (Grand Rapids Michigan: Baker Books, 1996.) Pp 90

like the apostle Peter whose triune denial of Jesus climaxed in Matthew twenty-six verse seventy-four when he curses the name of Jesus to a little girl because he is scared to death of persecution. On this scared little man, Jesus would begin to build his church.

Granting that God does have the ability to choose anyone whom he pleases to do his will, why then does he not just pick better options? Why choose to use such weak and flawed men and women? Paul assumes this question and answers it in verses twenty-nine. Paul writes: “So that no human being might boast in the presence of God.”<sup>10</sup> The truth of the matter is that God chooses to work through peoples that are in themselves nothing, to prove that he is the one that has done everything! God is and has always been jealous to be the only one that receives glory. This jealousy is most notably found inside the second commandment. Lest we confuse this jealousy with the sinful human emotion Ronald Clements clarifies, “The title does not imply unworthy feelings of envy or suspicion in God but his determination to uphold his honor in the face of evil, and falsehood, and his refusal to allow himself to be displaced by any rival.”<sup>11</sup> The fact of the matter is that our God is just, and it is only just on the eternal scorecards that the creator himself is the one who would receive any glory that ever is, anyone else would be unjust. It is not the workers in the field that glory in a good harvest, but the owner of the field himself. So, our Lord in His manifest wisdom, and to show His great power, works in and through the least of these. This is a lesson that the Corinthians were still very much learning. Kistemaker comments, “In an exemplary manor, Paul teaches the people not to glory in their achievements but to praise the Lord in everything they are doing: even their eating and drinking must be done

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<sup>10</sup> The Holy Bible: ESV. 1 Corinthians 1:29.

<sup>11</sup> Ronald Clements. *Exodus*. (Bentley House, London: Cambridge University Press, 1972.) Pp 124.

to God's glory. They must see that God has called them to boast of intimately knowing God."<sup>12</sup>  
May all believers only boast in knowing the Lord.

A great example of this pattern from our Lord is found in Gideon's army. The narrative is found in Judges Gideon was about to lead an army against the people of Midian. At first he begins by drafting a massive host to battle the pagan horde, but the Lord eventually forces him to only keep three hundred of the almost twenty thousand that he originally drafted. Yahweh explains his actions saying, "The people with you are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hand, lest Israel boast over me, saying, 'My own hand has saved me.'"<sup>13</sup> Here God states that if Gideon takes the large army to the battle that it will undoubtedly result in a victory due to the Lord's favor resting upon him, yet the men's wicked hearts would surely become inflamed with pride and keep them from honoring God properly. It is not right for man to boast, when God is responsible for the victory.

The prophet Isaiah teaches that even the most righteous acts of a human are still filthy rags<sup>14</sup>. Commenting on this idea of uncleanness Herbert says, "Unclean: the word means ritually unfit to enter the sanctuary, but this now related to moral and spiritual unfitness which separates from God. This followed by filthy rag is not a theological statement, but a statement of fact."<sup>15</sup> Completely unclean after the affects of the fall. Man is left completely lost and stained with sin. How could a man ever boast in this? Maybe it is the graciousness of God that he chooses those that ought to know better than to boast.

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<sup>12</sup> Simon Kistemaker. *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians*. (Grand Rapids Michigan: Baker Books, 1993.) Pp 63-64

<sup>13</sup> The Holy Bible: ESV. Judges 7:2.

<sup>14</sup> See Isaiah 64:6

<sup>15</sup> A.S. Herbert. *The book of the prophet Isaiah*. (Cambridge, London: University Press, 1975.) Pp 180.

But to those that do believe and are united to Christ by faith Paul reminds them, “And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption.”<sup>16</sup> Here Paul points us to the direct glorious truth of The Gospel. First that the Lord Himself has put us in Christ by working faith in our hearts and uniting us to him. Leon Morris comments on this complex idea saying, “Briefly we may say that the relationship of a believer stands in the closest possible relation to his Lord. Christ is the very atmosphere in which he lives.”<sup>17</sup> The second point is that now Christ Himself has become wisdom to us making the foolish wise. On this idea of wisdom one writer said, “In other words, the Lord Jesus Christ being in the heart gives wisdom in the believer’s thinking, in his values, in his plans for the future. Everything that he now has in his heart and mind is there because God is working in him.”<sup>18</sup> Thirdly, that we now have righteousness in God's law courts, sanctification in this life as we become more like Christ, and redemption at the end of the days. Gordan Fee sums up this idea saying, “Paul’s point is clear: In contrast to the world, you owe your existence to the prior activity of God, which has been effected in history through Christ Jesus.”<sup>19</sup>

Paul finally gives his readers the results of his teaching, “So that, as it is written, Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”<sup>20</sup> What is the results of all of this choosing the weakest? That no one can boast in anyone or anything else other than the God of all creation who sovereignly chooses to use those whom He wills! So, should humans never boast? Absolutely not! They

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<sup>16</sup> The Holy Bible: ESV. 1 Corinthians 1:30.

<sup>17</sup> Leon Morris. *The First epistle of Paul to the Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*. (Grand Rapids Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983.) Pp 48

<sup>18</sup> Manford George Gutzke. *Plain talk on Corinthians*. (Grand Rapids Michigan: Zondervan Corporation, 1978). Pp 26

<sup>19</sup> Gordan Fee. *The first epistle to the Corinthians*. (Grand Rapids Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987.) Pp 85.

<sup>20</sup>The Holy Bible: ESV. 1 Corinthians 1:31.

should boast in the Lord who has shown His awesome power by working in the least of these. Thomas Schreiner says, “Since the Corinthians are in Christ because of Gods work, and since Christ is their wisdom – that is, their righteousness, holiness and redemption – it follows that their boast should be in the Lord.”<sup>21</sup> So should all believers. Andrew Spurgeon also concludes on this text that, “It was through the cross, an offense to the Jews and foolishness to the Greeks, that God saved the Corinthians. Even if the Corinthians were foolish and ignoble in the world’s evaluation, they were still significant people because God called them and placed them in Christ Jesus, who had become their wisdom, righteousness, holiness and redemption.”<sup>22</sup>

Because it is generally speaking God's prerogative to work in and through the weak and ashamed things of this world to do His work, so that He alone will be glorified. Believers should first set their eyes like flint to look on Christ and Him crucified. The God that used men like Moses, Abraham, and Peter is the same God that uses weak humans today. No one can rightly look at the Holiness of God and assume that they could possibly ever personally bring anything to the table. Yet it pleases God to use them. The weak and sinful creatures that they are, which is only possible by the blood of His Son. Jesus the Christ lived the perfect life, died the perfect death, was resurrected, and is now seated at the right hand of the Father. As we now longingly look towards our Savior in faith we trust that He will make us more like Himself, and will use us to accomplish His purposes. God has used weak men and women in the past to prove His

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<sup>21</sup> Thomas Schreiner. *1 Corinthians an Introduction and Commentary*. (Downers Grove Illinois, InterVarsity Press, 2018.) Pp 75

<sup>22</sup> Andrew Spurgeon. *1 Corinthians: An Exegetical and Contextual commentary*. (Primalogue Publishing Media Private Limited, 2011.) Pp 29.

awesome power, let all men now worship Him, and His suffering servant king in the way that He deserves to be worshiped in spirit and truth.

Secondly if a person examines their lives with a somber analysis and they find that they can only categorize themselves as not wise, not of noble birth, not powerful, foolish, low, and despised. Well, they should praise God. Why? Because they are the exact demographic representation of the group of people that Yahweh normally works through! It is certainly worth pointing out that these scriptures begin with a word that has an “M” in it. Since Paul tells us that not many were... The door is still very much open for the use of those who are in the upper echelons of society. But for those that are not, those that are the other ninety-eight percent of society there should be great encouragement that God is pleased to use even them. In tandem with this encouragement should be a reminder to remain humble, since it is the Lord that wills and not man himself. May all men worship the Lord in Spirit and in truth.

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