

*1 Corinthians 1:26-28***PREFACE**

Jesus' closest disciples consisted of four, maybe five, common fishermen; one tax collector; and one freedom fighter. Of the remaining five, maybe six, we know nothing of their previous professions. These were obscure little men; most were country yokels. Not one of them would stand out in a crowd. Save for the apostle Paul, later, not one of them (that we know of) was a scholar. Yet Jesus called each one of them specifically, intentionally, to be His intimates, and to perform the critical job of carrying the gospel to both Jews and Gentiles after His ascension.

This is a trademark of the way God works. From the very beginning He has chosen common, sometimes deeply flawed human beings through which to work on this earth. Since v18 Paul has been leading into this point, first referring to the "foolishness" of the gospel. And I wonder if he wasn't looking back over his shoulder, anticipating a bolt of lightning to strike him, when he wrote v25:

Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

To paraphrase, *If it were possible for God to be foolish, His foolishness would be wiser than the wisest human being; if it were possible for God to be weak, His weakness would be stronger than the strongest human being.*

After stating that thesis, Paul then proceeds to expand on it in vv26-31, in which he contrasts the "foolishness" of the Corinthian church with the wise and strong and noble of the world.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:26-31.**v26**

Nothing has changed from the beginning; God's methods remain the same. He has specific things he means to accomplish here on earth, and to that end He calls—specifically, intentionally—individuals for those tasks. Jesus walked the dusty roads of Palestine and said, *I want you, and I want you, and I want even you.* Before they were even born the Son of God had selected those who would be his disciples during His time of ministry on earth. And that remains the method: Before they are even born, Jesus Christ has already selected those who will, and will not, be His followers, disciples, and brethren.

And He selects from every strata of society: the high and mighty, those high in intellect, kings and queens, those who are impressive and influential—but more often than not, just regular folks like you and me. In v26 Paul is making the point that most of them—those comprising the Corinthian church—were just regular, unimpressive folk when God called them.

For consider your calling, brethren...

Literally "calling" (*klesis*) refers to the act of calling—i.e., an invitation. But the NIV rightly captures the context with "think of what you were when you were called." It is not the best literal translation, but it expresses how Paul is using the word to make his point.

Just a Thought: Perhaps we all would take more seriously our relationship with Christ and our service in His name if we consistently reminded ourselves that God, personally, called each one of us. Paul captures it in his second letter to Timothy:

Therefore do not be ashamed of the testimony of our Lord or of me His prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel according to the power of God, who has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was granted us in Christ Jesus from all eternity, (2 Timothy 1:8-9; emphasis added)

that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble;

Sidebar: By stating that “there were not many” so defined, we know that there were, indeed, some who *were*. This will come into play later on in this letter. Also, just as “of this age” modifies all three categories in v20, “according to the flesh” (ESV: “according to worldly standards”) modifies all three categories in v26.

With these three categories Paul defines what would be the privileged elite of the time, as opposed to the plebeians.

wise = *sophoi* = the learned, clever, and experienced.

mighty, powerful = *dynatoi* = **powerful or capable** (literal or figurative); neuter possible :- able, could, (that is) mighty (man), possible, power, **strong**; “the influential whose wealth gives them the social and political levers of power” (Sanger).

noble = *eugeneis* = from <G2095> (eu) and <G1096> (ginomai); **well born, i.e. (literal) high in rank**, or (figurative) generous :- more noble, nobleman; “the well-born who have a proud pedigree and belong to the wealthy ruling class” (Garland).

In Roman society (after which the new Corinth was fashioned) status was everything. Patronage and clientage was a way of life for the upper class—in all things, not just in politics. For example, rooms with street access were included in upper class homes for the expressed purpose of doling out patronage to one’s clients every morning at the start of the business day. The patron’s clients would que to receive their handouts, bribes, etc.

At the same time there was a dramatic—especially to Americans—separation between the upper and lower classes.

In every city a crushing sense of social distance between the notables, the “wellborn,” and their inferiors was the basic fact of Roman Imperial society. The most marked evolution of the Roman period was the discreet mobilization of culture and of moral grooming to assert such distance. The upper classes sought to distinguish themselves from their inferiors by a style of culture and moral life whose most resonant message was that it could not be shared.

Even the definition of “poor” was different from ours in the Roman culture and society.

The trouble is that the word “poor” does not mean the same thing in Latin and English. For us “poor” establishes an implicit comparison between the majority who are poor and the handful who are rich; the whole of society is included in this comparison. For the Romans, however, the majority did not count, and the word “poor” took its meaning as a relative term within the minority that we would consider rich. The poor were the rich who were not very rich. Horace, who made a virtue of poverty, said he was prepared to see his ambitions come to naught, for this poverty would serve as his life raft. This “life raft” consisted of two estates, one at Tivoli and the other in Sabine, where the master's house covered some 6,000 square feet. Poverty in the Christian and modern sense was inconceivable.

Only common folk worked for a living.

(from *A History of Private Life: From Pagan Rome to Byzantium*; Paul Veyne, Editor)

In other words, to the Roman elite, most of the population around them were “not”—nothing, nothings, of no account. Remember that word “not.”

Sidebar:

according to the flesh

Here is Paul's first use of *sarx* (flesh) in his known letters. This concept will evolve in his mind, until we see it fully mature in his letter to the Romans, where he expounds at length on the difference between living “in the flesh” and “in the Spirit.”

Read Romans 8:5-8.

So when Paul remarks that few in the Corinthian church were wise or mighty or noble, he was essentially saying that they were—even from a worldly perspective—of no consequence whatsoever. If God behaved like human beings, if He called individuals based on their earthly status or accomplishments, these people would have been out of luck. But, to their—and to our—benefit, He doesn't.

v27-28

In vv27-28 Paul answers the three categories of v26.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:27-28

- the wise are shamed by the foolish
- the strong are shamed by the weak
- the noble are nullified by the base
(comparison more clear in the Greek: *agenes* means “without kin,” as opposed to those from noble families)

It is important to note how and why he modifies each of them with “of the world.” One should not assume from this passage that Paul thinks the world is divided into, for example, the wise and the stupid, and God is going to ensure that the stupid win. It is clear from the context that Paul is tacitly putting the foolish, the weak, and the base in square quotes; that is, the “foolish” are only so in the eyes of the wrongheaded of the world who fail to recognize that *they* are the real fools (Barrett).

Whereas the “wise” may think themselves learned, clever, and experienced, God has chosen the

foolish = *moros* = probably from the base of <G3466> (musterion); **dull or stupid** (as if shut up), i.e. heedless, (moral) **blockhead**, (apparently) absurd :- fool (-ish, × -ishness).

Whereas the "strong" may think themselves powerful or capable, God has chosen the

weak = *asthenes* (ahs-then-ace') = from <G1> (a) (as a negative particle) and the base of <G4599> (sthenoo); strengthless (in various applications, literal, figurative and moral) :- more **feeble, impotent, sick, without strength**, weak (-er, -ness, thing).

Whereas those that "are" may think themselves to be prominent, of noble birth and station, God has chosen the

base things = *agenes* (ah-gen-ace') = from <G1> (a) (as negative particle) and <G1085> (genos); properly **without kin, i.e. (of unknown descent, and by implication) ignoble** :- base things; **slave class**.

despised = *exouthenemena* = a variation of <G1847> (exoudenoo) and meaning the same :- **contemptible**, despise, **least esteemed**, set at naught.

things that are not = *me* (may) = a primary particle of qualified **negation** (whereas <G3756> (ou) expresses an absolute denial); (adverb) not, (conjecture) lest; also (as interrogative implying a negative answer [whereas <G3756> (ou) expects an affirmative one]) whether :- any, but (that), × forbear, + God forbid, + lack, lest, neither, never, no (× wise in), **none**, nor, [can-] not, **nothing, that not**, un [-taken], **without**. Often used in compounds in substantially the same relations. See also <G3362> (ean me), <G3363> (hina me), <G3364> (ou me), <G3372> (mekos), <G3373> (mekuno), <G3375> (men), <G3378> (me ouk).

God doesn't play by the rules of this fallen world.

- When He sent His Son, God in flesh, as the long-awaited Messiah, He arrived not in a flurry of power and majesty, but as a baby born in a place reserved for housing the beasts of the field.
- To save mankind from its inevitable doom because of its sin, God did not send His Son out with vast legions of angels, but nailed Him to a miserable cross.
- To witness for the Savior to a fallen world, to send the gospel into foreign lands, and to pen the fundamental Christian doctrine of the New Testament, God did not select the most faithful and true disciple of His Son, but the leading persecutor of the church.