

PREFACE

In our last session we established the Beatitudes in Matthew 5 as our baseline to reveal how far off the mark the Corinthians, as described by Paul in vv8-10, had traveled.

- In v8 we discovered that they were not hungering and thirsting for righteousness (Matthew 5:6) because they considered themselves to be already “filled.” That word translated “filled” or “full” describes someone utterly gorged, crammed full of food. So, if we were to be generous, we might think that the Corinthians were so full of God and His righteousness that they couldn’t find room for more. Even that would be misguided, but it was worse than that. What they were “already filled” with were the rhetoric and philosophies of the fallen culture in which they dwelt. And decidedly *not* God’s righteousness.
- We also discovered that the Corinthians considered themselves to be already rich, already having all they required, even though Christ said that the blessed were the “poor in spirit” (Matthew 5:3). To be poor in spirit is to understand that in ourselves we are utterly unworthy before God, deserving nothing, but that through Christ we are granted the right to stand before Him with confidence. To be poor in this world is to have an empty purse; to be *spiritually* poor is to have one’s heart filled with God rather than self.
- Finally, Paul asserts that they are behaving as reigning kings. The reward for living as one “poor in spirit” in Matthew 5:3 is “the kingdom of heaven.” Even though they do not think of themselves as “poor in spirit” (by the true definition of that phrase: utterly bereft without the riches of God) they are so full of themselves they have deemed themselves worthy of lording it over their lessers, as if they are reigning as kings.

We are now in the middle of Paul’s effort to convict the Corinthians by reciting, in a manner dripping with irony and sarcasm, how the Corinthians think of themselves—what is, apparently, in *their* hearts. Last week we looked at v8; in this session we will look at vv9-10. After this (vv11-13) Paul will drop the irony and sarcasm, to hold himself and the other apostles up as positive examples over against the self-righteousness of the Corinthians.

Correction: In the last session I said that in these verses Paul was doing this to “shame” the Corinthians. That was a poor choice of words, since in v14 he writes, “I do not write these things to shame you...” Thus in this session I have changed the word “shame” to “convict.”

Read 1 Corinthians 4:8-10.

For, I think, God has exhibited us apostles last of all, as men condemned to death; At this point I can't help but think of the prominent radio and TV preachers who espouse the so-called "prosperity gospel." Here is what Joe Carter, in an article at *The Gospel Coalition* web site, has to say about this.

Carter: The prosperity gospel (also known as the "health and wealth gospel" or by its most popular brand, the "Word of Faith" movement) is a perversion of the gospel of Jesus that claims that God rewards increases in faith with increases in health and/or wealth. As Stephen Hunt explains,

In the forefront is the doctrine of the assurance of "divine" physical health and prosperity through faith. In short, this means that "health and wealth" are the automatic divine right of all Bible-believing Christians and may be procreated by faith as part of the package of salvation, since the Atonement of Christ includes not just the removal of sin, but also the removal of sickness and poverty.

Any believer who actually *reads* his or her Bible knows that this is sheer nonsense. God's word declares precisely the opposite. Jesus addressed this in the Beatitudes

Read Matthew 5:10-12.

Jesus went on to say, later in Matthew's gospel,

"He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me. He who has found his life will lose it, and he who has lost his life for My sake will find it." (Matthew 10:37-39)

because we have become a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men.

Rich imagery lies behind the words of v9, and all of it portrays the status and condition of the apostles as dramatically different from the members of the Corinthian church, who saw themselves as wealthy, lordly, even kingly. The NIV captures some of it for us by the insertion of a few extra words.

For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like men condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to men.

There are two probable interpretations of Paul's opinion that "God has exhibited us apostles last of all," and either one works well.

- The first draws from the imagery of the Roman spectacles, such as the games in the Colosseum. Held till last, as the climax of the spectacle, were those condemned to die—either as gladiators or those thrown to the beasts.

- The second (as the NIV translates/interprets it) includes this, but first draws its imagery from the Roman triumph—the grand and extravagant parade held in honor of a conquering general returning to the city. The parade would include the triumphant general and his troops, wagons full of booty from the conquered land, slaves, exotic animals, and, “last of all,” (v9) at the end of the procession those captives who were condemned to die in the arena. Both the humiliating procession and their ugly death “exhibited” or “displayed” these poor souls to the cheering throng.

Whether one starts with the processional, or moves right to the arena, the result is the same: In contrast to the high-and-mighty Corinthians, Paul identifies closely with his crucified Lord, who was publicly “exhibited” in a humiliating, ugly, illegal, unmerited death. And by including “angels” (messengers) along with men who are witnessing this public spectacle, he makes the case for it being for the entire *kosmos*, the entire ordered universe.

v10

Then, in v10, Paul, returning to the more obvious irony he employed in v8, works through a bullet-list of specifics, contrasting the plight of the apostles to the self-perceived status of the Corinthians.

To appreciate Paul’s continuity in this letter, we need to return to its first chapter, where he introduced this theme.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:26-29.

There it is, in v29, the reason for it all: “...so that no man may boast before God.” And now Paul returns to this theme, drawing a dramatic contrast between many in the Corinthian church and the apostles—Paul, Apollos, Peter, et al.

We are fools for Christ’s sake, but you are prudent in Christ;

The inclusion of “in Christ” at the end of this first set (“prudent in Christ”) can at first be a little confusing, but I think it tracks if we remember that his remark is ironical from beginning to end. By this Paul is saying, *In Christ, we are fools, but you are prudent*. Irony means that just the opposite is really true, so in reality, in Christ, the apostles are wise, and the Corinthians are fools.

In the eyes of the world—and especially the Corinthian culture—the apostles are fools, but their “foolishness” is God’s brand of foolishness, which is the ultimate wisdom. By contrast, in the eyes of the world, these in the Corinthian church are *phronimos* (prudent, wise, intelligent, thoughtful) because they have ingested the world’s “wisdom.” Unfortunately for them, this makes them fools in the eyes of God.

And here we should shine the light on ourselves. Are we willing to be fools for Christ? Can it be enough for us that no matter what the world thinks of us, we are wise in the Father's eyes? The pull of peer pressure and acceptance—to “go along”—is strong; it requires someone of strong faith and reliance on the truth of God's word to stand against it.

we are weak, but you are strong;

In the same vein Paul speaks of weakness and strength, and when we turn it around to clarify the irony, Paul is actually saying that the apostles are strong and the Corinthians are weak. Yet we must clarify this further, for Paul is “strong” not in himself, but in Christ—which is illustrated best in the familiar passage from his second (known) letter to this church.

Read 2 Corinthians 12:7-10.

Paul glories in his weakness, for into and through that weakness flows the very power of God. To the world there was no better example of utter weakness and impotence than a human being nailed to a cross. But out of Christ Jesus going through that, His “weakness” resulted in unimaginable power! Just wait around for His return and you will see power demonstrated like you have never seen before.

Some, just a small portion of that power is ours even today when we quit trying to be strong (*ischyros, forcible, boisterous*) in ourselves, and let the power of God to flow into and through us.

you are distinguished, but we are without honor.

Finally, here again, if we set aside the irony, we are left with a worldly perception: In the eyes of the Corinthian society those Paul is addressing are indeed distinguished or honorable, and the lowly apostles without honor. But of course that is not Paul's perspective—nor is it God's. Paul is saying the opposite: In Christ, the apostles are distinguished and the Corinthians without honor.

Read John 15:18-19.

There were some in the Corinthian church who, apparently, were not comfortable with the society in which they lived hating them. They wanted to be liked, to be esteemed, to be accepted in that society. To that end they were compromising their faith—not to mention their relationship with God.

Let's close with the strong exhortation from the apostle John.

Read 1 John 2:15-17.