

Godly Boasting

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[0 : 00] God and Heavenly Father, we ask that your words might speak clearly to us, and that your Spirit might help us to apply your word to our lives tonight.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, if you could leave your Bibles open to the first chapter of 1 Corinthians as we look through it tonight.

And as well, there's a little handout, which hopefully will help you as you follow along. Well, I like watching the program, The Gruen Transfer.

I don't know whether any of you are familiar with it, but it's on the ABC, and it's a program about advertising and the tricks that advertisers get up to. It's a fascinating show because, you know, I love it because I like understanding how advertisers sort of mess with your minds.

But those of us who have been around for a while would probably recognize some of the methods that these people use. It used to be the standard way was to promote the benefits of the product.

[1 : 06] Don't ask me why I chose this example, but the one that I've got is combatant. One of the attractive benefits are one chocolate square each to treat, pun intended, the whole family, young or old.

Another method, of course, is to promote the people who use the product. And so here I've got an ad of a family for Queensland holidays. And I have to say, we've just booked a holiday to Queensland, of course.

And the idea is that they do this to imply that the people that holiday in Queensland would look like that. But I have to say, actually, my family looks much better than that.

The third method is to co-op celebrities to promote your product. And so here we've got Swiss vitamins. And, you know, somehow when Ricky Ponting says, you'll feel better on Swiss, it just sounds more convincing, doesn't it?

Well, advertisers use these methods all the time because they know it works. They play with our egos and they know the desires of the human heart. Well, tonight we're going to ask the question, what about the gospel?

[2 : 20] What methods should we use to promote the good news of Jesus? Or to use the title of the sermon, what do we boast about? What do we big note when we talk about the gospel?

Well, we'll find tonight that in the passage, God uses very different methods. Instead of appealing to what's attractive to the world, God uses a message of foolishness.

And so there's three parts of the passage tonight. In verses 18 to 25, we see Paul explaining God's method or God's way. And then he goes on to apply it with two examples.

The first example is in verses 26 to 31, the example of the Christian believers. And then the second example in verses 1 to 5 of chapter 2, Paul applies God's method to his own preaching.

Now, we already had some insight into how the Corinthians were promoting the gospel last week or promoting themselves. Paul had chastised them for boasting in their leaders and thinking of themselves good for doing so.

[3 : 22] They were, in other words, behaving just like the world and promoting the gospel like the world would. Well, here in this passage, Paul says that this is not what the gospel, the message of the cross in verse 18, is all about.

But that is not God's way at all. And as we read the passage, you'll probably notice the irony in this passage. Because Paul uses the very things that the Corinthians were obsessed about.

You know, wisdom, power, boasting. And he uses these words and inverts them to explain his point. And so in the first section, in verses 18 to 25, Paul begins by declaring that this message, which the Corinthians believed in, which they were dividing over, was actually foolishness to those who were perishing.

Foolish, that is, by human standards. Foolish to those who called themselves wise. Now, who are these wise? Well, Paul says that they are the scribes, the debaters of this age, the movers and shakers of the intellectual world.

People who get invited onto Q&A; and who write regularly for, you know, the opinion columns in the major papers, like the age. They shape culture and the prevailing wisdom.

[4 : 35] And they help create entire systems of thought that explain the world, what we would call worldviews. And in the ancient world which Paul lived in, there were two major ones.

There was the Jewish worldview, which were dominated by the scribes or the legal minds of Judaism. And then there was the Greeks, shaped by philosophers such as the Stoics and the Epicureans.

And to these worldviews, Paul says, the message of the cross, which Paul preaches, makes no sense. The Jews demand signs because they think that that's how God displays his power.

Well, the Greeks desire wisdom. But the cross, Christ crucified, is the message of a God who comes in weakness and suffers the most humiliating punishment known to the Roman world, that is, crucifixion, in order to save mankind.

God dies in weakness and humiliation. Exactly the opposite of what the wise would want. Exactly the opposite of what the wise would expect, both for the Jews and for the Gentiles.

[5 : 45] So no wonder Paul says in verses 24 that it was a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles.

But as I said, it is only foolishness to those who are perishing. Because for those who are being saved, back in verse 18, it is the power of God.

Or again, if you look in verse 24 and 25, And so the message of the cross, therefore, is anything but foolish.

It is actually the wisdom and power of God. But it is wisdom disguised as human folly. And it is the power of God clothed in human weakness.

It sort of reminds me of this picture. Some of you might have seen it. Some people would look at this and see nothing but the image of the ugly old woman.

[6 : 56] While others would see the image of the beautiful lady. It is the one picture, but it's got two images. And so similarly, the gospel is one message.

But by the world's standards, it's foolish and weak. Ugly. But for those who believe, it is God's power and wisdom. Beautiful.

And so the point is, the gospel is never attractive by the world's standards. It values different things to God. The world's standards has a different worldview to God.

And it gives greater weight to things which God does not. And in case you're wondering, this is not a mistake by God. For Paul says in verse 21, that this is something God in his wisdom decided to do.

To save, through the foolishness of Paul's preaching, those who believe. And the reason why God does this is found in verses 19 and 20.

[8 : 00] It is in order to destroy the wisdom of the wise and the discernment of the discerning. God uses what is foolish in the eyes of the wise.

You see, every worldview is set up as a substitute to God's worldview. And every worldview has its aim to exalt itself over the wisdom of God.

And so as a result, the cross makes no sense within that worldview. So for instance, those who have a worldview which insists that all things must be proven scientifically.

And we've heard a lot of that in recent times. Well, Christ's resurrection becomes a stumbling block, doesn't it? Because that event is beyond the proof of empirical science. Likewise, there's currently the obsession with human rights and equality.

Not that those are bad things, but it's become the maxim or the yardstick by which everything is measured or everything is decided. Well, human rights and equality have their place.

[9 : 11] But if it becomes the be-all and end-all, well, then the cross doesn't make sense. Because on it, Jesus sets aside his equality with the Father, gives up his rights as God, as a human even, to become a slave and to suffer a humble death on the cross.

Friends, God uses the message of the cross to tear down every other human worldview. And as long as we cling to our own worldview, the message of the cross will be foolishness to us.

It is only when we are willing to set aside our human wisdom and recognize our folly that we see in the cross the power and wisdom of God.

It is only then that we will believe and be saved. No one is saved by holding on to their pride or their human wisdom. Well, let's move on.

Paul, having explained God's ways, now goes on with two examples. So in the first, as I said earlier, in verses 26 to 31, Paul shows how God chooses the foolish to shame the wise.

[10 : 25] And Paul says that there is no better exhibit of this than the Corinthians themselves. So Paul says, look at yourselves, in verse 26.

Consider your own call, brothers and sisters. Not many of you were wise by human standards. Not many were powerful. And not many were of noble birth.

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 them precisely because they were foolish and weak.

When the foolishness of the message comes to people, it is the foolish and the weak of the world which God chooses to believe. And again, as it says in those verses, his purpose is to shame the strong and the wise.

And the result? Well, the result is that no one is able to boast in the presence of God. Not the strong and the wise. For God has bypassed them. Nor the weak and the foolish.

[11 : 32] Because they did not believe because of their own wisdom and strength. And so that's why Paul says that what the Corinthians were doing in chapter 1 just made no sense.

And yet, even though God chooses the weak and the foolish, the Corinthians and all who believe are neither weak nor poor.

They are actually rich. But not because of themselves, but because of God. Paul says in verse 30, God is the source of their life in Christ.

Their new life in Christ. Their wisdom from God. Their righteousness. That is their blameless standing before God. Their sanctification. The fact that they are now God's holy people.

And their redemption. The fact that they have been saved from the punishment of their wrongdoing. All these things and more are a result of what God has done for them in Christ Jesus.

[12 : 32] And so Paul says in verse 31, If you must boast, well then boast in the Lord who did all these things for you. If you must give credit for why you are so blessed, and we should, then let us give glory to God and his son Jesus Christ.

All these things spring naturally of course, if we have an overwhelming sense of God's grace in our lives. If we remind and realize ourselves over and over again, that God is the source of everything good in our lives.

Now let me pause for a moment because there may be some of you here tonight who think, well, I'm actually quite successful, you know, by the world's standards.

Paul doesn't say that not any of us will be saved, just not many. And some of you perhaps may be sitting here tonight with a spare billion or two in your bank account, perhaps.

Or maybe you're a world leader in your field of expertise. Well, many of you might know the Professor Ian Harper.

[13 : 43] He's an eminent economist, a member of the Wallace Inquiry into the financial markets reform. And I remember actually having studied him when I was at uni.

And he's highly sought after for his views. And actually in the previous government, he actually became the chair of the Fair Pay Commission. And some of you would also know that Ian is a committed Christian.

So what I'm going to show now is a clip, a bit of a testimony from him. And let's hear what he says. God, in a sense, knew that to get me on side, and this sounds arrogant, but it was the way it worked, he needed to appeal to my mind.

I'd fought myself out of this. So I needed to think my way back in again. And so I was confronted with two people who were educated men, men I couldn't simply dismiss as deluded fools.

That was a bit... I couldn't do that. They were clearly not. And so at the end of the discussion about Mark, John said to me, he said, well, what do you think? And I said, well, I'll give you this much, John.

[14 : 46] I said, it's not made up. And he said, why do you say that? I said, because it has the ring of truth, and the various stories in there would not be made up by somebody who was trying to fool you.

And he said, well, then, what do you think it is? I said, I don't know. I don't know. But it's not made up. He said, will you do one more thing for me? And I said, what's that? He said, I'd like to take you into town to this theological bookshop.

And I said, oh, yeah, fair enough. So we went. And then a little bit like John, who was concerned about, you know, not having the foundations, I wandered in there and he grabbed a couple of books off the shelf and he said, here, take a look at this.

Take a look at that. And I looked at these books and he'd given me books, as you say, of apologetics. So these were arguments which had been made down the ages for why Christianity was right and answers for reasons why other people said that it was wrong.

And I read through this and he looked at me, I looked at him and he said to me, he said, you're not the first person to have thought of these things, are you? Written down there were all the arguments I'd thrown up.

[15:48] And I said, I guess I'm not. He said, you know how old these arguments are? And I said, no. He said, oh, I'd say about 2,000 years. He said, there's more. I looked around. It was like being in Aladdin's cave. And I suddenly realized that for all of my education, for all of my sophistication, and for all of my intellectualism, I was dog bone ignorant about all of this.

Even though I didn't believe it, I felt this big, Carl, because there was an entire area of human experience and knowledge of which I knew nothing. And so he said, let me buy you a book.

Well, friends, even if you're like Ian and you are successful in life, I think your goal should be that God has chosen you and called you in spite of your position in society.

That God has chosen you when he could have easily bypassed you. Do you know why Ian's testimony is so powerful? I think it's because he boasted about his folly.

He was willing to humble himself and admit that in spite of how smart he thought he was, he was a fool when it came to God. And so some of you may find yourselves in a similar position one day, where the world may praise you for your achievements and your wisdom.

[17:17] And my prayer is that at that time, you will use that opportunity to boast in the Lord and to boast about how you became a fool in order to come to Christ.

Well, let's look finally at the last section, where Paul offers himself as the second example, that of the preacher of the gospel.

And so having explained God's way and how it was shown to work in the lives of the Corinthians, Paul now turns to his call as the messenger of the gospel. And what he says is that because God uses the foolish to show his power, Paul too will glory in his own weakness in order to show God's power.

That is, he will shape his ministry according to God's way. And so reading from verse 1, When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words of wisdom, for I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom, but on the power of God.

[18:37] So I don't think what Paul is saying here is that he doesn't use his mind or wisdom, or he doesn't try to think carefully through what he says. What Paul is doing is distancing himself from the preaching methods of the philosophers of his age, who uses clever tricks and rhetoric to try and win his audiences over.

Paul refuses to do this because there is, in one sense, no need to add to the gospel. The gospel is powerful without the need for lofty words.

It is effective even when the speaker is fearful and trembling. In fact, it is effective precisely because the speaker is fearful and trembling.

But more than that, Paul says that trying to use lofty words of wisdom can actually do damage to the message. For it runs the risk in verse 5 that our faith will rest on human wisdom rather than the power of God.

With that, he is actually repeating what he has already said in verse 17 of chapter 1, that he refuses to preach with eloquent words of wisdom, so that in verse 17, the cross of Christ might not be emptied of his power.

[19 : 57] So I think those of us who teach and preach would do well to remember this. But so too, I think, those of us who don't dare to speak because we think we need lofty words to be effective.

That actually goes against the gospel because at its heart, the gospel is a message of God's power displayed in human weakness. And so God has no need for us to add to his gospel with slick presentations or showmanship, thinking that that's the way to attract people to it.

God uses our words even when it comes with fear and trembling. It's exactly what God says to Paul in the second letter of Corinthians in chapter 12.

It's on the screen. It reminds me again of those chefs on TV when they tell the competitors less is more.

So I've got a gratuitous photo of MasterChef. Just so that, you know, whatever we said on Facebook was, we weren't misleading in our advertising.

[21 : 30] But both George and Gary say less is more because for them, to put too much seasoning was to take away from the style of the dish, you know, whether it was the meat or the seafood. And so it is with the gospel.

We don't have to over-season it with our lofty words or show with our human wisdom what the gospel is. We want the faith.

We want faith to rest on God's power and not on human wisdom. That is the message of the cross. That is the way then we should also preach it. So friends, tonight as we live out the gospel together as witnesses, as we continue to think through how we're going to share the gospel, how will we promote it to others?

Brothers and sisters, God's way, as reflected in the cross, as reflected in those he chooses to save, and reflected in Paul's preaching, is that he uses the foolish things in the eyes of this world, the weak in the world, to show his power and wisdom.

He does that so that there is no boasting in his presence. Or rather, if we should boast, then we can only boast in the Lord. Let's pray.

[22 : 56] Before I pray, there may be some of us here tonight who may still be grappling with the message of the cross. Perhaps Jesus does not fit into your view of the world.

If that's the case and you would like to talk a bit more, then please come to me afterwards, and I'll be more than happy to talk with you.

Let's pray. Father, we want to, again tonight, remind ourselves that we are weak and we are foolish by the world's standards.

And yet we are rich in Christ Jesus. And we want to remind ourselves, Lord, that as we share the gospel, that we can do so even in our fear and trembling, without the need to add to it, so that faith might rest not on human wisdom, but on the power of God.

We pray this, Lord, in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[24 : 43] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.