

**I Corinthians 1:26-31** *Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. <sup>27</sup>But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. <sup>28</sup>God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, <sup>29</sup>so that no one may boast before him. <sup>30</sup>It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. <sup>31</sup>Therefore, as it is written: “Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.”*

Dear friends in Christ,

I had it wrong. I made an assumption that turned out to be incorrect. When we heard the news last Sunday afternoon that Kobe Bryant and his daughter had been killed in a helicopter crash on Sunday morning, I lamented to my family in what I thought could be a teachable moment, “If only he had been in worship on Sunday morning instead of flying to a basketball tournament, this wouldn’t have happened.” It was a logical assumption to make. It seems many famous people, whether athletes or actors or politicians or academics or business-people or others like them feel they are too enlightened for religion. I don’t know if it is the hard work they had to put in to propel them to where they are or the notoriety and publicity they receive for what they’ve done and the decisions they’ve made or what it is, but many who are in a higher level of our society feel like religion is beneath them. They pride themselves on progressing beyond the need for a crutch or help in spiritual things. They claim a better knowledge and follow a more enlightened way. They speak with an air of condescension that they have risen above Christianity to a better place. For whatever reason they tend to look down on people who hold tightly to Jesus as weaker people who can’t make it on their own. I made the assumption that Kobe was in the same boat. Until I found out that he had been at 7:00 a.m. mass that morning with his daughter before they got on the helicopter to go to the basketball tournament. I don’t know exactly what was in his heart nor where he exactly stood in his relationship with Jesus, but this second glance might give us the opportunity to say that he wasn’t foolish enough to cast aside his religious beliefs for the foolishness of this world.

Perhaps Kobe Bryant’s sudden and unexpected death best expresses the thoughts of our text before us today. From an earthly standpoint we might look at him and say: he had it all. He had just a few years back finished one of the best NBA careers of all time. Money wasn’t a problem for him. He had certainly earned enough of it through his NBA contracts and all of his endorsement deals. He had developed his brand to make him one of the greatest cultural icons of his generation. He was young and just beginning the second half of his life focused on his family with a bright future ahead. The possibilities were endless. And just like that he is gone. All of that money, all of that success, all of that popularity, all of that future that was before him means nothing. If that were all he had to stand on before God last Sunday, he would have had a huge awakening. All that he had thought was everything, before God was nothing. Thankfully, we have reason to be hopeful that last Sunday was the beginning of his eternity in heaven, where he will enjoy all that God has to offer for all eternity. This is what our text emphasizes for us today! What the world considers to be everything means nothing before God. And what the world considers to be nothing, God sees as everything! Let’s consider this thought further as Paul reminds us how **God Turns Everything Upside Down**.

The Greeks in Corinth didn’t want what Paul had to offer. They glorified wisdom. They wanted a religion that would challenge their intelligence. They wanted philosophy, not a story about a crucified Jew who made great claims about saving the world. In their opinion, religion should be something scholarly and learned, something they could reason out. They scorned the concept of a crucified Savior. Salvation through the cross was absolute foolishness! It was the silliest thing they had heard of. They didn’t want to lean on anyone else for their salvation. They wanted to be able to figure it out for themselves and develop their own plan. They saw it as weakness for people to look to the cross and someone else for salvation. They mocked people too simple and uneducated to follow Christ rather than reason. They shunned the Christians. The men of wealth, the city fathers, the merchant princes, the scholars, the first families of the city would have nothing to do with the crazy religion this traveling Jew was peddling in Corinth.

The problem of course is their “wisdom” was leading them to hell. What they thought was everything was nothing to God. They were so sure they knew who God was and what he was like and how to deal with him. They were so confident they had the answers to the problems of sin and guilt that they automatically rejected what God had to say about their salvation through the cross. They rejected the very message through which God would give them salvation because they were too arrogant and proud to accept help from anyone else. And that “wisdom” was leading them to hell. These brilliant people would prove to be fools, because they with all their wisdom would reject the only way of salvation: Jesus of Nazareth dying on the cross for their sins.

It would be tempting for these young Christians to feel like weak fools and give up the salvation they had in Jesus just to save face in the eyes of their fellow citizens. The great majority of this congregation consisted of plain, regular everyday people. Although there were some among them of intellectual and political and social standing, there were also slaves who stood very low in the social scale and freedmen or former slaves who were now set free and enjoyed a somewhat higher social standing than what they had. Most of them weren’t much from an earthly point of view. But Paul shares something profound in our text: what the world considers to be foolish, God proves is wisdom; what the world considers to be weak, God shows to be strong. What the world considers to be nothing, God sees as everything. God had chosen these very people for a reason. He did this to shame those who prided themselves on their status or strength or position. He chose weak, foolish, lowly and despised people to be his people to show the world that salvation didn’t come through earthly power or wealth or success, but through him alone. God turned everything upside down. God chose people who saw their shortcomings and recognized their weaknesses to emphasize his grace. It wasn’t a weakness to admit your sin and need for a Savior. It was a strength because it caused the person to look to Jesus for the salvation that he offered, which is the only salvation God accepts for entrance into heaven. While the Greeks saw the cross as foolishness, God made that cross the most powerful instrument for good. While the Greeks saw the Gospel as absurdity, God made the Gospel the greatest truth for the salvation of humankind. When human beings stand before God as

helpless beggars and pitiable fools, we have to admit: we have nothing; we know nothing; we can do nothing to be right before God. We will never be able to take credit for knowing God or believing in God and thus being saved. But it's only when we come to this knowledge that we see in Jesus our Savior and Lord. It's only when we completely empty ourselves of everything that we see in Jesus the salvation that he offers.

Essentially, Paul was telling the Christians in Corinth, "If your fellow citizens want to mock you and look down on you and call you weak and foolish and treat you as if you have nothing, that's OK. They are wrong. In Jesus you have everything! They might be full of pride now and puffed up about how enlightened and progressive they are now, but it will be an entirely different story when they stand before God." While the world sees nothingness in the cross, faith, being weak and lowly, God sees nothingness in their riches, status, power, strength or position. God chooses those who are weak and lowly to expose their vanity so that they let go of relying upon themselves which will lead to their eternal damnation and turn to him. He does so to empty them of their pride and arrogance and see that he alone is the source and cause for all they are and more importantly for their salvation in Jesus. None of their riches or status or glory could possibly compare to the righteousness, holiness and the final redemption that God offers from sin and death in Jesus. Earthly riches mean nothing. What God offers means everything! He turns everything upside down!

Sadly, this concept of "rising above Christianity" or "progressing to higher state of enlightenment" or being "too strong to follow Christianity" is not something that was left behind in the first century. The pagan philosopher, Celsus, who lived in the second century after Christ, expressed the view of prominent Jews and Greeks when he wrote that a glance at the membership of Christian congregations in his day would only prove that the Christians "show that they want and are able to convince only the foolish, dishonorable and stupid, and only slaves, women and little children." The German philosopher, Nietzsche whom Hitler admired condemned the Christian faith as "a favoring of the botched and degenerate, and a despising of the rich, scholarly, noble, healthy and strong." We hear the same today. How many of the people who control the press and television of our country, how many leading entertainers, how many industrial magnates, how many noted scholars are simple, believing, church-going Christians? Some...but they are few. While there are many examples we could point to, some of the more recent comments along this line came from Aaron Rodgers, the quarterback of the Green Bay Packers. He is recently quoted as saying, "I just don't know how you can believe in a God who wants to condemn most of the planet to a fiery hell. What type of loving, sensitive, omnipresent, omnipotent being wants to condemn his beautiful creation to a fiery hell at the end of all this?" "Ultimately, it was that rules and regulations and binary systems don't really resonate with me." Now he focuses on a "different type of spirituality." He doesn't call himself an atheist, but neither does he call himself a Christian. The hard part is that these words, like most who follow this line of thought, are spoken with an air of condescension, that they have been able to rise above normal Christianity and have progressed to a better, higher place. They have a better knowledge and follow a more enlightened way.

We hear all this, we see the success they have been able to have in life, and we are tempted to say: maybe they are right! That certainly feels better than not only being seen as but labeling ourselves as weak, lowly, despised people. It is very humbling to listen to Paul describe us: "*Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth.*" He goes on to add the words: *foolish, weak and lowly.* Those aren't the words we would use to describe ourselves on LinkedIn or a job resume. We don't list these characteristics on our Facebook profile. You wouldn't use them to try and attract someone on eHarmony or Match.com. This doesn't make us sound very good at all. It makes us sound like...nothing. But you see, it's only by admitting that we are nothing that we can have everything. The first step in seeing Jesus as our Savior is admitting our sin and weakness. Before God in your sin—you are nothing. We can only admit that we deserve God's punishment of hell because of our sins. We have no choice but to admit that on our own, we can't do anything to save ourselves. We can't choose God, we can't decide to believe in him, we can't accept him as Lord. By nature we are enemies of God, hostile to him and want nothing to do with him. We can only stand before him admitting that we are helpless beggars and pitiable fools.

Thankfully, God turns all of this upside down. Only when we admit that we are nothing, does God give us everything. Admitting that we are nothing allows us to see the blessings that God so graciously gives us in Christ. We can't boast in ourselves. But we can boast in Christ. In Christ, we have the highest and most blessed wisdom that comes from God himself. We know the Gospel truth that Jesus came to this earth for the very purpose of conquering sin and death for us. We have the wisdom that Jesus lived perfectly as we could not. We have the knowledge that Jesus didn't just die on Calvary but offered his perfect life as a sacrifice for us when he suffered the hell that we deserve. We have the wisdom of knowing that he rose from the grave to give testimony that God accepted his sacrifice and granted eternal life to all who believe in him. Through faith he has given to us the righteousness and holiness that we need to stand at the final redemption and live with him eternally. We may have nothing here, but in Jesus we will have everything for all eternity.

So let the world laugh. God calls people blessed that the world would use as doormats. Let them scoff and mock. The world praised the brash, the strong and the self-sufficient. Jesus calls blessed what others would see as weak or stupid. Let them call you weak and foolish. God has given you the wisdom that will lead to eternal life where you will live with him in his power for all eternity. God may choose to bless you with riches and status and power and glory here...and he may not. But don't let anyone take away the wisdom that God has given you that brings eternal life. Thankfully, God gives us what we need to have everything for eternity. Thankfully, he turns everything upside down. Amen.