

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, May 4, 2014**

WALK HUMBLY WITH GOD

1 Corinthians 1:26-31

Since I will be away next Sunday, I want to share this Mothers' Day story with you a week early. As a Mothers' Day treat, two children told their mom to stay in bed. As she lay there looking forward to breakfast in bed, patting herself on the back (figuratively) for raising such thoughtful children, the smell of bacon floated up from the kitchen. After waiting for her breakfast a considerable length of time, she finally went downstairs to check out the situation. She found her kids sitting at the table eating bacon and eggs. "It's a surprise for Mothers' Day," one of them explained. "We decided to cook our own breakfast."

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Now that I've taken care of that, let's turn our attention to God's Word. As we do, let me remind you, if you need to be reminded, of the prophet Micah's declaration of what God desires from us, His people:

*He has showed you, O man, what is good.
And what does the Lord require of you?
To do justice and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with your God.
(Micah 6:8)*

Several weeks ago (March 30, 2014) we focused on the story Jesus told about a Pharisee and a tax collector in Luke 18:9-14, where we saw the stark contrast between the humility of the guilt-ridden tax collector who knew himself to be a sinner in desperate need of a Savior and simply cried out to God for mercy, and the self-righteous pride and boastfulness of the Pharisee, a man as outwardly religious and moral as you could find, who failed to recognize his spiritual poverty. He thought himself much better, much more virtuous, much more righteous and admirable than he actually was in the eyes of God. That day, Jesus said, a man everyone looked down upon as a "sinner" went home justified in God's sight, while the religious man, blinded by his pride, continued to believe the lies he told himself about himself.

The next Sunday (April 6, 2014) we turned the spotlight on Moses, whom the Bible describes as "a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth" (Numbers 12:3) – although there is really no comparison between the humility of Moses or anyone else and the humility we see in Jesus the Son of God, who willingly set aside all the glories and honors of heaven to come and live among us as a human being. And, if that were not humbling enough, Jesus went even further. The Scripture says: "He humbled Himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!" (Philippians 2:6-8). In other words, as an expression of His undying love for a world full of sinners, the true King of heaven and earth voluntarily endured the worst, most humiliating, most excruciatingly painful form of

execution man could devise. If you want to know what true humility looks like, just look at Jesus.

Today we look at the church at Corinth described by Paul in 1 Corinthians 1. Corinth, you may know, had a reputation for being as decadent as any city in the world. It was the “sin city” of its time, brimming with immorality, idolatry, and prostitution. It was a kind of melting pot at the intersection of a number of cultures and religions. Here, by the grace of God, Paul established a church during his 2nd missionary journey (see Acts 18:1-18). By the grace of God, many Corinthians came to faith in Christ. But when you read 1 Corinthians, which Paul wrote from Ephesus during his 3rd missionary journey, it is obvious that there were all kinds of problems in the Corinthian church: Disunity, factions, sexual immorality and a lack of proper, loving church discipline, lawsuits against one another with Christians taking other Christians to court, a pronounced lack of humility and of consideration for others, and the flaunting of their new-found freedom in Christ without regard for the consciences and spiritual well-being of others in the church. The list could go on. But you get the idea. It was a church with great gifts, a church with great kingdom potential, but also a church with serious issues.

Paul set out to nip the self-indulgent, head-swelling pride of the Corinthians in the bud by reminding them of their status in society – or, their *lack* of status – when God, in His sovereign grace, drew them to Himself in faith and made them part of His church. Notice the way Paul describes the members of the church in Corinth. There were a few exceptions, but for the most part, Paul says, they did not have impressive resumes. By the world’s standards, there was little or nothing about them to make anyone sit up and take notice. The Greeks loved wisdom. Philosophers were highly esteemed in Greek culture. But few, if any, of the Christian believers in Corinth were well-educated or noted for their wisdom. Not many of them were wealthy. Not many held positions of prominence in the city. Not many were from the upper class of Corinthian society. A few, perhaps, but not many.

Most of the Corinthian believers came from the lower classes. Most of them were poor, uneducated “nobodies” that the “somebodies” of their day just naturally overlooked or totally dismissed. For the most part, the church in Corinth was not a fellowship of “the best and the brightest.” It was more like “the least and the last.” Which is the way God often works.

If we were to paraphrase verse 26 in terms of our culture today, it might go something like this: “Not many of you were best-selling authors or nuclear scientists. Not many of you were Nobel Prize winners. Not many of you were senators or congressmen or judges or diplomats. Not many of you were Fortune 500 CEOs. Not many of you were Hollywood stars or sports Hall-of-Famers.”

This is not to suggest that God never calls scientists or authors, political leaders or business executives, or any of these other cultural icons to faith in Christ. We know that He does.

The point is that God did not call any of the Corinthians to faith in Christ *because* He was impressed with them, or *because* they had done something to deserve His favor. Not so. The point Paul seeks to impress upon the Corinthians – and us – is that God, in His sovereign

grace, chose them for salvation *in spite of* their unimpressiveness. The thing that most distinguished the Corinthian believers, and the thing that most distinguishes you and me, is not our ancestry or education, not our position or title, not our personal or professional accomplishments, not who we know or who knows us. What most distinguishes us is our sinfulness. What most distinguishes us is our unworthiness. What most distinguishes us is our inability to be good enough to earn God's favor. What most distinguishes us is our need for grace. What most distinguishes us is our need for a Savior – our need for *the one and only* Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ – who alone has done *for us* what we could not ever do for ourselves in His death on the cross:

He paid the penalty *for our sins*.
 He set us free from the power of sin and guilt.
 He gave us new life,
 a new identity as followers of Christ.
 He gave us peace with God
 and a place in the people of God.

That is what most distinguished the church in Corinth. It is what most distinguishes us.

And it is all by grace. So many, many people in the world don't get it. They can't get their minds around it. Or they reject it because it takes away all grounds for pride in their accomplishments or boasting in their self-sufficiency. It undercuts every human claim of deserving recognition, honor, or applause from God.

Listen to Peterson's paraphrase of this passage in *The Message*: "I don't see many of 'the brightest and the best' among you, not many influential, not many from high-society families. Isn't it obvious that God deliberately chose men and women that the culture overlooks and exploits and abuses, chose these 'nobodies' to expose the hollow pretensions of the 'somebodies'? That makes it quite clear that none of you can get by with blowing your horn before God" (1 Corinthians 1:26-29).

Paul's message to the Corinthians here is of signature importance both to the church as a whole and to each of us as individual followers of Christ. In calling the "nobodies" of the world to new life in Christ and fellowship in His church, God declares and demonstrates His rejection of the idea that the people who matter most to God are the people the world finds most impressive: those who are wise in the world's eyes, those who are brilliant or beautiful or charismatic, gifted, wealthy, powerful, or rich and famous. As one Bible commentator (David Prior) notes, such ideas and standards "die very hard even in the Christian church. They were a powerful force at Corinth," he observes, and "they stifle the glory of God today."

There is a warning here for us, a warning to be careful not to judge one another in the church, or others whom God may add to His church, on the basis of standards the world uses to judge a person's importance. It is a warning to us as a church not to show favoritism or give special treatment to wealthy, socially prominent, or powerful people in the life of the church, nor, conversely, to ignore, neglect, or brush aside persons who may be insignificant or undesirable

in the world's eyes. Dear friends, may we be careful not to stifle the glory of God in this or any other way.

The Bible contains a straightforward warning for us in James 2, where James writes: "My brothers (and sisters), as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism" (2:1). James goes on to say: "If a man enters your church wearing an expensive suit, and a street person wearing rags comes in right after him, and you say to the man in the suit, 'Sit here, sir; this is the best seat in the house!' and (you) either ignore the street person or say, 'Better sit here in the back row,' haven't you segregated God's children and proved you are judges who can't be trusted?"

"Listen, dear friends. Isn't it clear by now that God operates quite differently? He chose the world's down-and-out as the kingdom's first citizens, with full rights and privileges. This kingdom is promised to anyone who loves God" (James 2:2-5, *The Message*).

Let me repeat that: Citizenship in God's kingdom is promised to *anyone* who loves God. It is open to *anyone* who trusts in the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation. It is open to *anyone* who receives God's saving grace through faith in Jesus. It is open to *anyone* who is "poor in spirit." It is open to all of us who know that we are spiritually bankrupt apart from Christ, and who run to Him, and cling to Him, and trust in Him, and say with the hymnwriter:

Nothing in my hand I bring,
 simply to the cross I cling.
 (Augustus Toplady, "Rock of Ages")

There is no place in the church for the kind of favoritism or discrimination or prejudice or segregation James decries. We do not and must not discriminate on the basis of a person's color, appearance, age, sex, socio-economic status, or national origin. There is no place for that in the church. What we discriminate against is sin. What we discriminate against is anything that distorts or dilutes the gospel, any teaching that is contrary to the truth of God's Word, anything that robs God of the glory that is rightly His. What we are against is self-promoting human pride that refuses to acknowledge the loving sovereignty of God and our desperate need for grace.

Jesus said it is the "poor in spirit" who will inherit the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:3). To be 'poor in spirit' is to know your need of God and to acknowledge your spiritual bankruptcy. It is the essence of true humility, which involves knowing who God is and knowing who you are before Him. In his book *Generous Justice*, which I have mentioned to you before, Tim Keller writes that to be poor in spirit "means to see that you are deeply in debt before God, and you have no ability to even begin to redeem yourself. God's free generosity to you, at infinite cost to Him, was the only thing that saved you."

Pride, however, may prevent a person from embracing the teaching of Jesus about the depth and pervasiveness of our sinfulness and spiritual lostness. "On the contrary," says Keller, "you (may) believe that God owes you some things – He ought to answer your prayers and to bless you for the many good things you've done. Even though the Bible doesn't use the term,

by inference we can say that you are “middle-class in spirit.” You feel that you’ve earned a certain standing with God through your hard work. You may also believe ... that the success and the resources you have are primarily due to your own industry and energy” (*Generous Justice*, 101-102). This is how a lot of people feel, including some who may think of themselves – with pride – as being “poor in spirit.”

So let me ask you a serious question:

Are you “poor in spirit” or “middle-class in spirit?”

Do you think God owes you in some way because of the ways you have served Him or personal sacrifices you have made for Him?

Do you think you are entitled to certain blessings because of your faithful service to the Lord?

Do you think you have something – anything – to boast about in the presence of God?

Paul says that God sovereignly, intentionally, deliberately chose things the world considers foolish – things such as the cross, a crucified Messiah, the Corinthian believers themselves, and people like me, who don’t deserve His grace and never will – so that He could forever remove from us any possible grounds on our part of standing in the presence of God in all His majesty, power, and glory with something – anything – in our hands. (Adapted from Gordon Fee)

I don’t know who said it first, but I will gladly repeat it: The ground is level at the foot of the cross. Thank God! The ground is level at the foot of the cross. It is level for all of us. None of us can bring anything to contribute to our salvation. The only thing we contribute to our salvation is our sin. Our need of a Savior. That’s it. Nothing else.

Everything we have, Paul says in verse 30 – our right standing with God, a clean heart, forgiveness and rescue from our slavery to sin – is ours *in Christ. Through Christ. Because of Christ.* Therefore, Paul concludes, if you’re going to boast, make sure you boast in the Lord (1:31). Not in yourself. Not about yourself. Not to make a name for yourself. Let your boasting be in the Lord and in Him alone. As it says in *The Message*: “If you’re going to blow a horn, blow a trumpet for God.”

The Lord Himself had said in Jeremiah 9:23-24:

Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom
or the strong man boast of his strength
or the rich man boast of his riches,
but let the one who boasts boast about this:
that he understands and knows me,
that I am the LORD, who exercises kindness (mercy),
justice and righteousness on earth,
for in these I delight.

If you’re going to boast, boast in the Lord. Be careful not to think of yourself more highly than you ought (Romans 12:3), but walk humbly with God. Never forget who God is and

how merciful, gracious, and loving He has been to you. Give God the glory that is rightly His. Rejoice in the wonder of His grace. And walk humbly with Him. Always.

Lord, let it be so in us, to the glory of Your name. Amen.