

Text: 1 Cor 1.18-30
St Stephen's

Sept 14th, 2008
Sun

Surprise! Surprise!

Well, I finally got back to visit my grandson this past Sunday.



He's two months old, and he's added 6 lbs! Here I am giving him some good advice on how to grow a double chin.

We want to get an early start on helping Ian grow up, and as there is a big game tonight between the Steelers and the Browns – and as the Browns are big underdogs – again!!! We thought the dog pound in Cleveland might need a little help. So we got Ian ready... here's a 'little help'!!



Some of my Pittsburgh friends thought this was just getting him an early start in being a loser, but I look at it as a character builder. I mean, it is way too easy to be a Steelers fan with all those superbowl rings. Now, being a Cleveland fan... that's a character builder! Game's on!!

I want to open today with a quote from CS Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 'The Great Sin' (p. 109,110):

"There is one vice of which no man in the world is free; which every one in the world loathes when he sees it in someone else; and of which hardly any people, except Christians, ever imagine that they are guilty themselves..."

Do you know what it is?

I have heard people admit that they are bad tempered, or that they cannot keep their heads about girls or drink, or even that they are cowards. I do not think that I have ever heard anybody who is not a Christian accuse himself of this vice. At the same time I have very seldom met anyone, who was not a Christian, who showed the slightest mercy to it in others. There is no fault that makes a man more unpopular, and no fault which we are more unconscious of in ourselves.

Do you know what it is? It is **pride**.

In Christian teaching it is **the worst of all the sins**. Lewis says '*Pride leads to every other vice; it is the complete anti-God state of mind.*'

Seem exaggerated? Well, think about it a bit. Lewis asks, "*How much do you like it when other people snub me, or refuse to take notice of me, or shove their oar in, or show off?*" p.110

What is offended at times like that is our pride. Of all the sins, pride is the one that is **essentially competitive**. Pride doesn't just say you are smart, or strong, or beautiful. It says you are smarter, stronger, more beautiful. It is the Pharisee Jesus pointed to who prayed,

"I thank you Father that I am not like that man..."

What is pride? **Counting yourself better than others**. It leads you to **boast** about what you have and what you do.

The Corinthians are infected with pride, spiritual pride... The **headline** for their pride was the word '**wisdom**', which in ancient Greek culture was shorthand for an **exalted and secret knowledge** of God and the

mysteries of spiritual life.

They came from this culture, and when Paul brought the gospel it seemed to many of them that this gospel was exactly the **secret knowledge** that they were looking for. That might have been true, but then they did something very destructive with it. They thought that because they had this secret knowledge, they were **better than everyone else**. Better than the unbelievers around them. Better than their leaders. Better than each other. Better than their Apostle. Better than the Bible. And so they fought and quarreled, and ripped up the church.

Pride leads to the illusion of independence & self-sufficiency. *"it is the complete anti-God state of mind."*

Look at verse 21 with me...

For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.

1 Corinthians 1:21

We think we are smart, smarter, smartest, but we are not! What is true, and painfully evident as we walk through the years of our life, is that we are **not as smart as we thought**. the world did not know God through wisdom... We are not up to the task of life. Our wisdom is broken, darkened, 'fallen'.

There is a great **story about a boy scout and a molecular biologist and a pastor who were taking a small plane ride**. Half way through the flight the **pilot** got out of his seat and said, "the engine has died, we are going to crash, there are only three parachutes and I'm taking one!" He opened the door and jumped out! The **molecular biologist** looked at the scout and the pastor and said, 'You probably don't know this, but I am the smartest man in the world and I know all about the secrets of life and the world really needs me.' And he grabs another parachute and jumps out. The **pastor and the scout** look at each other. The **pastor** says, 'Son, I've lived a long life, God has been very good to me, and I know I will be with him when I die. You take the last chute and go.' The

boy scout replies, "No need to do that, pastor." "Why not?", said the pastor. "Well," the boy scout said, "The smartest man in the world just grabbed my backpack and jumped out with it. We still have two chutes left."

Sometimes you think you are so smart and then find yourself freefalling through space on a collision course with life – and you realize you are not so smart after all!

Part of the task of the gospel is to **free us from our pride**. God wants to help us get over ourselves. Look at vs 19:

For it is written,

*"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart."*

1 Corinthians 1:19

Paul quotes Isaiah (29) from a series of chapters where he God warns Israel not to **match wits with God**, not to think that you are smarter than God. Israel was always doing that. People always do that. It is a **heart thing**, a default position of the fallen human heart, where **we think we are smarter and stronger than God**. But sometimes you can find yourself in a freefall and **your parachute isn't working**.

I wonder if you have noticed this: that **the gods of the 'wise' are never very merciful**, never very compassionate to the unworthy. They often become the gods of the elite and deserving. This has played out in history in the XX century in brutal ways, with the slaughter of 10's of millions of people in Russia and China who **just didn't get it**. Not bright enough, or re-educated enough, or strong enough. It happens everytime people begin to think that they are the smartest and the strongest – and that others don't match up.

How God destroys the wisdom of the wise is to **turn it on its head**. To 'flip' it, to create a way of salvation that is **a contradiction** to human wisdom, **an antidote** to human pride.

God is using the cross of Jesus to bring down human pride, and to bring mercy to undeserving people. He is reminding the Corinthians of this, and he cites **two pieces of evidence...**

1. God's Savior

For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles

1 Corinthians 1:22-23

There is no doubt about **what kind of savior that Israel** was looking for – a king like David, a liberator, a leader who could rally the people and throw off the Roman yoke. A charismatic kind who could rally the people against the Roman oppressors and restore Israel to her ancient glory.

There is no doubt about **what kind of savior the Greeks** were looking for- someone who was eloquent, elite, articulate, smooth – who could speak persuasively about high and lofty things, who could move crowds with secret knowledge and lofty truth.

But what did they get? A crucified Messiah

You have to take a moment and lock into this and recapture **how offensive** the idea of **a crucified messiah** was to the Jews – and to the surrounding gentile culture.

- The **Jews were looking for power**. And the cross is not power. It is weakness. And scandal. And judgment. Where is the power in a Jew who can't keep himself off a Roman cross?
- The **Gentiles were looking for wisdom**, but a crucified savior doesn't calculate. Where is the wisdom in that?

This becomes what Paul would call, 'the offense of the cross'. The offense is an **intentional contradiction**. It is designed to **deliberately offend something offensive** in us – the idea that we are smart enough or strong enough to deal with life on our own.

So what God does is to **take something that appears to us weak**

and foolish and absurd, the crucifixion, and make it the place where he pours out his mercy and his strength. The result is that...

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

1 Corinthians 1:25

Surprise! Surprise!

His second piece of evidence is...

2. God's People

For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, 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;

1 Corinthians 1:26-27 (ESV)

His second piece of evidence is the Corinthians themselves.

1.26-31: ***consider your call, brethren...***

in human...wisdom not many were wise

in human...power not many were powerful

in human...privilege not many were of noble birth

But he chose us! Why? Partly to bring down human pride. To end the boasting.

Just a side note here. Note the little letter 'm'. Paul says 'not many' not 'not any'! Because most of them (but not all of them) were from what we would call the **under-privileged culture**. They hadn't had the best educations, the best advantages, the most opportunity.

And Paul is saying that **this is an intentional thing**. God is using the kind of people that we are to end human boasting. He is saying that God has a preference for **normal** people, **ordinary** people, **broken** people, **suffering** people. **Surprise! Surprise!**

People who feel the difficulty of life are more open to the gospel.

Chuck Swindoll:

*"I've lived long enough to be convinced that suffering is not an enemy. It seems strange to put it this way, but the truth is, suffering is a friend. Not until we acknowledge that will we glean its benefits. Job is living in the crucible. His misery in that difficult arena has forced him to focus on things that really matter. I have finally come to realize that one of the benefits of going through times of suffering is that **my focus turns vertical**. Here's the point: when flat on your back, the only way to look is up."*

The cracks in your life let God's light in. And then you see it:

He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption;
1 Corinthians 1:30

It's all him. All from him and all about him and all unto him. And if we are going to brag about anything – let's be bragging about Christ!

I want to introduce you to someone... **ArchBishop Peter Akinola**, primate of Nigeria, spiritual father to 20 million Anglicans. I was reading an online interview with him yesterday. He is the primary leader of the Global South movement in Anglicanism that is challenging the dominance of the Americans. He is a great guy. The Americans just can't get over how uppity these Africans are!



In 2006 and 2007, *Time* listed you as one of the 100 most influential people in the world. How do you reconcile the status

of a primate in the Anglican Communion with the call to humility and servanthood?

I suppose my background helps me to achieve that. My father died December 12, 1948 when I was barely five years old; my mother never went to any school, and so when I left primary school in 1959 there was no one to even pay my fees to go to secondary school. I was on my own then, struggling through life to get to where I am today. From time to time I ask myself: '**Peter, who do you think you are?**' and I remind myself of who I know I am. As we say in my country, I have been 'hewed out of the rocks'. I have **no claim** whatsoever to glory, to glamour, to superstar syndrome - I'm not into such things - and so I have no choice but to be humble. Let me be blunt with you: **I'm a nobody, all right?**

Look at Jesus Christ, my Lord and Saviour, whom I serve, who has called me to serve him, who has made me whom he has made me! Look at the pattern of his life! He stooped to conquer. He had the power to turn the nails on the cross into common thread, but he didn't do it. He had the power to bring down soldiers from heaven to destroy his enemies. He didn't do it. Rather, he subjected himself to inhuman treatment. But then on the third day God raised him from the dead and gave him his name that is above every name.

And that for me is the principle of life - as he himself said: 'He who humbles himself will be exalted. And he who exalts himself will be abated.' So, I believe that and I practice that.

We are just little people, who love a great savior.