

5. From junk to masterpiece

July 1, 2018

I am sure that you all had an occasion or two to see some beautiful paintings of an old barn with a tattered roof, broken hinged doors, shattered windows, and paint peeled off from its wall. If we see it in real life, we would say, "This is an ugly place to be." But somehow, a great artist uses this old barn as his object and paints it, it becomes a masterpiece. What happened to the barn? The barn is still same old ugly barn. But in the painting, it is so peaceful and seems like it has a load of histories to tell you. Nothing changed in the barn itself, but the artist beautified it and gave life into the image of the old barn. That's like us with our God. We were nothing more than that old tattered barn. But God put a new life into us, so that we may become new creations in Christ Jesus.

Apart from Christ, we are nothing as Jesus taught us in the Gospel of John chapter 15. But once our Lord gets hold of our lives, our transformation starts. Our Lord goes to work like a master artist who changed the image of the old ugly barn to the place we'd love to be.

At first, our transformation is hardly noticeable. But in time, His artistry begins to glisten. People look and admire, some perplexed about how the change took place... others clearly seeing the handiwork of God in our lives. As much as we might want to take credit for our makeover, deep within we know that the Lord deserves all the recognition. He has made us useful and approachable. He has molded our worthless lives into priceless works of art for His own glory.

However, sometimes we forget our sinful beginnings. Our pride stands up and parades our spiritual charms. We act as if God performed great work on us because we gave Him high-quality material to start with. In other words, we behave just like the Corinthian Christians did.

In 1 Corinthians 1:26-2:5, the apostle Paul sets the record straight. He reminds us if were it not for God's gracious intervention in our lives, we would still be spiritual ugly barns.

A. THE FACTS

1 Corinthians 1:26-29 For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. 27 But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; 28 and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, 29 that no flesh should glory in His presence.

People including us, like to talk about the best parts of their lives – supposedly good 'ole days. But reminding them about the worst time of their lives is not exactly pleasant to hear from their point of view. Paul started this part of his rebuke by giving these prideful Corinthians the hard facts about their call. With few exceptions, these believers were on the bottom rung of the social ladder. They were nothing but door hinges, tattered roof, and broken glass of the ugly barn. Even so, out of grace, our God stooped to paint them and made them one of His masterpieces.

Listen, the Gospel of God's grace leaves no room for personal boasting. Unlike us, God is not impressed with our looks, our social position, our achievements, our natural heritage, or our financial status.

One of the things we study in our Inductive Bible Study sessions in the Midweek services is noticing the repeated word in the Scriptures we read. I asked you to underline "*God has chosen*" that was repeated 3 times. That is a phrase with a meaning of determining intention from God's part, but it has nothing to do with ours.

Such grace should remind us that the artist, not the art, should get the honor. Why has He bothered to make any of us valuable? God will not tolerate the proud. So He steps on the proud and arrogant upper echelon by lifting up the dregs of society as honored citizens of His kingdom.

Pride is self-deification. Let's be honest. It is that competitive drive within to be richer, cleverer, better-looking, or more powerful than someone else. We like the feeling and recognition that comes from standing above the rest. And we seek these pleasures in everything we do – including our pursuit of God.

These 4 verses are very personal to me. Let me tell you my own story. The Lord called me to be a pastor around late 1990s. I was excited, but at the same time, I was very scared. I loved to study the Word of God and loved to teach it to others. That hasn't changed. Though I was a lay pastor for the prison inmates at the Arizona State Prison Wilmot Complex for a long time, it's a completely different story to be a pastor of a church outside.

In 2000, I felt that the Lord called me to start a Bible study in Sahuarita which I couldn't even pronounce properly at that time. A pastor in Tucson who had much influence on me told me that I shouldn't start a church. Behind me, the same pastor asked some of my friends if I was good enough to teach the Bible because of my broken English. When I heard the story from that friend, I was disheartened and confused. I thought that I misread the Lord's call in me. This confusing time lasted about a year.

Through much prayer and encouragement for those who were around me, the call of God was affirmed and we started the Bible study with 8 people in 2001, including me and Karen, my wife. Instead of folding up and quitting, our church continuously grew. The pastor who discouraged me at the beginning, reluctantly acknowledged the call of God in me.

A couple of years later, I went to a Calvary Chapel Senior Pastors' Conference in Southern California. One of the pastors whom I've known blurted out to me, "When are you going to start to speak good English?" I thought that pastors are supposed to encourage, build up, and correct, not tear down. Obviously not!

Yes, I do have a couple of complexes – my language and education. No, I don't speak perfect English, but I realize that even those who make fun of my broken English speak with bad grammar and not so good English. No, I don't have a Bible college degree and seminary degree to show off, but I do have the call of God as a pastor which, in my opinion, is more important than degrees.

Some pastors have long range plans and visions – how they are going to take their churches in the future. I don't. First of all, I don't know how long I am going to live

and I don't care to live long. But I do have one non-negotiable plan that I may teach the Word of God to you faithfully week after week, so that you guys become the best fed and most loved sheep in the world, not because I am a good preacher or a pastor, rather because our God choose to speak to you through the most unworthy and most unqualified man.

If you learn the Word of God through me, people would realize that it is obviously the Lord, not the speaker. And I love it.

Just a side note, at no extra charge: Please do not make fun of other people's short-coming or handicaps in physical, emotional, and spiritual ways. You might think that it is funny, but to the person who was teased by you is hurting inside. If you feel that you must make fun of someone, pick on yourself – self-deprecating humor. It's good for your humility. By doing so, you don't take yourself seriously.

B. THE STARK CONTRASTS

1 Corinthians 1:30-31 But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God—and righteousness and sanctification and redemption— 31 that, as it is written, "He who glories, let him glory in the Lord."

The world looks for heroes; God seeks the humble. The world is impressed by power, prestige, and money; God is impressed only by Christ – the gentlest, most humble person who ever walked the earth. Therefore, God has given His Son preeminence over all creation and made Him our wisdom.

Christ is our righteousness; through Him we are justified, released from the penalty of sin. – Romans 3:21-26

Christ is our sanctification; through Him we are made holy, liberated daily from sin's power. – 1 Thessalonians 4:7, 1 Peter 1:1-2

Christ is also our redemption; through Him we are glorified and freed forever from sin's presence. – Romans 8:23, Revelation 21:9-22:5.

Alone, we are nothing. But in Christ, we are invaluable. The difference lies in Him, not us. Thus, if we boast at all, we should boast in Him.

Why does God use foolish people to shame the wise in the world? Because the foolish people cannot claim that their accomplishments are done by themselves. They themselves and the people around them can see that it is from God and give the glory to Him. Does it mean that God is a glory hog? No, He is not. If we give glory to a man and put that person on a pedestal, we would tend to put our hope in that man more than God. People can and will let you down one way or another. God will never let you down. In His love for us, God tells us to put our entire hope in Him, give Him glory, so we won't be disappointed by Him.

C. THE APOSTLE PAUL'S MESSAGE, METHOD, AND MOTIVE

1 Corinthians 2:1-5 And I, brethren, when I came to you, did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God. 2 For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. 3 I was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling. 4 And my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, 5 that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

1) Message – v1

Although Paul was a deep thinker and a good debater, he could not match the oratorical skills and commanding presence of an Apollos. But this didn't matter to him, because his goal was to highlight one message: "Jesus Christ, and Him crucified." Nothing else was a matter to him.

2) Method – v2 and 3

When Paul served the Corinthians, he did so *"in weakness and in fear and with much trembling."* This forced Paul to depend on the Lord perhaps more than he ever had before. The result was staggering. What he lacked in courage and talent, God made up in His power. As Paul spoke, the Gospel brought people of Corinth to their knees and they found the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

The Holy Spirit moved into shops, homes, temples, synagogues, and alleys. People came and listened to unimpressive Paul, and many walked away singing God's praises. Like Paul, we may not be fearless souls or great public speakers, but then we don't have to be. The Lord will reveal His strength through our weakness and inadequacies. All He asks is that we rely on Him as we carry out the tasks He has for us. It is not ability of men, but men's availability to God.

Zechariah 4:6 "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit," says the Lord Almighty.

3) Motive – v4 and 5

Couldn't the apostle Paul take speech lessons from the expert in communication or oratory skill of his day? Could he not come up with spellbinding arguments, fancy clever punch lines, and punctuating jokes to wow his audience?

One time I listened to a pastor's teaching. He spoke 45 minutes. But his first 30 minutes were filled with jokes that had his congregation in stitches. If that is one of the reasons why people go to church, they should stay home and watch the Comedy Central channel on TV. People should go to church to hear from God and be convicted and bring glory to the Lord with their changed life, not to hear funny joke lines.

Someone said to the group of pastors, "If you want to be popular, preach happiness. If you want to be unpopular, preach holiness."

Human ingenuity and rhetorical flourish will never bring people to salvation. Only the simplicity of the Gospel coupled with the work of the Spirit can humble people and lead them to redemption.

D. APPLICATIONS

1) Remember the pit.

God is molding us into priceless works of art, perfect images of His Son. But let's never forget that He found us in the spiritual garbage dump of human depravity – without purpose, significance, or hope.

2) Refuse the praise.

If we were to take credit for what God has done through us, we would be like sculptures accepting applause for the sculptor's genius. But when appreciation for how we've benefited the people around us, we should answer them simply, "Thank you, praise the Lord!"

False humility is worse than a showy display of our supposed superiority. Rather, we should offer a simple "Thank you," humbly recognizing that we are nothing without Him.

3) Recognize the Master.

We are not remaking ourselves – God is. He is following His design and using His tools. We are simply broken and bent materials He has graciously chosen to transform.

4) Rest in God's power.

Until we become like Christ, imperishable and immortal in soul and body, we are sinful and fragile. Circumstances will threaten to chip us, crack us, even shatter us. But if we rely on God to empower us, we will be able to handle any situation He permits to come our way.