

I'm Most Proud Of... – 1 Corinthians 1:26-31

Pastor Colin Rieke – January 29, 2017

²⁶ 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. ²⁷ 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. ²⁸ God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, ²⁹ so that no one may boast before him. ³⁰ 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. ³¹ Therefore, as it is written: “Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.”

This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it,

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.” The opening lines of Charles Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities* could very well have described the era in which Jeremiah, the Old Testament prophet lived. Jeremiah was a prophet of God, who served as God’s mouthpiece to an unfaithful Israel. The Jews had lived in the Promised Land for several hundred years, and they had become complacent. The kings that ruled over Israel and Judah were by and large kings that sought their own glory and their own wealth, instead of remembering God. And this attitude filtered down to the people. There were many things that the Jews were proud of, not the least of which was pride in their nation.

Generally speaking, pride in a nation would be seen as a good thing, but in this case, the pride in their nation turned out to be their downfall. You see, Israel, like other nations in the Middle East often served as pawns to the world powers of Egypt, Assyria and Babylon. Babylon had imposed a tribute tax upon the land of Judah, which meant Judah had to pay Babylon a certain amount of money each year in order to not get invaded. Pride in their nation, the independent spirit of the Jews did not want this, and so they stopped paying their tribute. This is what caused the nation of Babylon to fight against Judah.

But what looked like a normal turn of events from an earthly perspective – a more powerful nation coming to impose its will on a weaker nation – had a deeper spiritual meaning. It was not just that Judah was a weaker nation, but this invasion came as a result of Israel and Judah’s rebellion not against Babylon, but their rebellion against God. After Kings David and Solomon, the Jewish people had very few kings that listened to God. And this is why God sent prophets, like Jeremiah, to warn the people of the coming judgment of God through the nation of Babylon. And it was Jeremiah who spoke the words that were alluded to in our second lesson from Corinthians this morning, to remind the Israelites where their strength should lie. **“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 him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight,”**

These were the words that Paul had in mind when he addressed the troubled congregation of Corinth in the first chapter of his letter. And these words really ask one important question to the Corinthians. They serve as an important question to us as well. It's the question, "Of what are you most proud?" And so, I want you to ponder that, and how would you complete the sentence: "I'M MOST PROUD OF ..."

Like the Israelites a few hundred years before, the Corinthians also had reason to be proud. Like I mentioned two weeks ago, the city of Corinth was a melting pot of culture and ideas. Some would have been proud of their Roman citizenship, some would have been proud of their Jewish heritage. Within the church in Corinth we saw how individuals took pride in which pastor they liked most. From the rest of the letter, we can presume that some were proud that they didn't sin in such gross and visible ways, while there were others who were proud that they were so advanced in their Christian faith that they were tolerant of all sorts of actions that others would consider sinful. In short, there were many things that the Corinthians were proud of.

So about what was Paul writing to them? It was not about all of the things they took pride in, but in what they took most pride in, well actually, what they didn't take most pride in. You see, the Corinthian church was most proud of things that were not dissimilar to the other people living in Corinth. They took pride in and sought after more money, more power, more privilege. And Paul had to remind them that this isn't what matters, this isn't what counts. And so he wrote, **"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."** If the Corinthians were taking pride in these things, there were others out there who had more reason to be proud than they were.

Because another way of saying "of what are you most proud?" is asking "on what is your foundation?" "What is it that gives your life meaning?" Those in the Corinthian church I'm sure were proud they were Christians, but that wasn't what they were most proud of. Instead, they were letting other things become their foundation. And it was a foundation that was crumbling.

I don't think life is very different for us today in America, is it. I'm sure there are many things that you are proud of. I'm sure many of you are proud of your family or your kids, I'm sure many of you are proud of your home, proud of your job, proud of your possessions, and hopefully even proud of your church. But how would you finish the statement: "I AM MOST PROUD OF..."? This is not a trick question, and many people could give the right answer if required to on a test. But I want you to think about how you answer that question not only with your mouth, but with your life, with the choices you make, with the priorities you set. Where does your foundation lie?

I don't think we're that dissimilar than the Corinthians a few thousand years ago. Like us, they probably cherished their church, even though there were struggles. But like us, they had lots of other things going on as well, lots of other things that sought to crowd out the goal of the church. They built on a mixed foundation, and so do we. It's easy to see this evidenced by the lives that we live. If our foundation was completely upon Christ, things like money problems, marriage problems, and emotional problems wouldn't phase us. Or how much do you lose hope or lose faith when you hear about the latest political bombshell, when you become discouraged by an inappropriate comment made towards you or a

loved one? Perhaps, it's the ways we don't feel affected that are the most dangerous. When we can watch a "PG13" or "R" rated movie and not notice the overabundance of crude language or violence. When we plan out our schedules or our budgets which are filled with activities and expenses, but barely room for God or his Word.

When this is our foundation, when we chase after these things, we're bound to be disappointed by them. Because many of us are not wise by human standards, not many of us are influential, not many were born into a rich family. But far from being something that we should despair over, Paul tells the Corinthians to rejoice in this fact. **"God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things to nullify the things that are."**

Think about it this way. If we are full of ourselves, if we are full of our accomplishments, if we are full of the things that we are proud of, there leaves no room for God. And it's only when we empty ourselves, it's only when we realize our weaknesses, it's only when we remember who we are, that we can be filled up by God. And when we have been filled up by God, when we have God place us on the solid foundation of Christ, when we are most proud of our God and what he has done, we cannot lose. This is why Paul quoted Jeremiah by saying, **"Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."**

And we don't even have to boast that we chose God. Rather we can boast that God chose us. We can trust not in our own strength but in God's strength. And when our foundation is upon Christ and what he has done, we don't have to worry about our sins, for they have been covered over. We don't have to wonder if God loves us, because he already did. We don't have to be afraid of that foundation being broken, because it never will be. By the world's standards, we may never amount to very much. We may be accused of being backwards thinking, we may be accused of being anti-science, we may be belittled for not taking advantage of situations. But we have the wisdom of Christ. We have the wisdom of knowing where we will be going after we die, and that is far more valuable than those things the world values.

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Now, before you go off thinking that Pastor Rieke doesn't want you to be proud of anything else in this world except God, listen here. We still can and will have things that we are proud of here in this world. There's nothing wrong with being proud of your kids, there's nothing wrong with being proud of your family, there's nothing wrong with having prized possessions. But recognize their place. Recognize that these are gifts of God that he has placed into your life.

And the same thing goes for anyone who is or strives to be wise and learned in various career fields, those who are influential in our midst, those who were born with a certain status. There's nothing wrong with learning as much you possibly can. There's nothing wrong with being influential in our world. There's nothing wrong with coming from money. Recognize that those too are gifts of God to be used in service to him.

What I do want you to go away thinking about is not what you can't be proud of, but rather what I'M MOST PROUD OF. I'M MOST PROUD OF not my own accomplishments or accolades, but rather I'M

MOST PROUD OF my God. I want to better learn to trust in God's strength – like Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego did in our first lesson. I want to better learn to trust in God's strength when my own strength fails. And most of all, I want to trust in God's strength to get me to heaven. Amen.