

### ***Winners and Losers***

In the name of him who is for us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, dear friends in Christ: Everyone wants to be a winner. No one wants to be a loser. But sometimes it's hard to tell who or what is going to be which. I mean, take the last presidential election. One candidate supposedly had the race in the bag. It was as good as done – a slam dunk. All the pollsters, papers, pundits, and prognosticators said so. The other candidate they said was joke. No way he could win. Then he did, and that quite handily. Only five days before that, in another stunning upset, the Chicago Cubs broke their 108 year losing streak to win the World Series. Naturally fans of the Cubs (a special breed of people who seem to thrive on big dreams and bitter disappointments) were elated.

So, like I said, sometimes it's hard to pick the winners. And it's even harder if you don't know the rules of the game. A month or so ago I was involved in a card game with some of you. When it was done, I claimed victory. After all, I had the highest score. The trouble is it was one of those games in which points count against you. I wasn't in first place; I was in last. And yes, I was joking about winning.

But suppose someone were playing a game like that and didn't know that points counted against them. Why, they'd be trying to run up their score not knowing that with each point they garnered they were actually getting farther behind. Thinking themselves to be winners, they'd be making themselves losers.

This is precisely the problem that the Apostle Paul is addressing in today's Epistle lesson from his letter to the Christian church at Corinth. It was one messed up congregation. We heard a bit of it in last week's reading from the same letter. Paul was taking them to task for the deep divisions that they'd allowed to fracture their church into competing groups, each one claiming some kind of superiority over the others. Like the disciples of Jesus who were always squabbling among themselves about which of them was the greatest, the rival parties in the Corinthian church were contending for top honors in one category or another. "We're more spiritual" one group would say. "We have the most and best good works" said another. "Our wisdom and understanding of theology are the best" claimed a third. Others were saying they had the Holy Spirit in greater measure because they could speak in tongues (or so they claimed). And so it was going, each faction claiming bragging rights for itself and belittling and looking down on the others.

Paul said, in effect, what is wrong with you people? There aren't supposed to be divisions like this in the church. You are to be united in Christ in the same mind and the same judgment, all confessing together the same truth.

Today's text overlaps the section we heard last week; the last two verses we heard then are today's first two. And what Paul is showing is how the members of the congregation have imported a worldly way of thinking into the church. They were applying the wisdom and rules we live by in the world out there to how we do things in here in the fellowship of faith. And it won't work. Here the wisdom and rules are different.

Outside, in the world, everyone tries to promote themselves. We want to pride ourselves in our accomplishments. We lust after fame, wealth, power, and glory. We're always trying to

prove ourselves worthy of honor and recognition. We have our trophy cases and “I love me walls” on which we hang the tokens of our achievements: the pictures, diplomas, certificates, ribbons, medals, and other bric-a-brac that tell us how much we are appreciated. Oh, and we do the comparisons. Not only are we constantly rating ourselves, we’re rating everyone else too to see how well we stack up against them. And it’s funny how it works: the measure we use on others is usually a lot more demanding than the one we use on ourselves. It’s easier to see their faults than our own.

These are the rules and wisdom the world lives by. And to a certain extent it works. It’s what drives business and competition. It’s what makes some leaders and others followers. It’s what produces great works of art and literature, what causes advances in science and technology, and what drives people to work hard to get ahead. It’s what makes the world go ‘round.

The problem comes when we think that what works out there ought to work here in the church as well. Sure, the goals are different. Out there we strive to be successful. In the church the goal is to be righteous, to stand before the Lord in a spiritually successful sort of way. Applying the same principles, then, we know we have to work at: work hard to keep the commandments, struggle mightily to overcome sin and temptation, and labor to offer the Lord gifts or good deeds worthy of his recognition – and therefore to our own honor and reward. And the standard of measure we use to evaluate our progress? Not the perfect demands of God’s Law, no, that’s too difficult. Instead we measure how we’re doing compared to everyone else – or at least to how we judge them to be doing. And it’s funny how it works: everyone rates themselves above average or better. That in turn leads to contentious competition and infighting as each one tries to prove their own superiority and worth to the others, which is exactly what the church at Corinth was experiencing.

Paul shuts this way of thinking down. He says the world in its wisdom did not know God. No, if you look at human history, the tendency of our race has been to turn away from God. I mean, at certain points everyone was a believer – like when it was only Adam and Eve, or when Noah and his family got off the ark. And yet, in both cases, within just a few generations, people had created their own religions and their own false gods. Fallen human wisdom turned them from the Creator to worship created things. The same is true in the history of Israel. At certain points, like when they passed through the Red Sea or when they crossed the Jordan into the Promised Land, everyone believed. And yet very shortly thereafter they began to go after other gods. Worldly wisdom does not lead to God; it leads us away from him.

But God has a different kind of wisdom that governs his church. It’s the wisdom of the cross. The wisdom of the world is that of achievement, of doing things worthy of honor, of accomplishing something to be proud of. It’s the wisdom of the Law. The wisdom of the cross is that of pure grace. It’s the wisdom of the Gospel that says God did for you what you could not possibly do for yourself. It’s the wisdom that says as a sinner, you are incapable of doing anything pleasing to God. Nothing you are, you have, or you can do is worthy to be offered him. Quite the contrary, all that fills his nostrils with a foul stench. He regards our imagined righteous deeds as filthy rags. But in Christ Jesus, God in mercy did it all for you. God sent his Son to become our brother in human flesh, to live a perfect life on our behalf, and then to surrender his life on the cross as the sacrifice for sin. That’s the wisdom of the cross by which we are made righteous and become heirs of salvation not by doing but by believing what God has done for us.

The world looks at this wisdom and declares it to be folly. “What? God becomes a man? Makes himself a Jewish carpenter? And then goes on a quick three-year preaching tour that ends in his death—the horrific and humiliating death of crucifixion? God dies for us on a cross? And therein lies our salvation? I don’t have any part to play myself? That’s not a religion. That’s insanity! It’s utter nonsense!”

Yes. But to us who are being saved by the proclamation of these foolish truths, Paul says, it is the power of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

And thus, it is that the rules and wisdom we live by in the church are different. Here we live by the wisdom of the cross. This wisdom says that our own score on the righteousness scale is always at best zero. The righteousness we have is that imputed to us by Christ through faith. We stand before the Lord only in *his* sinless perfection. And here’s where we go wrong: if now having come to faith in Christ, I start thinking that it’s up to me to do things that are pleasing to God, that is, I continue to think in worldly ways and assume that to some degree my standing before the Lord depends on what I do or don’t do, then what I’m actually doing is transferring some of the honor due to Christ alone to myself. Like the pagans, I begin to worship the creature (me) instead of the Creator and Redeemer. Thinking my score is going up, it’s actually going down into the negative numbers because I’m practicing idolatry and I think I’m doing right.

Now, don’t misunderstand me: I’m not saying we shouldn’t do things that are good and in accord with God’s Law. We should love and care for each other as brothers and sisters in Christ. But nothing we do however helpful or outwardly noble will ever count toward our righteousness before God. Thinking that it does – and we all do it – is idolatry of the self: a sin that we need to repent of. It’s easy enough to see our obvious sins; that is, our violations of God’s Law. It’s a lot harder to see the sin of prideful presumption that we have something to boast about before the Lord. And that’s what makes the sin of our so-called good works that much more dangerous and deadly.

Everyone wants to be a winner. Here in the church, you win by losing. You lose your ability to boast about anything that you are or have done. You lose your sense of self-esteem and any notion of your own goodness or worthiness. You lose your right to judge others or to consider them worse or lower than yourself. You lose it all. And so, losing, you gain everything. You gain Christ. You gain his righteousness and sanctification and redemption. You gain the crown of life. And you gain something to boast about: not yourself, but Jesus Christ the Lord. In his holy name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***