

“The Contradiction of Christ”

1 Corinthians 1:18-25; Matthew 5:1-12

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Some of you might be familiar with the term ‘writer’s block.’ I’m sure that some of you have likely experienced it yourself. When you just can’t seem to get on track to begin a writing project. One’s mind is cluttered with so much stuff, so many distractions, that you’re not focusing as well as needed. Well, as I struggled with that on Friday... in the midst of pondering challenging, even contradictory words of Jesus and Paul about what it means to be ‘blessed’ and ‘foolish’... I went to a place where you go to purge your head, where you will encounter subject matter that requires very little thought: FACEBOOK. A popular pastime in our nation... and world... that could be considered by those same words in Scripture: ‘blessed’ and ‘foolish.’ That ‘exercise’ (NOT In the physical sense of the word) that I have always been leary of for its sneaky time-consuming nature. ‘Face-stalking’ can be as addictive as any drug... electronic cocaine, if you will. AND YET... in ‘moderation’... one can definitely come away more ‘blessed’ than ‘foolish’...

Besides the number of posts that made some reference to LSU... either the 50th anniversary of ‘Pistol Pete’ Maravich becoming the all-time scorer in NCAA basketball history, or this year’s National Championship team (most of the latter costing money)... or the many that were celebrating birthdays or other very important personal happenings... there were some that really did make me think. Or Laugh. Or both. A few examples:

The Star Wars version of “Y.O.L.O.” - “Only Once You Live” – Yoda

In theological subjects, “Atheism could be defined as a ‘non-prophet organization’”; and, that “anyone who believes in Total Depravity can’t be all bad”...

A t-shirt bore the following inscription: ‘WWII Vet’s son – most people don’t meet their war heroes... I was raised by mine.’

And then there was the young man who was in our church youth group in BR who went on to be an ordained Presbyterian minister, who shared the book that was most influential in his growth in ministry: Not “The Peter Principle,” but St. Peter’s Principle: Leadership for those who already know they’re incompetent. Ironically, it was written by a guy also named ‘Peter’ (Lillback).

And finally, a post that I found on page of a name known well to most of you... the ‘Facebook frequent flyer’ himself, John Wamsley: “I always thought for teacher to say ‘Don’t get smart with me’ was counter-productive”...

THE POINT? What we hear or read others say can have many effects: bring us **joy** and **laughter**; make us think about its **truth** or **falsehood**; poignantly **touched** by emotion; be **puzzled** by its meaning; **cast away** as without value. And these were all indeed different reactions to the very words of Jesus, and of Paul. And while we should be careful NEVER to ‘cast away’ ANY of God’s Word as ‘without value,’ we can, hopefully, be ‘touched by its emotion’... and experience JOY... and maybe even LAUGHTER. Today’s two passages, however, could offer more of a ‘puzzlement’... ones that ‘make us think’ about how true they are to us. For while we may be familiar with old sayings like ‘**only the strong survive**,’ in part because they are ‘**worldly wise**,’ our Scriptures tell us that “**God has made foolish the wisdom of the world,**” and that “**the meek** (not ‘the strong’) **shall be inherit the earth.**” Sometimes what God instructs us to do flies in the face of ‘conventional wisdom’... even in the ‘wisdom’ of Social Media.’ 😊 How do we reconcile what the world considers ‘strength’ and ‘wisdom’ with “**The Contradictions of Christ?**”

First, though, let us consider how God’s truths were taught in this most holy ‘teachable moment’ known as “*The Sermon on the Mount.*” When we think of this event, what kind of attendance do you think this ‘plenary session’ to have had? Hundreds? Thousands? OK... what does the first verse say? **When Jesus saw the**

crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him.
(Matthew 5:1) AND? ***“Then he began to speak, and taught them.”*** (5:2)

Now I don't know about you, but it sure sounds like when Jesus saw ALL those people, he left them to go up the hillside and sat down. Was he tired? I think not. And WHO followed him? ***“His disciples came to him.”*** It doesn't say that the 'crowds' came to him. And when they came, ***“THEN he began to speak.”*** It looks to me like he was only speaking to the disciples. How many? So far in this Matthew narrative, we only know of Him 'recruiting' FOUR. Perhaps it just doesn't mention the other eight. But regardless, he is teaching these most valuable lessons not in the larger 'lecture class,' but in 'small group.' Which should remind us that the most valuable lessons will NOT be learned in church. As much as I wish that they would, I am a realist enough to know that most 'parishoners' will be more likely to remember the *closing hymn* than parts of the message. BUT, when you are a part of a small group, interacting, discussing, laughing, crying, *whatever...* you are more likely to have a meaningful, memorable experience. As we approach the Lenten Study, most appropriately entitled *“Time to Dream,”* I hope that you will all give serious consideration to the 'model' displayed by those first disciples... be they 4 OR 12... as to how to best follow Jesus.

As we listen to Jesus' teachings on the 'BE-ATTITUDES'... 'attitudes' that you should 'be' in order to be '**blessed**'... I personally think that most of them sound pretty reasonable. If one mourns, there will be those who comfort them. Especially God. If one shows mercy, they are more likely to have mercy shown in return. The pure in heart will see God? Sounds right. Peacemakers being called children of God? I'd say so. But now, this whole 'kingdom of heaven' belonging to the '**poor in spirit**'? Say WHAT? And the **meek** inheriting the earth? On WHOSE watch? I don't see too many 'meek' soldiers and law enforcement agents standing watch or out on patrol, either across town or around the world.

These statements don't sound like ones synonymous with terms like 'wisdom' and 'strength' to me. I'd say that they might appear... *contradictory*...

As we look closer at those two seemingly **deficient, inferior** descriptions of 'blessed' children of God... "***poor in spirit***" and "***meek***," are they REALLY? Is it truly an impoverished condition of the believer's spirit, or an acknowledgement of where he/she must go to *remedy* their condition? Is that heir to heaven and earth truly meek, passive, outwardly timid ... or that their strength is based on the One who dwells deep inside of them? "***Man looks at the outward appearance, but God looks at the heart.***" (1 Sam. 16:7)

Speaking of 'books,' I mentioned earlier that book that offered guidance for leaders who "already knew that they were incompetent." While this term may sound not too complimentary... 'contradictory,' in fact, to the excellence we aspire to as Christians... might this not speak more to the **humility**, the **wisdom**, the **strength** that Christ in truth embodied? Is not the first step to growing stronger recognizing one's weaknesses? In the words of the author, Peter Lillback, true leadership is exhibited "***when a man, knowing his incompetence, nevertheless seeks to meet his deficiencies through God's gracious gift of wisdom found in his Word.***" And, in addressing to what end true power and strength is exhibited, Mr. Lillback goes on to say that "...*the power of leadership should be used to **serve others**. Power wisely used is a tool, not an idol.*"

So, it would appear that the true test of our level of wisdom is our increasing awareness of our LACK of wisdom. 'The more we know, the more we know we *don't* know.' That the true 'fount of every blessing'... the source of all wisdom and strength... is "***through God's gracious gifts through his Word.***"

And, further, the way we best demonstrate ourselves to be 'powerful' men and women of God is to GIVE that power away. Our true strength lies not in how high esteem others hold us, but how we respect and care for others. 'Power wisely used is a tool, not an idol.' Much in the same way that Jesus himself, that 'Name above all

names,' would yet declare that He came ***“not to be served, but to serve, and to give himself a ransom for many.”*** (Mark 10:45)

In speaking of the human tendency for misplaced priorities, Paul said that ***≥*** ***“Jews demand signs (of power) and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified... but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.”*** (1 Corinthians 1:22-24) The Savior of the world... the One who ultimately would conquer the overwhelming power of sin and death... was a humble servant, the ‘Lamb of God,’ who would remain silent before his persecutors and suffer a brutal, humiliating death on a cross. And yet, this seemingly weak, foolish man would have the ultimate victory. One he claim for you and me... and that we, in turn, are to share in that victory with others.

In closing, I would leave you with two quotes from today’s passages:

“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” (Matthew 5:11-12) ‘Rejoice and be glad when people revile me, persecute me, speak evil against me?’ HOW COULD WE DO SUCH A CRAZY THING? ***For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.”*** (1 Corinthians 1:25) You want to test that ‘theory?’ Try sharing these thoughts with someone else to see what they think. Who knows... you might even see what you get by posting these on Facebook...