

Theme: Be a weak, insignificant fool and boast in the Lord.

This week I was attacked by the devil and the attack came from the unlikeliest of places. Message after message came at me ripe with the devil's lies. He was telling me exactly the things I wanted to hear, the things that pet my ego. Subtle little whispers, stuff like, *"Nothing you can't handle!" "You can do it and you know it!" "Buckled down and push forward!" "Bet on yourself,"* and maybe the most dangerous of them all, *"You got it in you!"*

I've never received quite such an onslaught of these messages and so I had to stop and ponder a moment the place where these attacks were coming from, the medium that the devil was using to speak to me, and the means he had hijacked in order to try to get me to sin. It wasn't his usual subjects. It wasn't blatant attacks from the TV or the internet or people in general. The attacks came from all things, my cough drop wrappers.

You see I started the week with a case of the sniffles and so I grabbed for the bag of *Halls Vitamin C Defense* drops and bam! The devil was on offense, after me with slogan after slogan about how good and strong I was, making me believe that I had the power to do everything I needed to. I just had to dig down deep within myself and summon the strength! Got a sermon to prepare this week? *"Nothing you can't handle!"* Feeling a little under the weather? *"Buckle down and push forward."* *"You got it in you!"* It was all within me.

Then I began to think about how prevalent that kind of thinking is in our midst. It comes from cough drop wrappers and it comes from renowned writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson, who said, *"What lies before us and what lies behind us are small matter compared to what lies within us. And when you bring what is within out into the world, miracles happen."* Or sometimes it comes from Disney hero princesses like Moana, *"Sometimes our strengths lie beneath the surface... Far beneath, in some cases."* And don't be fooled into thinking this is just coming from the new age, self-esteem movement. It's in the classic underdog tales too, like the Italian Stallion, Rocky Balboa, who says, *"It ain't about how hard you hit, but about how hard you can get hit and keep moving forward. How much you can take and keep moving forward. That's how winning is done."* Oh man, the first time I saw that speech, I felt like I was ready to eat raw eggs, run through the streets of Philadelphia, and go 12 rounds in a boxing match.

Now hearing those little mini-motivational speeches, you might wonder what the big deal is. It's just a little pep talk, a little boost, a little inspiration. But if you look a little closer, you'll find that each of those phrases is really an appeal to this natural born sixth sense inside you that makes you think you can do everything, you can handle everything, you are just fine all on your own, you've got the strength. The little sixth sense is so audacious that it even goes so far to say, *"You can save yourself."* Theologians sometimes call it by its Latin name, the *Opinio Legis*, the "Opinion of the Law". The Law tells me, *"Do this,"* so of course I must be able to do it.

When you try doing it that way, when you rely on your own strength, you will fall so flat on your face that no cough drop wrapper slogan or even Rocky Balboa himself will ever be able to pick you up. And the more capable you think you are, the stronger you are, the wiser and more significant you are in your own eyes, the harder you will run trying to accomplish it and the harder you will trip over the stumbling block that is Christ, and you will fall just as everyone before you has fallen short of God.

So today, the Apostle Paul stands before us and eviscerates this kind of “strength theology” that we love so much. He gives a beat down to the earthly wisdom and the “opinio legis” inside of us that says, “We’ve got it in us.” Paul’s call to us today is essentially this, our theme for today: **be a weak, insignificant fool and boast in the Lord.**

Now there’s meaning we have to attach to that so you don’t go home telling everyone, “Well, pastor told me to be a weak fool today, so I’m going to make a fool of myself.” Here’s the “who” and the “what” and the “why” of what Paul was talking about.

He says, **“Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many of you were influential, not many were of noble birth.”(1 Cor 1:26).** For the most part, the believers in Corinth weren’t from the upper crust of society. Maybe the congregation had a few here or there, but in general, they weren’t the wise philosophers or the prominent citizens of their city. Yet, those believers were living in a city and a society that put all those earthly things—wisdom, power, nobility—up on a pedestal. The Greeks were all about their search for wisdom and knowledge and philosophy, and not many of them would dare to stoop so low as to believe in something as foolish and weak as the message of Christ crucified.

That’s because the message of Christ demands for each person to admit to being a helpless sinner, worthy of death and hell, who must rely on Christ totally and completely without one ounce of human effort, wisdom or strength to contribute to the matter. For the “upper crust” Corinthians and the wise of this world, a message like that was appalling, it was below them, it was for the peasants and slaves and the masses, not for upper crust. A message like that was foolishness to the wise and in their supposed wisdom, they would perish.

“For God chose the foolish things of this 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—and the things that are not, to nullify the things that are.” God chose the have-not’s instead of the have’s, to shame the have’s. God chose the only way to be saved to be a way that nobody would be able to “handle on their own” or “buckle down and push forward” to achieve. God chose the foolish way so that no one would just be able “bet on themselves” for it. He chose people who were weak and insignificant and foolish enough to believe that God in his grace would do it all for them. **“God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to saved those who believe.”** (1 Corinthians 1:21).

Why did he do it all this way? Why did he shame the wise, the elite, the powerful? Isn’t that kind of mean to shame anybody? That’s what everybody says nowadays, right? Well think about what you are telling God when you say you’ve got it all on your own. God in mercy gives the costliest gift imaginably, his own Son as Savior. Now if you say, “Thanks but no thanks! I’ll take care of it myself!” Then you’re basically saying to God, “Shame on you, for thinking that I needed saving,” and you’re calling God a fool for spending everything on a gift you didn’t even need. And your calling Christ a fool too for being the Savior of those who didn’t need saving.

That's the way Martin Luther puts it. If you can save yourself, then **"What a fool was Christ, who shed his blood to purchase us for the Spirit"** ¹

No, the fact is that the whole world needs to be ashamed of itself because of sin, and every person humbled before God. It's those who are strong and the wise and the powerful in their own righteousness that are the least likely to realize they need God. That's why God did it this way, so that **"no one may boast before him."** No one may boast thinking that they had contributed to their own salvation.

Here's the final truth Paul is driving home, **"It is because of [God] that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness, and redemption."** (1:30). It is because of God that you are a believer. You weren't wise enough to choose it, or strong enough to achieve it, or noble enough to be born into it. You cannot by your own thinking or choosing, believe in Jesus Christ or come to him, but God the Holy Spirit called you by the gospel, the message of foolishness, the message of the cross—which is the power of God to us who are being saved.

Do you know what that means for you? You don't have to be strong to save yourself. You can be weak and broken, a total failure, and rely totally on Christ who is strong to save. He is your righteousness and holiness. Your salvation is not in you, it's in him. You don't have to prove yourself to be a "somebody!" You can be an insignificant nobody in this world and know that you were so significant to Christ that he purchased you with his own blood. He is your redemption! You don't have to find the wisdom that will wow the world. Christ has become for us wisdom from God. You can be a fool who knows nothing but Christ and him Crucified for the forgiveness of sins. That truth makes you wiser than any philosopher of this age. It makes you wise for salvation in the foolishness of God.

My friends, it's time to put down the burden of saving yourselves. Drop the act of having it all together all the time. You know that's nothing but a lie anyway. Pastors have to do it to! We love to make it look like we've got it all together all the time. No it's time for all of us to humble ourselves before God. As Paul says, **"Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."** (1 Cor 1:31). It's so much better that way anyway because we could never be certain about whether we'd done enough to save ourselves, but we can be certain about his work on our behalf. So be a weak, insignificant, fool, and know that he is your strength, that you are valuable in his eyes, and that those who trust in him will never be put to shame. **Be a weak, insignificant fool and boast in the Lord. Amen. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God. (Matthew 5:3)**

¹ Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*. Translated by J.I. Packer and O.R. Johnston, Grand Rapids, Baker Academic, 1957.