

Buzz King

buzz@BuzzKing.com

<https://BuzzKing.com>

1st Corinthians 4:8–13, New Living Translation

⁸ You think you already have everything you need. You think you are already rich. You have begun to reign in God's kingdom without us! I wish you really were reigning already, for then we would be reigning with you. ⁹ Instead, I sometimes think God has put us apostles on display, like prisoners of war at the end of a victor's parade, condemned to die. We have become a spectacle to the entire world—to people and angels alike. ¹⁰ Our dedication to Christ makes us look like fools, but you claim to be so wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are so powerful! You are honored, but we are ridiculed. ¹¹ Even now we go hungry and thirsty, and we don't have enough clothes to keep warm. We are often beaten and have no home. ¹² We work wearily with our own hands to earn our living. We bless those who curse us. We are patient with those who abuse us. ¹³ We appeal gently when evil things are said about us. Yet we are treated like the world's garbage, like everybody's trash—right up to the present moment.

Scripture in the landfill.

There is a one big difference between being a chaplain in a hospital and being the pastor of a church. As a pastor, I am blessed with being able to get to know people over an extended period of time, to develop relationships with them, to watch their children grow, and to help them confront medical, financial, and spiritual problems. But as a chaplain, I often see someone exactly once, for perhaps no more than twenty minutes. I frequently wonder what becomes of people after they leave the hospital. Did they fully recover? Were they able to

get on with their lives, despite a permanent disability or the diagnosis of a chronic disease? But every once in a while, someone is in the hospital for an extended period of time, or they return to the hospital over and over, and I see that person many times. Then, I might develop a more long-term relationship with them.

Recently, there was a man twenty or so years younger than me who was in the hospital for over two months. I saw him when he was first in the hospital, and as he progressed through a series of treatments, surgeries, and complications, he asked for me to see him again and again. The first time I saw him, he was in our oncology unit, having been diagnosed with metastasized pancreatic cancer. He had been undergoing chemotherapy for some time. The reason for his hospitalization was that he had developed a tumor in his colon, and it had caused a complete colon blockage. I talked to him the day after his emergency surgery. He was a quiet, thoughtful, and intelligent man, who had had to stop working because of his illness. He told me that when he was told that his cancer had spread, he would have stopped receiving treatment – but he had a son who was in high school and he dearly wanted to live long enough to see his son go off to college. But his son was only in his second year of high school and he realized that it was unlikely he would live that long. Still, he decided that he would do

everything he could to try to be there the day his son got his diploma. I am, as always, changing details of this story to protect this man's privacy.

We'll call him Alan. We only talked briefly during that first meeting, because he was very tired after having had major surgery to remove the blockage. One thing he told me that first day was that before he became sick, he and his wife volunteered for his church's street ministry; they gave food and blankets and clothing to people living on the street. He asked me to come back the next day, which I did. But things were not going well when I returned. He was suffering from a serious complication from his surgery and was about to go in for another one. He told me again that he wouldn't have put himself through all this if it weren't for his son. Alan asked me to pray with him, and I offered a prayer of healing, asking for a successful surgery. I asked God to relieve Alan of pain and anxiety, and to heal him. The surgery did not go well. There was yet another complication. In the end, Alan was in the hospital for almost two months, receiving chemo, having a series of surgeries, and receiving other treatments to try to keep him alive and comfortable. I got to know his wife and his son. His wife was a very empathetic person who suffered along with Alan. Alan's son was intelligent and polite and wanted to be an engineer. Alan's son told his father in my presence that he was very thankful to have Alan as his father. After his son

left, I told Alan that God had blessed with a magnificent family, and that when he died, he would leave an incredible legacy.

Another time, I was giving Alan's son some advice about going to college and studying to be an engineer. Then, after his son left, Alan thanked me for talking to his son. I said I was very happy to do it. Then Alan told me that his wife had asked him if the real reason he was trying to stay alive until his son finished high school was because Alan himself felt very unsuccessful, that he was looking to live the last bit of his life vicariously through his son. Alan told me that other than finding a perfect woman to marry and having a son of whom he was very proud, he hadn't accomplished anything in life. Then, looking away in embarrassment, he told me that he had spent twenty-something years working in a landfill. He had driven a bulldozer-like machine, pushing mountains of garbage around. He said he would come home smelling like garbage. He was embarrassed to tell his neighbors and the people in his church what he did for a living. But he had never finished high school and he wanted to make sure his son started down the path of doing something far more important with his life. I of course told him that it was a perfectly respectable thing to do, working in a landfill. He fed and clothed and housed his family doing it. I told him that he spent his life making up for the fact that Americans have huge carbon footprints.

I told him that my hunch was that he hadn't lived a very commercial lifestyle, that he probably didn't have that much of a carbon footprint himself. He told me that this was true, that he and his wife had very little. They shared a subcompact car that got great gas mileage and they threw very little out. I said that was something to be proud of. But then he repeated that spending more than half of his life doing a menial job in a garbage dump was embarrassing.

I told him that besides having a very small carbon footprint, he also had a very small spiritual carbon footprint. He asked me what I meant. I told him that I made that term up, spiritual carbon footprint. My point, I said, is that Americans spend their lives buying things, like cars and electronics, things that are made by marring the planet with mines so they can get precious metals for electronics, and by demanding consumer items that require huge amounts of energy to manufacture, and by using manufactured items for only a little while and then throwing them out. But most Americans, I told him, do more than leave a huge carbon footprint behind them. They also have a huge spiritual carbon footprint. They leave this planet having done very little for each other and having spent very little time with God. They do tremendous damage to their souls and don't do anything to help others find a path to God. Most Americans have huge spiritual carbon footprints. But I pointed out that Alan had a well-thumbed Bible at his

bedside; he was an elder in his church; and he was clearly a long-standing and deep believer. Alan's spiritual carbon footprint was tiny, I said. When he died, he would leave almost no spiritual pollution behind him. He smiled at this.

Then I told him that working in a garbage dump wasn't embarrassing at all. I asked him if he knew that landfills were very important when it came to Scriptural studies. He said no and asked me what I meant. I told him that there was a huge, ancient garbage dump in Egypt. It's near an ancient city called Oxyrhynchus Oxy-rin-chus. It's actually a landfill, with many layers put down over the centuries. In this landfill are countless fragments of the Bible. This dump contains some of the oldest New Testament fragments ever found. Why are they in a dump? Back then, the Bible was written on papyrus, which was a very thick, dark paper made from a plant that grew in the wetlands along the Nile. Sometimes an old piece of papyrus that had Scripture on it was simply thrown away because it was old. But papyrus was very expensive. So, when a long piece of papyrus with Scripture on it was old, it would sometimes be torn into pieces and people would use the back of it for business receipts or notes. Eventually, those receipts or notes would be thrown out. Because trash was piled up in layers, keeping the elements away from the trash, ancient pieces of papyrus survived, often giving biblical scholars an opportunity to piece together very old

bible manuscripts. Alan laughed at this and told me that he doubted that he bulldozed many ancient biblical manuscripts, but that it was true that he spent his life cleaning up other people's messes instead of making his own.

Perhaps a week later, I visited Alan again. He was doing better, but his prognosis was still very poor. He returned to this thing about working in a dump. He said that when he told people what he did for a living, they often treated him like **he** was the trash. And it was all the worse, he said, because although he had done his best to provide for his family, he hadn't been able to give them the things they really wanted. Alan and his wife didn't own their home and they had been living for free in a rental home owned by a friend; the house was under major renovation and he had no idea where his family would live when the renovations were done. He said that his son was using a computer that someone else had been about to throw away. His wife shopped for clothes at second-hand stores, often at the Salvation Army. People looked down on him. This made me remember a passage in one of Paul's letters, and I found it in Alan's Bible. It's our passage for this week, and here is a compressed version of it:

You think you are already rich. You have begun to reign in God's kingdom without us! But we have become a spectacle to the entire world—to people and angels alike. ¹⁰ Our dedication to Christ makes us look like fools, but you claim to be so wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are so powerful! You are honored, but we are ridiculed. ¹¹ Even now we go hungry and thirsty, and we don't have enough clothes

to keep warm. We are often beaten and have no home. ¹²We are treated like the world's garbage, like everybody's trash.

This is from 1st Corinthians. What Paul is doing here is viciously criticizing some of the so-called Christians in Corinth. He's telling them that they are spiritual children. He is sarcastically telling them that they are full of pride, that they are spoiled and arrogant, that they judge true Christians, those who live Christ-like lives of humility as fools, as human garbage. These corrupt believers think they are kings. They have become addicted to wealth and power – and they need to turn back to God and live for the things of God's world, not the things of this world. I told Alan that he should have pride in living a simple life, in dedicating himself to being a man of faith who lives only for his family and for God.

The idea for this sermon came to me when I was driving past the dump on County Road 14. It had been windy several Sundays ago, and trash was strewn across the road and across the farmland on the other side of the road. I thought about how Americans live such privileged lives and then we do our best to hide the damage we do. It's a simple fact that the more well off we are, the more garbage we produce. But God decided to come along and remind us all of what's hidden in that landfill. The wind blew it around for all of us to see. If the rest of the world lived the way we live, if people in China, Africa, and South America had

the standard of living that we have, there wouldn't be enough precious metals, energy and human labor to provide consumer goods for everyone. We really do live privileged lives. Our media tells people who don't have a lot that they are garbage. Our media tells people who say they live for Christ that they are fools.

But this is nothing new. There have been privileged, spoiled people for thousands of years. The world is dotted with deep deposits of trash, left by the wealthy, left by people who had so much while others had so little. It used to be that the area around the Nile was where the wealthy and the powerful lived, and they left a huge landfill behind them. Well, God used that landfill to teach us some modesty. We have some of the world's best Scriptural researchers, some of the most educated and knowledgeable people in the world digging through the garbage left behind by ancient wealthy people. The image on your bulletin is of a fragment from the Book of James, found in that ancient landfill in Egypt.

The last time I talked to Alan, just before he died, I prayed with him. He had decided to stop treatment and to go home in hospice. He died about a week later. But during that last prayer in his hospital room, I asked God to lift him up, to hold him close as a true believer with only a tiny spiritual carbon footprint, and to give him a life of joy for all of eternity. I asked God to lift up and bless his wife and his son so that they would live long and joyful lives. I also thanked God for

the gift of having gotten to know Alan, a man who lived, not in the world of spoiled people, but in the world of what spoiled people threw away. I thanked God for letting me spend time with a man who was very much like the Apostle Paul – a man with no permanent home, who led a spartan life, who served people who had almost nothing, and lived for Christ. Please pray briefly with me.

God, let us remember that we are indeed considered fools by many, because of our faith. Many people who spend their lives collecting wealth and fighting for power see us as wasting our time. But God, let us leave behind not a vast and deep pile of trash that we have thrown away. Let us do what Alan did, and that is to leave behind us love for family, for Christ, and for people who are in need.

Amen.

