

Port Gardner Church
February 3, 2013
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1 Corinthians
The Power of the Cross and the Wisdom of Men.
1 Corinthians 1:18-31

1. (18) The central point: How the **perishing** see the cross, and how the **saved** see the cross.

1 Corinthians 1:18 *For the **word of the cross** is **folly** to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the **power of God**.*

In 1 Corinthians 1:17, Paul has just declared the idea that the cross could *be **made of no effect*** if it were presented with *the **wisdom of words***. Paul now **will show why** this is true of the cross and the message of the gospel.

The word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing

- To those who reject the salvation of the cross,
- the idea of being saved through the work of a *crucified* man is foolish.

The words **word of the cross** sound kind of noble and religious to our twentieth-century ears.

- But in the first century, saying **word of the cross** was about the same as saying *message of the electric chair* - except worse!
- What message does a cruel, humiliating, unrelenting instrument of death like the cross have?
- No wonder it is **folly to those who are perishing!**

To us who are being saved it is the power of God

- It is a strange message, and regarded as foolish by the world
- But to those who trust in it and are **being saved**,
- this **word of the cross** becomes to us the actual **power of God**.

There is inherent **power** in the preaching of the true gospel, when it is received with faith.

- The hearing and trusting of the true gospel will bring the **power of God** into your life!

The **word of the cross** *is* the gospel.

- It is impossible to preach the gospel without presenting the **word of the cross**.
- So, preaching a high moral standard is **not preaching the gospel**,
- preaching the universal fatherhood of God is **not preaching the gospel**,
- and preaching the universal brotherhood of man is **not preaching the gospel**.
- The gospel *is* the **word of the cross**.

The verb tenses of **are perishing** and **are being saved** are significant.

- They both describe a work in progress.
- Each of us is definitely moving in one of those two directions.

2. (19-21) The wisdom of the world and the wisdom of God.

1 Corinthians 1:19-21 [19] For it is written, "**I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.**" [20] Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? [21] For since, **in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom**, it pleased God through the **folly of what we preach** to save those who believe.

The **debater of this age**

- Debate and reason were especially prevalent in the Greek culture.
- The "debater" was the man who wanted to dispute every issue and solve it by human reason.
- This is the exultation of man and his so called "wisdom" above the knowledge and wisdom of God.

The point is plain

- There is no wise man, no scribe, and no debater who can do what Jesus Christ has done.
- And what Jesus has done confounds those who do not believe.

2 Corinthians 3:16-18 [16] But when one turns to the Lord, **the veil is removed.** [17] Now the Lord is the Spirit, and **where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.** [18] And we all, **with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.**

It is significant that often the most educated people seemingly have the least regard for God.

- This is not always the case; some of the most brilliant men of history have been Christians (such as Isaac Newton).
- But largely, the "smarter" one sees themselves, the less regard they have for God.
- Human "wisdom" is constantly rejecting God and opposing Him,
- In our mind we get into a "thinking" match with God
- But the result will ultimately show itself foolish and perishing in doing so!

One day, students in one of Albert Einstein's classes were saying they had decided that there was no God. Einstein asked them, how much of all the knowledge in the world they had among themselves collectively, as a class. The students discussed it for a while and decided they had 5% of all human knowledge among themselves. Einstein thought that their estimate was a little generous, but he replied: "It is possible that God exists in the 95% that you don't know?"

The phrases **folly of what we preach** and **foolishness of God** do not mean Paul actually considered the message and God foolish.

- He is describing them as they appear to the perishing man, the "wise" man of this age.

God's wisdom is not man's wisdom multiplied to the highest degree;

- it wisdom of a different order altogether.
- **Isaiah 55:8-9** For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways, says the Lord. For **as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts.**
- Paul isn't condemning all learning or education here;
- he is merely saying that they are, in themselves, useless for obtaining **spiritual** wisdom.

“It is certain that a blind man is no judge of colors, a deaf man is no judge of sound, and a man who has never been quickened into spiritual life can have no judgment as to spiritual things.” (Spurgeon)

It pleased God

- God takes pleasure in accomplishing our salvation in a way no one would have expected.
- He is *happy* to do it in this way which offends the height of human wisdom.

3. (22-25) The wisdom of God, though foolish to the world, triumphs.

1 Corinthians 1:22-25 [22] For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, [23] **but we preach Christ crucified**, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, [24] but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, **Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God**. [25] For the **foolishness of God is wiser than men**, and the **weakness of God is stronger than men**.

For Jews demand signs

- In Paul’s day, the Jewish world was looking for a sign.
- They wanted the sign of a miraculous Messianic deliverance.
- They were not looking for the *message of the cross*.
- Their desire for deliverance was not bad, but their rejection of God’s way of deliverance was.

“Their idolatry was that they now had God completely figured out; he would simply repeat the Exodus, in still greater splendor.” (Fee)

Greeks seek wisdom

- The Greek culture valued the pursuit of wisdom,
- usually expressed in high, academic, philosophical terms.
- They did not value the wisdom expressed in *the message of the cross*.
- Their desire for wisdom was not bad, but their rejection of God’s wisdom was.

“Their idolatry was to conceive of God as ultimate Reason, meaning of course what **we** deem to be reasonable.” (Fee)

We preach Christ crucified

- Instead of giving the Jews and Greeks what they demanded in deliverance and wisdom,
- God gives them something unexpected: a crucified Messiah.

Christ (Messiah) meant power, splendor, and triumph.

Crucified meant weakness, defeat, and humiliation.

Christ crucified was the ultimate oxymoron, and this was what Paul preached!

The Jews regarded *Christ crucified* as a **stumbling block**; perhaps this is better understood as an *offense* or a *scandal*.

The Greeks regarded *Christ crucified* as **foolishness**.

- But God did not respond to the polling data.

- He kept to His gospel, because for those who believed it (**both Jews and Greeks**), *Christ crucified is the power of God and the wisdom of God.*

As much as Paul was once offended by a crucified Messiah, so the Greeks thought a message of salvation through a humiliating instrument of death foolish. A well known piece of graffiti in Rome shows a worshipper standing next to a crucified figure with the body of a man and the head of an ass, and it says “Alexamenos worships his god.” This is how foolish the Greeks saw the cross.

Those who insist that we must change the emphasis of the gospel because people can’t relate to it today must realize that the people of Paul’s day couldn’t relate to his preaching either, yet he kept it up, and with great results.

“Certain divines tell us that they must adapt truth to the advance of the age, which means that they must murder it and fling its dead body to the dogs . . . which simply means that a popular lie shall take the place of an offensive truth.” (Spurgeon)

The foolishness of God is wiser than men

- By human terms, God was at His most “foolish” and very “weakest” at the cross;
- but it was infinitely wiser and stronger than anything man could do.
- Salvation is not the achievement of human wisdom; it is the embrace of God’s dramatic, unexpected act of love at Calvary.

4. (26-29) God’s “foolish wisdom” is also displayed by whom He has chosen for salvation.

1 Corinthians 1:26-29 [26] *For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. [27] But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; [28] God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, [29] so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.*

For consider your calling,

- Paul says to the Corinthians, “Look at yourselves. You’re no great bargain.”
- There were **not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble** among the Christians at Corinth.

But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise

- Paul can say “you aren’t wise according to the world, you aren’t mighty, you aren’t noble –
- but you are among **the foolish things of the world.**”
- We are the fools.

Isaiah 64:8 [8] But now, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.

So I’m a piece of clay. And when I think about that, I think I’m this piece of clay trying to explain to other pieces of clay what the potter is like. It shows the silliness that any of us is an expert on Him. Our only hope is that He would reveal to us what he is like and we would be able to repeat those things

In Psalm 25:9 He explains, "His way" to those that are humble. And so I want to humble myself because I want to know the truth about you. Humble me. Show me the pride in my life.

We've got to guard against heartlessness. We are talking about real people here. We can't just have these theological discussions about doctrine while we're talking about people's eternal destiny at the same time.

We can't be careless. We can't just argue for our point of view as if it is a political argument. We've got to lay all the facts on the table because it is too important to the destinies of all of us. That means teaching and preaching the whole council, the whole truth of God. Not just the parts we feel comfortable talking about. Not just the parts that won't stir up controversy or animosity.

Remember Isaiah 55?

Isaiah 55:8-9 *For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways, says the Lord. For **as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts.***

So when we begin an argument with "**well, I wouldn't believe in a god who would...**"

Who would what? Do something that you wouldn't do? Or think in a way that's different from the way you think?

Have you ever even considered that the Creator's sense of justice is actually more developed than yours?

And that His love and His mercy are perfect.... **And that you could be the one that is flawed?**

When we make statements like... "**well God wouldn't do this would he?**" Do you understand that at that moment you're actually putting God's actions in submission to your reasoning? We're saying that "God wouldn't think that way or act that way because... **I wouldn't act or think that way.**"

When I read the scriptures... all through this book... I think. Man... God there are some things that you say **that I would never say...** there are some things that you do **that I wouldn't think to do.**

Like... when Adam and Eve sinned... and you're going to put a curse on the earth... **I wouldn't think to do that.**

Or the story of Job.... One of the most faithful men on earth... You're going to allow his family to be killed, his life destroyed, boils all over his body... and suffering. Wow.

And then I get to the cross and I say... really God? To save me... I mean we have been so wicked and your response is that you're going to give up your son. Your only son, your perfect son, my beloved son, humble himself and take the form of one of these human beings. And I'm going to let these other human beings torture him, spit on him, nail him to a cross and then you're going to have him pay for the crimes of everyone else, I think.. **I would never have thought to do that...**

And then we get to the end of the book... and we see that God is going to take Satan, his own creation,

Revelation 20:10 [10] *and the devil who had deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and sulfur where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.*

And then in verse 15 He says

Revelation 20:15 [15] *And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.*

Look, there are a lot of places in this book that I think... wow... God, you did that, you thought that? I wouldn't think that I wouldn't have done that...

But when I come to those passages, and when you come to those passages, does it even enter your mind... that He knows something... that you don't?

Or is it always...."I have this ability to reason... and I have this level of morality so... something in Him must be off here... or I won't believe in Him"

The Corinthian Christians were beginning to think of themselves in **high terms** because of **God's work in them**. They have not been chosen because **they are so great**, but because **God is so great**.

God loves to rebuke the idolatry of human wisdom, and He often does it by choosing and using the **foolish things of the world**.

God isn't saying that it is better to be foolish or uneducated.

- He is saying that the world's wisdom and education does not bring us salvation in Jesus Christ.

The end result is plain: **That no flesh should glory in His presence**.

- No one will stand before God and declare, "I figured You out" or "You did it just like I thought You should."
- God's ways are greater and higher, and nothing of the **flesh** will **glory in His presence**.

5. (30-31) True wisdom belongs to the believing.

1 Corinthians 1:30-31 [30] *And because of him you are **in Christ Jesus**, who became to us **wisdom from God**, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, [31] so that, as it is written, "**Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.**"*