

Sermon 5: 1 Corinthians 1:18-25: The Word of the Cross

OUTLINE

The folly of the cross
The wisdom of the world
The power of God

INTRODUCTION

The cross is the central symbol associated with Christianity. Christianity is not symbolized by a manger; or the round stone rolled away from the empty tomb; or the bowl Christ used to wash His disciples feet. The cross with all of its terrible connotations summed up the heart of God's saving act in Christ. So much so that Paul also calls the gospel 'the word of the cross.' We would struggle to understand this because we are so used to the idea of Jesus dying on the cross, but the ancient world balked at the message of the Savior of the world needing to die on a cross. John Stott writes, 'Roman citizens were exempt from crucifixion, except in extreme cases of treason. Cicero in one of his speeches condemned it as *crudelissimum taeterrimumque supplicium*, 'a most cruel and disgusting punishment'. A little later he declared: 'To bind a Roman citizen is a crime, to flog him is an abomination, to kill him is almost an act of murder: to crucify him is—What? There is no fitting word that can possibly describe so horrible a deed.' Cicero was even more explicit in his successful defence in 63 bc of the elderly senator Gaius Rabirius who had been charged with murder: 'the very word "cross" should be far removed not only from the person of a Roman citizen, but from his thoughts, his eyes and his ears. For it is not only the actual occurrence of these things (sc. the procedures of crucifixion) or the endurance of them, but liability to them, the expectation, indeed the mere mention of them, that is unworthy of a Roman citizen and a free man.'¹ In fact the very first appearance of the sign of the cross associated with Christianity was in the form of ridicule. In an ancient building in Rome some graffiti was uncovered where a Christian is being mocked for being a Christian. It is the picture of a man worshipping with his hand raised, before Jesus portrayed as a man with a donkey's head being crucified upon a cross.

We know what it is to be embarrassed of the gospel. Today we face the disgust of someone like Richard Dawkins who speaks of the remission of sins through the shedding of blood as barbarous. Or the idea that God in love giving His Son to die on the cross is conceived as an act of cosmic child abuse. We have all felt the force of the anger of those who shout at us about our arrogance for believing that Jesus is the only way to heaven; or that any so called sincere person of any other religion who does not believe in Jesus will go to hell. The Corinthians were in a similar situation. These people who were highly influenced by Roman pride and Greek philosophy would be under a lot of pressure to make the gospel more 'seeker sensitive'. The perennial temptation to remove the rough edges from the gospel to make it more palatable was present. It seems that this temptation is what drove them in part to entertain those who had a message of wisdom which would be more popular; and who presented that message in the more entertaining and fashionable way associated with famous orators. The lack of a renewed mind and clarity around the gospel would lead them to a prefer

¹ The Cross of Christ: With Study Guide by John Stott, Alister McGrath
<https://a.co/1SEzStP>

something more familiar; the pressure to avoid talking about a crucified Savior would lead them to want to mix and syncretize Christianity with something more acceptable. It appears that the Corinthians who have let the culture of man-following into the church have not only divided the church but also compromised on the gospel as the problem of man-following has also brought with it the problem of wanting to water down the gospel for a more palatable message, in this instance something associated with wisdom which was well presented.

V17 gives us the context, 'For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.' Last week we saw how man-following and a party spirit was dividing the church. Here Paul introduces two more issues associated with that problem, 'eloquent wisdom'. Eloquence points to the way these influential speakers spoke and won people to their point of view over against the gospel. And wisdom, points to the essence of what was being presented which was challenging the message of the gospel which the Corinthians were too quickly abandoning for something more familiar. Paul takes this problem head on highlighting the clash between the gospel and this world's wisdom. We will look at 1 Cor. 1:18-25 under three headings. The folly of the cross; the wisdom of the world; and the power of God.

The folly of the cross

V18, '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.' Why does Paul distance himself from the message and messengers popular in the day? Because despite the word of the cross being folly to those who are unbelievers, we who are believers know it to be the power of God for salvation. What should stand out immediately is Paul's unapologetic owning of the central stumbling block to the gospel, the cross. Paul does not call it the 'good news' but the word of the cross. He is doubling down on what causes unbelievers to stumble, and what is putting pressure on the Corinthians to go after other messages and messengers—namely the cross.

What makes the cross look like folly, ridiculous, impossible to the unbelieving mind? If we do not have the basic assumptions that we are taught by the gospel we will reject it. The basic truths that make the gospel desirable and not contemptible are the truths that we are hopelessly lost sinners who have broken the law of a holy and righteous God; but though we deserve punishment that God because of His love and grace makes a way of salvation possible by His Son coming and dying a criminals death in our place, namely on the cross. This solves the basic problem of how do I as a sinner become righteous in the eyes of a holy God. But if we disagree with any of those truths then the gospel will appear foolish. Like the Romans; Dawkins; and those who hold to the cosmic child abuse theory, it will seem gruesome, cruel and abhorrent. Those who demand that everything God does be filtered by what agrees with our logic will reject the gospel as folly because we see an innocent person dying the death and paying for the sin of a guilty person; as well as the principle of imputation, where my sin is credited to Him, and His righteousness being credited to me as being illogical. If I have a view of human nature that sees myself as basically good and my sin as small and not worth punishment never mind death and hell, then the gospel will seem an unnecessary measure and something to be rejected as a thought carried over from a more uneducated time. A common approach of rejection is to reject that the bible is God's word. That the eye witness accounts of the four gospels, and the ministry of the original apostles who were all eye

witnesses of Christ's death and resurrection are merely fabricated stories. Today people reject the gospel because it goes against the therapeutic view of man. Human nature is seen as something essentially good that with the right environment and the right teaching, we can all self-help ourselves into being good people. The gospel smashes this wrong view of ourselves portraying us as needy and hopeless sinners who cannot save ourselves. Muslims reject the cross because they cannot conceive of God becoming a man and dying for sinners. Many Greek thinkers would have done so for similar reasons, 'The second-century philosopher Celsus, who made a career out of attacking Christianity, wrote, "God is good and beautiful and happy, and if in that which is most beautiful and best, if then he descends to man it involves change for him, and a change from good to bad, from beautiful to ugly, from happiness to unhappiness, from what is best to what is worst, and God would never accept such a change." The idea of the incarnation, not to mention the crucifixion, was utter folly to Greek thinking. To those rationalists nothing could be more absurd than the idea of an incarnate God giving Himself to be crucified in order to secure salvation, holiness, and eternal life for a fallen world.'² People reject the gospel thinking they are justified in rejecting it. Paul will later reveal that this is because it is by the power of the Holy Spirit that the spiritual truths of the gospel are revealed. Here Paul is leaning into this conception and setting up the contrast between the way the gospel appears—folly; and what the gospel is—the power of God to save. This word folly comes from the Greek word *moria* from which we get our English word *moron*.

We also must not miss what Paul says about those who reject the gospel for all their so called logical reasons, they are perishing. This is contrasted with those who believe who are being saved. Perishing is referring to eternal condemnation. To reject the gospel is not a whoopsy; it is not a mere misunderstanding; it results in judgement upon the one who rejects Christ. We know the reason why. Jesus died upon the cross to take the judgement that our sins deserve, so if we reject Jesus and His death for us, we are rejecting the only thing that can save us from the judgement of God upon our sins. There are only two types of people in the world, those being saved and those perishing, and what makes the difference is whether you believe the word of the cross or not.

The wisdom of the world

Now Paul has basically accused the whole world of being wrong, and of course this would include all the top philosophies and schools of thought of the day. How can they be so wrong? Paul goes on to talk about the wisdom of the world, v19-20, 'For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." 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?' Now we do not know what the exact version of wisdom that was being pushed in Corinth and was preferred to the gospel, so Paul takes on the whole swath of worldly wisdom. Paul goes on to describe why the cleverest people on the earth will reject the truth of God in the gospel. It is because God has made it that sinful rebellious human genius or ingenuity will never result in the saving knowledge of God. Paul quotes from Is. 29:14. The prophet is talking about how God will subvert the political expediency of Jerusalem's politicians who were angling to make an alliance with Egypt against

² John F. MacArthur Jr., [1 Corinthians](#), MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984), 46.

God's instructions to help with the problem of Assyria. The solution to the problem of Assyria will finally come when Hezekiah prays (an act of weakness and dependence upon God) and in one night 185 000 Assyrians are slain, not by man's hand but God's angel. All that political maneuvering would amount to nothing as God saved. Paul is now applying the same principle here to this world's wisdom. The very best the world has to offer cannot save from satan, sin, death, nor change the heart of sinner from its sin. Paul makes some rhetorical challenges, where is the wisest philosopher who can answer all the world's mysteries; where is the most informed scribe who knows the law back to front; where is best public debater who can make the crowds eat from his hands. Take the very best the world has to offer and it cannot save.

Now some have mistakenly thought that therefore Paul is anti-intellectual, that Paul is anti-wisdom, anti-law. Friends we must remember that all truth is God's truth, so within philosophy, psychology, science, and all the areas of human learning there will be truth which is God's truth. Wherever man has analyzed creation and seen true things, this is by the rational powers God has given to us, rational powers that are not altogether extinguished by the fall, though there are definite effects upon the mind. The human mind is finite and so we need revelation from God to know certain things; and the human mind is also influenced by our sinfulness therefore it does suppress certain truths especially as they relate to God's truth or law; but this does not mean that everything outside the bible and the unbeliever thinks is completely untrue. Paul is not against the many truths these schools of thought have but their attempts to analyze our main problem and the solutions they present for them. All their attempts to make better laws; build better societies; come up with better self-help programs; or create better religious rituals and exercises, none can save, but God's gospel alone. Like any modern attempt outside of Christ they are merely patch jobs and distractions that ultimately do not solve our sin problem.

V21, '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.' Paul has experienced the futility of this world's wisdom firsthand when he preached in Athens. He encountered their snobbery, endured being a distracting curiosity, only to be finally rejected by most because the message of the resurrection galled their Greek philosophical sensibilities. Luke has this unflattering description, Acts 17:21, 'Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.' God has deliberately made salvation possible not by those strong enough pulling themselves up by their own boot strings; or privileged enough to gain access into some society for the worthy; or by being clever enough, but by believing in a message of someone else saving us by dying on the cross in payment for our sins. This is truly good news. Salvation is not for those clever enough but those who believe, not for those who have finally found all the answers to all the great questions, who have overturned every stone and conspiracy theory, but those who see their sin and fall before a God of grace for mercy because of what He has done in Christ. Can you fall down in your need before Him? Can you ask Him for forgiveness? Can you come to Him for help and not all the other things you have been looking to for salvation? This is the way of salvation for broken people not competent people; stupid people who have ruined their lives with their own foolishness not the wise, which is truly all of us. Imagine we began talking about the gospel as a special wisdom you had to aspire to, it would close the door to sinners and failures and fools.

Now Paul uses the word 'preach' which is the word 'heralding/proclaiming' it comes from the word herald. The ancient rhetoricians would never use such a drab and dreary concept to describe their supreme art form. A herald is judged to be a good herald not by well he dresses; not by adding any words to the message of the king; not by adding any prophetic dance to the delivery; not by being original and creative but by a clear and faithful delivery of the king's message. An artist will give you his own interpretation or impression, a herald dares not. The content of what Paul preached, was not immediately attractive because it was a message about us being sinners who deserved judgement; and how we could not save ourselves not matter what. But then the God whose law broke and to whom we would have to give an account, He because of His grace pays for our sins Himself in the death of His Son. The cross is offensive, our inability is offensive, our guilt is offensive, the truth of who God is as holy is terrifying, but this is the message Paul will not compromise on. He will clearly preach it no matter who thinks it is digestible or fashionable. He talks about 'we' preaching, this is of course a reference not just to Paul but all of the apostles and the message they preach. There is no other name under heaven by which we must be saved; Jesus alone is the way the truth and the life.

The power of God

Paul expands using two examples, v22-23, 'For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles.' Paul is helping us to see that not everyone rejects the gospel for the same reasons, though there is a front of rationality in all unbelief. The Jews demand signs; and the Greeks seek wisdom. The Jews saw the miracles of Christ, but did not believe. They wanted the miracles of conquest against Rome, not works of mercy amongst the needy and sinful, nor the work of a substitute paying for their sin upon the cross. They wanted Roman blood to flow and could not even imagine a saviour who over comes by dying. Because they were self-righteous and couldn't see their sins, they thought their greatest need was liberation not forgiveness and couldn't see the cross as a sacrifice, but instead saw it as a failure. Presuppositions about what they need, and assumptions about their own selves blinded them.

Notice that they demanded signs. This is often an attitude of unbelief. We demand that God prove Himself in the ways that we think He should prove Himself. I am in pain, prove you are God by removing my pain. My loved one is sick prove you are God by making them well. I am lonely prove you are God by giving me a spouse. I think the world is broken in a particular way, prove you are God by fixing it the way it think it needs fixing, etc. etc. but of course God has given signs. He gave the sign of a virgin conceiving and Emmanuel, God with us being born. He gave the signs of miracles of Jesus ministry. He gave the sign of darkness upon the land when Jesus was God forsaken; He gave the sign of the earthquake during the crucifixion showing God's wrath being poured out upon Him; He gave the sign of the tearing of the temple curtain indicating that Christ's death has made the way open to God; there was the sign of the OT saints graves opening and them resurrecting indicating that death itself has taken a death blow; there was the sign of Jesus Himself resurrected from the dead witnessed by over 500 people. There was the sign of the Spirit poured out on the day of Pentecost; God has given signs, but we will not see. Paul highlights that the Jewish mind would automatically associate Jesus dying on the cross as someone cursed by God, Gal. 3:13, 'Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who is hanged on

a tree". Paul is quoting Deut. 21:13. How can the Christ, the blessed one of God be the cursed one at the same time. How can the conquering one be the dying one at the same time?

The Greeks on the other hand were deep thinkers and for hundreds of years already had spilled much ink and had many public speakers and debates about the truth and the true nature of things. It was a common past time for them to occupy themselves with the novel and new ideas that were going around, changing beliefs like they changed their clothes. They also had wrong settled ideas about God, for example God could not feel they had an inert idea of God's impassability, so for God to love and be compassionate was alien, and deemed wrong. Flesh was evil, so to say that God became flesh was an impossibility and gave rise to an error that John takes on in his first epistle where some false teachers were denying that Jesus could be a man. So to these 'wise' Greeks the story of God becoming man, and dying for our sins was ridiculous because it didn't fit with the ideas that they already held.

V24-25, '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.' What is the difference between those who believe and those who do not, those who believe are called. Here we see that God saves sinners of all stripes, from both the Jews and the Greeks. Even though these groups have their mental barriers excusing them from believing, when God's power works they believe. Christ who was the weak and cursed one becomes to them the power of God to save, not from Rome but satan, sin and death. And the Greeks who despised Jesus because He did not fit into their philosophy, they suddenly see the wisdom of God as they experience forgiveness through the innocent becoming sinful; life through one experiencing death. The folly of their self-salvation is exposed as they cast themselves on the only one who can save.

Are we ashamed of the gospel because it does not conform to modern expectations? Paul is saying, that is the point, God is opposing the thinking of this world and is making a way of salvation that does jar with our self-deceiving sensibilities. We must be those who cling to that old rugged cross, its shame and reproach gladly bear. The word of the cross is hard to hear, but that is because the gospel teaches hard truths that we need to hear before we can be saved. Let us not tone it down or allow worldly wisdom into the church to try and make it more amenable to modern tastes, let us revel in it for the way it glorifies God, faithful in preaching it as the only message by which sinners can be saved.