

**THE "FOOLISH" GOSPEL**  
**1 CORINTHIANS 1:18-31**

Tuesday is New Year's Day. So perhaps you, like many of us, will spend some time in the next couple of days doing some self-evaluation — where have you done well physically, financially, relationally, and spiritually this year? Where have you not done so well? And what changes do you need to make in the coming year — what goals will you set to stimulate personal and spiritual growth?

Many of us, as we come to these days, find ourselves looking at old friends — practices we do well — and facing old foes — things we don't do particularly well. Sometimes our failures are a matter of rebellion and sin. Sometimes our failures are just a makeup of who we are — they are ingrained patterns or even part of our created being. We aren't failing necessarily because of sin but just because it is one of the mechanisms of weakness God has placed in our lives to make us dependent on Him.

What is true of us as individuals is also true of churches at a corporate level. We have dispositions and character that make us what we are. Some things we do well, and others not so well. Today we want to address from Scripture one of the areas of our corporate struggle. We don't necessarily struggle because of rebellion — in fact, I know many of you *want* to do better in this area. Sometimes the struggle is actually part of the outgrowth of our strengths — because we do well in other areas of ministry, this one area is sometimes relegated to a secondary status and the gifts are not fully developed.

I'm speaking of evangelism — both personal and corporate.

What is evangelism? It is speaking the truth of Christ's death and resurrection to free men from the penalty and power of sin with the intent to persuade sinners to believe in Him.

In evangelism, we have one message. But it is a message the world rejects. They scoff at it. They mock it. They hate it. They persecute those who believe it. So why preach this gospel? Why continue to talk about Jesus Christ as the crucified King and Savior? Because there is only one true message that will save people and there is only one true message that is powerful to transform people.

That's Paul's message in 1 Corinthians 1 —

**"CHRIST CRUCIFIED" IS THE ONLY TRUE AND EFFECTIVE GOSPEL.**

As we think about evangelism and GBC in 2019, we don't need more guilt for our failures to speak and we don't need more motivation to talk. *We need to be convinced of the truth of the gospel and the effectiveness of the gospel.*

*In this passage Paul reveals five truths about the “foolish” cross —*

- 1. The Gospel is a Message of the CROSS (v. 18)**
- 2. The Gospel of the Cross is POWERFUL (vv. 18-19)**
- 3. The Gospel of the Cross is WISE (vv. 20-25)**
- 4. The Gospel of the Cross is MAN-HUMBLING (vv. 26-29)**
- 5. The Gospel of the Cross is GOD-GLORIFYING (vv. 30-31)**

In this passage, we will discover five truths about the "foolish" cross:

### 1. The Gospel is a Message of the CROSS (v. 18)

- With the word **for**, Paul is providing a reason for what he said at the end of v. 17 — the cross of Christ is not void and empty. *Why* is the cross not void? What makes the cross substantive? What *is* this **word of the cross**? When Paul refers to the cross and says we preach the cross, what does he mean?
  - ✓ The cross was a horrible means of death. The victim suffered incredible thirst, physical exhaustion, and suffocating breathing. They might linger on the cross for days before dying. It was degrading and abhorrent. And the spiritual suffering was greater (Mt. 27:46).
  - ✓ This cross is the core of what we preach. The instrument of salvation is a tool of death. Sin is deadly and it took the death (and resurrection) of a perfect human sacrifice to atone for sin. Luther said, "The cross is God's 'No' to all the vain attempts of humanity to merit God's favor."
  - ✓ The cross also emphasizes the shame involved with our salvation. The cross "cuts to the heart of self-centeredness....[It] is the message of self-renunciation..." [David Lowery] It took the selflessness of Christ to produce salvation (Mk. 10:45). It takes self-renunciation of the believer to embrace Christ and receive salvation as His gift (Gal. 3:13-14).

"It is in that very moment, when he is made most physically appalling, that he becomes most dear to us. 'Christ was never more lovely to his church than when he was most deformed for his church,' wrote Richard Sibbes....Reliance on ourselves is no option in light of the cross. However fantastically marvelous we may think we are, the cross is God's verdict on us as sinners. It annihilates even the possibility of finally placing our trust in ourselves. Meaning we can know a far greater assurance, anchoring it in firm ground outside ourselves, in Christ. Christians are people who have given up all claims to both our badness and our goodness - and instead gotten him." [Reeves, *Rejoicing in Christ*, 58, 62.]

- Sometimes we don't speak the gospel and we don't talk about Christ and the cross because we don't have a clear understanding of it ourselves. Let me help you. Here is the gospel in six words:
  - ✓ **Grace** — the gospel is a free gift (Rom. 6:23; Eph. 2:8-9).
  - ✓ **Man** — the gospel must be by grace because man is a sinner — his life is stained and permeated by sin so that there is nothing good about him that can either produce or merit salvation (Eph. 2:1-3). We are incapable of saving ourselves (Rom. 1-3).
  - ✓ **God** — God is loving and merciful. He even loves the unrighteous (Ezk. 18:32; Mt. 5:44-45); He is also unrelenting in His wrath against sin (Mt. 3:12; Rev. 20:11-15). He *will* punish all sin.
  - ✓ **Christ** — Christ is the infinite God who laid aside the privileges of Heaven and assumed manhood so that He might die in the place of sinners and free them from the penalty and power of sin (Phil. 2:5-8; Rom. 3:25-26; 4:5).

- ✓ **Faith** — belief in Christ alone for our salvation; faith says, “I can’t save myself; God *must* save me” (Rom. 3:28; Eph. 2:8-9).
  - ✓ **Hope** — the object of the gospel is God — Christ died to get us to God, to renew our fellowship with Him so that we could eternally enjoy Him (Mt. 1:23; Jn. 14:3). And if you aren’t interested in God and Christ, you aren’t a believer, you aren’t saved, and you are dead in your sins and under God’s wrath. The purpose of the gospel is to get us to God.
  - ✓ Summary: Our sin is imputed to Christ and Christ’s righteousness is imputed to us so that we can enjoy God forever. The key word in the gospel is *substitution*. The substitutionary work of a *crucified* Savior. Unless we preach the gospel of Christ dying for sin and sinners, we have not preached the gospel.
- *The gospel is a message of the cross. But don’t assume that it is a weak message....*

## 2. The Gospel of the Cross is **POWERFUL** (vv. 18-19)

- As you might expect, the world hates and mocks a message like the cross.
  - ✓ There are two kinds of people in the world — the first are **those who are perishing**. These are not people who *will* die, but they are already in the process of dying. They are living dead men. These are people like those in Romans 1, who are already under the judgment of God (Rom. 1:24, 26, 28).
  - ✓ Dying people consider the cross **foolishness**. They consider it “moronic” (Mt. 27:39-44; Acts 17:32).
  - ✓ Even believers sometimes have trouble embracing the cross. Remember Peter (Mt. 16:22)?
  - ✓ Why would one embrace the cross when it is a place of death? Who wants to die? The ironic truth is that you will only live when you embrace the cross of Christ’s death; and if you avoid Christ’s cross you will only keep on dying until you enter eternity and will die there eternally.
  - ✓ To those who are dying, the cross is offensive, foolish, vanity, and to be avoided.
- The message of the cross, contrary to the world’s thinking, is **powerful**:
  - ✓ What is salvation powerful to do?
    - The cross is powerful to produce sanctification — being set apart to God (v. 2)
    - The cross is powerful to produce blamelessness at the end of time (vv. 7-8)
    - The cross is powerful to maintain fellowship with God (v. 9)
    - The cross is powerful to effect unity in the body of Christ (v. 10)
    - The cross is powerful to reveal the wisdom of God (v. 24)
  - ✓ But notice also that it is only powerful for **those who are being saved**. This is the second kind of person in the world. These are in the process of being saved; they have been declared righteous, are in the process of being sanctified, and are certain of their glorification (Rom. 8:28-30).
  - ✓ All men are one of these two categories — either dying or being saved. There are no other options.

- ✓ This salvation is about God's power to save and man's inability to save himself. In v. 19 Paul quotes **Is. 29:14**. Judah was being threatened by Assyria and King Sennacherib; the Lord told Isaiah not to worry, that Sennacherib would not succeed, but it would not be because of Judah's wisdom or might — it would be through the hand of the (one) angel of the Lord who killed 185,000 Assyrians (**Is. 37:36-37**).
  - ✓ Just as it took God's power to deliver Judah, so it takes God's power to save sinners.
  - ✓ If anyone thinks himself *wise* or *clever*, God will **set (him) aside**. He will be made low, disregarded, and made void. He will be rejected. There is no hope for the self-reliant man.
- Those who are dying are self-reliant and believe they are self-sufficient — “I will trust myself before God and I have enough within me that I don't have anything to fear from Him.”

“I am persuaded that all of our problems are conceived and born in the sinful belief, embedded deep within, that something or someone other than Jesus Christ can quench the thirst of our souls. Each of us by nature is determined to make life work without Christ. We are committed to independence at any cost.”  
 [Sam Storms, “Is Jesus Really Enough?”]

- ✓ And that is exactly where we must take the gospel — to help them see their powerlessness and Christ's authority and power. If we will declare the gospel of Christ's cross, we will declare the insufficiency of man's power and the surpassing greatness of God's power.
- ✓ The power of the cross is not just that sinners are declared righteous (wiping out the judicial accusations against them), but that the cross actually changes people (**1 Cor. 6:9-11**). This was Paul's own testimony (**1 Tim. 1:12-15**).
- ✓ Are you convinced the gospel is able to do this?
- ✓ Our dalliances with sin reveal we really don't believe in the gospel's power; if we are going to be faithful proclaimers of the gospel, we are going to believe in and delight in the gospel's power.

### **3. The Gospel of the Cross is WISE (vv. 20-25)**

- There are many smart people in this world. But just because they have intellectual capacity does not mean they are wise. Paul asked **where is the wise man...scribe...debater of this age?** (v. 20)
  - ✓ With those terms he referred to both the Jewish scribes and interpreters of the Law and the Gentile philosophers and scholars.
  - ✓ Where are they? Where are they flourishing? Where have they overcome God's wisdom?
  - ✓ God has made them all **foolish**. The world hasn't understood the power or importance of the cross, and God has already put them down and eradicated their power from them.

- Verse 21 reveals that God’s wisdom decreed to save mankind through the cross and nothing else.
  - ✓ God was **well-pleased** to save through the cross — what the world abhors and rejects, God embraces and delights in (Col. 1:19-20).
  - ✓ The Father loved the cross because by the cross sin is vanquished and Christ is made victorious.
  - ✓ Then through the **preaching** of the cross men are brought to life, as Christ was resurrected.
- That’s not the way the world thinks about the cross (v. 22) —
  - ✓ Jews wanted only **signs** — they wanted demonstrations of His Messiahship — they wanted to be fed and have miracles (illness removed); they did not want the Messiah Himself (Jn. 6:26f)
  - ✓ Greeks wanted only **wisdom** — a clever idea to stimulate their mind & intellect (Acts 17:21).
  - ✓ Those cultures wanted what our culture wants — idolatry. They (and we) wanted God in their image, God on their terms, God on their time. They wanted a tame, manageable, grandfatherly, benevolent, unimposing, undemanding, mostly feeble God. Some in the Corinthian church were no different (vv. 10-12). And our culture (and we?) are no different.
  - ✓ These men are **searching** — but they do not search for the truth; they search for a god that conforms to their concept of God, which will inevitably produce repugnance to the gospel. They want a gospel of self — something that glorifies self and makes self the object of worship. Remember, that ultimately, no man is genuinely searching for Christ and God (Rom. 3:11).
  - ✓ What gospel will we give to them? Will we tell them something that appeals to them? Or will we stand for the truth and speak the truth about a crucified Christ? What the world needs today is not more of the world from the church. The world needs a crucified and risen Savior. Nothing else.

*“Preach any Christ but a crucified Christ, and you will not draw men for long. Preach any gospel but a gospel of atoning blood, and it will not draw for long.” (R. A. Torrey)*

- Preach a “loving” Christ (who is soft on sin) and you will not reach men.
  - Preach a murdered, “pitiful” Christ, and you will not reach men.
  - Preach a gentle, friendly Christ (who is incompetent), and you will not reach men.
  - Preach a “great teacher” Christ (who is not demanding), and you will not reach men.
  - Preach a miracle-working, prayer-granting Christ (who exists to fulfill our lustful desires), and you will not reach men.
  - Preach any Christ but a crucified Christ and you will not reach men for long.
  - But preach Christ crucified and you will reach men (cf. Acts 2:36, 41; 4:10, 18, 31).
- This message of the cross is repugnant to most men — why? (vv. 23-25)
    - ✓ In contrast to the Jews and Greeks is the antithetical message of the cross — **Christ crucified**.
    - ✓ Since **Christ** means “anointed One” and is a Messianic title, it could be paraphrased, “we preach the humiliation, defeat and crucifixion of the one who embodies power, splendor and triumph!”

- ✓ What did this mean for Jews and Greeks?
  - The crucifixion became a **stumbling** block — an impediment and trap preventing Jews from trusting Christ — how could the Messiah (victor & anointed One) be accursed? (Dt. 21:23).
  - The crucifixion was the height of **foolishness** (moronic thought) — we have little concept of how deeply the cross was disdained — it was a virtual obscenity and no cultured person would dare to even utter the word in public.
- ✓ But the cross is **power...and wisdom of God** (v. 24) because God's "foolishness" and "weakness" is greater than anything the world has to offer — His ways are higher than ours (Rom. 11:33-36). "In the cross God 'outsmarted' his human creatures and thereby nullified their wisdom." [Fee]
- The world considers the cross and concludes it's the epitome of folly. But that will not change our message. We have no wisdom to offer apart from the folly of the cross. We have two objectives:
  - ✓ Make sure they understand the cross and what it does.
  - ✓ Make sure they understand the hopelessness of their wisdom.

#### 4. The Gospel of the Cross is **MAN-HUMBLING** (vv. 26-29)

- What does the cross do? It exposes our prideful self-reliance and our inadequacy and inability to save ourselves. So Paul reminds the Corinthians of what they were: **consider your calling...**
  - ✓ That is, consider (the word is "see" or "look" — it has the idea of examine) what you were in yourselves when God called you to salvation (and His calling is another reminder that He chose them and they did not choose Him, Eph. 1:4-6). Who initiated your salvation? Who brings it to completion? Not too many of you are particularly impressive, are you? (v. 26)
  - ✓ There is nothing inherent in man that either attracts or repels God. His choice is His choice, apart from anything in us. It is all grace and all His doing.
  - ✓ **But God** (don't you love that phrase?) has used the **foolish** cross to **shame** (humiliate and disgrace) and **nullify** (reduce to nothing and render inoperative) earthly **wisdom** and **pride** (vv. 27-28; Ps. 6:10).
  - ✓ Why? Verse 29 is the key to the entire passage — **so that no man may boast before God**. Consider, see and understand your salvation so that there will be no prideful boasting. (The hymn "At the cross" is right — "Alas! and did my Savior bleed? And did my Savior die? Would He devote that sacred head for such a worm as I?")
    - This was the heart of the Corinthian problem — notice how often he addresses the sin of pride — 3:7, 21; 4:6-7, 18; 5:2; 8:1; 13:4
    - What is pride? (Piper — 1 Cor. 1:31)
      - ... It is boasting in self and not the Lord.
      - ... It is taking credit ourselves for what only God can do.

- ... It is relying on self and not God.
- ... It is feeling sufficiency in our own strength and not in God's.
- ... It is the disinclination to admit that we are mere earthen vessels, so another gets the glory
- ... It is the unwillingness to admit weaknesses that may accent the power of Christ.
- ... It is a source of confidence and a form of trust — that which we boast about is that which we trust. [Fee]

- ✓ The cross is the very means God uses to root out our pride and self-sufficiency and self-reliance — by placing us in a situation where we cannot trust ourselves but must trust in someone who demonstrated His supremacy by going to the cross (and defeating death)!

*"The things which elevate man in the world, knowledge, influence, rank, are not the things which lead to God and salvation." [Hodge]*

*"The ground is level at the foot of the cross; not a single thing that any of us possesses will advantage him/her before the living God — not brilliance, 'clout,' achievement, money, or prestige. By choosing the lowly Corinthians God declared that he has forever ruled out every imaginable system of gaining His favor. It is all — 'trust him completely' (v. 31) or nothing." [Fee, p. 84]*

- God's purpose (notice **so that** in v. 29) is to keep us from boasting. We will speak the right gospel when what we say pulls man down low (Jn. 3:30; 1 Pt. 5:6). While our culture (and culturally-sensitive churches) will seek to raise the esteem of men to make them feel good about themselves, the gospel of the cross will have us consider ourselves soberly and accurately so that we no longer pursue self-esteem but pursue Christ-esteem.
- Are you convinced of man's lowliness and his spiritual inability? That's essential for evangelistic boldness.

## 5. The Gospel of the Cross is GOD-GLORIFYING (vv. 30-31)

- Notice v. 30 — It is only by God's decree and plan that **you are in Christ Jesus**.
  - ✓ It is **by His doing**. If it was our doing, we would never pursue Him and even if we did want Him, we could never get to Him. Instead, God has done what we could never do and placed us **in Christ** (which is what we've been talking about in Rom. 6-8).
  - ✓ That's is the **wisdom of God**. In fact, **Christ** is the **wisdom of God**. Wisdom originates in God and He makes it to dwell in Christ and through Christ and His cross we possess spiritual wisdom. And with that wisdom (of the cross), we receive **righteousness, sanctification, and redemption**.
    - We receive imputed righteousness.
    - We are progressively sanctified.
    - We have the confidence of ultimate redemption.
    - This triad pictures the progress of our salvation — start to finish (Rom. 8:30).

- All of this is to make us to boast in the Lord (v. 31).
  - ✓ This is a quotation from **Jeremiah 9:24** — just as the Corinthians were tempted to boast in themselves, the Israelites were also prone to boasting in their wisdom, strength, or riches (v. 23). The only reason to boast is in the kindness, justice, and righteousness of God (Jer. 9:24).
  - ✓ Only God is pre-eminent. God is always first. And the temptation of the flesh is to attempt to push God off His throne so that we might sit there. The gospel is about the priority of God — even when God is in the person of Jesus Christ, crucified on the cross.
  - ✓ “Everything that we know and appreciate and praise God for in all of Christian experience both in this life and in the life to come springs from this bloody cross.” [Carson, *Scandalous*]. And that is what we declare to sinners who are hoping in themselves to be good enough before God.
- This message has been to believers to encourage them to be convinced of the power of the gospel. But you may not be a Christian and you’ve become convinced this morning that you are powerless to change and that the cross is powerful to change you. I exhort you to believe today in Christ — to trust that He will forgive you for the penalty of your sin and free you from the power of sin...

**CONCLUSION:** We are sometimes hesitant to speak the gospel because we believe it is out-of-date, weak, or inadequate. We need to be convinced of its relevance, power, and wisdom. That’s Paul’s message.

In 1838, Robert Murray M’Cheyne preached a sermon, “God Let None of His Words Fall to the Ground.” To demonstrate the power and authority of God’s Word, he related this story:

The excellent John Flavel was minister of Dartmouth, in England. One day he preached from these words: ‘If any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be anathema maranatha.’ [1 Cor. 16:22] The discourse was unusually solemn – particularly the explanation of the curse. At the conclusion, when Mr. Flavel rose to pronounce the blessing, he paused, and said: ‘How shall I bless this whole assembly, when every person in it who loves not the Lord Jesus is anathema maranatha?’ The solemnity of this address deeply affected the audience. In the congregation was a lad named Luke Short, about fifteen years old, a native of Dartmouth. Shortly after, he went to sea, and sailed to America, where he passed the rest of his life. His life was lengthened far beyond the usual term. When a hundred years old, he was able to work on his farm, and his mind was not at all impaired. He had lived all this time in carelessness and sin; he was a sinner a hundred years old, and ready to die accursed. One day, as he sat in his field, he busied himself in reflecting on his past life. He thought of the days of his youth. His memory fixed on Mr. Flavel’s sermon, a considerable part of which he remembered. The earnestness of the minister – the truths spoken – the effect on the people – all came fresh to his mind. He felt that he had not loved the Lord Jesus; he feared the dreadful anathema; he was deeply convinced of sin – was brought to the blood of sprinkling. He lived to his one hundred and sixteenth year, giving every evidence of being born again. [From [“Banner of Truth”](#)]

This is the power of the gospel — the gospel we are committed to preach personally and corporately in 2019.

**BENEDICTION:** **Rom. 11:33-36**