

Understanding the Message of the Cross

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

1 Corinthians 1:18-31: "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. 19 For it is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, And bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent." 20 Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? 21 For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. 22 For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; 23 but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, 24 but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25 Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. 26 For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. 27 But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; 28 and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, 29 that no flesh should glory in His presence. 30 But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God—and righteousness and sanctification and redemption— 31 that, as it is written, "He who glories, let him glory in the Lord."

Background Notes

The church at Corinth had a lot going for it. The Corinthian Christians were the Lord's people living in the midst of a pagan society that was characterized by idolatry and immorality, especially at Corinth. Corinth was a port city and a wealthy center of commerce. The city was known for loose living, and archaeological finds in ancient Corinth certainly back up the fact that it was an idolatrous and immoral city.

So the church at Corinth was a light for God in the midst of a lost and corrupt society. It was also a gifted church. Verses 5-7: *"You were enriched in everything by Him in all utterance and all knowledge, even as the testimony of Christ was confirmed in you, so that you come short in no gift."* That was the good news.

The bad news was that there were problems in the church at Corinth, and one of the biggest problems was that there were divisions and quarrels in the church. Verses 11-12: *"For it has been declared to me concerning you, my brethren, by those of Chloe's household, that there are contentions among you. Now I say this, that each of you says, "I am of Paul," or "I am of Apollos," or "I am of Cephas," or "I am of Christ."*

This sectarian spirit was fracturing the church at Corinth, and it was tearing down the testimony of Christ. This is why Paul was so concerned that the Christians at Corinth come to unity. Verse 10: *“Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.”*

Unity in the church was important in the 1st century, and it is still true today. It's important for churches to be unified because divisions and cliques within a church can fracture the visible body of Christ and can ultimately split the church. It also tears down the testimony of Christ. In John 17 the Lord prayed for unity among His people. Ephesians 4:3 teaches that we must be diligent to *“preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”*

In the second half of this chapter, Paul got to the root of the problem - the cause of the divisions at Corinth.

Doctrinal Points

1. To the unbeliever, the message of the cross is foolishness and powerless.

A ***correct understanding of the message of the cross*** would have eliminated the divisions in the church at Corinth, and it would eliminate divisions in any Christian fellowship or church today.

The message of the cross, rightly understood, is a message of self-renunciation and *dying to self*. It is a message of *servng others*. The message of the cross is the opposite of self-seeking and not self-serving – those characteristics will always lead to division.

The Corinthian believers needed to understand this, because they were putting too much emphasis on the wisdom of man and the glory of man. God does not work that way! God delights in taking what the unbelieving world classifies as foolish and weak and lowly and insignificant, and using these things and these people to shame the wise and strong of this world.

And God pulls down those who think they are so wise and clever! Remember the Tower of Babel? Let's read about that event in Genesis 11:1-9. *“Now the whole earth had one language and one speech... Then they said to one another, “Come, let us make bricks and bake them thoroughly.” They had brick for stone, and they had asphalt for mortar. And they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top is in the heavens; let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth.”*

But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower which the sons of men had built. And the Lord said, “Indeed the people are one and they all have one language, and this is what they begin to do; now nothing that they propose to do will be withheld from them. Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one

another's speech." So the Lord scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they ceased building the city. Therefore its name is called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth; and from there the Lord scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth."

Genesis 11 is a great illustration of the truth that is presented in 1 Corinthians 1. The people of Genesis 11 thought they were very clever and wise. They decided to build a huge tower to make a name for themselves. The context indicates that the tower was definitely not for the glory of God, but actually to defy God.

But God had the last word! *"...the Lord came down to see the city and the tower which the sons of men had built"* (Genesis 11:5). This great tower that man in his wisdom and pride was building was so small that God had to come down to see it! I can just imagine God saying, "What is that little speck that those foolish people are building? I'll go down and check it out." Certainly God has a sense of humor. The wisdom of man is but foolishness with God. *Has God not made foolish the wisdom of this world?* (v20). God pulls down those who think they are wise and mighty and clever.

Verse 19 is a quotation from Isaiah 29:14, where the wise and clever in Israel thought that they could form an alliance with Egypt against Assyria. "Sorry," said the Lord. "Your wisdom will not save you." It was only the miraculous intervention by God that saved Israel at that time. God makes foolish the wisdom of this world (v20) because the foolishness of God is wiser than man, and the weakness of God is stronger than man (v25).

To the unbelieving Jews who seek for signs, the message of the cross is a stumbling block. To the unbelieving Gentiles who seek for wisdom, the message of the cross is foolishness (v23). To the unbeliever, the message of the cross is foolish and weak. Little do they know that they are really the foolish and weak ones, because the message of the cross is the wisdom of God and the power of God (v24).

2. For the believer, the message of the cross is the wisdom and power of God.

Notice that there are only two classes of people in reference to salvation – those who are perishing, and those who are being saved. Verse 18: *"For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."*

Those who are perishing cannot understand the fact that they cannot save themselves. The idea that Jesus died on the cross as a substitute for sinners, and that a simple faith in Christ as personal Savior results in eternal life, is foolishness to the unbeliever. They simply cannot understand this – it doesn't make sense to them. And you have to admit that apart from the inner conviction of the Holy Spirit, God's plan of salvation is totally foreign to the human way of thinking. Would you have ever conceived God's plan of salvation for mankind - that the eternal Son of God would become Man in order to

be crucified and die on a Roman cross? Apart from divine enlightenment, that's just incomprehensible foolishness to the human mind!

But to those who are saved and have the Holy Spirit to convince us, the message of the cross is the wisdom and power of God. Because of the cross of Christ, believers now have God's wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption (v30). This package of benefits includes our redemption from sin *now*, and our redemption in its *future* full and final aspect - the resurrection and glorification of our bodies.

All of this is because the Man named Jesus died on Roman cross in the Middle East about 2000 years ago. Amazing! All of this is foolishness to the unbeliever, but the message of the cross is the wisdom and power of God for the believer.

Practical Application

1. If you're well off in this world, be glad for the letter "M"!

Verse 26: *"For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called."* Notice what the verse does not say. It doesn't say "not *any* wise according to the flesh, not *any* might, not *any* noble, are called." No! It says "*not many*." So if you're a Christian and you're well off in this world with intelligence, power, position, and money, you should be glad for the letter "m". Verse 26 doesn't say "not any" - it says "*not many*"!

I don't have to worry about all those things - but if you're well off in this world, be glad for the letter "m."

2. Let's "boast" in the Lord!

Verse 31: *"Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord."* So it's okay to boast? Wait a minute - I thought it was wrong to boast! Yes, it is wrong to boast about yourself, but this quotation from Jeremiah 9:24 says that we *can* and *should* boast in the Lord.

How do you "boast in the Lord"? You talk about the Lord to others. You tell them how great He is. You tell them about His wonderful works of creation. You tell others what He's done for you, and what He is doing through you. Tell them about His grace and His offer of free salvation.

Let's not boast about ourselves - let's boast in the Lord.