

1 Corinthians 1:18-19

PREFACE

In the next extended passage of our text—1:18 to 2:5—Paul wholeheartedly embraces God’s audacious plan for man’s salvation. He gives not an inch toward contemporary sensibilities; he makes no apology for God’s use of a cruel and shameful death for His Son.

There is no “Yes, but...” where it comes to the cross:

- *Yes, you’re right, Christ died—but He rose from the grave.*

There is no “Yes, but...” where it comes to wisdom:

- *Yes, the Greeks are wise, but God is wiser.*

Paul unabashedly embraces (in this context) not Christ *resurrected*, but Christ *crucified* (v23). And he unapologetically declares the ‘wisdom’ of this world to be nothing more than “foolishness” (v20).

Before we even begin to dig into the text, God has given us here a valuable take-away. Whether from the pulpit to hundreds, or over the backyard fence to a neighbor, we need never apologize for the gospel. We need never round off its sharp edges, or soften its unabashed truth. We are, instead, to embrace it fully, as is.

Note: In the handout for this session I’ve taken the liberty—may God not strike me down—of adding scare quotes to show how Paul uses the word “foolishness” in different ways. Scare quotes are used to denote ironic, sarcastic, or otherwise out-of-the-ordinary usage.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:17-19.

v18

As mentioned in our last session, Paul links v17 to v18 by using the same word: *logos*. The word translated “speech” (NASB) in v17 is a form of *logos*, often translated “word.” Then Paul links v17 with v18 by referring to the *logos* of the cross. And I think the NIV and NKJV “message” is good: What is the cross telling us? What is the message of the cross?

For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing,

It is important that we understand how scandalous Paul’s declaration is regarding the cross; to that end, we need to understand *why* it would be regarded as “foolishness” to many in the first century.

The cross was “a particularly cruel and shameful death, which as a rule was reserved for hardened criminals, incorrigible slaves, and rebels against the Roman state” (Hengel). If we look upon the event of Jesus’ execution dispassionately, as an outsider might at the time, we would see that

- “He was rejected by the very people He came to save,
- was deserted by His own disciples,
- was strung up by the proper [and lawful] authorities, and apparently
- was powerless to save His own skin...

The cross was repugnant to ancient sensibilities” (Garland).

To us, in the context of our religion, the imagery of the cross might represent love and life—eternal life—and God’s power, but the typical imagery for that to the religious in the first century might be stalks of grain, a basket of fruit or (with apologies) an erect phallus (Furnish). *Not* a means of execution.

Proclaiming a crucified Jew from some backwater of the empire as “a divine being sent on earth, God’s Son, Lord of all and the coming judge of the world, must have been thought by any educated man to be utter ‘madness’ and presumptuousness” (Hengel).

This is why Paul writes that to those who are perishing—i.e., unbelievers—the *logos* of the cross is utter foolishness. Disengage yourself from our time, and consider it from a first-century, pagan perspective. The cross was not yet the “old rugged cross” sentimentalized in hymns, glorified in stained-glass windows, perched on marble altars, or fashioned into gold charms (Garland). It was just an ugly method of execution for presumed guilty criminals, something civilized people in the first century did not want to see, to think about or discuss. Contemplation of the cross was, to them, loathsome. It represented nothing less than abject humiliation.

It is the *gospel* that transforms the cross as a symbol of Roman terror and political domination into a symbol of God’s love and power (Garland). And Paul relies on *that* power—the power of God and His Christ, and the power of the cross itself—*not* the power of clever eloquence, to convict his audience of the truth.

Foolishness? Just think about it: In your world of the first century, all the gods have a measure of power; those in the upper echelons of divinity have the most power, while those at or near the bottom have less—sometimes *far* less, and they are referred to as “demigods” (*demi* = *half*). But even these lesser gods would not permit themselves to be nailed to a tree—and to die. *And now you expect me to believe that the most supreme God of all, the one with power over every other god, delivered His own Son to suffer such a powerless, humiliating death. Rubbish. You’re insane.*

The Corinthians were letting the world’s philosophies—and the world’s love of philosophy—invade the church and weaken the truth of Christ’s gospel. I am intrigued by something John MacArthur wrote in his commentary.

MacArthur: A Christian has no need of human philosophy... Where it happens to be right it will agree with Scripture, and is therefore unnecessary. Where it is wrong it will disagree with Scripture, and is therefore misleading. It has nothing necessary or reliable to offer.

The older I get—the more I study God’s word—the more I realize that ultimately—and the earlier the better—one must choose between the cross and the philosophies of this world. Most of us, even if a Christian at an early age, pass through stages where we try to mix the two: We are followers of Christ, but also believe that the “wisdom” of this world has something to contribute—not for salvation, but as regards life and living, social interaction, philosophical thought, etc.

But the two do not mix. At all. We must decide: Will it be God in Christ, or will it be the “wisdom of words”—those claiming that “the word of the cross is foolishness”?

Read Colossians 2:6-8.

but to us who are being saved...

Technically the opposite of foolishness would be wisdom, and the opposite of power would be weakness, and Paul will make that comparison in v25. But here Paul is pointing back to what he said in v17, where the “*wisdom of word*” empties the cross of its *power*.

Here we have, in the correct translation of the verbs in v18, the concept of “now—not yet,” or “already—not yet.”

- those who **are perishing** (i.e., in the process of perishing)
- us who are **being saved** (i.e., in the process of salvation)

Because I have addressed this in-depth in a number of studies (not least in our study of *Christ in the Old Testament*), I won't spend much time on it now.

Now

Every follower of Christ is immediately, absolutely saved / sanctified / atoned for / redeemed / justified. Nevertheless, the Christian remains on this fallen earth—and remains in flesh. The “old man” ([Romans 6:6 KJV](#)), the sinful nature of the flesh in which we are born, remains, setting up the tension between righteousness and sin with which we are all familiar. Ideally our sanctification does not remain static, but throughout the life of the believer progresses, matures, until the day the old flesh is no longer. We are “now” saved, but not complete.

Not Yet

On that day the ongoing battle between holiness and sin with which we have become so familiar will immediately cease, and, standing in His presence, we will be complete. That day has “not yet” come for us still here. But it will—that is the promise of God.

it is the power of God.

From v17 to v23, then back to v18 and v24 we can trace Paul's flow of thought:

v17: [I came] to preach **the gospel** =

v23: we preach **Christ crucified** (i.e., the cross) =

v18, v24: the word of the cross...is **the power of God**.

Naturally, the “power” of God is limitless and pervasive, but what does Paul mean by it here? Let's look at a few other references to this power for a fuller picture. Let's begin with what God says about it Himself in the book of the prophet Jeremiah—and as I read this passage, remember, to the Corinthians Paul wrote that the *word* of the cross is the power of God.

Read Jeremiah 23:24-29.

In the first chapter of his letter to the Romans, because there he is emphasizing faith and belief, Paul associates the power of God with salvation for all.

Read Romans 1:14-17.

In Chapter Six of 1 Corinthians Paul associates God's power with resurrection.

Read 1 Corinthians 6:14.

We could do this all day. For example, in the gospels and the Acts alone *dynamis* is used forty-eight times to reference Christ's and the apostles' miraculous powers. But let's return to our passage.

Just as in Romans, Paul's usage of the word is based on the context, and the context in our passage is comparing the wisdom of men to the wisdom of God. So in v24 he tacks that onto his second use of *dynamis*.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:24.

But perhaps my favorite example of God's power is seen one day out on the Sea of Galilee.

MacArthur: God's power is real power, power that means something and accomplishes something. It is not *of* men, but it is offered *for* men.

But as they were sailing along He fell asleep; and a fierce gale of wind descended on the lake, and they began to be swamped and to be in danger. They came to Jesus and woke Him up, saying, "Master, Master, we are perishing!" And He got up and rebuked the wind and the surging waves, and they stopped, and it became calm. (Luke 8:23-24)

There is *real* power. The scene is of utter calamity: a fierce wind, high waves, the boat being swamped, everyone fearing for the lives. And Jesus is sound asleep. They wake him, He rubs the sleep from his eyes, notices the wind and high seas, and says to the wind, "Be quiet." And it stops. Period. Full stop. *That's* power.

v19

Then in v19 Paul backs up v18 with a quote from the prophet Isaiah.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:19.

The verse in Isaiah 29 immediately follows the more familiar v13.

Then the Lord said, "Because this people draw near with their words And honor Me with their lip service, But they remove their hearts far from Me, And their reverence for Me consists of tradition learned by rote..."

Because they do not mean what they say, and their hearts do not truly revere Me, then this is what I am about to do (and there are Messianic undertones in the text):

"Therefore behold, I will once again deal marvelously with this people, wondrously marvelous; And the wisdom of their wise men will perish, And the discernment of their discerning men will be concealed." (Isaiah 29:13-14)

The Corinthians who still value "the wisdom of the wise" have failed to notice God's apocalyptic judgment on such wisdom through the crucified Messiah. For Paul, Isaiah's words are not just a judgment on ancient Judean leaders, but also an indictment of the rhetorical affectations of the Corinthians (R. B. Hays).

And in all of this we see evidence for "the power of God."

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

18 For the word 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 THE CLEVERNESS OF THE CLEVER I WILL SET ASIDE.”

20 Where is the wise man? 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 through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the **‘foolishness’** of the message preached to save those who believe.

22 For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom;

23 but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles **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 consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble;

27 but God has chosen the **foolish** things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong,

28 and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are,

29 so that no man may boast before God.

30 But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption,

31 so that, just as it is written, “LET HIM WHO BOASTS, BOAST IN THE LORD.”

‘foolishness’ = scare quotes added to denote ironic or sarcastic use