

1 Corinthians 1:18-25 The Power of God Falls Ch. AM 1/14/2024

Where can we find true power? Not where people think, at first.

One year on New Year's Day, in the Tournament of Roses parade, a beautiful float suddenly sputtered and stopped. The float was out of gas. The whole parade was held up until someone could get a can of gas. The amusing thing was this float represented the Standard Oil Company. With its vast oil resources, its own truck was out of gas.

Where can we find true power? Not where people think, at first.

When people who are called by Christ hear the preaching of Christ crucified, we hear God's power and wisdom.

1. Silly? Those not called by Christ consider preaching silly. (v.18)

Verse 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."*

'...the Word of the cross...' = 'the proclamation of the cross.' It means preaching from the Bible about the cross of Jesus. It is a way of describing true preaching, Biblical preaching. This is in contrast to the type of speaking Paul had mentioned just prior, back in verse 17. There Paul wrote that he was called *"to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom."* That is, not with fancy words of clever rhetoric. Instead, with straightforward and plain preaching.

Okay, what about it? Well, Paul wrote that such preaching drew out one of only 2 possible reactions from hearers, and they were 2 very different reactions.

The first reaction is that for some people, true preaching is considered to be folly. The word folly means silly, or empty, or nonsense. Who would say such a thing about preaching? The only people who would say such a thing are those people in a state of mind known as perishing or people who are spiritually dead. They are the only people who say such things.

Is that our view of preaching? What would we say? We have the other view of preaching. We would say that gospel preaching is not silly, but instead is the power of God! Why would we say that? Because we are in a very different state of heart and mind known as spiritually alive, or flourishing, or being saved for heaven. And upon us, preaching has a very good effect; preaching has a very life-giving effect on us. Even long after our initial conversion to Christianity, when we have come to know well and be thoroughly familiar with the old, old story, even then, we are still richly blessed, supernaturally equipped, whenever we get to hear the good news proclaimed again. To us, writes Paul, this preaching is the power of God. The word power here is the Greek word *dunamis*, from which we get the English word dynamite. It is mighty power. Even explosive and unstoppable power. This power draws us, and makes us riveted to the message when heard, and leaves us changed by the message afterwards. That is the power of God.

Paul has cast one unusual image for the power of God – the cross! Is that silly? The cross presents the meaning of One person giving Himself for the rescue of others. That self-giving seems silly to the world. So, to talk about it also seems silly to the world. To do so every Sunday in every sermon seems like a waste of time to those who are on their way to ruin. But to us who are being saved, hearing again about the cross is our refreshing source of life!

2. Wise? Other ‘wisdom’ paths do not lead to God. (v.19-22)

In verse 19, Paul quoted the prophet Isaiah, saying that God would destroy the ideas of those with earthly wisdom.

God’s purpose was to show that the cross is the only pathway to spiritual life.

The world’s proposed ideas of alternate pathways to God are many various ideas. The world’s many spokesmen step forward and find various ways of basically saying, ‘We don’t need Christ and His cross, because all roads lead to God.’ They are wrong. It is sad because only later, when other pathways fail to lead them to God and fail to usher them safely through the day of Judgment – only when it is too late - will they realize that their many various ideas were not wisdom at all. Instead, their ideas were the ideas that were foolishness. It is sad!

So Paul’s phrases here in verse 19 are copied from Isaiah, phrases like ‘*the wisdom of the wise*’ and ‘*the discernment of the discerning*’. These phrases have the effect of comprehensively saying the best thoughts of the top experts of the world. The best of the best. The smartest thoughts of the smartest people. What about their collective wisdom? At the end – all will be shown to be silly. By whom? By God. All the best wisdom of the world’s smartest people will be shown to be silly by God. God said it, and so Isaiah wrote it, and then Paul quoted it, and now we are studying it from verse 19 – God will destroy and God will thwart the ideas such as modern pluralism – the idea that all roads lead to God. That idea is silliness. Be very careful, as you walk through this world – because there are a lot of false voices of silliness. God is asking - are you truly looking for wisdom?

Verse 20, “*Where is the one who is wise?* (this is a reference to the whole Greek academy of philosophers and all their best conclusions)...*the scribe* (this is a reference to the whole Jewish synagogue, and all their writings and traditions), *the debater of this age* (anyone else who rises up now with newest and latest ideas)” All of them are foolish if they have their minds closed to the message of the cross. Because of that one single fact, God has declared them foolish. Not that there is no redeeming value in their research and products. Rather, that when we consider ultimate things, and the most important questions of humanity, these leading minds of the world get it wrong. King Solomon wrote, “*the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom.*” Proverbs 9:10 The best minds of the world’s best universities don’t have the key to life and the secret to eternity future. Because of

that - says Solomon, and says Isaiah, and says Paul - they have not even begun to gain wisdom. Says God.

Verse 21, it was God's idea, it was God's wisdom that says that this world's scholars cannot get to know God by continuing down the road of their own earthly wisdom. Instead, it is through cross-proclaiming that people come to know God. Verse 21, "...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 was challenging their views of both wisdom and folly! Wisdom? Paul asks? Where is your wisdom when that wisdom cannot bring you to God! Paul asks, "Preaching is folly, you say?" Take another look at the result - that supposed 'folly' of what we preach is causing people to truly come to know God! That folly of what we preach is saving people's souls through faith. Paul challenged the church in Corinth not to be hoodwinked by the false messages around them in sin city. See this clearly - the 'folly' of what preachers preach is the precise means that God had decided to use to introduce people to wisdom in the first place. Our first step on the path of wisdom is to hear about the cross, and to embrace the risen Jesus Christ by faith.

The leading scholars of this world have both wisdom and foolishness all backwards! What they call wisdom is actually foolishness. What they call foolish preaching, is actually the only password that gains access to everlasting wisdom. Paul put this question to university professors and speakers at the ancient world's cutting-edge conferences - why did they keep on trying to invent their own ways to God? Man had previously tried that by building the tower of Babel. The man-built tower did not reach heaven. The Greeks tried through philosophers, the Jews tried through writings, the debaters tried through conferences, and Paul said all of it was empty! Paul said all of it was nonsense! Which brings us to our third point. How do we gain access to God's wisdom?

3. Called? Those called by Christ are drawn to know God. (v.23-25)

Verse 23, "...but we preach Christ crucified." Paul then explained the 2 opposite responses both generated by the same preaching of Christ crucified and risen again. One response was from this world. Both Jews and Gentiles had the same negative unbelieving response to the preaching of the cross. To Jews, the preaching of Christ crucified was a stumbling block. The Jews refused to believe that their long-awaited Messiah could be the man upon the cross unto death, and the same man who was then buried in the tomb. For the Gentiles also, the same preaching of Christ was folly to them.

But then there was another different response to this preaching. Verse 24, "to those who are called..." We remember Paul's emphasis on the word called in verses 1, 2, and again in verse 9. Anyone could be called, whether those called ones are Jews, or whether those called ones are Gentiles. To the called ones, the

preaching of Christ crucified sounds very different. To those called, this preaching sounds like power, like dynamite. It sounds like powerful heavenly wisdom. To those of us called, we used to be spiritually dead, but then we became eternally alive under the hearing of the preaching of Christ crucified.

Why the two reactions?

Consider the teaching of Christ Himself. Matthew 7:24-27, the wise man built his house on what? The rock. The foolish man built his house on what? The sand. The result? The storm blew over the foolish, while the wise stood firm. Two reactions to the same storm.

But why? How do we account for 2 different responses? We account for it with either the presence of the calling of God or the absence of the calling of God!

Again, let's see it in the teaching of our Savior. Listen to the prayer of Jesus to God the Father in Matthew 11:25-27, "*At that time Jesus declared, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to Me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal Him."*"

Jesus taught that God the Father hides spiritual truth from this world's wise persons, because they refuse to listen to the message of the cross of Christ. The Father and the Son work together to reveal true wisdom and everlasting life to those who come to God the Father through the Son.

Again our question - why the 2 different reactions to the preaching of Christ crucified?

Here in verse 24, Paul's teaching lines right up with the teaching of Jesus. The 2 opposite reactions are because some are called, and some are not called. This is, God calling people to believe, through the plain gospel preaching. Could be a Jew, could be a Gentile. The key thing that differentiates which reaction a person would have to the invitation of Christianity's gospel, is not our ethnicity. It is not our personal background or our education or our training. The only distinguishing factor that determines whether we embrace Christ who is preached, or reject Christ who is preached, is whether or not we are called by God.

Period. Called by God.

In verse 25, Paul summarizes and concludes with this statement, "*For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.*"

God is asking you. Are you looking for wisdom? God has all wisdom. Colossians 2, Paul wrote, "*to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, in Whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge."*"

God is asking you. Are you looking for power? God has all power. Even the weakest aspect of God is stronger than all the mightiest aspect of any human.

Paul was writing with the intent of God getting His proper recognition and acclaim. God must get His credit. A sage cannot think his way into heaven. A monk cannot purify his way into the presence of the holy God. A debater cannot smooth-talk his way into the good graces of God. The only way to God is through God's own powerful calling upon our souls. How do you know if you have that calling? You know by your response to preaching! The unmatched power of God brings us unto salvation. God calls us. God saves us. God provided His Son to be our Savior upon the cross, and God provided news about our Savior through preachers bringing the word of the cross to the ends of the earth. That is the way to God. No other roads lead to God.

Conclusion: SI - A young boy traveling by airplane to visit his grandparents sat beside a man who happened to be a seminary professor. The boy was reading a Sunday school take-home paper, and the professor thought he would have some fun with the lad. "Young man," said the professor, "if you can tell me something God can do, I will give you a big, shiny apple." The boy thought for a moment and then replied, "Mister, if you can tell me something God can't do, I'll give you a whole barrel of apples!"

In this passage, Paul takes on everyone. It was not just about the limits of the wisdom of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Stoicism and Epicureanism that is present in this passage. It is about the limits of anything humans rely on to get through life and to get to heaven.

The rich man thinks he can buy his way out of any problem.

The smart man thinks he can think his way out of any predicament.

The influential man thinks he can influence his way through all things.

God says to the rich man – you have no purchasing power out of sin, other than the blood of Christ crucified.

God says to the smart man, you cannot find a way through your predicament of the penalty due unto you for your wrongdoings, other than the wisdom of Christ alone, and the inestimable treasure of His light shining upon your darkness.

God says to the influential man – you have no power over me that would open gates into My eternal dwelling, other than the power of Christ risen again.

Jesus our Shepherd said in John 10:27, "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me." That is the power of God.

Do you hear the voice of Christ calling you to believe? That is the unmistakable power of God. *Psalm 29:4 – The voice of the Lord is powerful.*

Paul wrote in Romans 1:16, "*For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.*"