

Holy by Grace. Bound for Glory. Now What?
The Word of the Cross
1 Corinthians 1:18-25
 Pastor Jason Van Bommel

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. 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. 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? 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. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

- 1 Corinthians 1:17-25, ESV

Lifting Weights & Building Cars

I go to the gym sometimes. At 45, I don't try to lift really heavy weights. I mostly stick to the machines and focus on reps instead of heavy loads that might break something. But I do have a guilty pleasure of watching strongman competitions and strongman feats. I really enjoyed the History Channel's Strongest Man in History series that featured Brian Shaw (4-times World's Strongest Man), Eddie Hall (Britain's Strongest Man and 1-time World's Strongest Man winner) and others. So, here's the thing. Imagine I went to the gym and was challenged to deadlift 1,000 pounds or to bench 500 pounds, what would I do? What if I absolutely had to do it, and I couldn't get out of it. Well . . . I would probably ask if I could get a substitute and then frantically try to find Brian Shaw's phone number.

Or, here's another scenario to consider: What if I was given a basic frame and then a random bunch of old car parts in various bins and boxes, and I was told I needed to build a 1967 Pontiac GTO. The right parts were in the bins and boxes, and I would even be given directions and some tools. But at the end of a week, I must have a complete, perfect 1967 Pontiac GTO. What would I do? Well, can I get some expert assistance? Or maybe another substitute?

What do lifting weights and building cars have to do with the word of the cross and this passage from 1 Corinthians? Well, nothing, and yet, here's the connection: Impossibility, and the need for rescue through a more qualified substitute. But more on that later.

Paul has been addressing the problem of divisions, of factions, in the Corinthian church he had founded about 5 years before he wrote this letter. In the years since he left Corinth, various groups within the church had started to identify themselves with famous preachers, saying "I follow Paul." "I follow Apollos." "I follow

Cephas.” And the really super-spiritual ones who didn’t think they needed any human spiritual leadership said, “I follow Christ.”

Paul is leading them away from their self-centered, prideful factions and back to a stronger, clearer focus on Christ and the cross. In verse 13, he asked, “*Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?*” He was driving home the point that they all belong to the same Lord Jesus Christ, who alone was crucified for them and in whose name they were all baptized.

In dividing themselves into these personality cults, the Corinthian believers were acting just like the culture around them, which was a celebrity-obsessed culture, much like our own, only their celebrities were mostly powerful and effective speakers. It does seem like these factions in the Corinthian church probably had an ethnic or cultural flavor to them. Apollos was the most eloquent and powerful speaker among the trio of Paul, Apollos, and Cephas (Peter). He was the most powerfully persuasive.

Peter had probably done the most miraculous works, the most signs. Peter and John had healed a lame man who was begging at the Beautiful Gate in Jerusalem, in Acts 3, and then, in Acts 5:12-16, we read this description of the church in Jerusalem under Peter’s ministry –

Now many signs and wonders were regularly done among the people by the hands of the apostles. And they were all together in Solomon’s Portico. ¹³ None of the rest dared join them, but the people held them in high esteem. ¹⁴ And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women, ¹⁵ so that they even carried out the sick into the streets and laid them on cots and mats, that as Peter came by at least his shadow might fall on some of them. ¹⁶ The people also gathered from the towns around Jerusalem, bringing the sick and those afflicted with unclean spirits, and they were all healed. – Acts 5:12-16, ESV

If those who said, “I follow Cephas” were those who had come from Jerusalem and had been baptized by or who had sat under Peter’s ministry in Jerusalem, then we can know two things about them: They were Jewish and they had seen many miraculous signs done by the Lord through Peter.

With this background, the contours of the likely patterns of worldliness in the church in Corinth become clearer:

For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

A. Foolishness and Wisdom

Greeks seek wisdom. They enjoy hearing a good argument well presented, a compelling case powerfully articulated. That was Apollos’ specialty. Of course, there’s nothing wrong with presenting the truth in a compelling manner, but Paul explains that doing so can sometimes have a hidden danger:

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. 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. For it is written,

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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? 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 intentionally contrasts “words of eloquent wisdom” (v. 17) with “the word of the cross” (v. 18). And this contrast is tied into a greater contrast: “the wisdom of the world” verses “the wisdom of God.”

The word of the cross is the wisdom of God, but it is foolishness to the world. It is folly to those who are perishing. We need to remind ourselves of this.

Cicero was the greatest of all Roman orators. He was a great statesman who served as the Roman consul in the year 63 BC. He died in the year 43 BC, but his wisdom and influence on the Greco-Roman world was tremendous. He gave a speech against crucifixion, which reveals what Romans thought of even the word “cross”:

Wretched is the loss of one's good name in the public courts, wretched, too, a monetary fine exacted from one's property, and wretched is exile, but, still, in each calamity there is retained some trace of liberty. Even if death is set before us, we may die in freedom. But the executioner, the veiling of heads, and the very word "cross," let them all be far removed from not only the bodies of Roman citizens but even from their thoughts, their eyes, and their ears. The results and suffering from these doings as well as the situation, even anticipation, of their enabement, and, in the end, the mere mention of them are unworthy of a Roman citizen and a free man.

And here comes the Apostle Paul into Corinth, proclaiming “the word of the cross,” the message about a crucified Savior who is Lord of all. This is such folly as to be absolute madness to the Greeks who prize wisdom.

And yet, as much as the world regards the word of the cross as folly, we have to ask in turn, “Where has the wisdom of the world gotten us?” Has the wisdom of the world been able to settle the deepest questions and most profound problems of the human race? No. In the end, it is empty. The world’s wisdom is merely a re-arranging of the deck chairs on the Titanic. The biggest problems and the deepest needs are left unsolved and unmet.

So, Paul did not want the Greeks in the church at Corinth to focus too much on the great wisdom of Apollos, their favorite. For the eloquence of Apollos was not the real treasure, but it was the word of the cross, the true wisdom from God, which may have been meekly spoken by Paul and powerfully spoken by Apollos, but it remains the same message, the word of the cross.

B. Weakness and Power

Just as Greeks naturally seek wisdom and are repulsed by the word of the cross as folly, so the Jewish people are taught to seek signs. Repeatedly in the Gospel, we find the religious leaders of the Jewish people demanding that Jesus do a spectacular sign to demonstrate the power of God and justify His own authority:

In John 2:18, as Jesus cleansed the Temple of the money-changers and animal-sellers, the Jewish leaders demanded: “*What sign do you show us for doing these things?*”

Then, in John 6:29-30, after Jesus had already fed the 5,000 miraculously, He told the Jewish people at the synagogue in Capernaum, “*This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent.*” So they said to him, “*Then what sign do you do, that we may see and believe you? What work do you perform?*”

Of course, Jesus did many signs to validate His ministry and prove His authority, but the Jewish leaders wanted specific, powerful signs, miracles that would overthrow the Roman rule and free them.

And so, Paul says, “*For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles.*” A crucified Messiah was a real stumbling block to Jews, because it went against all of their expectations, just as it was folly to Greeks. The adjective crucified could only be attached to a shameful criminal or a rebellious slave, not to the Messiah.

Part of Paul’s ministry was to show Jewish people from the Scriptures that the Messiah must suffer and die, even the death of the cross, which is something that Jesus Himself had to teach His disciples after His death and resurrection. And so Paul would visit the synagogues and would open the Scriptures to Psalm 22 and point out the opening line, “*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*” which was spoken by Jesus on the cross. He would then read these lines:

*I am poured out like water,
and all my bones are out of joint;
my heart is like wax;
it is melted within my breast;
15 my strength is dried up like a potsherd,
and my tongue sticks to my jaws;
you lay me in the dust of death.
16 For dogs encompass me;
a company of evildoers encircles me;
they have pierced my hands and feet—
17 I can count all my bones—
they stare and gloat over me;
18 they divide my garments among them,
and for my clothing they cast lots. – Psalm 22:14-18*

He would tell them that, though David wrote these lines, they cannot be about David, for David never suffered these things, but these lines describe the suffering of one who is crucified, a form of tortuous execution not even invented until hundreds of years after David.

Then, he would take them to the prophet Isaiah, and he would read:

*Surely he has borne our griefs
and carried our sorrows;
yet we esteemed him stricken,
smitten by God, and afflicted.
But he was pierced for our transgressions;
he was crushed for our iniquities;*

*upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
and with his wounds we are healed.
All we like sheep have gone astray;
we have turned—every one—to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all. – Isaiah 53:4-6*

And then later, these lines

*Yet it was the will of the LORD to crush him;
he has put him to grief;
when his soul makes an offering for guilt,
he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days;
the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand.
Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied;
by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant,
make many to be accounted righteous,
and he shall bear their iniquities. – Isaiah 53:10-11*

Thus, while a crucified Messiah was a stumbling block to Jewish people, God had shown His people ahead of time that the Messiah would suffer and die, and that by doing so He would bear the sins of His people and would justify many.

C. Perishing and Being Saved

And this powerful truth brings us to the real dividing line in the world. By dividing themselves into factions, the Corinthian church was obscuring two vital things: their own essential unity and the real dividing line in the human race, between those who are perishing and those who are being saved. It is the word of the cross which makes the unity among God's people, and it is the word of the cross which also makes the dividing line between those who hear the call of the world and its wisdom and those who are called by God.

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. – v. 18

For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. -vv. 22-24

So, what is the real difference between “those who are perishing” and “us who are being saved”? It is the difference between those who are blind and those whose eyes have been opened so we can see. It is the difference between those who have ears to hear the call of God and those who do not.

In 2 Corinthians 4:3-4, Paul speaks again of “those who are perishing” –

And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. – 2 Cor. 4:3-4, ESV

If I could summarize the key difference between those who are blinded by the god of this world and those who have had their eyes opened by God's grace, I would say that those who are blinded do not understand their current condition, their real problem or predicament, and the glorious solution of salvation God has provided through the cross. That's why they are arranging deck chairs on the Titanic, because they think the issue is how to have a better view or a more comfortable seat, and they don't realize the whole ship is doomed and sinking.

To get back to our opening illustrations, if you think you're just as the gym to exercise, get in shape, get your heart racing, no problem, But if you understand that the requirement is actually that you **MUST** dead lift 1,000 pounds, you will cry out for a substitute Savior. Or if you know you **MUST** build the Pontiac GTO – or else – you will desperately search for a master car builder. You will know the vital task in front of you is well beyond your abilities.

So, what is the task of the human race? What is our true condition and our deepest problem? We must start with God, because God is the ultimate reality, not you and me. God is the Creator and Sustainer of all things, He who brought everything into existence and who upholds everything. And God is holy, holy, holy. The Bible tells us He dwells in unapproachable light, that His eyes are too pure to look on evil, and that no one may see Him and live.

The Bible also tells us that, while we are made by God in His image, we are fallen and corrupted sinners. "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" is how Romans 3:23 puts it. We were made by God to be like Him and to enjoy His glory with His, but we have sinned and we fall short. More than this, the Bible tells us that, by nature, we are "dead in our sins and trespasses" and we are "children of wrath, like the rest of mankind." So, we are sinful, we are dead to God, and we are under God's just and holy wrath and curse. "The wages of sin is death," Romans 6:23, means that every day we are earning death by our works of sin.

What can we do about it? Nothing. Isaiah 64:6 says, "*We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.*" Even worse, the Bible tells us, in our natural condition, we don't even want to do anything about our sinful, corrupt, and condemned condition:

*"None is righteous, no, not one;
no one understands;
no one seeks for God.
All have turned aside; together they have become worthless;
no one does good,
not even one."* – Romans 3:10-12, ESV

Only when we understand who God is and who we are by nature do we begin to grasp the problem. We need perfect righteousness to live forever in glory with a holy, holy, holy God, but all we have is a polluted garment of sin and death, and we are powerless to do anything to change it; in fact, in and of ourselves, we don't even want to. We don't see the problem.

Perfect righteousness and a thorough cleansing from sin is what we need, and for us, that's a task far more impossible than dead lifting 1,000 pounds. It's so far beyond us, we might as well be asked to pick up Island of Manhattan and move it to the South Pacific. And yet, without perfect righteousness and a complete cleansing of

our sin, we will die forever, perishing eternally in just wrath away from the presence of the God who made us, the one and only God who is eternal life and in whose presence alone there is fullness of joy forever.

So, what can we do? Nothing. But the word of the cross tells us the only good news we absolutely need to hear and receive, that God has sent forth His perfect and only Son, who fulfilled all righteousness for us, and who went to the cross to bear all of our sins in His body on the tree, so that we might be saved from sin and clothed in righteousness forever.

God made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, so that through Him, we might become the righteousness of God – 2 Cor 5:21

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. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith." – Romans 1:16-17, ESV

He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. – 1 Peter 2:24

This is the word of the cross, the message of salvation that God revealed through the Prophet Isaiah and that Jesus fulfilled in His life, death, and resurrection. To the world, it is foolishness that a cross should bring wisdom and power, forgiveness and freedom, salvation an eternal life. But to us who are being saved, Christ crucified and resurrected is indeed the wisdom of God and the power of God.

D. Benefits from the Cross & the Word of the Cross

The word of the cross is the proclamation – the heralding – of what Jesus accomplished by His death and resurrection, and it is a message focused on Christ and redemption – forgiveness of sins, reconciliation to God, perfect righteousness, eternal life. This is what we truly need, what solves the real, deep, eternal problems of sin and death.

Now, once we come to faith in Jesus and, by believing the word of the cross, are reconciled to God, we receive great benefits. We have peace with God and then the peace of God to guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. We have the hope of eternal joy, and then we have real hope and joy in this life, knowing that we belong to God as His forgiven and adopted children forever. We also have been given His word, which has wisdom for how we are to live our lives in this world by faith in obedience to God.

However, all of these benefits – peace of mind, hope, joy, wisdom for living – are benefits which flow to us from the cross, but they are not themselves the word of the cross. The message of the cross is NOT a message of how we can have a better life, full of peace, joy, and hope, guided by wisdom and blessed by God. Those are some of the benefits, which many believers enjoy more than others, but they are NOT the Gospel, NOT the word of the cross.

Just as Paul was concerned that eloquent words of wisdom could obscure the word of the cross, so we must be concerned that talk of the benefits of the cross can obscure the word of the cross itself. We need the cross, the Gospel, the forgiveness, the righteousness, the reconciliation of the cross first and foremost. And we receive this by faith in Jesus and what He has done for us in our death and resurrection.

Conclusion: Where is our hope?

And so, this is our true and undying hope: Not that we would receive enough benefits from the cross that we can have a good and happy life, but that through the cross, we receive forgiveness and eternal life by faith in Christ alone. In other words, our hope is Jesus Himself and what He has done for us and for our salvation, not in what generous gifts He may give us to make our lives in this world happier or more comfortable.