

1 Corinthians 1:18–21

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.

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.

“The Preaching of the Cross” **1 Corinthians 1:18-21**

INTRO:

Let us continue our thinking about the cross. The Apostle Paul wrote **1 Corinthians 1:18-21**, a very important message about the importance of Christ’s cross. In the context, Paul wrote to this troubled church about divisions in their midst. They were rallying around their favorite Bible teachers. **Verse 12** says, ***“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 division was just a symptom of a deeper problem. In the third chapter we read: ***“For you are still carnal. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men?”***

To this church caught up in these divisions, Paul held forth the cross as the priority. The Corinthians needed to understand their divisions were inconsistent with the very core truth which brought them to Christ in the first place. That central reality is the cross of Christ.

I. The Priority of the Cross (v. 18)

II. The Reason the Cross Is the Priority (v. 19-21)

I. The Priority of the Cross (v. 18)

A. “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.”

To properly understand what Paul wrote in **verse 18** we need to retreat to the paragraph before it for a moment.

1. In **verses 13-17**, Paul reasoned with the Corinthians about the foolishness of their bickering over the various men whom God had used in Corinth. The

Corinthian believers were into soaring rhetoric and exhibitions of so-called wisdom. However, Christianity is not about rhetoric or worldly wisdom, it is about Christ.

2. His argument climaxed in **verse 17**.

“Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of no effect.”

When I, Paul, was in your midst, I did not preach in such a way as to make personal disciples. I did not try to establish a fan club. No, I preached not with the ***“wisdom of words (logos),”*** but the logos of the cross!

B. Here then is the priority of Paul’s ministry and the guiding principle of Paul’s life: the cross of Christ.

“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.”

1. The logos of the cross is the message God sent His Son into the world to die on a cross and to bear our sin so we might be saved. Yet, it is more than this. The message of the cross is the message we need to give everything to the Lord who saved us. Paul wrote in another place,

Galatians 6:14 ***“But God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.”***

We come to Christ through the cross, and then we serve Him because of the cross in our lives. It cuts to the heart of self-centeredness.

2. The message of cross is a watershed. It divides humankind into two groups; not Jews and Gentiles, but ***“those who are perishing and those who are being saved.”*** A Million years into eternity it will not matter how much money you made, what high political office you held, or how nice a house you had. What will matter is whether you are saved or perishing.

C. When the message of the cross is preached, those who are perishing see it as foolishness. The word, ***“perishing,”*** is in the present tense. This fact introduces a different perspective. Those who reject the Gospel are not those who potentially could perish, but they are those who are right now actively perishing.

1. Those who are perishing cannot understand the message of the cross. Paul expanded on this in **(verse 22)**.

“For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom.”

It is foolishness for the Jewish person who is perishing because he demands a supernatural sign. They cannot see the power of God in the crucifixion of His Son. To the Jew, to die hung on a tree is to be under the curse of God. How could a Savior, hung on a tree, be God’s Messiah? They did not understand He was made a curse for us!

2. The Greeks also thought this was foolishness, because they looked for wisdom. They wanted something that appealed to their understanding of reality. They were into Plato, Aristotle, Stoicism, and so forth. How could a simple Jew who was hung on a cross compete with the soaring knowledge of Socrates?

D. But ***“to those who are being saved, it is the power of God.”***

1. It is the power of God because through this simple message, God the Holy Spirit called us from death to life. Through the message of the cross we understood our need of a Savior. We understood that He had been made sin for us, He who knew no sin that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him (**2 Corinthians 5:21**). And we put our faith in Him alone to save us.

2. The Word of the cross is the power of God, also, because those who are being saved recognize a part of the on-going salvation is God the Holy Spirit changing us from the inside out.

2 Corinthians 5:17 ***“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.”***

Through the message of the cross, we found life transforming power.

II. The Reason the Cross Is the Priority (v. 19-21)

A. Because of the difference the cross of Christ makes, we begin to understand, why the preaching of the cross is such a priority. It is a priority because God is going to destroy the wisdom of the world. Paul establishes this by quoting from **Isaiah 29:14**. ***“For it is written: ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent.’”***

God promised He will destroy all that mankind sees as wise. It will all be done away. By the cross, God shatters all human pretensions to wisdom and strength.

B. Paul made it clear God did this through three rhetorical questions in **verse 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?”***

1. ***“Where is the wise man?”*** The concept of the wise man here is not the Hebrew concept of practical wisdom. Rather, it is the description of one who has a well-established world viewpoint; a view which explained all of the complexities of life. **[1]** What is really real? The wise man in Paul’s point of reference would be the Stoic, the Sophist, the Platonist, or the Epicurean. **[2]** Did their wisdom lead them to God? **[3]** Did their wisdom produce salvation or deliverance from the power or penalty of sin? Did it reconcile us to God?

2. ***“Where is the scribe?”*** While the first question dealt with the Greek, this second question dispenses with the Jewish Biblical expert. The scribe did not find the only way to approach the true and living God. They did not come up with the cross as the only way to deal with sin. They were not any better off than the wise man.

3. ***“Where is the debater of this age?”*** Rhetoric and debate were the fashion in Corinth. Like their brethren at the Areopagus in **Acts 17**. They loved to hear the debates of the philosophies of the day. Did any of these debates bring to light the truth of the cross? Did any of them shine the light of knowledge on the Gospel? No!

4. Three strikes and you are out and that is exactly what Paul declared.

“Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?”

God has reduced to utter foolishness all the wisdom of the world.

C. Here is ultimately how God has undermined the world’s wisdom and shown the importance of the cross.

v.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.”*

1. ***“In the wisdom of God, the world through its so-called wisdom will never know God.”*** Humankind searched for God in many ways over human history. He sought God in nature, in rational thought, through science, and in philosophy. Has any of these methods ever brought man to God? Man’s wisdom is totally unable to bring us to know God. It is incapable of making us right with the God whom we have offended. If all man has is the world’s wisdom, he will never find God.

2. No, God’s way is an entirely different way. God is pleased through the ***“foolishness of the message proclaimed, preached, to save those who believe.”*** The cross, which to the wise man seems to be the height of foolishness, is the means of our ultimate salvation and relationship with God. The cross is a message proclaimed. God is not presenting His Gospel as one of many competing philosophies to be explored, debated, or considered. It is to be proclaimed as the only Gospel. Here is the truth, there is no other. Here is the Lord Jesus, the Savior. He is the only one. If we do not proclaim this as the only truth, the ultimate reality, we are not proclaiming Him as God says He should be proclaimed!

Have we been to the cross?

Do we believe on the Lord Jesus Christ?

Then, is the cross central to our ministries, message, and life?

Can we say with Paul:

Galatians 6:14 *“But God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world?”*

Hymn #189 *Calvary Covers It All*