

The Foolishness and Power of the Cross: 1 Corinthians 1:18-31
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I want to share briefly this evening about the foolishness and power of the cross. Let's look at two aspects of the foolishness of the cross, and then we'll turn to the power of the cross. And we'll continue in this passage on Sunday morning.

The Foolishness of the Cross – A Shameful Death

One aspect of the foolishness of the cross is that crucifixion was such a shameful death. Andrew read for us from John 19, and there's not a whole lot of description of the crucifixion, itself. That's because for the original readers of the Gospels, not much needed to be said. That one word, crucify, was sufficient. Intense images would immediately come to mind. For us, we need at least a little bit of background and description.

Everything about this mode of execution was torturous and shameful. It was meant to be a long, agonizing death, and it was meant to bring as much shame and ridicule upon the person as possible. The Romans crucified many, many individuals. And they used this as a way, not only to punish those whom they deemed to be criminals, but they also used it as a powerful deterrent to the masses. It was a scare tactic—a gruesome scare tactic. In 71 B.C. when Spartacus led the slaves in a revolt, Rome defeated them and then crucified 6,000 of the rebels along the Appian Way that led into the city of Rome. For miles people who were travelling in or out of Rome would have witnessed in an unforgettable way the power and the ferocity of the Roman authorities.

Crucifixion involved incredible shame and agony. It was so shameful because the condemned individual was put on display before the public so that all could watch them suffer and die. Men were typically crucified naked, adding to the shame. We're not sure if that was the case for Jesus. It may be that the Romans allowed a loincloth because of Jewish sensibilities. Regardless, crucifixion was a shameful death. To be bruised and bloody from the flogging, and then to be attached to a wooden cross and lifted up for the masses to scoff at, it's about the most humiliating and horrific ordeal imaginable.

The intense shame would only be exceeded by the intense physical agony of crucifixion. Death by crucifixion was basically death by exhaustion. It was a prolonged death. Once attached to the cross, the victim would have to raise himself up for each breath, pulling with his arms and pushing with his legs. For those who were simply tied to a cross, this could go on for days. For

those who had been flogged severely, and for those nailed to a cross, death could come much more quickly.

In 1968 archaeologists discovered three burial caves just northeast of Jerusalem, and in them they found bones which give evidence of crucifixion in the first century.¹ They found the complete remains of an adult male. In his right heel bone there remained a 4 ½ inch nail. They also found that a small piece of wood had been placed between the heel and the head of the nail, serving as a kind of washer so that the foot was securely fastened to the vertical beam of the cross. Both shins were broken, which gives evidence of what is recorded in John 19:31. They would often break the legs in order to speed up the process. If the victim's legs were broken, it would make it all the more difficult for him to raise himself up for a breath.

These details help to paint the gruesome picture for us of Jesus on the cross. His hands or wrists were pierced with nails and fastened to the horizontal beam. His feet were nailed to the vertical beam. He had already lost much blood from the scourging. He had a crown of thorns pressed into his head. He was nearly naked, if not completely naked. His garments were being divvied up between the soldiers. He was raised up between two robbers, for all to see, with a sign above His head which read, "The King of the Jews," meant as a mockery. And everyone around was mocking Him, from the passersby to the chief priests and scribes, to the thieves who were on the crosses next to Him. This was the shame and agony of the cross.

As we read in 1 Corinthians 1, this message of a crucified Savior is utterly foolish to those who are perishing. To the natural mind, this is ridiculous. Apart from God's grace, the word of the cross is folly. That's what Paul writes in verse 18, "For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing." And then he states this in a little more detail in verse 23, "we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles."

For the Jews, this was not what they were expecting in a Messiah. They were looking for a conquering King, not a suffering servant. They were anticipating someone who would ride in on a big horse and defeat the Roman authorities, not someone who would humbly serve and teach and then die a shameful death at the hands of the Roman authorities. They just couldn't get their minds around this. And for the Gentiles, they scoffed at this, too. They had their supposedly powerful gods and their impressive philosophies. It would be sheer foolishness to turn away from those things and worship a man who was crucified as a criminal.

¹ William Lane cites this study, page 565.

The Foolishness of the Cross – An Affront to our Pride

Another aspect of the foolishness of the cross is that it is an affront to our pride. The cross confronts our pride and says, you are desperately wicked and desperately in need of a Savior. The cross offends us by putting us in our place. It's an offense to our pride.

Pride becomes manifest in our lives even from a very early age. For the kids who are here this evening, maybe you can identify with this. Have you ever gotten angry at someone because they're trying to help you do something that you're not very good at yet? You really want to be able to do something yourself—tie your shoes, zip up your jacket. Or maybe you want to help in the kitchen. You want to crack the egg or pour the milk, and your mom says she'll need to help you with that. But maybe you get angry at that point and say, "I'll do it myself." Believe it or not, I've heard kids say that before. "I'll do it myself."

As we grow up, we may not say it quite the same way, but we continue to do that very thing. And it's certainly a good thing to learn to take care of yourself and work hard and do all sorts of things. But what we need to recognize is that we also have this tendency in our spiritual lives to say to God, "I'll do it myself. Don't try to help me."

This is another aspect of the foolishness of the cross. The cross is a very clear message to us of how messed up we are. The gruesome and excruciating death of Jesus on the cross is a picture of what our sin deserves. That's how wicked we are. That's how sinful we are. That's how needy we are, that if Jesus didn't die in our place, that's what we would experience forever in hell—excruciating agony separated from God for all eternity. So the message of the cross is an affront to our pride. It shows us that we cannot make it on our own. We cannot do it ourselves. We are not OK. We need serious help. We need to be rescued from ourselves. And this is why the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing. We don't want to admit our need. I'm perfectly fine on my own, we want to think.

This month marks the 100 year anniversary of the sinking of the Titanic. It was on April 14th, 1912, at 11:40pm that the Titanic hit an iceberg in the North Atlantic. By 2:20am on the 15th it had sunk. There had been 2,224 people on board, but only enough life boats for about half of them—1,178 (if the life boats had been filled to capacity). Unfortunately, the officers of the ship were unprepared for this, and they ended up launching many of the lifeboats only half-full. Over 1,500 people lost their lives. The Titanic had been assumed to be virtually unsinkable. And therefore, why would it need lifeboats for everyone on board.

Surely, they would never have need of *any* lifeboats. That was the assumption.

That's the mindset of sinful humanity, going through life thinking we are indestructible, independent, autonomous. So when the Bible tells us, "You have need of God's forgiveness that comes only through the sacrificial death of Christ on the cross," we say, "that's foolishness, I'm perfectly fine on my own."

In verse 23 of our text Paul says that he preaches Christ crucified and it is a stumbling block to Jews. That word for stumbling block, *skandalon* (from which we get the word "scandal"), is also used in Romans 9:32 where Paul says that Israel stumbled over the stumbling stone (Jesus) because they had not pursued the law by faith but as though it were based on works. They wanted to pursue their own righteousness by their own works, and therefore Christ was a stumbling block to them. They didn't want to rely on someone else.

Paul also uses this word, *skandalon*, in Galatians 5:1, where he writes, "But if I, brothers, still preach circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? In that case the offense (scandal) of the cross has been removed." In other words, if Paul was preaching circumcision (if he was preaching works salvation), then he wouldn't have been persecuted. But it's the cross that is an offense, a scandal to the unregenerate person, a stumbling block. If we preach, "Do this, and do this, and don't do these things, and you'll be saved," that's a message that some people can warm up to. That's a message that appeals to a person's pride, and puffs them up as they begin to conform themselves to the list of requirements.

But to say that there's nothing you can do to save yourself, you are utterly helpless and weak and needy. That's offensive. That's scandalous. That's a stumbling block. People won't go for that, until God sovereignly works in their hearts to regenerate them.

This is the beauty of God's plan of salvation. He offends our pride in order to humble us and bring us to the foot of the cross. And then we say, as we sang at the beginning of this service, in the song *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross*, the second verse begins like this "Forbid it Lord that I should boast, save in the death of Christ, my God." I'm not going to boast in anything but the cross. I have no boast in myself, but only in the Lord.

And that's what we find in our text as well. God saves in this way—He takes nobodies and humbles them before the cross—so that no human being might boast in the presence of God (verse 29). And then the chapter ends with a quote from Jeremiah 9, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

The Power of the Cross

That leads us, finally, to the power of the cross. The cross is folly to those who are perishing because it is so counter-intuitive. It is the opposite of what the world esteems. It is also an affront to our prideful self-reliance. And so for those who are in the flesh, for those who are unbelievers, for those who are unregenerate, the true message of the cross is simply absurd. But there's another group of people Paul speaks of here.

In verse 18 he writes, "For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to those who are being saved it is the power of God." And then, in more detail, he writes in verses 23-24, "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."

The cross may seem weak and shameful. The horrific death of Christ may look like nothing but a tragic defeat. But in reality, it is victory. Jesus' life was not taken from Him. He gave it up, of His own accord. And by His death He achieved our salvation. He succeeded in all that He came to accomplish. That's why He says in His last breath, "It is finished"—*tetelestai*, it has been accomplished (John 19:30).

For those who have eyes to see, the cross is powerful and glorious and hope-giving. Therefore we can say with Paul, "I am not ashamed of the Gospel (which is the message of the cross), 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.'"