

The Folly of the Cross

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Well, I have no doubt that the Lord will answer that prayer of that hymn, "More love to thee, O Christ," as we go through what we have in front of us here this evening from the word of God. Many of the great hymns of the faith emphasize the cross of Jesus Christ. I'll quote just a few. We sing many of these songs at one time or another at Truth Community.

"Beneath the cross of Jesus, I fain would take my stand.
The shadow of a mighty rock, within a weary land."

"Down at the cross where my Savior died,
Down where for cleansing from sin I cried,
There to my heart was the blood applied,
Glory to his name."

"In the cross, in the cross,
Be my glory ever;
Till my raptured soul shall find
Rest beyond the river."

"When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride."

To quote the hymn writer, "The true Christian will cherish the old rugged cross because our Lord was crucified to take away our sins." He gave himself up for us, as we saw in Ephesians 5:2, to make an offering and a sacrifice a fragrant aroma to God. What Christ did on the cross of Calvary satisfied God on our behalf and it is only because of the cross that we can gather together tonight secure in the reality that our sins are truly forgiven, never to be brought up against us again.

So, of course, the cross is precious to us, more precious than anything else in all of creation but understand when we lift high the cross, to quote another hymn that we sing here, that it was not always that way. In the first century, the cross was, humanly

speaking, an impediment to the spread of the Gospel. It was a reproach and that reproach was so great that it actually made people turn away from the Gospel, to reject the Gospel message out of hand, in a way that is different from anything that we understand here in the 21st century. And yet it was that message of the cross of Jesus Christ crucified that was divinely powerful unto salvation.

What I want to do this evening is touch on the reproach of the cross and specifically the significance of what the crucifixion meant in the first century. Rather than trying to judge the significance of the crucifixion by 21st century standards when there hasn't been a crucifixion really practiced for almost 1,800 years, rather what we want to do is try to enter into the mindset of the man on the street in the first century in order to understand what it meant then because if we see what the cross meant in Jesus' day, even though our culture is different, we will have a better idea of its significance for us in the 21st century.

So what I want to do here this evening is I want to lay out for you five aspects of the crucifixion in its historical setting to give you a sense of the profound depth of the humility of Christ, the shame that he was willing to undergo on our behalf. As you understand these things, it will sweeten your devotion to Christ. It will make him more precious. It will humble you and it will strengthen your commitment to be faithful to the Gospel simply by understanding these five things that we're going to look at tonight.

The Bible says that the cross was a stumblingblock and the question that we want to answer is why? Why was the cross, why was a crucified Savior a stumblingblock to the success, so to speak, of the Gospel in the first century? Now, let me issue a warning here, a disclaimer, if you will: what I'm going to say this evening is not for the faint of heart. This is graphic because crucifixion was graphic but it is necessary to enter into this to understand that crucifixion of Christ and have an appreciation of what our Lord did for us 2,000 years ago when he humbled himself to the point of death, even death on a cross. It wasn't just any death that Christ underwent, it was the most shameful means of death that was known to mankind, certainly at that time and perhaps throughout the course of all created history.

Well, what do we want to see? First of all, we want this: that crucifixion was common in ancient history. That's our first point for this evening. Crucifixion was common in ancient history. You know, I think that sometimes there's a sense that we have in the modern day because crucifixion is so far removed from our modern experience, that you almost fall into something without even thinking. Maybe there were like three crucifixions in the olden days; there was Jesus and the two people around him and you don't realize how absolutely common it was and we need to understand that Christ entered into not only a difficult painful death but he entered into a common method of execution. He set his eyes on Jerusalem knowing that the cross lay ahead of him and that he was about to experience a common death that was very, very usual in that society.

What was crucifixion? Well, it was simply stated: crucifixion was a method of execution in which the victim was attached to a wooden cross and then left to die. In the simplest terms of definition, that's what we're talking about here. There were different forms of the

cross, different kinds of crosses. Some were a "T," like a capital "T". Some were more like a small "t" where there was a projecting beam up above the crossbeam and they had different forms of it; there wasn't one standard form of the wood that they were attached to. The history of crucifixion can be traced to about 500-600 years before the time of Christ and traced to the rise of the Persian nation and the Persians used crucifixion in both individual and in mass executions based on the historical sources that have been bequeathed to us from history. By the way, if you ever desire to pursue this more, you can do a search for "[The Folly of the Cross](#)" with my name next to it and an article will pop up that has all of this documented so if you're interested in pursuing the original sources more, that is all readily available. I'm not going to allude to any of the footnote aspects of this tonight because it's going to be a long message as it is. I normally bring five pages into the pulpit with me on Wednesday, I've got eight tonight and we'll see how that goes but I am energized to share these things with you tonight because I know that it's going to affect you. It's going to impact you. It's going to sweeten your love for Christ. I first did this material almost 20 years ago and it is constantly operating in the background of my mind. It is something that has shaped my heart so deeply and so profoundly that I can't really separate my own existence from the things that I'm about to tell you here this evening because it came early in my ministry and it has shaped me and affected the way that I preach. Every message I preach is somehow affected by this even if I'm not conscious of it at the time.

Well, what about these Persians? And what I want to do here tonight is simply to kind of walk you through 1,000 years of human history from the perspective of crucifixion and just very lightly touch on different episodes just to give you a sense that there is a continuous unbroken nature of history of crucifixion for 1,000 years before and after the time of Christ, to reinforce to you that crucifixion was common in ancient history.

Alright, 600 years, Persians before the time of Christ. A ruler named Astyages (585-550 B.C.) put some of his advisers on a stake because they had given him bad advice. His circle of close advisers, this Persian ruler crucified his advisers because he did not like the counsel that they gave him.

About 200 years later, the great Greek conqueror Alexander the Great crucified 2,000 people at one time after a military conquest so this is like 330 B.C. One historian records and I quote, "The anger of the king offered a sad spectacle to the victors. Two thousand persons, for whose killing the general madness had spent itself, hung fixed to crosses over a huge stretch of the shore." Imagine yourself being at a beach: Atlantic Ocean, Pacific Ocean, Indian Ocean, I don't care. Pick your beach and and just imagine being on a beach and looking down both to your left and to your right as far as you can and imagine men hanging in agony on a cross. That's kind of the picture that we have here from Alexander the Great. Massive executions taking place at a single time to manifest his supremacy and his victory and to squelch any future idea of resistance because who wants to go through that.

Another 200 years later pass, about 150 B.C., a leader in Palestine named Alexander Jannaeus took vengeance on his opponents. He crucified 800 men with a particularly

sadistic twist to his methods. While those 800 men were hanging on the cross, Alexander brought out their wives and children before them and slaughtered them while those men watched helplessly attached to a cross. Shocking to our modern ears how severe, how barbaric this was and yet it was an accepted practice across different societies, different cultures, different nations. This is what they did.

The Romans continued this practice during and after the time of Christ. The perverse Emperor Nero encased Christians in wax, crucified them and set them on fire to light his garden in 64 A.D. and subsequent leaders carried out crucifixions as well. It was the Roman Emperor Constantine who finally outlawed the practice about 300 years after the time of Christ and if you do the math on it, 1,000 years of this method of execution being practiced openly, publicly, individually, mass executions. This was embedded upon social consciousness as a way of life in a way that you and I cannot understand.

Our only point here for that little historical survey is to see that crucifixion was common in ancient history and so when Christ was crucified, beloved, the manner of his death was not unique. It was one of tens of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands of crucifixions that were carried out over the course of ancient history at the time. So when Christ entered into the world knowing that he was headed for a cross, beloved, understand that he knowingly embarked on an earthly career that would end in him being crucified in a common manner though he was the unique, only, eternal Son of God who created this world which rejected and crucified him. He entered in with the express design of taking upon himself, of submitting himself to a common method of execution though he was sinless and he did that on our behalf.

Now, secondly, it's not just that crucifixion was common, secondly: crucifixion was a sign of shame. It was a sign of shame. Crucifixion was an instrument that the nations used to maintain public order. It was not something that was indiscriminately practiced. Usually Roman citizens, and I'm just going to restrict this to the basic time of Christ because it's more pertinent to our discussion, usually Roman citizens were not crucified. It was a privilege of citizenship to avoid that method of execution. Instead it was used on rebellious slaves, notorious criminals or defeated military foes, perhaps sometimes used on citizens guilty of treason but all of it being implemented to demonstrate this one point: Roman supremacy over those who opposed the empire. The world belonged to Rom, in a manner of speaking in the first century, and they enforced this in many ways and one of the ways that they enforced it was by practicing crucifixion on those who violated law and order, on those who opposed the empire, and therefore manifested their supremacy over their helpless victim as he hung there on the cross. In other words, the Roman practice of crucifixion disgraced the victims by binding them to a cross and associating them over a pattern of time, associating them with the dregs of society. Men that were held in contempt were the men who were crucified. So it was a sign of shame simply because of the association of those who were crucified. You see the connection of Christ being associated with the dregs.

Thirdly, crucifixion was sadistic. It was sadistic. The manner of this type of execution defies human description. For preliminaries and we see this rehearsed the Gospel

accounts of the crucifixion of Christ, what you read in the final days of Christ and what you read about what led up to his crucifixion and his actual crucifixion, it's all repeated; it's all evident in other secular history sources in terms of how this was done. What did they do? Well, for preliminaries, the condemned victim was flogged with a leather whip studded with bone or metal just as Christ was and Isaiah spoke of how by his stripes we are healed. Well, the stripes are simply an indication that they would stretch out the back taut and a very skilled torturer would come with this leather whip and the bone and the metal embedded and just start whacking on his bare back, the bare back of the victim so that before he was ever even crucified, his back was reduced to throbbing ribbons of bleeding flesh.

Then they forced the condemned and, again, we're getting a broader context of the path that our Lord voluntarily walked on our behalf. That's why this matters. This isn't history for the sake of history, this is designed to help you identify with Christ and realize how severe his human suffering was; how severe the shame that he underwent on your behalf was. Because when you appreciate that, then you are going to appreciate and love Christ more and you are going to be less infatuated with the world, less inclined to betray Christ by seeking the applause of men because the thought of betraying one who went through this on our behalf is unthinkable. So they beat these people to a bloody pulp.

They then forced the condemned to carry the crossbar. Usually not the entire cross, that would be a very heavy thing that most men probably didn't have the strength to carry, especially after being beaten like that so they would carry the crossbar on their shoulders. He would have to carry his crossbar to his own execution site, being paraded in the process with a placard around his neck that indicated the crime of which he had been convicted, that which he would die for. So when they put a notice above Christ saying, "This is Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews," indicating the crime supposedly for which he was being crucified, understand that that was their practice so that when people saw him and saw him suffering like this, the question becomes, "Why is he suffering like this? What is the reason for this?" They would put that up there, their intention being, the Roman's intention being, to dissuade people from acting in like manner lest they face a like fate themselves.

So they get to the execution site. Once to the site, the condemned would be stripped naked and his outstretched arms would be tied or somehow nailed to the crossbar and then the crossbar would be hoisted up and fastened to an upright post and a small peg was hammered into the post to give the condemned a place to sit. Understand that that was not for his comfort. That was designed to prolong his suffering because from the position of the peg on which he sat, it gave them a position of leverage to lift up their lungs so that they could get a little bit of air in before they had to collapse back down.

So once attached and once all of the beating and the floggings and the carrying of the crossbar and the attachment and the nails, once all of that was done, then do you know what happened? Then the real agony began because they simply left these men to die of suffocation or exhaustion and for many of them, death might not come for several days. That's why Pilate was so surprised when the Roman soldiers reported that Jesus was

already dead. You're not supposed to die in a matter of a few hours; this is supposed to take a few days. So that's why he had to ask and inquire, "Are you sure he's dead?" And one of the things because it was a Sabbath on that particular day on the day of Jesus' crucifixion, they came and they broke the legs of the other two men. Why? So it would hasten the suffocation; they were no longer able to push off with their legs in order to get a little bit of breath.

As I've said, this was all done publicly for the deterrent effect that it would have on those about. Beloved, understand, Romans hung people on crosses on the busiest roads to maximize the public deterrent effect. All who passed by would see the indignity and be motivated not to repeat the crime. Look at John 19 in this regard just to the incidental nature of scriptural statements as it would be a fascinating study on its own, but in John 19, in verse 19, you see an incidental allusion to this deterrent effect and what the nature of the practice was. John 19:19, for those of you following along at home. Notice what it says, "Pilate also wrote an inscription and put it on the cross. It was written, 'JESUS THE NAZARENE, THE KING OF THE JEWS.' Therefore," here's all I want you to see in this context, "Therefore many of the Jews read this inscription." How was it that so many of them saw it? Well, it's because it was the nature of the practice. "Jesus was crucified near the city; and it was written in Hebrew, Latin and in Greek." So they put up multiple translations on Jesus' placard to magnify and multiply the ability of the people to read and understand what was going on.

So it was very public. It wasn't an isolated small group of people that saw this, Scripture itself says many of the Jews read it. Why was Jesus being crucified? In the providence of God, it was because he was the King of the Jews. Not because he said he was the King of the Jews but because he was the King of the Jews and this is what God had ordained for his Son to undergo on behalf of everyone who would ever believe in him.

Now, beloved, let's take a little time out here and just step back for a moment and think and realize how different the environment is today. In those places that still practice the death penalty in our country anyway, the death penalty is carried out in a sterile, private environment, minimizing the number of witnesses. Done behind penitentiary walls. Done behind prison walls to minimize the indignity, to maximize the dignity of the moment even though society carries out the death penalty to uphold its laws. Whatever you think about the death penalty, that's the way we do it if and when we do it. Understand that that mindset toward the death penalty is diametrically the opposite of what was happening in the first century. They maximized it. They wanted everybody to see it so that it would have a chilling effect, a controlling effect, on the populace. No secondhand reports from witnesses who come out later after it was done and a man is quietly put to sleep with drugs injected into his system. You want to talk about cruel and unusual punishment, we don't even know what that means. And to multiply the sadism of it all, the sadistic, cruel nature of it, often the final indignity came after the crucifixion, after the man had expired and was dead: often they simply left the corpse on the cross so that birds and wild animals could come and eat the flesh of the deceased.

It was a sadistic practice carried out on the scum of society as they saw it back then. Everything about it was designed to show that these victims were helpless at the hands of the invincible Romans. Beloved, there is nothing in our contemporary experience that gives us any measure whatsoever to identify with what we're describing here tonight. There is nothing like this, at least in our Western world. The guys in the Middle East that are doing their thing are reintroducing it, I guess, but it's not part of our life here in Western society.

So let me kind of bring us up-to-date here, catch you up with where we're at in the message. Crucifixion was not rare; it was common. A common death that symbolized the inferiority of the victim. Sadistically practiced. Designed to maximize the suffering and shame of it and to display the invincibility of the Romans.

Now, let's transition from that description and try to do what we can to enter into the mindset of society that was familiar with crucifixion because the society that was familiar with this was the society that they were going out and preaching the cross to. You're starting, I hope, to start to see this is becoming a problem for the success of the Gospel on a human level. What did general society think about crucified men? Well, fourth point tonight and perhaps duplicating a little bit the second point. I said crucifixion was a sign of shame, fourthly, crucified men were despised. They were despised and for those of you that are tender hearted here tonight, I realize that this is going to be hard for you to understand because your natural sympathies as you think about someone going through that kind of pain and shame and suffering and just how awful it is, especially to our modern ears, it's hard for you to feel anything other than sympathy for those who had gone through it regardless of what led them to that point, whatever crimes they had committed. So I appreciate the fact that there are those of you with tender hearts who just can't imagine anything other than sympathy as you think about the men that went through this but that wasn't the mindset of the first century. We need to set aside what we would think today and enter into the nature of the thinking at the time and that's what I want to help you do here at this point.

Crucified men were despised. Let me just review these points with you real quickly so that they stay fresh in your mind. Crucifixion was common in ancient history. Secondly, crucifixion was a sign of shame. Crucifixion was a sadistic practice. Now, fourthly: crucified men were despised by society. Crucified men, beloved, were not pitied. They were viewed with contempt. Gentiles and Jews both scorned them, although they held that scorn for different reasons.

Let me give you a little bit of background about Gentiles for a moment in this context. For Gentiles, crucifixion was a virtual obscenity that was not to be discussed in polite company. Although it was done publicly, it was not something that was discussed in polite society and so it was one of those hidden operating systems, if you will, in the public mindset where everyone is aware of it but no one wants to speak about it because it was so shameful.

You can see this in their own words that history has left behind to us. In Rome, a criminal defense attorney named Cicero was defending a Roman citizen against a murder charge and the prosecutor, in making his case, was seeking the death penalty for the accused by crucifixion. Cicero's trial strategy was brilliant. It included an effort to discredit the prosecution by showing that the prosecution was over-zealous; the prosecution was over-reaching and therefore the jury should not receive anything that the prosecutor said because the prosecutor showed their true stripes by what they were trying to do. Here was part of his argument to the jury. He said and the historians quote and thus, so do I, "The very word 'cross' should be far removed not only from the person of a Roman citizen but from his thoughts, his eyes and his ears." He says to the jury, "We should never even be talking this way. We should not be thinking this way and yet here we are with your prosecutor in front of you saying we should do this to a Roman citizen." Why would he make that argument except that he knew that it would connect with the jury that he was trying to persuade? He said, "We all know this is wrong. We shouldn't even talk this way."

As the Gospel began to spread, Gentiles mocked the Gospel mercilessly precisely because it featured a crucified Savior. One Christian apologist from that time summarized their attack and argument in this way. He said and I quote, "They proclaim our madness to consist in this, that we give to a crucified man a place second to the unchangeable and eternal God, the Creator of all." He says, "They say we're crazy. They accuse us of insanity because we preach Christ crucified for salvation."

The mockery even reached the street level of common thugs. Archeologists have found a graffiti, you can find it in books, outlines, pictures of it. Archeologists have found a graffiti that shows the head of a donkey – stay with me here because I want you to get the image – it shows the head of a donkey on the body of a man. This half animal/half man is hanging on a cross. The graffiti includes another image. It's painful to even describe this because it's so blasphemous. The graffiti includes another image: a man on bended knee before this cross lifting his hand toward this crucified monstrosity and below the worshiper is written the inscription, "Alexamenos worships his god." It's saying, "You worship a crucified donkey. How stupid! How ridiculous! Don't you understand that this cannot possibly be true? That what you are doing is a sign of perverse thinking and utter distortion of everything that our society knows to be common knowledge?"

So whether it happened before a jury at the hands of a trained orator like Cicero or whether it happened probably at the hands of a half-drunk teenager or whatever on the street and all points in between, the cross was a symbol of scorn. A crucified man, colloquially speaking, was a scumbag. This was deeply engrained on social consciousness when the apostles preached the message. A poor analogy for us in our day would be the scorn that our society reserves for child molesters, one of the few things that is still left that is socially unacceptable on a broad scale. The shame of that probably doesn't even begin to mirror the shame that was attached to a man who was crucified.

Those were Gentile attitudes recorded in history. What about the Jews? Well, the Jews also viewed crucified men with contempt. They despised them and if it were possible,

and it was, the Jews held crucified men in even greater contempt than the Gentiles did because they believed, based on Scripture, that crucified men were cursed by God. It wasn't simply a human dimension of shame that was attached, they looked at a passage like Deuteronomy 21 and said, "This man is cursed by God." Look at Deuteronomy 21:22-23 with me so that you can see where they got their mindset from. Deuteronomy 21:22-23. I'll give you just a moment to turn there. Deuteronomy 21:22-23, ""If a man has committed a sin worthy of death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his corpse shall not hang all night on the tree, but you shall surely bury him on the same day (for he who is hanged is accursed of God), so that you do not defile your land which the LORD your God gives you as an inheritance." If he's worthy of death and you put him on a tree, don't leave him hanging there overnight. Incidentally, such a man is cursed of God.

Jews didn't crucify living persons. They hung corpses on a cross to display their humiliation. It was a punishment that was especially used for those who were considered blasphemers and idolaters. Crucifixion, hanging them on a post like that, was a sign of God's judgment against the victim. One second century Jewish writing speaking about this practice says and I quote, "Why is this one hanged? Because he cursed the Name," the name of God, "and the name of heaven was found defiled."

So, as we look at this, we see the way Gentiles thought, the way the Jews thought. We see some of their reasoning. Beloved, I want you to remember this: that the contempt that was associated with men who were crucified was stamped on the ancient consciousness far more than the assassination of Abraham Lincoln is stamped on ours in America. This was something that was inbred in them; had been for centuries and was woven into the fabric of their life in a way that we scarcely can identify with but we see enough from the ancient sources to give us a taste, to give us a flavor, to give us a sense of how bad it was.

Now, here's a question for you: when the Gospel features a crucified Savior, how could that ever work? How could that ever succeed? How could it possibly be that someone would respond to that message and say, "That is true. I will rest my eternal destiny on what you're preaching to me, Paul." How could anyone believe that? Well, that brings us to our fifth point and will bring us back to our text that I read earlier. The fifth point: Christ crucified is the power of God. It is the power of God to proclaim a message that the world rejects in order to display that when someone receives it, the power of God is most certainly at work. Not human motives. Not human judgments. Not human approval, but rather the power of God being displayed.

Go back now to 1 Corinthians 1 and with all of this background, these 45 minutes of background and introduction for a ten minute sermon here. That's a little bit out of proportion, isn't it? Those of you that have been to seminary, they don't teach you to do it that way. Well, I like to violate the process once in a while just because I want to and sometimes you need background to understand what the text is saying.

Jews and Gentiles, as we have seen, viewed crucified men with great scorn. What's the effect of that? The Gospel came to them through the preaching of the Apostle Paul and it

humbled them with this message. Look at verses 22 through 24 of 1 Corinthians 1. Now all of a sudden these three verses explode off the page with power as we understand the historical background in which Paul was speaking. He says in verse 22...let's go back to verse 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." It's not because from God's perspective the message itself was foolish. No, that's not the point, it's the fact that the world regarded it as foolish and God worked through what they rejected in order to accomplish his eternal purposes in the salvation of men who believed in Christ.

Verse 22, "For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." Paul says Jews were looking for signs, by which he means, they were looking for miraculous wonders that would authenticate a messianic claim. "You say you're preaching the Messiah to me, show us a miracle that would vindicate that." Gentiles were looking for wisdom in the form of what they valued at the time, human rhetoric; eloquent speaking to satisfy their intellectual pursuits. And they engaged in the mental gymnastics of oratory while keeping their hearts far removed from any interest in the true God.

So the Jews say, "Show us some signs." Just like they did to Jesus, "Show us a sign," and Jesus said, "No sign," Matthew 12, "will be given to this generation except the sign of Jonah." He said, "I don't operate on that. The Gospel doesn't come to you and doesn't come to sinful men for them to place conditions on that which they say will make them believe." "Give me a sign and then I'll believe," and the answer is, "No. There are no signs. We don't give signs, we preach to you Christ crucified."

Gentiles say, "Be eloquent." Paul said, "I came in inferiority of speech." Look at chapter 2, verse 1, "When I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling, and my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power." Where was the power? The power was in preaching a crucified Savior, the very thing that was unthinkable to the world.

So Jews looking for signs, Gentiles looking for human rhetoric and here comes the Apostle Paul preaching Christ crucified. Beloved, a greater cultural collision cannot possibly be imagined. When Paul proclaimed a crucified man as the Lord and God of the universe to that first century audience and the only Savior of mankind, it was designed to be something that they could only reject in their natural minds. In light of everything that we've said in our first four points: common practice; symbol of shame; crucified men were despised, beloved, it was something they could only reject in their natural minds. To suggest that a crucified man was God and Savior was absurd.

Paul says, look at the text with me here in verse 23, Paul says, "we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block." The Greek word "skandalon" means it was "a temptation to sin; or an enticement to apostasy and unbelief." In other words, to tell them that Christ crucified was their Messiah was a contradiction in terms. It was an oxymoron to suggest that the Messiah could have been cursed by God. The offense of Paul's message caused Jews to turn away because the contrary was so deeply ingrained in their consciousness.

Likewise Paul says, look at verse 23. I like this little bit of exegesis that I'm about to give to you here in verse 23, to Jews it was a stumbling block. They tripped over it. They sinned in response to it. They stirred up people in opposition and raised cities up into uproar in the book of Acts to reject this message, so great and fierce was their hatred of the message. But look at what he says there in verse 23, "to Gentiles foolishness." That Greek word "foolishness" is the Greek word "moria." It's the word we get our English word "moron" from. It was ridiculous. To say that a crucified man was king was stupid and moronic. It could be dismissed out of hand. Contemporary writers variously called Christianity in the first and second century: a pernicious superstition; a sick delusion; a perverse and extravagant superstition.

To Gentiles, the Gospel messages was insane and contradicted all prevailing rational thought. It was preposterous to suggest that the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth was the focal point of the redemption of mankind. Martin Hengel, the scholar who wrote a book on the crucifixion, said this and I quote. Listen to this carefully. "To believe that the one pre-existent Son of the one true God, the Mediator at creation and the Redeemer of the world, had appeared in very recent times in out-of-the-way Galilee as a member of the obscure people of the Jews, and even worse, had died the death of a common criminal on the cross, could only be regarded as a sign of madness."

Beloved, do you want proof that the Gospel is true? That it is actually and in reality the one true saving message of God and there is no other? Do you want proof of the uniqueness of the saving message of Jesus Christ? Here it is: in the midst of that society, in the midst of common knowledge, prevailing thought, the Gospel of Christ crucified flourished. Thousands were converted in the book of Acts as the apostles preached Christ crucified to them.

Verse 24 of 1 Corinthians 1, realizing that God has set apart before the foundation of the world a people who would believe his message, Paul says, "to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." God was at work through the apostolic messengers. God was at work through the preaching of the Apostle Paul that did everything but give the audience what they wanted from him. He proclaimed a message with content that they could only reject in their natural mind. That was the only possible outcome. If it were not true, there would never have been any power to it whatsoever but instead, Paul says, "Look at the fruit of my ministry. Look at the churches that have been established as I preach Christ crucified and understand that that which the world rejects is what God has taken and powerfully used in the hearts of

men to save them from sin, to convert them to Christ, to make them new men in Christ and the veracity of what I speak is manifested in the lives of the redeemed."

God takes what the world despises and uses it to open spiritually dead hearts to believe in Christ for salvation. The last thing that we should do as a church, the last thing you should do as a Christian evangelizing those that you love and care about, the last thing you should do is to try to tailor the message to appeal to their carnal unconverted minds because we do not rob God of his glory in the message of salvation by trying to make it something that pleases men. The first century Gospel did not please Jews. It did not please Gentiles. They thought it was ridiculous and perverse and yet Paul says, "I understand all of that. I get the whole situation. It's clear in my mind and here's what I do: I preach Christ crucified and nothing else."

Now, beloved, the shame of crucifixion has been lost in the haze of time that has passed in the past 1,800 years. Eighteen hundred years, imagine that. Our country is what? Two hundred and fifty years old, give or take? We're talking about four times longer than that. Actually, we're talking eight times longer than that...the math is going to confuse me here. We're talking about something that is a multiplied factor longer than our nation has been in existence, since crucifixion ceased to be practiced, and we're talking about a practice that took place over the course of four times the length of history that our country has been in existence. A thousand years up to and through the time of Christ where crucifixion was practiced. Now 1,700 years have passed since Constantine outlawed it in the Roman Empire and so the magnitude of time here is something that is almost outside our experience. But understand this: yes, the shame of crucifixion has been lost with the passage of time; it's not readily known; it's not something that is spelled out in detail in Scripture. You see the flecks of evidence of it that shows the connection of Scripture to its historical setting but here's what we need to see and respond to: the apostolic pattern is still our example. It's still the way we do things today. This is what the true church of Jesus Christ does.

We preach Christ crucified regardless of the fact that unsaved, unredeemed, uninterested people in the world try to tell us to do something different. Atheists pretend that they want rational proof and our response is, "No. We preach Christ crucified." Charismatics say, "We want signs and miracles." And we say, "No, we preach Christ crucified." The world says, "Make it quick for the video generation. People don't have the attention span to listen to long messages, Pastor, haven't you gotten the word yet?" To which I gladly and defiantly say, "No, we preach Christ crucified." So-called evangelicals make churches seeker friendly in order to try to win people. I hope that by now you see how distasteful and wrong that is.

You cannot make the Gospel attractive to the natural mind. That's not what we're supposed to do. We are supposed to be faithful to the message that has been entrusted to us regardless of what the world thinks about us as we do it. And ironically, beloved, it is only the unashamed proclamation of Christ crucified that will win people to Christ. Only that kind of evangelism, only that kind of preaching will be blessed with the power of God. Why would he bless with saving power a message which intentionally distorts it to

please natural unconverted men? God is right to withhold his power. He is right to withhold his saving glory from those that distort the message with a greater desire to please unsaved men than to please the glory of our God.

So what do we do? Well, knowing that God will draw his own through that message of Christ crucified, it's not complicated: we faithfully proclaim it whether the world likes it or not. Charles Spurgeon said, this is one of my favorite Charles Spurgeon quotes, Charles Spurgeon said this and I quote, "This talking about Christ crucified is said to be archaic and not at all suitable to the refinement of this wonderful age, but our mind is made up and our foot is put down. If it be foolish to preach up atonement by blood, we will be fools and if it be madness to stick to the old truth just as Paul delivered it, we mean to stick to it for we are persuaded that the cross of Christ, which stumbles many and is ridiculed by so many more, is still the power of God and the wisdom of God. Yes, just the old fashioned truth: if you believe, you shall be saved. That we will stick to and may God send his blessing upon it according to his own eternal purpose."

For those of you watching the live stream, for you blessed friends in this room, Truth Community Church intends to be known for preaching Christ crucified and that alone. Are you with us? To the sinner tonight, unconverted, dead in your sins, I invite you to the love of God tonight that sent the eternal Son of God to go to a cross in shame, derision from the world, in order to bear the sins of sinners just like you. To give himself up for people just like you. Just like you. That you might come to him and find salvation, forgiveness of sins and eternal life. Even you little ones, I invite you to Christ. To come to him. To leave the world behind and say, "I embrace this bloodied one as my Lord and King. I embrace the cross as my only hope of entrance into heaven."

Have you don't that? Will you do that? Don't walk out tonight saying no, not in light of what you've heard here tonight. Don't walk out that door saying no to Christ any longer. It's time to come to Christ and lay your life down before him.

Let's pray.

Our precious Lord, we bow before the cross. We bow before the wonder of a Savior who willingly, voluntarily went to the cross of shame to bear our shame that we might have eternal life. Lord, love so amazing, so divine, demands our lives and our all. Our souls, we offer them up to you tonight, our God, and in response to the cross, we tell you that we love you and we ask, Father, having preached Christ crucified here tonight, having done everything within our power to enter into the spirit and the footsteps of the Apostle Paul who went before us, we ask you to bless this message here tonight, Father, as a defining mark where souls came to Christ as a result of saying nothing more than Christ underwent the scorn and contempt of the cross to save sinners. And may the power of that message work on unconverted hearts here tonight, Lord, and may your Spirit, as it were, compel them to come in true repentance and faith, for surely there is no excuse for walking away after what we have heard tonight.

God, we further ask you to sanctify our church and sanctify the people of our church with a fidelity to this message, a loyalty to Christ, that is never tempted even by the applause of men. Lord, we don't care what unconverted men think of us. We don't care of their taunts or their ridicule. Supremely, we want to be faithful to you and we believe that by being faithful to you, you will use us to save others maybe who are hostile now but you will save them like you turned us from rebels into those who trust Christ. All we can do, Father, all we can do is preach that which you have given to us and if you don't bless it with your saving power, we act and speak in vain. So with complete dependence, with an utter humility and an utter denial of any power in ourselves, Father, we ask you to take your word and bless it and bless us as a congregation as we try to be faithful to it in the days to come. In the name of Christ Jesus, our crucified and gloriously more our risen and ascended Savior, we pray. Amen.