

Christ Crucified: The Wisdom and Power of God
1 Corinthians 1:18-25
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Introduction

As we have already seen, the church in Corinth was dividing over leaders. The church was separating into various exclusive factions, which was causing the fabric of the unity in the church to disintegrate. Paul, like any good doctor, diagnoses their spiritual condition (in vss. 10-17) and then immediately begins to treat his patient by dealing with the root of their problem (vss.18 and following). Paul begins to treat the Corinthians disease of sectarianism in the text we will be considering this morning. What we will find is that their unity struggles were the result of an inability to discern both the difference between true wisdom and the pseudo-wisdom of this world and the difference between true power and the pseudo-power of this world.

You see, I don't doubt that the Corinthians knew the Gospel, and I don't doubt that the Corinthians believed the Gospel. The question, however, is whether or not they adopted the Gospel as the rule and norm of their lives. Surely, they knew the Gospel, but were they living out the implications of the cross-centered Gospel? The Gospel of Jesus Christ, which centers on the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, is not merely a fact of human history that we must embrace and accept. For the Christian the cross opens up a whole new way of looking at the world. And the goal of the Christian life is not merely to know the facts of the crucified Christ but also to embrace the message of the crucified Christ as the standard of our lives. We are to, as Anthony C. Thisselton explains, follow Jesus by adopting a "cruciform posture," a life which reflects the transcendent wisdom and power of God as evidenced in the death of Jesus Christ.¹ Thus, the message of the crucified Christ is something to be lived. It is no mere set of data. It is a paradigm-shifting, worldview-shaping reality.

The cross of Christ redefines all the terms; it establishes a completely different set of values, and in so doing exposes the façade of the pseudo wisdom and power of this world. Paul even says in 1 Corinthians 3 that their division over leaders was the result of their immature faith (3:1-5). Their faith was immature because they had not embraced the crucified Christ as the model and posture of their lives. Because they had not adopted the message of the crucified Christ as the supreme paradigm for their lives, they were unable to discern true wisdom and power from worldly displays of wisdom and power. In other words the cross must remain central in our doctrine, in our proclamation, in our living, in our thinking, in our reasoning, in our relating. Why? Because it is the norming norm; it is God's paradigm for our entire lives.

The Corinthians were unable to discern the power and wisdom of God because their eyes were fixed on the physical, on the world. They were not adopting the values of the cross as the rule of their lives, because they were clinging so tightly to values of Corinth. This is why they were dividing over leaders—this is why they were dividing at all! God reveals His transcendent wisdom and power in the cross of Christ. Where is the fast track to true power and wisdom? It is found at the cross.

1 Corinthians 1:18

In 1 Corinthians 1:18 Paul divides the world up into two categories: 1. "those who are perishing" and 2. "those who are being saved." Read the text with me.

¹ Anthony C. Thisselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 157.

For to those who are perishing the message of the cross is foolishness, but to us who are being saved it is God's power.

Paul only knew two groups of people living on the earth—the saved and the perishing. That's it. You are either perishing or you are being saved. And there is one major difference between the saved and the perishing. It has everything to do with one's view of the message of the cross. Those who are perishing are unable to evaluate the true worth and power of the cross—they see it as nothing but foolishness. And why do they see it as foolishness? Because it runs contrary to values of this world. God's wisdom doesn't make sense to the proud, earth-bound, unregenerate heart and mind.

But those who are being saved know it to be the power of God. Surely, the message of the cross does not look like the wisdom of this world and it certainly doesn't resemble worldly displays of power, but those who have been saved have experienced the power of the message of the cross in their own lives. True believers can confidently attest with Paul that the "Gospel is the power of God unto salvation to all who believe" (Romans 1:16). Those who are being saved know its power to cleanse and its power to transform. It is the foolish who experience the power of God while those who consider themselves wise perish. This is the irony of the cross in a world of sin.

The Foolishness of the Cross

But is the message of the cross really nothing more than foolishness to those who are perishing? Paul says so in vs. 18 and vs. 22-23. Paul refers to the message of the crucified Christ as "a stumbling block to the Jews" and as "foolishness to the Gentiles."

You may say, though; "I know many unconverted people who know the story of Jesus' death on the cross, and although they do not embrace the cross they respect my beliefs. Surely they do not see the cross as having any significance for them, but they do not see it as foolishness, and they do not see it as a stumbling block." There is some merit to this question. However, there are three primary reasons why the cross does not have the same effect on people in our culture as it did on those in the first century: 1. since it has been well over a millennium and a half since the cross has been a cultural reality we do not have a lingering bad taste in our mouth when we think of it;² 2. because the cross was adopted as the official symbol of the Christian church it did not take long before the cross became a mere sentimentality; 3. when the Gospel is explained the historical facts pertaining to the cross are not generally shared.

The fact is, however, that the cross was a spectacle, it was foolishness to the Gentiles and it was a stumbling block to the Jews. I want to share a few things about the practice of Roman crucifixion in order to give you a sense of why it was a stumbling block and foolishness. *First, the cross was an ancient form of capital punishment.* Let's get all the sentimental ideas of the cross out of our heads. The cross was an instrument used by the Roman government to put criminals to death. Many have likened the cross to the electric chair, lynching, lethal injection, or to hanging. Certainly these are appropriate parallels in that they are all different instruments used for capital punishment. On the other hand, the cross was much different than these modern instruments/modes of capital punishment. *Second, The cross was meant to be a spectacle. The cross was not merely an ancient form of capital punishment, it was a mechanism used for the*

² Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Cross* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 29.

purpose of bringing public humility and shame to the offender in the worst way possible. And because of this it was not merely used for the purpose of extinguishing the life of a criminal, but rather for making a public spectacle of the criminal, prolonging death for as long as possible and mutilating the body as much as possible for the purpose of bringing public shame on the individual. This is where the parallels between the cross and the electric chair, hanging, lethal injection, and lynching (for the most part) stop. Although no form of capital punishment is easy to think about, these forms (apart from lynching—but lynching was never a practice used by the government for capital punishment, but rather by mobs and gangs) modern forms of capital punishment are (for the most part) designed to be humane. The cross was just the opposite—it was designed to be as barbaric and inhumane as possible. Oftentimes the criminal on the cross suffered in inexpressible agony not just for hours but for days, dying the most slow and agonizing death imaginable. And all for the purpose of bringing shame and disgrace on the criminal. Modern forms of capital punishment are done in rooms closed to the public. Crucifixion was done for all to see. Why for all to see? So that the one being crucified might die in dishonor and shame.³

The cross was meant to put the criminal on central display in the most horrendous way possible. How many of you saw the Passion of the Christ? While I would never see the movie again (unless I absolutely had to), I thought it was quite good. However, and I do not fault Mel Gibson for this (and I am not seeking to vindicate him either), the movie did not even begin to depict the violence of the cross. For starters, Jesus would have been wearing no loin cloth (complete shame). If Gibson would have depicted the scene of the crucifixion with exacting precision, the movie would have never made it to the theatres. Consider the following quote with me about the realities of crucifixion in the ancient world.

In ancient times, crucifixion was synonymous with horror and shame... Josephus terms it ‘the most pitiable of deaths’ (J.W. 7.6.4—203; cf. 1. 97), Cicero calls it ‘that cruel and disgusting penalty’ (*In Verrem* 2.5.64.165). Those crucified were made a public spectacle, often being affixed to crosses in bizarre positions, and their bodies left to be devoured by vultures...

For hours (if not days), the person would hang in the heat of the sun, stripped naked and struggling to breath. In order to avoid asphyxiation, he must push himself up with his legs and pull with his arms, triggering muscle spasms causing unimaginable pain. The end would come through heart failure, brain damage caused by reduced oxygen supply, suffocation, or shock. Atrocious physical agony, length of torment, and public shame combined to make crucifixion a most terrible form of death.⁴

Mark Strauss goes into greater detail explaining the goal of the Romans in maximizing not just pain but also shame in the way that they went about the practice of crucifixion.

³ There is no doubt that crucifixion was also done in public to deter lawlessness.

⁴ Andreas J. Kostenberger, “John,” in *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary*, Vol. 2, ed. by Clinton E. Arnold (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 175-176.

Various positions were used to maximize torture and humiliation... Seneca wrote that ‘some hang their victims with head toward the ground, some impale their private parts, others stretch out their arms on fork-shaped gibbet.’⁵

And as we all know, the crucifixion did not start and stop with the cross. The cross was the end of a long journey of torture, pain, and humiliation. The Gospels suggest that Jesus was flogged. The scene of the flogging of Jesus was depicted in the *Passion of the Christ*, and yet the scenes in the movie did not even begin to capture the blood bath that flogging was designed to be. Michael J. Wilkins explains the ancient practice of flogging.

Flogging or scourging was a beating administered with a whip or rod, usually on the person’s back. It was a common method of punishing criminals and preserving discipline... Flogging in the Jewish synagogue was limited to forty lashes by the law (Deut. 25:3), but no such restriction limited Roman flogging. In many cases the flogging itself was fatal. When the condemned man (women were not flogged) was tied to a post, he was flogged with the cruel *flagellum*, a leather strap interwoven with pieces of bone and metal that cut through the skin, leaving the skin hanging in shreds.⁶

We can identify with the images of the *Passion of the Christ* thus far. However, Wilkins continues:

The repeated flaying often left the bones and intestines showing, and the person was not infrequently near to the point of death when he was taken to be executed.⁷

The whole purpose of the physical beating was to disfigure the body to the point where every onlooker would scoff at the spectacle, saying, “What sort of a vile and deranged man was he to deserve such a shameful and dishonorable death?”⁸

⁵ Mark A. Strauss, “Luke,” in *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary*, Vol. 1, ed. by Clinton E. Arnold (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 493.

⁶ Michael J. Wilkins, “Matthew,” in *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary*, Vol. 1, ed. by Clinton E. Arnold (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 175-176. Lee Strobel explains the same reality in a bit more detail; “The back of the person being flogged would be so shredded that part of the spine was sometimes exposed by the deep cuts. The lash of the whip would go all the way from the shoulders down to the back, the buttocks, and the back of the legs. The whip would tear into underlying muscles to produce quivering ribbons of bleeding flesh, and sometimes even expose internal organs.” Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ: A Journalist’s Personal Investigation of the Evidence for Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 85.

⁷ Wilkins, “Luke,” 176.

⁸ It would also be necessary at this point to mention that the wooden plaque above the head of Christ, which read “King of the Jews,” was also meant to bring greater shame and humiliation. D.A. Carson explains that “it was the custom for the crime of which the person doomed to crucifixion had been guilty to be written on a tablet or placard and hung around his neck or carried before him as he made his way to the place of execution.” Carson continues; “Once the prisoner was crucified, the placard was often *fastened to the cross*.” He goes on to explain that the tablet which was hung over Jesus’ head was evidence that “the charge on which Jesus was eventually found guilty was the first one, the charge of sedition” (see John 18:33). D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1991), 610-611. Make no mistake about it; the purpose of the tablet was not merely to make an example out of the criminal. In other words, although it certainly was Caesar’s goal to publicize the crime of which the criminal was being punished for the sake of warning the populace of the consequences of committing such crimes, the tablet was also fastened to the cross for the

Third, the death of the cross was reserved only for the worst criminals. The cross was not the sole avenue of extinguishing the life of a criminal in the ancient world—it was reserved for the dregs of society. Consider what DA Carson says about the shame of the cross:

What would you think if a woman came to work wearing earrings stamped with an image of the mushroom cloud of the atomic bomb dropped over Hiroshima?

What would you think of a church building adorned with a fresco of the massed graves at Auschwitz?

Both visions are grotesque. They are not only intrinsically abhorrent, but they are shocking because of powerful cultural associations.

The same sort of shocked horror was associated with *cross* and *crucifixion* in the first century. Apart from the Emperor's explicit sanction, no Roman citizen could be put to death by this means. Crucifixion was reserved for slaves, aliens, barbarians. Many thought it was not something to be talked about in polite company.⁹

The cross was something of a cultural taboo in the first century. You have to understand how all of this would have come as a shock to those living in the ancient world. It is not just that the Christ has died, but rather that He has died the ignominious death worthy of only the worst of criminals. He did not die an honorable death. His body was mutilated, dishonored, and shamed. Paul highlights this aspect of Jesus' death in Philippians 2:6-8. In speaking of Christ he says,

...although He existed in the form of God, [He] did not consider equality with God a thing to be stolen. ⁷ Instead He emptied Himself by assuming the form of a slave, taking on the likeness of men. And when He had come as a man in His external form, ⁸ He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.

You can see in this text a progression from miraculous to unthinkable to absurd. This one who is equal with God Himself became a man (a miracle), he took on the form of a slave

purpose of bringing public shame upon the criminal. In the case of Jesus, the tablet was certainly meant to mock the weak and dying "**King** of the Jews."

⁹DA Carson, *The Cross and Christian Ministry: Leadership Lessons from 1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1993), 12-13. Gary M. Burge, Lynn H. Cohick, and Gene L. Green say of crucifixion, "Cicero called crucifixion the *crudelissimum taeterrimique supplicii* ('that cruel and disgusting penalty' *Against Verres* 2.5.165) and the *summon supplicio* ('the extreme penalty'; 2.5.168). It was considered the most wretched of deaths. Roman citizens and, in particular, members of upper class were exempted from this form of execution. Death on a cross was limited to foreigners and people of the lower class, especially slaves." Gary M. Burge, Lynn H. Cohick, and Gene L. Green, *The New Testament in Antiquity: A Survey of the New Testament Within Its Cultural Contexts* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 207. They also provide a quote from Cicero regarding crucifixion, which provides evidence that the cross, as Carson suggests, certainly was a topic to be avoided in public discussion. "How grievous a thing it is to be disgraced by a public court; how grievous to suffer a fine, how grievous to suffer banishment; and yet in the midst of any such disaster some trace of liberty is left to us. Even if we are threatened with death, we may die free men. But the executioner, the veiling of the head and 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. For it is not only the actual occurrence of these things or the endurance of them, but liability to them, the expectation, nay, the mere mention of them, that is unworthy of a Roman citizen and a free man." Cicero in *Pro Rabirio* 16 in *Ibid.*

(unthinkable) and did not just humble “Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death” (which would be tipping the scales at irrational) but then Paul does the absurd and suggests that the long-awaited Messiah died a criminal’s death on a criminal’s tree. He did not die the death of an honorable man nor did he die the death of a rich man, he didn’t even die the death of a normal man and He didn’t even die the normal death of a criminal. No, he died a death worthy only of the dregs of society.

Let’s get back to 1 Corinthians. Do you have a better understanding now why the message of the crucified Christ was considered a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles? Paul says that the Jews seek a sign. They seek evidential proof. Jesus rebuked them on a number of occasions for their refusal to believe in Him apart from Him giving them verifiable miraculous proof of His Messiahship (see Matthew 12:38-42; 16:1-11; Mark 8:11). They demanded proof. They demanded that God jump through their little hoops before they would embrace Jesus as God’s sent Messiah.

Many of the Jews were expecting the promised Messiah to be a military figure. They expected him to come and rescue them from the hands of their earthly enemies. They were looking for pomp and circumstance. This message of a crucified Christ (or Messiah) was a stumbling block because it did not conform to their understanding of who the Messiah was supposed to be. Yea... it flat out contradicted who they expected the Messiah to be. Not only did Jesus not wrangle in a large army and defeat the Romans, but he died the shameful, dishonorable, humiliating death of the cross *at the hand of the Romans*. Thus, Gordon D. Fee helpfully explains that the concept of a crucified Messiah, to the Jewish mind, was an oxymoron. Fee likens it to “fried ice.” He explains; “One may have a Messiah, or one may have a crucifixion; but one may not have both—at last not from the perspective of merely human understanding. *Messiah* meant power, splendor, triumph; *crucifixion* meant weakness, humiliation, defeat.”¹⁰

The Jews were also skeptical because of God’s declaration regarding one who hangs on a tree. Turn with me to Deuteronomy 21:22-23.

²² "If anyone is found guilty of an offense deserving the death penalty and is executed, and you hang his body on a tree, ²³ you are not to leave his corpse on the tree overnight but are to bury him that day, for anyone hung [on a tree] is under God's curse. You must not defile the land the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance.

We, of course, know that Jesus did not commit a sin ‘deserving the death penalty.’ He is the spotless lamb of God (1 Peter 1:19). However, we do know that God “made the One who did not know sin to be sin for us” (2 Corinthians 5:21) The just (the spotless Lamb of God) dying as a substitute to remove the sins of the unrighteous. Paul communicates this very idea in Galatians 3:13.

Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, because it is written: **Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.**

¹⁰Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*; The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), 75.

But Paul says that the message of this crucified Christ was a ‘stumbling block’ to the Jews. Fee explains the significance of Jesus being a ‘stumbling block’ to the Jews.

The Greek word translated ‘stumbling block’ is *skandalon*, from which we derive our word ‘scandal.’ ‘Scandal’ is in fact closer to the sense than ‘stumbling block,’ since the word does not so much mean something that one is tripped up by as something that offends to the point of arousing opposition.¹¹

Paul’s message of a crucified Christ was downright offensive to the Jews. “You are telling me that the long awaited Messiah died as a public spectacle of shame and humiliation—he died the death of one under the curse of God’s wrath—and at the hands of the very people that he was supposed to save us from?”

Paul then says that the message of the crucified Christ is ‘foolishness’ to the Gentiles. In other words, they deem the message of the crucified Christ to be “madness” or complete folly.¹² All the faculties of earthly wisdom could never lead you to see the transcendent wisdom and power of the cross. Think about it. How could the human mind, working with logic and reason alone—without the Spirit of God opening up the understanding—arrive at the conclusion that the best way for God to effect salvation and gain decisive victory over sin, Satan, and death would be through the shame and disgrace of the cross? Apart from the Spirit of God opening our understanding we simply do not have the categories to even begin to comprehend the transcendent power and wisdom of God (we will get to this more when we get to 1 Corinthians 2). Consider the transcendent wisdom of the cross: the greatest among you must become your servant (Matthew 23:11), when I am weak; then I am strong (2 Corinthians 12), if I want to be wise I must become a fool (1 Corinthians 3:18-19); if I want to be exalted I must seek humility (Matthew 23:12). And it is not just that human wisdom could not conjure this up, it is that the cross is flatly opposed to everything that the cross is about. This wisdom and the power of the message of the crucified Christ are antithetical to the pseudo-wisdom and power of this world. One cannot hold on to both at the same time any more than a human can be both a bird and a human at the same time. It is not just that human wisdom is insufficient; it is that it is opposed to the cross on every front.

How could Christ establish His reign through the shameful death of the cross? That is the question that humans, apart from the Spirit of God opening their hearts and minds, could never answer. C.K. Barrett explains the ironic wisdom and power of God in the face of the pseudo-wisdom and power of man.

What God has done in Christ crucified is a direct contradiction of human ideas of wisdom and power, yet it achieved what human wisdom and power fail to achieve.¹³

Paul will go on to say that Christ is God’s wisdom and power, and that those who have been called have eyes to both see His transcendent wisdom and power and to sniff out the folly of human wisdom and power.

¹¹ Ibid., 75fn38.

¹² Ibid., 76.

¹³ C. K. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*; Black’s New Testament Commentary (Peabody, Hendrickson Publishers, 1968, 2006), 56.

Yet to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ is God's power and God's wisdom (1 Corinthians 1:24).

It is not that God has failed to meet the criteria of both the Jews and the Gentiles; but rather that He has done so on a plane higher than they can see. Since they cannot see the Kingdom of God, being spiritually blind, they have no ability to discern true wisdom and power from the wimpy wisdom and power of this age.

Application

Most importantly, the Corinthian believer's needed to embrace God's transcendent wisdom and power, the wisdom and power of the crucified Christ, as their way of life. The wisdom and power which looks to flashes of earthly strength, significance, and brilliance ultimately leads to a whole lot of nothing. The Corinthians were warring against each other because of their inability to detect or discern God's cruciform wisdom and power, and because of their inability to see the inconsistency between the wisdom and power of Corinth and the wisdom and power of the crucified Christ. What they needed more than anything was a reminder of the transcendent values of the Gospel.

Consider Your Need for Jesus

Turn with me to Galatians 3:13.

Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, because it is written: **Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.**

I don't know about you, but when I think of the horrific nature of Roman crucifixion, I am tempted to wonder why God sent His Son to die the most barbaric, shameful, and publicly humiliating death known to man. Jesus did not merely die, He died as a spectacle. His death was a radical display of shame, and the suffering accompanied by the shame literally finds no parallel in today's modern world. The cross was designed for the purpose of bringing as much shame and humiliation on the crucified subject as possible. So... why didn't God send Jesus to die for sinners in a more human society? If Jesus would have been born in modern America, He would have been put to death by way of lethal injection (or the like), a virtually painless and silent mode of capital punishment. But God did not see fit to send His Son to 21st century America!

Why all the gore? Why all the shame? Why did it have to go the way it went? It has everything to do with the fact that Christ bore our sin and in so doing became a curse for us. The violent death that He died was necessary... it was necessary to demonstrate the seriousness of our sin against God. The point is that the violent death that Jesus died was to be the death that I was supposed to die. The cross does not over-express the holy hatred of God against sin. In fact, the cross can rightly be spoken of as the revelation of God's thoughts on sin. This is how seriously God takes sin.

You may ask, however; "Don't you think that His attitude toward sin is a bit overboard? I mean, isn't the ignominious death of the cross just a bit over the top?" The answer is a resounding, Absolutely Not! Sin is serious because we are insignificant and God is infinitely glorious and holy. We have rebelled against our infinitely glorious and holy and loving Creator. Sin is no mere social defect; it is nothing less than rebellion against the Creator of all things. The

fact of the matter is that if you have not received Jesus as your Lord and Savior, if you have not repented of your sins and believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, the violent death that you see on the cross will be yours—and rightfully so. You are, after all, guilty.

However, God extends a free offer of salvation from the guilt and punishment of sin if you will call out to Him in faith and repentance. If you do not know Jesus as your Lord and Savior, I plead with you submit your life to Him today. However, if you do know Him this morning, and if you know the joy of having your sins forgiven, I ask you to participate in the celebration of the death of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We do not celebrate His death because we are morbid. Rather, we celebrate His death because it is God's perfect pledge of His love for us. Paul says in Romans 5:8; "But God proves his own love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us!"

"Amazing love, how can it be, that Thou, my God, wouldst die for me?!"