

## **1 Corinthians 1:18-31: Preaching the Foolishness of the Cross**

### **OUTLINE:**

The message of the cross  
The people in the Church  
The God of our salvation

### **INTRODUCTION**

Do you feel embarrassed about the Christian message? Are you embarrassed about the exclusive claims that Christ is the only way to heaven? Do you cringe when you have to sound 'cruel' by affirming that everyone is a totally depraved sinner? Do you drop your voice when you say that homosexual lust is a sin and homosexual marriage is an impossibility? Do you leave out quoting the Bible in your conversations because of how people today think of God's word? Have you ever felt tempted to rethink some traditional Christian beliefs on things like hell, the inspiration of Scripture, humanity as male and female because of the pressure to be politically correct? Then you are able to sympathise with the Corinthians in the first century.

If I were to tell you that an Afghan shepherd who had been shot down and killed by an American bullet, had risen from the dead and was proclaimed the Saviour of the world, you would think it a laughable and ridiculous notion. That is what the world first thought and still thinks of the carpenter from Nazareth, who lived in an occupied country and who was killed by the authorities. However the message of the cross was not only rejected because the saviour did not come from Rome, or lead an army, many rejected Jesus because he did not fit into the preconceived ideas of what they felt a saviour should be like and what he save them from. The Corinthian Church had received the message of Jesus as their sin bearer happily, but now they were acting a little like the seed that was sown in shallow ground, when persecution, probably in the form of social disapproval, rained down they were very willing for some false teachers to make the Christian religion look more respectable. As we enter into this section of 1 Corinthians we are going to see Paul taking on those who are trying to present Jesus as just another philosophy, another higher wisdom that many of the religious teachers and philosophers taught.

Paul has just been dealing with the divisions over who baptised who, and he emphasized that it was believing the preaching of the gospel that saves not baptism, 1:17. And so having raised the issue of the preaching of the cross being the saving message, he changes topic and takes on those who feel that this despised and ridiculous message needs to be dressed up in more acceptable language and ideas, so that it can also appeal to the educated, the influential and the important. Paul has to deal with the perennial problem of intimidated Christians trying to sell the gospel by dressing it up or taking away the embarrassing aspects of its message.

The king of the universe is a man who was born in a stable, did carpentry for a living, he never led an army, wrote a book, or travelled the world campaigning. He preached for three and a half years, he was rejected by the people he was sent to save and died the humiliating death of a common criminal at the hands of the then world power. No wonder Paul says in v18 "For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing." For those who evaluate the message of the cross by external things like show of power, credibility, self-esteem, social activism, gender affirming etc., the cross is an absurd message to believe. That is why we need the Holy Spirit to help us to believe and to empower us when we preach, because on the surface the gospel message is absurd. And so Paul goes on,

"but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." As Christians who have been convinced we often found ourselves frustrated as we try and convince those of what we so clearly see, but they do not see at all. This is because they are blinded by their worldly point of view and to them it appears foolish.

We might want to protest that this is frightfully unfair, 'if only the gospel were more appealing and put across more convincingly', we might want to say. Or, 'Why doesn't God just make it easier for people to believe?' Paul tells us that God deliberately chose these paradoxical means, these apparently foolish means on purpose, v19. He did it to expose the heart of all man's efforts to save himself, and the vainglorious way in which he has sought to do so. At the heart of every religion, philosophy, or worldview is man centred on himself. Even the Judaism of Jesus day, a religion where we would expect to find God at the centre, instead we see man trying to save himself by his own efforts and using the religion that God had given to promote self. The Greeks were very big on philosophy, there was Aristotle, Plato, Zeno, Epicureas, etc, each of these men and those who followed believed in the ability of man's mind to discover the truth, that by their own intellect they could know all and fathom all depths. Power was the lust of some, others followed sensuality. But in the saving work of God sending Jesus to be our saviour all of man's best is shown to be fruitless, barren, worthless, even damning. God used a despised race not the master race to bring salvation. He saves us by grace not our own efforts, he grants understanding by the illumination of the Holy Spirit and doesn't leave it to the clever to find him, he didn't use force or power to conquer but death and sacrifice. Not sensuality but holiness. With one act he swept all our best, all that we consider saving, precious, worthy aside, he shamed it, through the cross of Christ. And so he writes, "For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart."" All of man's efforts earned him nothing, God had to come and save, and he did it in a statement making way.

Let's look at those that Paul is talking about, in particular he singles out the Jews and the Greeks. V, 20-25, 'Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?21 For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.22 For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom,23 but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles,24 but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.25 For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.'

The Jews want miraculous signs, and the Greeks seek wisdom. This is very interesting. The Jews saw the miracles of Christ, but did not believe. They wanted the miracles of conquest against Rome, not works of mercy amongst the needy. They wanted Roman blood to flow and could not even imagine a saviour who over comes by dying. Because they were self righteous and couldn't see their sins, they thought their greatest need was liberation not forgiveness and couldn't see the cross as a sacrifice, but instead saw it as a failure. Presuppositions about what they need, and assumptions about their own selves blinded them.

The Greeks on the other hand were deep thinkers and for hundreds of years already had spilled much ink and had many public speakers and debates about the truth and the true nature of things. It was a common past time for them to occupy themselves with the novel and new ideas that were going around, changing beliefs like they changed their clothes. They had settled ideas about God and the universe, for example, flesh was evil, so to say that God became flesh was an impossibility and gave rise to an error that John takes on in his first epistle where some false teachers were denying that Jesus could be a man. Or to

say that eternal life is not escaping the body but resurrection to a new body was absurd. So to these 'wise' Greeks the story of God becoming man, and dying for our sins was ridiculous because it didn't fit with the ideas that they already held.

And these two examples highlight the trouble that we are experiencing today. People have set ideas and if Christianity does not fit into them then it is wrong not them. Today we need to speak more about world views than peoples. In Jesus day Jews were Jews and they all would have shared the same characteristics, but today we do not see that, we live with influences shaping our lives from South Africa, Jamaica, England, America, Iran, etc. Many of us are a hodgepodge of influences. And I would like to tease out two strands from the cord that is wrapped around all of us. What do we feel tempted to add to the Gospel to make it more appealing to the world? Today we are surrounded by Humanism, and Pluralism, and these have become added to the Gospel to make it more appealing.

Humanism is the new religion of self. We must save ourselves, we must not depend on religion but find the truth within ourselves. This combined with New Age religion has put the source of all truth and experience in the self, we are gods, I am divine, is the message of this new religion. Combined with psychology it has given rise to various psychologies where the defining moral law is, does it suit me? Self-esteem, independence, self-assertiveness, there is a new cult of self. So when Christianity comes along and tells you that you are blind to spiritual truth, it upsets those who see their intuition as the touchstone of truth/divine guidance. When we tell people that they are intrinsically bad and sinful, that doesn't help self-esteem, or a positive view of the self and so it is ousted. Pluralism teaches that either there are many truths and everyone is right, or the truth is so obscured that no one should be dogmatic. So when we say that Jesus is the way the truth and the life, and there is salvation in other name. We are narrow-minded, we are not being charitable, we are intolerant.

A few years ago at a conference I was asked the question what I thought the next thing was going to be in theology? I answered anthropology. What is mankind? Are we here by chance, were we designed, did God make us male and female? Questions of nature, purpose and power are forced upon us. Tremendous pressure is being exerted to get Christians to tow the party line on gender equality. Recently there was a conference in America for 'sexual minorities.' This is a capitulation. To speak of a minority group is to speak of a legitimate but oppressed or underrepresented people. Races can be minorities, but homosexual/transvestites/Bi, etc. cannot.

Questions: How have we fallen into the trap of the Corinthians? Are we embarrassed about the message about sin, and wanting to tone it down because the majority don't like it? Are we wanting to make a space for other religions because that is the way most people see things? Will you uphold the biblical teaching on manhood and womanhood? In every generation we are going to face the temptation to set aside those parts of the gospel and God's truth which seem foolish and are unpopular, and we will want to include into Christianity those things that make it seem more marketable. It will always look stupid to the lost, God saves people by the Holy Spirit working through our bad preaching of the truth, through our weak efforts, but he uses the truth to save not a redone gospel fitted for the world's approval and convenience. If you take away the truth about our sins and our weaknesses you are taking away the gospel. If you remove the truth that there is salvation in no one else you are taking away the gospel, if there were another way, then Jesus died for nothing, all God's efforts in the cross are just for show because they aren't necessary.

## **The people in the Church**

Many Christians are embarrassed by the fact that there are few celebrities in the Church, and when there is a famous Christian we want to parade them around. The Corinthians were feeling this embarrassment. Many say with pride that Johnny Cash or Justin Bieber is a Christian. V 26, 'For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth.' But Paul is emphasizing the reason that so few people of the world are getting saved is because they are blind, not you. They are the ones who don't need salvation because they already think they have it all. He dresses the naked, gives wisdom to the foolish, grace to the humble, fills the hungry. To save those who are self-righteous would be to deny his own holiness, to lower his standards, and to overlook their many sins. To give truth to the worldly wise would be to reward foolishness, pride and be at the mercy of man's approval. To beg to be accepted by those of social standing is to abdicate the right to rule and be the king of the universe. Through Christ God topples man's self-righteousness, his wisdom, his power, his prestige, his self-exaltation and self-importance. Christ is not a saviour fit for a king, or a Hollywood star, or a great politician, he is a saviour fit for sinners. We can only receive him on our knees. Paul is telling these people to look with spiritual values not physical and worldly ones. We must not be intimidated if a celebrity joins the JW's or another religion, or when Cat Stevens becomes a Muslim. So what if Orlando Bloom is a Buddhist; that Madonna studied Kabbalah; or that Tom Cruise is a Scientologist. To long for Christianity to be approved of by important people is to forget that they are sinners in need of God's approval. Christianity is no better for those who become Christians, it is they that are benefited because of Christ. Like the Corinthians we are swayed by those who are self-important, thinking that our faith is at the mercy of their approval. We must not forget that God has deliberately not come seeking for man's approval and so we must not be willing to compromise the message to obtain it. Have you ever felt embarrassed by the truths of the Gospel, and deliberately toned it down? Have you ever thought Christianity more 'respectable' because a famous person now believes it? Remember, v27-28, 'But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are.'

## **The God of our salvation**

The Gospel exists to glorify God and to shame man; to show the best of God saving, forgiving, redeeming; and to show the worst of man, and he gets all the glory not us. To rearrange the gospel so that it is convenient or suited to a particular religion or worldview is giving God's glory to another. If we are able to save ourselves through Islam, Muhammad and I get the glory, not God, etc. But the message of the cross exposes the naked truth about our inability, and God's grace. And so Paul says in v 28-29, "God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God." Let's think about the different parts of our salvation and see where God and not we are the pivotal actors in saving us. God elected us in eternity past, he caused us to be born, he guided the steps of our life, he began to call by his Spirit. Then he enabled faith and repentance, keeps us until the end and will one day exert his power in our glorification and we will receive new bodies and total salvation from all the effects of sin. For which part of my salvation should I take the glory, where is my effort the crucial part that tipped the balance, at what point did I do anything that bought me the right to spend eternity with God enjoying his richest treasures as an adopted son? Never! V30, 'And because of him you are in Christ Jesus.'

And now that we are in him what do we have? Do we need to feel inferior because we do not have what the world advertises with false smiles to be the truth? Must we feel in competition and try and change the content of our message so that we can enter the competition to win this sinful God rejecting world's approval. Naturally I am not saying that we shouldn't do good and seek to win others to Christ, but we should not do it by changing the message of the cross. Paul tells us that we do not need to feel that we do not have what the other religions and philosophies are selling, he tells us that Jesus, v30 'became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption.' The Greeks are promising wisdom through their systems of philosophy, we have more than that we have the true wisdom from God, not from man. We are declared righteous by a declaration of God, we are set apart to walk in the most prestigious footsteps, those of Christ, and we are redeemed, set free, like a slave who has been bought their freedom. For those who were feeling that they were missing out, Paul tells them what they have, and we are millionaires in Christ. This world and its philosophies offers you truth, you have that truth in Christ, it offers you a way of righteousness we receive a free gift of righteousness in Christ, it promises a happy life, we find that happiness in the holy pursuit of Christlikeness; and it promises freedom, but true freedom only comes from Christ setting us free from serving sin to serve Him.

We must say as Paul does in v31, "Therefore, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord". So let's be proud of our despised message remembering that it is the world that needs God's approval, not he theirs, and that we must never change that precious gospel for it glorifies him and saves us. We must not be superior or bombastic but rather confident that we have the truth the world needs and boldly believe and proclaim it.