

My career in litigation didn't exactly get off to a smooth start. I was barely a year out of law school when I faced my first trial. Literally. I was the junior associate (a.k.a. cannon fodder) on a trial team defending a local TV station in a libel lawsuit. It stemmed from a story they did on – and I quote – “the dirty doc.” Given we are in the house of God, I will spare the details.

Prior to the trial there was a hearing to decide various pretrial motions, including a motion to dismiss we filed on behalf of one of the defendants. In arguing the motion, the other side cited a case that pretty much gutted our position. Needless to say, it was a problem. At the close of the argument, the judge took a 20 minute recess before deciding the matter. Seizing the opportunity, the trial team turned to me with marching orders: go to the court library and find a case that will save our motion. So I hit the books pouring frantically through every decision I could find that cited their case. It was looking hopeless until I found *the one*. A case with a similar fact-pattern to ours in which the judge ruled our way. I was in a great rush, so I didn't *exactly* read the whole thing, just the part I needed. I printed it off, raced upstairs to the hearing room, and came in just as the judge was about to lay down the hammer on our motion. I gave it to the partner arguing the motion, open to the relevant page. He read it, smiled, and said “your honor, we would like to bring to your attention some important authority opposing counsel failed to cite.” He handed the opinion to the judge, who read it carefully. This was getting good. My career was about to take off.

But then something else happened. As the judge flipped through the *rest* of the opinion, a perplexed look came over his face. “Counsel,” he finally said to my colleague. “You are correct, this case is on point. However, you do realize that you are referencing the dissenting opinion in the case, correct?” Yeah, that was not a shining moment in my legal career.

But I share this for a reason. You see, when I went looking for that case, I went looking not necessarily for the *actual* truth but rather for a truth that *matched my need*. There was truth in the opinion I found – that is to say, it reached a conclusion that was authoritative and relevant. It just wasn't the conclusion *I wanted*. I found the conclusion *I wanted*. It just happened to be in the wrong part of the opinion.

I was neither the first nor am I the last person to seek *my* truth instead of *the* truth. Even in this moment, indeed especially in this moment, we hear also sorts of conflicting

narratives purporting to be the truth. We're left wondering, which do we believe? Do we believe CNN? Do we believe Fox? Or MSNBC? Or Twitter? Frankly, we don't know if COVID coming or going? Depends who you ask. Is the economy firing up or bogging down? Depends who you ask. Are we on the verge of civil war, or is this a new beginning? Depends who you ask. Who won the election? Depends on who you ask.

And these are just the questions pertaining to politics, society and culture. What about matters of our ontological existence – our very being? Why is there something instead of nothing? Who or what is God? Is there really no absolute truth? And isn't that statement an absolute truth in itself?

I could go on, but you get the point. In a place and time where there seem to be so many versions of "truth", which can we trust? As parents, what do we tell our children? As pastors, what do we tell our flock? In the midst of the confusion, it is easy to get fearful and despondent. But you need not, because there is an answer to those questions. God answered them through the apostle Paul, and we're going to explore His answer today.

The text we're going to look at is 1 Corinthians 1: 17-25, if you would like to turn there. The text will also be on the screen. As we look at this pericope, we will see that the core truth given us by God – the absolute truth, the gospel truth – gives believers all the solid ground we need in turbulent times like these. But we're also going to see that the truth is nonsensical to the lost, those who are blinded by unbelief. And because of that, the church has work to do.

### **Background – Conflict in the Corinthian Church**

Before we delve into the text, we need to consider the context. Paul was writing this letter to the church in Corinth, a port city located on the isthmus that connected the Peloponnesian Peninsula to the rest of Greece. As such, it was on a major north/south trade route, which ensured wealth and all that comes with that. It also was a significant hub of Greek religious, philosophical and cultural thought – much of which was grounded in worldly desires. Paul wrote the letter during his time in Ephesus around AD 55, after learning that the church had become plagued by conflict and division within the body. The division was grew out of their lack of spiritual growth and focus on worldly matters. In particular, rather than focusing on the

gospel, they were focusing on those preaching the gospel. Note what Paul writes in 1 Cor. 1:11-14:

*For I have been informed concerning you, my brethren, by Chloe's people, that there are quarrels among you. Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, "I am of Paul," and "I am of Apollos," and "I am of Cephas," and "I of Christ." Has Christ been divided? Paul was not crucified for you, was he? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one would say you were baptized in my name. – 1 Cor. 1:11-4*

Paul is referring here to silos that developed in the church because people were following different church leaders, who offered different perspectives or approaches to the work of the church. **Paul** was particularly concerned about the salvation of the Gentiles and emphasized salvation apart from works, including circumcision. **Apollos**, meanwhile, was a Jewish Christian from Alexandria, which was home to a significant population of Jewish intellectuals known for merging Greek philosophy with Jewish thinking. Thus, it could have been that Apollos was sewing the same Greco-Roman wisdom and philosophy into his teachings. **Cephas**, or the Apostle Peter, meanwhile, adhered more closely to Jewish tradition in his approach. Though clearly not a Judaizer, he had a tendency to distance himself from Gentiles. In fact, we see this in Gal. 1:11-14, where Paul recounts challenging Peter for separating himself from eating with Gentiles.

The point is that in all cases, people were more enthralled by the messenger than the message. Do we see this today? I fear we do. I follow Piper. I follow McArthur. I'm more of a Francis Chan guy. Paul is calling on the Corinthians, and us, to set such things aside and focus on what is truly important – which is the gospel itself. He underscores this point in verse 17, where he reminds the church of his calling.

*For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not in cleverness of speech, so that the cross of Christ would not be made void. - 1 Cor. 1:17.*

In other words, Paul is called to preach the gospel of Christ, not build a following for himself. He adds he is called to preach "not in cleverness of speech." In the Greek – ο υ κ σ ο φ ι α λ ο γ ο υ – this literally means "the wisdom of word." What Paul is saying is

that it is not the mastery of his delivery or the eloquence of his words that matter, but rather the content of his message. The “wisdom” Paul refers to here is the wisdom of the world, as opposed to that of God. In Paul’s day, it would have been the intellectual debates of Greek philosophers and Sophists. But what does that look like today? Worldly wisdom could be many things, but in a nutshell, I think it can be summed up as “whatever I want it to be.”

Now notice what else Paul is saying here, namely that he does not preach in cleverness of speech is “so that the cross of Christ would not be made void.” In Greek, the verb for “made void” is  $\mu\eta\ \kappa\epsilon\ \nu\omega\ \theta\eta$ , and literally means “to be emptied, destroyed, rendered void, or to be of no effect.” The implication, then, is that when we allow worldly wisdom and clever speech to intermingle with or supplant the truth of the gospel, the work of Christ on the cross is made void – rendered ineffectual – to the unbeliever. It is a very serious and sobering reminder that we are called to preach the Truth in truth, and nothing more. But we must preach it. We can’t hide it.

### **Foolishness and Power**

In the verses that follow Paul expands on why it is vital that we preach the gospel, and not be sidetracked by the wisdom of the world. He writes, in verse 1:18

*For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. – 1 Cor. 1:18*

The first question one might ask is what is the “word of the cross?” Well, it is just that. It is the message of the crucifixion and death of Jesus Christ, and the role these play in the salvation for all who believe. To those who are perishing (unbelievers) Paul says this message is “foolishness.” The Greek word is  $\mu\omega\rho\iota\alpha$  or  $\mu\omega\rho\omicron\varsigma$ . Sound familiar? It’s where we get the word “moron.” Have you even been made to feel like a moron because of your faith?

But why is the message of the cross foolishness to the unbeliever? Verlyn Verbrugge puts it this way, when describing their thinking: “Who in their right mind would say that the way to get peace with God is to build a relationship with someone who suffered the type of death reserved only for the worst of criminals in the Roman Empire?” Let’s face it, the world scoffs at those who believe that the God of the universe would send His only Son to a tiny

planet, in a solar system on the outpost of a minor galaxy, to die on a cross. And the world scoffs at the notion that a member of the Godhead would choose to empty Himself of His power so that His creation could flog and crucify Him. That God would use this way to save us and reconcile us to Him is simply crazy talk to the world.

The Bible is full of timeless truth, and here is but one more example. The “foolishness” of the message of Christ crucified to unbelievers in Paul’s time is the same foolishness that exists for unbelievers today. Nothing has changed. The question for you and for me is **are we willing to look foolish to them for the sake of their souls?** Or do we hide the wisdom of the cross to preserve our image and intellectual reputation. We are **all** called to preach the gospel – not just pastors. And we do so **boldly** and without reservation. Consider what Paul writes in Romans chapter 1:

*For I am not ashamed of the gospel, 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 to faith; as it is written, “But the righteous man shall live by faith. – Romans 1:16-17*

Paul also captures this idea of the power of God here in 1 Cor. 1:18, noting the message of the cross is “the power of God” for those being saved. But how is the wisdom of the cross power? Indeed, the message Jesus sent through the cross seems counter-intuitive to power, at least by the world’s standards. He renounced His claim to Himself and His position. He deferred in absolute obedience to the will of the Father – even to the point, as Luke tells us, of sweating blood in His anguish in the Garden of Gethsemane. And His obedience led to humiliation and death. How is this power?

Well, this is the message of the cross. But not just this. The message of the cross leads to and includes the message of the empty tomb. If Jesus did not die on the cross, He would not have overcome death through His resurrection. And if that did not happen, as Paul writes in 1 Cor. 15:14 “our preaching is useless and so is your faith.” But our preaching is not useless, and your faith is the most valuable thing you have – because the resurrection is *true*. John 14:6, my life verse, says Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. Yet the way is through the cross. The sacrifice of our Suffering Savior led not to destruction but resurrection, not to a temporal lowly estate, but to restoration of His eternal state on the throne of heaven. That is the power.

In the same way, we place our trust in Jesus, renouncing our claims to ourselves and following Him in obedience – even if it means being called foolish, even if it includes humiliation, even if it leads to death. For if we do these things, we will experience the power of God; the power that saves us for eternity. That power does not exist in the halls of Congress, the chambers of the Supreme Court, or the vaults of Wall Street. That power exists in the heart of the believer. And it truly is the only power you need.

### **A Battle Against Pride**

But Paul's message here deals with more than just the worldly wisdom of philosophers, or in today's case, atheists and agnostics. His audience also included Jews, who rejected the message of the cross for different reasons, as we will see. In verse 1:19, Paul quotes a prophecy that would have been all too familiar to them.

*For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the cleverness of the clever I will set aside." – 1 Cor. 1:19*

The reference is from Isaiah 29, God's warning to Ariel. Literally meaning "Lion of God", Ariel refers to Jerusalem, whose leaders (King Hezekiah in particular) relied on human counsel and wisdom rather than faith in God when facing the Assyrian invasion. Instead of calling on God, they sought an alliance with Egypt to protect them. In response to their reliance on their own wisdom, God warns through Isaiah:

*Because this people draw near with their words and honor Me with their lip service, but they remove their hearts from Me, and their reverence for Me consists of tradition learned by rote, Therefore behold, I will once again deal marvelously with this people, wondrously marvelous; and the wisdom of their wise men will perish, and the discernment of their discerning men will be concealed." – Isaiah 29:13-14*

The Israelites had lost sight of all that God had done to protect them, and turned to their own logic and perceived sense of intellect. In rejecting Christ, the Jews did the same thing. As Paul shows us here it has always been God's plan to humble the wise and proud, and lift up the meek and humble – those who earnestly seek His help rather than leaning on their own

wisdom. In light of this truth, in verse 20, he asks three rhetorical questions related to earthly wisdom:

*Where is the wise person?* – That would be again, the one with  $\sigma \circ \phi \circ \varsigma$  the worldly wisdom gained through learning, education and intellectual exercise.

*Where is the scribe?* – That would be the  $\gamma \rho \alpha \mu \mu \alpha \tau \varepsilon \upsilon \varsigma$  – or “experts in matters of divine revelation” such as the Jewish teachers of the law.

*Where is the debater of this age?* – That again would be the Greek philosophers, who engaged in endless debates to demonstrate their intellect.

Where are these people? The implication of the question is that they are fleeting, for none of these offer true, lasting wisdom. None can compete with the message of the cross.

Why? Paul answers this with a fourth rhetorical question: *Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?* We see again  $\mu \omega \rho \circ \varsigma$  – from which we get the word “moron.” Paul asks, has God not made moronic the wisdom of this world? Jesus Himself answered this question in Luke chapter 10. Speaking of the return of the 70 he sent out, Jesus prays out: *“I praise You, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and have revealed them to infants. Yes, Father, for this way was well-pleasing in Your sight. – Luke 10:21*

God’s plan is again repeated in verse 1:21

*For indeed by the wisdom of God the world did not know God through its wisdom. God preferred through the foolishness of preaching to save those believing.” - 1 Cor. 1:21*

So it has always been God’s plan to make the wisdom of this world a stumbling block to truth. We see this theme more fully developed in Romans 1:18 – 23, which speaks of the “wrath of God” revealed against those who “suppress the truth in unrighteousness” even though the truth of God has been made evident to them through all He created. There Paul writes:

*For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man, and of birds, and four-footed animals, and crawling creatures. – Rom. 1:21-22*

And donkeys. And elephants... oh wait, that's not in there. But you see the point. It is out of foolishness that this world calls truth foolish. It is out of blindness that this world ridicules faith as "blind."

### **Three examples for approaching the wisdom cross**

Paul next gives three practical examples of how people approach the gospel, or as Warren Wiersbe puts it of three "attitudes toward the cross." Paul writes:

*For indeed, Jews asks 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 called, both Jews and Gentiles, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. – 1 Cor. 1:22-24.*

Jews at the time stumbled over the cross, just as many people do today. In their minds, the power of God would have been better revealed through miraculous signs and wonders similar to the many examples they were familiar with in Scripture – from Exodus to Elijah. How was it that the Messiah would bring about salvation in any other way but through power, glory and victory? The cross, for them, was the opposite – it represented weakness, defeat and death. Their problem, of course, was that they misinterpreted their Scriptures, which are replete with prophesy regarding the manner in which ultimate victory over sin and reconciliation with God would come about.

Sadly, they were not the last to stumble over their perception of the cross as a sign of weakness. Many struggle with the notion that God would condescend Himself as Jesus did for our sake. Perhaps it is because if Jesus is to be our example, that's not a road we want to take. We want a God who makes us victorious in *this* world, not on the other side of it. If you find yourself stumbling over the cross because it represents weakness, reflect on the message Jesus sent through it. It is not about the weakness of God, it is about the depth of His love for you.

Paul speaks of a second view of the cross, that of the Gentiles, as "foolishness" – in other words, they mock the message of the cross. We've covered this group in detail already. They are the prideful, the arrogant, the ones who will mock you for your faith. I've been told by unbelievers that "faith is a crutch" – and my response is always the same. "You're right. The difference between you and me is that you have no idea your leg is broken." Remember, God has told us that it was in His wisdom that He allows the wisdom of the world to derail the

prideful unbeliever. If you have faith, your wisdom is greater and your hope is not fleeting. I have known incredibly gifted and intelligent people who reject the truth of God, only to face senility in their waning years. Those stories leave me incredibly sad – for their trust is in a wisdom that will only fade away. They need the better wisdom, the true wisdom that will deliver them from perishing.

Our final group consists of “those called.” For them, Christ is the “power of God” and the “wisdom of God.” They, and hopefully you, cling to a truth that has no agenda other than God’s covenantal promise. It is a truth we can surely lean on in these turbulent times, when deception seems endless and the wisdom of the world is devoid of cohesion and stability. And our last verse today shows us why we can lean on the truth, the wisdom of the cross.

*Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. 1 Cor. 1:25*

The message of the cross, to the unbeliever, describes God in His most foolish and weakest state. Yet even if we grant that view, we know from Paul’s letter that the greatest wisdom of the world still can’t even approach the wisdom of the cross. Take heart and believe the message of the cross, it is the message God gave you so that He might deliver you.

### **Conclusion**

Remember that trial motion I told you about earlier. You won’t be surprised to learn that we lost. The judge ruled against us because he knew what the controlling legal authority was in the case. And he knew it wasn’t found in a dissenting opinion. There is a far greater Judge sitting on the throne of the universe, and He too has issued an opinion. His ruling is simply this: *I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me.* That is the wisdom of the cross.

There are plenty of dissenting opinions, of course. But *none* hold any weight. None are controlling. And none will withstand the test of time. My question to you is this: Have you accepted the majority opinion; the ruling of the Judge of the universe. Or are you clinging to empty philosophies built on specious and fleeting ideas of truth. Are you grasping the wisdom of the cross; that Jesus Christ dies and rose again to make a way for you be with Him in eternity? Or are you grasping at air, looking for any other way than that which looks foolish to

you? There is no other way. So let today be the day you let go of the pride and lay hold of the cross.

And for those who know the wisdom of the cross, it's time to make that message known. If you get nothing else out of this message, please get this: Do not fear being called foolish for sharing your faith. Rather, expect it. Do not hide the truth for sake of avoiding ridicule – for the very ridicule you receive is evidence that you preach the all powerful wisdom of God. Now perhaps more than ever, a great many need that wisdom and the hope that comes with it. Jesus said “you are the light of the world”, and the world is indeed a very dark place at the moment. Testify to the truth. Let your life reflect the message of the cross. Let the world laugh at you, mock you, ostracize you. So be it, for every slight that you endure is evidence that you not only comprehend, but live out the wisdom of the cross.