

“The Foolishness of God”
1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5
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Text Comment

With v. 18 we begin the *probatio*, the “proofs” which will make up the body of the letter and take us to the middle of the last chapter. Now these “proofs” are not, as the word might suggest, demonstrations that something is true or false. Rather they are the arguments designed to persuade the reader to take the course of action that Paul has recommended in v. 10. But, in order for him to persuade the Corinthian Christians of the rightness of his counsel, he must first disabuse them of some of the opinions they have.

Now, in v. 17 Paul has already introduced the contrast between the gospel and human wisdom. He is now going to expand on that contrast.

- v.18 Paul summarizes his entire message and the gospel itself as “the word of the cross.” There have been any number of attempts made through Christian history, and they are being made as well today, to refashion Christianity into a message that does not focus on the cruel death of the Redeemer, but for Paul, for the Bible, for the NT, the gospel is message about the cross. That is the first and the central thing. We have a savior who died for us.
- v.19 The word “wisdom,” *sophia*, is used 17 times in 1 Corinthians, 16 of those times in chapters 1-3. Elsewhere in all of Paul’s letters it is used only 11 more times. So obviously this idea of “wisdom” is a matter of special concern in the Corinthians’ situation. *Sophia* in those days referred not only to content, but to form, it referred to philosophy together with rhetorical eloquence. [Witherington, 108] *Sophia* was a passion of the Greeks and a special interest of those who lived in Corinth. Several centuries before this the Greek historian Herodotus wrote that “All [Greeks] are zealous for every kind of *sophia*,” and that was still true in the Corinth of Paul’s day. The Corinthian culture was a culture excessively concerned for reputation; self-promotion was a common and accepted practice; and, in this setting, eloquence, especially eloquence in the service of learning, secured praise and influence like nothing else. These Corinthian Christians had fallen prey to the temptation to want their new-found Christianity to compare well with the Greek philosophy and morality that the eloquent sophists were famous for teaching. “Look,” Paul says to them, “you want the gospel to be, you think the gospel is another form of *sophia*. But look at it. It is nothing like the wisdom of this world. It’s message is of a crucified Messiah. No worldly wisdom would ever have come up with that!” [Fee, NICNT, 67]

So Paul begins with this citation from Isaiah reminding them that the world’s wisdom, far from being the pattern that Christians are to emulate, still less something that Christians can embrace for themselves, stands, in fact, under the judgment of God. In fact, God said that he would destroy human wisdom.

- v.20 “Scholar” is literally “scribe” and thus a reference to a Jewish rabbi or teacher of the law. Both Jews and Gentiles are to be the focus of his remarks in the following verses.
- v.21 The world’s wisdom and God’s wisdom are two orders in opposition to one another. They cannot be reconciled. The wisdom of the world *keeps people from God*, it does not bring them *to God*.
- v.23 “stumbling block” is the word “scandal” which here means not something that makes a person stumble, but something that is deeply offensive. The Jews sought miraculous signs because that is what they expected of the Messiah who would come to deliver them. He would, they believed, repeat the triumph of the exodus on a still greater scale. Remember in the Gospels how often they asked Jesus to show them a sign. The Greeks wanted reason and *sophia*. Theirs was a great civilization that had astounded the world with its progress. It was their very advances that had caused many to abandon belief in the traditional gods and pursue philosophy and reason instead. How like our own day.
- Instead of signs and *sophia* God gave them a crucified Savior, instead of grandeur he gave them weakness and humiliation. For the Jew a crucified Messiah was an oxymoron, like married bachelor. To the Greek it wasn’t so much irreverent as it was ridiculous.
- v.25 Well, then, why didn’t God just give them signs and a wisdom that would have impressed the world instead of this silly superstition of the cross. The reason is that it is in this weakness and foolishness that salvation comes. Here in this foolishness we find the true wisdom and in this weakness the true power.
- v.26 There is another way in which the gospel defies expectations. Not only is its message totally contrary to what the world expects of a religion worth its attention, it makes its progress not among the beautiful people, the great people of the world, but among the nobodies. [Fee, 78] He reminds them to look at themselves and at what they were when God summoned them by his mighty power to believe in Jesus. They weren’t folk with clout, far from it. There were, to be sure, some folk of wealth and influence among them – note Paul’s “not many” – but only some.

Listen to the scorn that Celsus, the 3rd century pagan critic of Christianity, pours on the new faith for this very reason:

“Their injunctions are like this: ‘Let no one educated, no one wise, no one sensible, draw near. For these abilities are thought by us to be evils. But as for anyone ignorant, anyone stupid, anyone uneducated, anyone who is a child, let him come boldly.’ By the fact that they themselves admit that these people are worthy of their God, they show that they want and are able to convince only the foolish, dishonourable and stupid, and only slaves, women, and children.” [Cited in Fee, 81]

If you remember, a *Washington Post* reporter got in trouble a while back for saying virtually the same thing on the front page of the newspaper. By choosing such people

God shamed the world and demonstrated that he would bring it and its wisdom to nothing.

- v.29 And what was the purpose of God's choosing the lowly of this world? To destroy every human pretence of our merit before God, every human idea that we have something that will make God sit up and take notice of us; to destroy our pride.
- v.31 Everything you have now and all that will someday be yours is God's gift to you in Christ. He has given you wisdom to be sure, but it isn't the *sophia* that impresses people in Corinth, it is instead the righteousness, holiness, and redemption that is what people *really* need.
- 2:1 There is a third way in which the gospel is nothing like the worldly *sophia* or wisdom of Corinth and Greco-Roman society. Not only is its message utterly unlike anything worldly wisdom would ever devise; not only are its recipients unimpressive, hardly the sort of people to enhance the reputation of the message, but, now Paul says, "Remember my preaching among you! Remember my weakness as an orator. Hardly the way worldly wisdom would gain the respect of Corinthian society."

A more likely translation of v. 1 is "excellence of word or wisdom", that is, Paul is saying that he did not speak in such a way as to distinguish himself. He was no Pericles. He was no Abraham Lincoln or Winston Churchill. As James Denney once remarked, "No man can give at once the impression that he himself is clever and that Jesus Christ is mighty to save." [cited in J.S. Stewart, *Heralds of God*, 74]

- v.2 In other words, Paul did not rely on the eloquence of which the Corinthians were so enamored, but on the truth and power of the message itself.
- v.3 In Acts 18:9-11 we read that the Lord had to encourage Paul to keep him in Corinth so stiff was the opposition.
- v.5 What matters is not eloquence but the working of the Holy Spirit, and Paul's ministry among them and their changed lives were the demonstration of that.

For generations now it has been difficult for Christians to enter into the world of first century Christianity. Christianity has exercised immense influence in Western Civilization, has been for many centuries the received religion of that civilization, and, it has been understood, even by its fiercest detractors, that it must be spoken of with respect. Even as late as a few years ago, when the *Washington Post* reporter wrote in a front page article that evangelical Christians were, as a class an uneducated and unsophisticated lot and easily led into ridiculous opinions, he was immediately taken to the woodshed and made to issue a public apology.

But we are beginning to understand what it must have been like for Christians in the first century, for more and more the genuine hostility and contempt for Christianity felt by many, especially among the cultured elite, is being openly expressed. Whether it is Richard Dawkins or Richard Rorty on the academic side or Ted Turner for the media or Alec Baldwin for

Hollywood, open animus toward biblical Christianity has now entered the mainstream of our culture.

But still we face nothing like what believers faced in those early days. The message of the cross *was* genuine foolishness in the view of a great many especially among the cultured elite.

The Jews, of course, were incensed by the claim of the Christians that the Messiah had come but that he had come to be crucified. They had an expectation of the coming of the Messiah, but crucifixion, weakness, suffering for sin, had no place in their expectation. The Messiah's coming would be in glory not humiliation. What is more, Deut. 21:23 taught that it was a sign of God's curse for a man to hang on a tree. The Christian doctrine of Jesus Christ was such a complete repudiation of Jewish thinking about the Messiah that it is no wonder they found it profoundly offensive.

And the same was true for the Gentiles for different reasons. The notion that the meaning of the world should be found in a Jewish rabbi who was crucified outside Jerusalem was, in their view, more than faintly ridiculous. Christian faith and experience has over the many generations since then cast such a halo around the cross that we have a very difficult time appreciating what a cross symbolized for the first century world. We make crosses of gold and hang them around our necks; our churches are decorated with them; we sing of the blessed cross and glorious cross and pray that the Lord would keep us near the cross or beneath the cross. But folk in that time would have thought such expressions madness.

In fact they spoke of Christian belief in Jesus Christ, who had been crucified as a state criminal, as a "sick delusion" (*figmenta male sanae opinionis*) and a "senseless and crazy superstition" (*vana et demens superstitio*). And chief among the monstrosities of this new faith was that the Christians worship one who had been crucified. [Hengel, *Crucifixion*, 3] No criminal deserves to be worshipped, they thought, and certainly no criminal deserves to be thought a god!

In a fascinating and important study of crucifixion in the ancient world, the German scholar, Martin Hengel, points out that references to crucifixion were few and far between in the literary remains of that culture. The sophisticated were ashamed of crucifixion and, having witnessed it, they had a deep aversion to it. He goes on,

"...for the men of the ancient world, Greeks, Romans, barbarians, and Jews, the cross was not just a matter of indifference, just any kind of death. It was an utterly offensive affair, 'obscene' in the original sense of the word." [22]

There is a graffito that has been discovered by archaeologists who excavated the quarters of the imperial pages on the Palatine Hill in Rome. It dates from the 3rd century, the 200s. It is drawn in a youthful hand and depicts a boy, standing in the attitude of worship, with one hand upraised. The object of his devotion is a figure on a cross. The figure has the body of a man and the head of a donkey. Underneath the picture are scrawled the words: "Alexamenos worships his God." One of the pages there was a Christian and his fellows were mocking his beliefs. And chief among those beliefs that made the boy's faith so silly to them was this notion that he should worship someone who died on a cross. [Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, 174-175]. By

the way, nearby is another inscription, in another hand, which reads, “Alexamenos is faithful.” Perhaps it was the Christian boy’s own response to the cruel mockery, or perhaps it was that of one of his classmates who was beginning to see what a difference the cross of Christ really made.

Now, as Paul suggests here, there is a common thread to these Jewish and Gentile rejections of the Christian message. In neither case did these people genuinely reckon with the threat of God’s wrath against them for their sins.

As Paul says in v. 18, “For the message of the cross is foolishness *to those who are perishing...*” They are perishing precisely because they do not know themselves to be perishing and have, therefore, no conception of their being in desperate need of redemption. As Paul says of himself in Romans 7, Christ never made any sense to him until he first realized himself a sinner, in bondage to sin, and in desperate need of redemption. Christ is for those, Paul says, again in v. 18, “*who are being saved.*” But these people did not think in terms of being saved; they didn’t think they needed to be saved. We must never lose sight of this fact. The reason Richard Dawkins is so enamored of evolution and Richard Rorty of relativism, the reason so many in our elite culture despise Christianity for its moral absolutism, whether its condemnation of sex outside of marriage or of homosexual sex or abortion or euthanasia, is because they do not think that they are perishing and they have no sense whatsoever that they need to be saved!

The Greeks’ religion was different from that of the Jews, of course. It had little concern with the world to come. It had rather to do with ways of acquiring prosperity and blessing in this life. There is little reflection on eternal life or life after death or resurrection. It is very interesting, for example, to read through the numerous personal questions asked of the oracle at Delphi:

How may I become a parent?
 Shall I succeed?
 Where shall I go or settle?

All the questions are about affairs in this life and about how things will turn out in the here and now. The questions are prompted by sickness, death, plague, famine, war, career opportunities, desire for marriage, infertility, and the like. It was an entirely this-world perspective. For such people, salvation had to do with health and prosperity now, not peace with God and fellowship with God in the world to come. It is, of course, very much the same today, as you know. And the result is the same: they have no need for a Redeemer to die for their sins. They don’t need forgiveness, they need a wife or a husband or a child; they need a new job or a better car; they need a bigger house, they need a lighter heart, they need, as Dr. Schaeffer used to say, “personal peace and affluence.”

If Jesus Christ did not come to give them that, what good is he? And if he cannot even give me what I need, why in the world should I take seriously some long ago Jewish rabbi whom the Romans summarily dispatched in the most ignominious way. It’s absurd. Is this not the problem today. There is no sense in the hearts of most people that they have any need of what the Christians say Jesus Christ alone can supply. This is one of the reasons why even so many churches today are moving away from the message of the cross – the forgiveness of sins and the hope of everlasting life through the death of Jesus Christ on our behalf – to other emphases.

Christ can heal your marriage they say, or give you satisfaction in your job or even help you make more money. Now, Jesus Christ *can* do all of those things, to be sure; though he does not always do them by any means; but when he does them, he does them by changing our lives *by the message of the cross*.

These folk in Corinth had experienced the transformation of their lives. They had changed in many happy ways. But they had changed because they had embraced the message of the cross, received the forgiveness of their sins, the power to repent of those sins and live a new life, and the hope of eternal life in the world to come. Paul came to Corinth with no other message than the message of the cross – our sin, God’s wrath, Christ’s substitution of himself for us and bearing our punishment – he came with that message *in defiance of the fact that it was ridiculous to the Greeks*, because it was the truth they had to hear and the only message that could save them from perishing. The fact that they did not know they were perishing didn’t stop Paul. He preached their sin and God’s wrath and Christ’s redemption and the Holy Spirit worked that truth into their hearts and transformed their lives by it.

The Jews, on the other hand, thought about the life to come and how to get there; but they did not think in terms of “salvation,” of their being deserving of God’s wrath, of their being unable to escape it by themselves, and of their being rescued by a loving and powerful Redeemer who had to take their place and die for their sins. They thought of heaven as something they must earn in the prosaic ways of ceremonial and moral obedience. But many among them also fell under the spell of the Holy Spirit and suddenly saw what they had always refused to see before: their own terrible sin and guilt; the exquisite holiness of God; and Christ being made sin for them that they might become the righteousness of God in him.

It is only when our sin and God’s wrath is revealed to the conscience that suddenly the cross makes perfect sense and Christ is seen for what he and he alone can give us: viz. righteousness, holiness, and redemption. The message, of course, fell on deaf ears in Corinth many more times than it was embraced. But God had many people in that city and the Holy Spirit opened the eyes and ears of them all and what they would never have believed before suddenly became to them utterly self-evident and surpassingly wonderful truth. Truth with a capital “T.”

So we have completed the circle. Paul reminds these Christians that worldly wisdom has nothing to do with the gospel. Worldly wisdom, such as it was prized and sought in Corinth, has self-sufficiency and self-congratulation and self-love shot through it. It vaunts itself as the answer to man’s need. That is, of course, genuinely ridiculous, for we have been living with *that* wisdom now for thousands of years and have just as much need as we ever had before. There was no “Gospel”, no Good News in Judaism or Greek philosophy. There was advice – advice that didn’t amount to much as it turned out – but no wonderful news of God’s love and our rescuer from sin and death.

True wisdom is much more honest, painfully honest than the wisdom of the world. It forces us to recognize that our problem is not our circumstances, it is not other people; our problem is ourselves. We are sinners, selfish, disobedient, and unkind; we do not, by nature, live in a way that pleases God. Our creator’s great purposes in us we do not fulfill. We are utterly careless of God and his interests, his law and his commandments, his holiness and purity. And all of that sin

must pay a wage. It provokes the holy wrath of God, his justice. That may not be what people think about their lives, it is certainly not what people *want* to think about their lives, but it is, in fact, the truth about their lives.

There is a dilemma of epic proportion. What can be done? How can I face God with my sinful life? And, then, comes the wonderful good news, the word of the cross. *You* can do nothing, but *Christ* has done everything. On the cross, he bore in your place the punishment of your sins. Believe in him and you will be saved! Saved in this life and saved to live and love and rejoice forever! That was the message Paul brought to Corinth. Salvation for sinners through God's love and Christ's sacrifice. That is the message of the cross that has been proclaimed throughout the world ever since. It remains foolishness to most human beings even today. But to those whose minds the Holy Spirit illuminates it is the most clear and compelling, the most self-evident and self-authenticating, the most heart-warming and soul-stirring truth in all the world.

The message of the cross is that mankind is perishing in sin and that Christ and Christ alone can deliver men and women, boys and girls, from guilt and sin and give them eternal peace with God. It may not be hip. It may not satisfy the tastes of the sophisticated. It may not appear to vast numbers of people to be a message of any immediate relevance to them. They may well prefer to think about many other things.

But the difference, Paul says, lies here. The view of things that the worldly wise have is false. However compelling their philosophy of life may be to them, it is false. It is not reality. The message of the cross is true! There is the great difference. Let us face facts. This message of the cross has never been generally popular. It cuts across the grain of human pride. It offers a different salvation than human beings expect or desire. That has always been true and is true today.

But there is no need for us to sell out, no need to give up the cross for another, more popular message. Honesty and faithfulness compel us to go on with this same gospel. It is the only message that will do people real and lasting good. And, we know the Lord still has many people to call to his salvation and is calling them, and his wisdom, when wielded by the power of the Holy Spirit, confounds, shames, and exposes as a lie the wisdom of the world and does so very easily in a human heart. Fact is, the message of the cross was an impossible message in first century Corinth, *impossible!* But multitudes of people believed it and were transformed by it and are in heaven today because of it!