

The Power of the Cross

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

Introduction: The wonderful pastor and Bible teacher James Boice well said, “The cross stands as the focal point of the Christian faith. Without the cross the Bible is an enigma, and the Gospel of salvation is an empty hope” (*Philippians*, 1971, 144).

John Piper in *Don't Waste Your Life* adds to Boice's thoughts and prepares us for our study of 1 Cor 1:18-25. He writes,

“Life is wasted if we do not grasp the glory of the cross, cherish it for the treasure that it is, and cleave to it as the highest price of every pleasure and the deepest comfort in every pain. What was once foolishness to us---a crucified God---must become our wisdom and our power and our only boast in this world.”
(---John Piper, *Don't Waste Your Life*, 46, 2018 ed).

Christianity is a Jesus Christ religion. It is a cross religion. Without the cross of Christ, there is no Christianity. And, without a biblical understanding of the cross, there is no authentic Christianity. Salvation for fallen, lost, spiritually dead humanity comes only through a crucified and risen Savior. It is the one way and the only way to God. Billy Graham says, “God proves His love on the cross. When Christ hung, and bled, and died, it was God saying to the world, “I love you.” Paul in 1:18-25 would add, “God also proved His power on the cross. It and it alone can give us spiritual and eternal life.”

Paul will make three important theological observations about the cross of Christ in these verses. They are essential to a right understanding as to what Jesus did when He died on a Roman cross in c.A.D. 33. They deserve our most careful meditation and reflection.

I. The word of the cross separates the lost and saved 1:18

Verses 18ff naturally follow 1:10-17 as the word “for” clearly indicates. Human wisdom exalts the cult of personality. Human wisdom empties the cross of Christ of its power. And, both human wisdom and human power are completely and totally at odds with God’s plan of salvation. John Polhill is helpful here when he writes:

“Paul considered the Corinthian espousal of their favorite teachers as the pursuit of human wisdom. He dealt with the problem in 1:18-3:23. First, he argued the incompatibility of divine and human wisdom. By human standards God’s wisdom is foolishness (1:18-2:5). The cross is the ultimate demonstration of this (1:18-25). By all standards of human wisdom, the cross is foolishness---folly to the Greek way of wisdom as well as to the Jewish way of divine manifestation by sign. But God’s way of salvation is through the cross. The cross is thus the negation of all human attempts to know God. One can only know God by first being known by God and called by God in the wisdom and power of Christ and his atoning death (v.24).” (*Paul & His Letters*, 237).

The cross is the great divide. It forces all of humanity into one of two opposing camps. Paul will explain this throughout this paragraph, but he sets the table here in v. 18.

1) It is foolishness to the lost

Paul tells us that “the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing.” The phrase “the word of the cross” is synonymous with “preaching the gospel” (v.17). There is no gospel without the cross and there is no gospel without the resurrection (15:1-20). Death by crucifixion was especially despised and loathed in the ancient world. The Roman orator Cicero wrote, “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” (*Pro Rabirio Perduellionis Reo* 5.16). The very idea that this heinous act could bring humanity to God is unimaginable to the wisdom of this world. And yet that is exactly what God had planned and did in Christ. This message was received as “foolishness” (Gr. *moria*) by the spiritually lost, those described as in the process of “perishing.” Schreiner points out this “is a common word in Paul for eschatological [end time and final] destruction (e.g. Rom. 2:12; 1 Cor. 15:18; 2 Cor. 2:15; 4:3; 2 Thess. 2:10)” [*1 Cor.*, TNTC, 67). The cross is foolishness to the perishing. They cannot believe this is the way of salvation.

2) It is the power of God to the saved

Paul draws a stark contrast between those who are perishing and those “of us who are being saved.” For the saved, the message of the cross is not foolishness, it is the power of God for our salvation (cf. Rom 1:16; also Rom. 5:9; 1 Cor. 5:5; 2 Cor. 2:15; 1 Thess. 2:16). The cross of Christ is the power of God that saves us in 3 tenses! It:

- a) delivered us in the past from the penalty of sin (justification)
- b) delivers us in the present from the power of sin (sanctification)
- c) It will deliver us in the future from the presence of sin (glorification)

The cross of Christ, again, is the great divide. It is easy to see a number of contrasts that clearly appear when we meditate on what the cross means to the saved in comparison to the lost.

The cross

The saved

Power

Wisdom

Eternal Deliverance

Power and Wisdom

Wisdom of God Which Saves

Heaven

Righteousness

Sanctification

Redemption

Boast in the Lord

The perishing (lost)

Weakness

Foolishness

Eternal Destruction

Stumbling Block and Foolishness

Wisdom of the World Which Condemns

Hell

Unrighteousness

Uncleanness

Slavery

Boast in Ourselves

C.S. Lewis said so well, “It cost God nothing, so far as we know, to create nice things; but to convert rebellious wills cost Him the crucifixion [of His Son].” The cross of Christ is the great separation of all humanity. It is the great divide for every single person in the world.

“Nothing can for sin atone, nothing but the blood of Jesus;
Naught of good that I have done, nothing but the blood of Jesus.”

II. The wisdom of the cross shows the foolishness of worldly wisdom 1:19-21

I have a Ph.D. in Humanities. My primary fields of study were history and philosophy. In my studies all of my professors were brilliant in their areas of expertise. Most of them also were atheists or agnostics. Today I have the joy of working daily with evangelical, Bible believing Ph.D’s. And yet, I continue to be haunted by the warning of 1 Corinthians 8:1, “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.” Now, we need biblical balance in this area. The Bible is not down on knowledge or wisdom. The question is, “Is it the right knowledge and wisdom?” In Matthew 22:37, quoting Deut. 6:5, Jesus commands us to “love the Lord your God with all your mind.” James 3:17 teaches us there is a “wisdom from above that is first pure, then peace-loving, gentle, compliant, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without pretense.” However James also warns us of worldly wisdom that is characterized by “bitter envy and selfish ambition in your heart...Such wisdom does not come down from above but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic (Jam 3:14-15).

There is a perpetual danger of being seduced by the wisdom of this world. It is, after all, attractive to our intellectual pride and arrogance. It seduces us into boasting about ourselves and not Christ; boasting in the pride of our intellects and not the wisdom found in the cross. Here in verses 19-21 Paul shows the absolute folly and foolishness of trusting in any wisdom other than the wisdom of God revealed in Christ and His Word.

1) It reveals the impotency of prideful people 1:19-20

God tells us in Isaiah 55:8-9, “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, and your ways are not my ways... For as heaven is higher than earth, so my ways are higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.” Paul affirms this truth by quoting Isaiah 29:14 where so-called prophets completely missed what God was doing (Jesus alludes to this same passage in Matt 15:8-9). Verse 19 quotes Isaiah 29:14 and reads, “For it is written, **I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and I will set aside the intelligence of the intelligent.**” Curtis Vaughn’s comments are spot on when he writes, “[Paul] indicates that worldly cleverness fails in dealing with the things of God. Isaiah sees the failure of worldly statesmanship in Judah in the face of the judgement of the Assyrian invasion. Paul takes this principle and applies it to the failure of worldly wisdom in the face of the cross” (*1 Cor*; BSC, 29). Paul drives home God’s rejection of human wisdom with three stinging and sarcastic questions with clear cut answers in verse 20: 1) “Where is the one who is wise?” He is not

here! 2) “Where is the teacher of the law,” the Jewish scholar? He is not qualified to speak either! 3) “Where is the debater of this age,” the man gifted in philosophy and rhetoric? He is nowhere to be found! None of these gifted humans has a thing to contribute to what God has done in the cross of Christ. God has taken all human brilliance and shown its utter bankruptcy and foolishness. God has “made the world’s wisdom foolish.” Fee sums it up perfectly:

“The cross is foolishness to the perishing (v.18), but by means of it God has himself thereby rendered as foolish the world’s wisdom; wisdom that belongs merely to the sphere of human self-sufficiency. God has not simply made such wisdom *appear* foolish; by means of the cross God has actually turned the tables on such wisdom altogether, so that it has been made into its very opposite --- foolishness.”
(The Epistle to the Corinthians, rev. ed., NICNT, 75).

Humans think they can reason their way to God, but God says “No!” All who come to me for salvation, must come by the way of the cross! No matter how smart you think you are, God says you are a fool without Christ and His cross.

2) It reveals the inadequacy of prideful ideas 1:21

Prideful humans and their prideful ideas cannot really be separated. They are a package deal. Paul tells us God has made foolish both the persons and their ideas by His wisdom in the preaching of the cross. And, this was God’s plan all along. Paul points out “in God’s wisdom,” His sovereign plan, “the world” (the whole of the human race), “did not know God through wisdom.” Human reasoning and brilliance could never come to a saving knowledge and relationship with God. As

Paul succinctly puts it in Romans 1:22, “Claiming to be wise, they become fools.” The reason this is so is self-evident. We need salvation not information. We need a Savior not an educator. With both irony and a bit of sarcasm, Paul declares, “God was pleased to save those who believe through the foolishness of what is preached.” Gordon Fee’s comments and insights on Paul’s argument again are extremely helpful:

“A God discovered by human wisdom will be both a projection of human fallenness and a source of human pride, and this constitutes the worship of the creature, not the Creator. The gods of the “wise” are seldom gracious to the undeserving, and they tend to make considerable demands on the ability of people to understand them; hence they become gods only for the elite and “deserving.” It should be noted that Paul is here acknowledging that there is another *Sophia*, God’s wisdom, which he is about to explicate (see v. 24); but that wisdom turns out to be the exact opposite of human wisdom.” (p. 76).

And opposite it is! Man does not save himself, God does! Humans are not saved by what they know (a philosophy) but who they believe in (a person brutally executed on a cross for the forgiveness of sins). The message of a crucified Savior strips prideful humans of all their genius and intellectual achievements. It drives us to our knees at the foot of a horrible instrument of execution and says here and only here may I be forgiven, here and only here may I find God!

“I must needs go home by the way of the cross.
There’s no other way but this. I shall ne’er get sight
of the gates of light, if the way of the cross I miss.

The way of the cross leads home. The way of the cross leads home. It is sweet to know as I onward go, the way of the cross leads home”

Foolishness to the world. Salvation for me. Oh how I love the old rugged cross.

III. The witness of the cross is a hinderance to some but the power of God to others 1:22-25

The final verses of 1:18-25 reinforce and summarize the argument Paul is making. Wisdom, a word that dominates the paragraph, is again the dominate theme. Paul has divided the world into two categories in verse 18: those who are perishing and those who are being saved. He will address both groups in greater detail in verses 22-25, revealing some additional subdivisions that provide historical and theological insight.

1) Some reject and ridicule the cross 1:22-23

Those who are perishing and headed for eternal damnation are subdivided into Jews and Greeks (or Gentiles). Their division is based on their particular rejection of the message of the cross. Why do they reject the message? For Jews, it is because they ask for signs, the miraculous. Nothing could be more antithetical to their request than a bloody, criminal on a cross. And, the idea of a crucified Messiah hanging on a tree is absolutely and completely repugnant and inconceivable. Deuteronomy 21:23 teaches

“anyone hung on a tree is under God’s curse” (but see Gal 3:10-14). A crucified Jew on a Roman cross is about as far away from the miraculous as you can get. Sadly, the Jews did not interpret correctly texts like Psalm 22 and Isaiah 53. They did not heed the words of Jesus in Matt 12:38-42; 16:1-4; John 2:18-22; 6:30ff.

In contrast to the Jews, “the Greeks seek wisdom.” Knowledge was their pride, their idol. Heirs to Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, sophists (traveling teachers of wisdom), popular rhetoricians and debaters, were the celebrities of the day. How could a stupid Jew who got himself crucified as a criminal compare to those intellectual titans? What a joke. To such persons, the preaching of Christ crucified just did not cut it. The cross was 1) a “stumbling block (*Gr. skandalon*), an offense to the Jews” and 2) “foolishness (*morian*) to the Gentiles” (*ethne*). It was madness, insane, utterly unimaginable. Plain and simple, it was a message to be rejected and ridiculed for its lack of power and its foolishness. It is hard to imagine anyone would be foolish enough to stand up and proclaim such a gospel.

2) Some receive and rejoice in the cross 1:24-25

The perishing (spiritually lost) stumble over the cross of Christ and find it foolish. It does not fit into their human ideas and how one encounters the divine. “Yet, to those who are called [divine initiative, cf. 1:2,9], both

Jews and Greeks, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God.” This is a divine work as God effectually calls sinners to Himself by His power and wisdom. This is an indiscriminate work as God calls both Jews and Greeks (Gentiles). God’s saving power is alive and active in the saved. God’s wisdom, not man’s, is alive and active in all whom He called. Leon Morris says it well, “The power of the cross opens the way for the humblest to know God and overcome evil, and that is a wisdom superior by far to anything the philosophers could produce. On the level of the search for wisdom the foolishness of God proved to be true wisdom” (*1 Cor.*, TNTC, 46).

Paul concludes his argument noting just what a paradox, an enigma, the gospel of a crucified Savior is. He uses two phrases we would not expect: “God’s foolishness” and “God’s weakness.” Of course we know that God is neither foolish or weak. But the cross looks both foolish and weak. Yes, but only to foolish and weak humans. In actuality, it is power and wisdom for salvation. It is how God both saved us and put sinful humanity in its place. By the cross God outsmarted the wise and overpowered the strong. God’s foolish thing and God’s weak thing is wiser and more powerful than anything mere mortals can come up with. Truly, the cross is

what all who are being saved rejoice and boast in (1:31). We need nothing else. We want nothing more. It is all we need today and forever.

Conclusion: It is one of the most beloved and popular Christian songs in our day. Singing it never grows old. It is written by dear friends Keith and Kristyn Getty. The song is titled “The Power of the Cross.” In part, it says:

“This the power of the cross,
Christ became sin for us.
Took the blame, bore the wrath;
We stand forgiven at the cross.”

The gifted Bible teacher Matthew Henry would add:

“Come, and see the victories of the cross. Christ’s wounds are thy healings, His agonies thy repose, His conflicts thy conquests, His groans thy songs, His pains thine ease, His shame thy glory, His death thy life, His sufferings thy salvation.” (*The Communicant’s Companion*, 1828, p. 136).

This is the beauty, the glory, the power, of the cross! Hallelujah! What a Savior!!!