

THE FOOLISHNESS OF GOD

SERIES: MOVING ON TO MATURITY



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1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5
2nd Message
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There we were on December 19th, a bunch of guys with plenty of food and a big TV, sitting in Tom Means' man cave waiting for the Steelers/49ers game to start. Suddenly Chris Berman appeared on screen looking grave. The telecast then showed a picture of a sparking transformer and a darkened stadium. It was Monday night football championship caliber teams, HD images broadcast from the Bay Area, the world's center of high technology. With millions of viewers looking on, the supply of electricity to Candlestick Park failed and a short time later it failed again. Those events serve as an introduction to the text considered here: a discussion of power and its limits.

We ended the previous study with 1 Corinthians 1:17 in which Paul makes a reference to the power of the cross: "For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with wisdom and eloquence, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power." Real power, enduring power resides in the message of the cross. This message will begin where we left off and conclude with another reference to divine power, 2:3-5 "I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power."

What is the relationship between human weakness and divine power?

Review and Preview

Reviewing briefly, the church in Corinth was both passionate and immature; a congregation with great gifts and self-centered divisions.

Challenging this selfishness, the apostle will raise three considerations: 1. A foolish message; 2. Unimpressive converts (the Corinthians themselves didn't amount to much); and finally, 3. Himself as a weak and fearful messenger. All of these make clear that real power comes from God alone.

1 Corinthians 1:18-19:

¹⁸For the message of the cross is foolishness to

those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹For it is written:

"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate."

God's determination to frustrate the intelligent is not similar to a fundamentalist's fear of new ideas. Rather, his determination to 'frustrate the intelligence of the intelligent' comes from the human inability to disconnect capability from prominence, accomplishment from applause. Men and women who have exalted insights insist on personal exaltation for themselves. If I'm smart, I deserve to be admired. It is inevitable that we connect these things. Therefore, in the end, the pride of 'the wise' will supplant the glory due to God and he will have none of it.

1 Corinthians 1:20-25:

²⁰Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. ²²Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, ²³but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.

Here is a contrast. On one hand there are those who are perishing—those under a death sentence. Their brand of wisdom is only temporary, related to a particular point in history ('this age'). Their voices include man-made Jewish religion and Greek philosophy.

On the other hand, Paul says, there are some who are being saved (not perishing) who are called by God, who preach the cross. The crisis at the center of this argument is

that only some came to know God (v. 21). For Paul, that's the central question. It's not, "Are you Greek or Jew?" It's not, "Are you educated?" And it's not, "Are you admired?" The crucial question is, "Did you come to know God or did you not?" And, for his own purposes, God has determined to make himself known only to 'those who believe.' The ones who are perishing are perishing because they don't know God. The ones who are being saved are being saved because they do, and they know him through believing the message of the cross of Jesus Christ.

We should remember the context of this argument. Paul is not lecturing the world for being worldly. He's not primarily concerned that unbelievers are dazzled by loud proclamations, glitzy performances or humanly conferred status. He isn't commenting on how armies choose their officers, or how markets favor one technology over another. He has no opinion on who should be given tenure in a university, or who should win an election in New Hampshire. It is, however, a grave matter of concern when 'the wisdom of the world' holds sway in the church.

There will always be a new voice ('philosopher of this age') with a popular style or promise of success which will claim to speak for God, a new voice with a message that is not centered on Jesus' sacrifice, a new voice that is perishing. The message of Jesus' willing sacrifice, spoken by a servant of God who takes the lower place, is foolishness in the world—but it should be honored in the church. The foolishness of God is wiser than man. The weakness of God is stronger than men.

1 Corinthians 1:26-31:

²⁶Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. ²⁷But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. ²⁸He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, ²⁹so that no one may boast before him. ³⁰It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. ³¹Therefore, as it is written: "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord."

We have observed in earlier verses that there were divisions in Corinth, factions that attempted to stake out the high ground of superiority and place others beneath them. The

irony in this behavior is that the Corinthian church was primarily a collection of nobodies (v. 26).

The TV show, American Idol, unveils a startling reality. Scores of thousands of our fellow citizens think they are professional quality singers. "Mother has paid for my voice lessons since I was three and she thinks I'm special." The level of self-delusion is quite remarkable. And the claim to theological superiority on the part of the Corinthians is similar. Brand new Christians saved in obscurity, are dismissing the apostle for his inadequate teaching. Selfish posturing in church—'my group is better than yours'—is always wrong. God chooses the weak and the outcast to silence all boasting. "Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord."

Finally in chapter two, Paul speaks not of the foolish message or the lowly recipients of the message, but of himself as the messenger:

1 Corinthians 2:1-5:

¹When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. ²For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. ³I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. ⁴My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, ⁵so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.

The book of Acts tells some of this history. Paul traveled to Corinth having previously been in Athens. He was at a very low ebb—broke, alone, discouraged. His ministry companions had stayed behind in Macedonia and Paul was by himself when he challenged Athens' idolatrous culture, preaching with both courage and wisdom. The result, however, was public rejection, ridicule, and only a relative handful of converts. With the derision of Athenian elites in his ears he walked for fifty miles, shoulders stooped. I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling.

Why does Paul describe himself in this way? Sometimes preachers will speak of personal difficulties (I know) for selfish reasons. But the apostle is neither angling for sympathy nor apologizing. He is not decrying his unworthy performance in gospel preaching. In fact, his inadequacies served God's purpose.

Paul had long since discovered that his pedigree and

accomplishments in Judaism amounted to nothing. His early effort to articulate Christian faith bore no fruit when he preached the Bible from the storehouse of his own great intellect alone. He was beset by physical ailments that would never be alleviated. Paul learned the hard way that human abilities by themselves were no advantage in serving God. “My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God’s power.”

So what then is the message of the cross? What does it mean to preach Jesus Christ and him crucified? Of course there are depths here we cannot plumb, but I want to say three things as we conclude; three things that will be true when the cross is proclaimed.

First: The events of that Passover weekend in Jerusalem—Jesus death, burial and resurrection—are true history. No modern Christian has seen anyone tortured to death on a wooden cross. We wear gold crosses as jewelry. But all who first read this letter had seen men die by crucifixion. The telling of his death for a broken human race makes Jesus unique among all teachers of morality. The gospel is not a beautiful myth or powerful parable. It is not a story that ‘fans into flame the heroic selflessness that resides in every heart.’ Jesus’ terrible execution, his burial, and his resurrection all are genuine history with unique significance.

Second: Preaching the cross will always confront the hearer and the speaker with sin. Why did Jesus die? Because we deserved to die. Most of us have hidden our failure from view (even from ourselves). But the message of the cross brings guilt and weakness into the light so that we can be healed. Jesus died because we are unable to fix, forgive, or free ourselves.

Third: The message of the cross declares the love of God. Jesus’ life was given up because “God so loved the world.” Jesus died because of love for ‘friends’ who failed him and enemies who hated him. The Savior’s life was freely offered, not taken from him. It was an offering of love.

We are reminded of the false claims of human genius and the inadequacy of man-made power when a spectacle like Monday night football goes dark. Life-giving power that accomplishes eternal transformation is found only in the message of Jesus’ cross. And this message is declared most faithfully by those who do not promote themselves.

“I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God’s power.”