1 Corinthians 1:18-21 Sermon Manuscript

“Weak People Proclaiming A Foolish Message” Part 1

When you go up to the pulpit:

[I was originally going to preach verses 18-31 of 1 Corinthian chapter 1 as one message, but I decided I wouldn’t because I have so much to say about these verses that I wanted to share with you. So we will only go over verses 18-21 today, and hopefully next week we can go the rest of chapter 1 in verses 22 through 31.]

In January of this year, during the 82nd Golden Globes, a Hollywood Awards Ceremony, the host of the awards, a lady named Nikki Glaser mocked God when she pulled up a poll of people who received the most shoutouts in the acceptance speeches, she showed “cast and crew with 11 mentions, moms with 3 mentions, and then when it came to God, she said “God creator of the universe, 0 mentions…” with the crowd of famous actors and actresses laughing and cheering her on. While that is shocking and offensive for Christians to hear, yet we shouldn’t be surprised at this mockery, because the world views us and the message of the gospel as foolish. It should be no surprise that God is mocked today in our godless culture and society. And our faith is not only being mocked today, but it has also been mocked even from ancient times. For example, there is ancient etching or a sketch around 200 AD onto a surface that was discovered called the “Alexamenos Graffitos,” sometimes known as the “blasphemous graffiti,” where it pictures a man, presumably named Alexamenos, worshipping a crucified man with the head of a donkey. Inscribed in the etching it says “*Alexamenos worships his god*,” obviously mocking this Christian man and mocking Christ. The Greeks saw Christians worshipping Christ as equivalent to worshipping a donkey crucified on a cross.

And just as Hollywood mocks the mention of God, just as many back then saw the worshipping of the crucified Messiah by Christians as no better than worshipping a crucified donkey, so the Greek culture of Corinth saw the message of the cross as foolish and weak. And sadly, the values of the church at Corinth were being influenced by the values of the unbelieving culture of Corinth. The value and premium for the Corinthians, like any other Greek pagan city, and like our culture today, is human wisdom and intellect and rationale. The church at Corinth was a church that were compromising with the world. They were losing sight of the love and wisdom of the cross in which they were saved, and they were being infected with the love of the wisdom of man and corrupted with a love for man’s values, esteems, and boastings.

Last week we looked at how the church in Corinth formed factions and splinter groups each claiming the superiority of their own leader, whether it be the apostle Paul, Peter, or Apollos, or even Christ, which on the surface being of the group of “Christ” might not seem bad, but the idea behind “I am of Christ” is the idea that I don’t need the church, I don’t need to follow any interpretation or example of any human leader. I follow Christ how I see fit. I interpret the Word of God how I see fit. Just like how the Greeks prided in and exalted their philosophical leaders like Aristotle, so the Corinthian believers were acting like the world by showing off their leaders. The city of Corinth did not consider the message of the gospel or its messengers as glorious or strong or wise, and neither today does our culture believe that the message we cling to so dearly is wise unto salvation.

But there’s a reason for that, and that reason is what we are going to look at today in God’s Word. God is going to show you why he has chosen what the world considers as “weak and foolish” people to deliver what the world considers as a “weak and foolish” message of salvation. That is, He has chosen a weak and foolish people and message so that no one would boast before Him. Now last week we ended with Paul being glad he did not baptize more than a handful of people in the Corinthian church because that could have led people to have boasted that they were baptized in the name of Paul instead of Christ. And then he says, in verse 17 “*For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to proclaim the gospel, not in wisdom of word, so that the cross of Christ will not be made empty*.” Jesus commissioned Paul to be a proclaimer of His saving gospel, not to be a baptizer of people, without downplaying the importance of baptism either.

And furthermore, Paul was commissioned to not deliver the message in a way that would make men be persuaded to trust in Paul, but in power of the gospel. Because if the way you proclaim the gospel draws more attention to yourself than Christ, then you are making the cross of Christ “empty.” So the way Paul proclaimed the message of salvation was nothing but simple, straightforward truth. His job was to be a herald…heralds during that time were tasked with declaring the exact message of his king to the people. The job of the herald was not to add or subtract, or manipulate or interpret the king’s message to the herald’s liking, but to relay the message he received to the people exactly as he received it. Paul was not an actor, a rhetorician, or a debator, but was a “herald,” and we need to be that way as well; heralds of the gospel. Being faithful to deliver the message of the king exactly as He wants it to be told.

And that leads us into today’s text, starting in verse 18. Look with me at verse 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*.” The gospel in which you and I were saved in, is, to the world…foolishness. It is moronic, utter stupidity and illogical. Why? Because ultimately they are perishing. Because they cannot believe because they are blinded by their own sin and own supposed human wisdom. 2 Corinthians 4:4 says that “*the god of this age has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.”* Until God lifts that veil of blindness from an unbeliever’s eyes, they will never see the wisdom, power, and the love of God shown for sinners at that cross.

Notice Paul says it is the word of the “cross” that is foolishness. He could have said “for the word of the “gospel,” or the word of “salvation, or the word of “grace” is foolishness to those who are perishing, but he doesn’t. He says the word of the “cross” is foolishness. It is the cross, that horrible and brutal form of Roman execution that we Christian boast in and claim is their salvation. Sometimes, I think in our Christian culture we glamorize, or idealize, or romanticize the cross too much to the point where we forget how the cross symbolizes the horror, shame, and pain of the one crucified. Yes, of course we are to love the cross and love what Jesus did on that cross for us, but let us not forget that the cross was a taboo subject to bring up in ancient times. In fact, crucifixion was such a horrific execution that it was hardly mentioned by name. It was a hush hush by word among the people. You would dare not blurt out the word stauros (which is the Greek word for “cross”) because it would offend so many people around you. Greeks were disgusted with the act because of how humanly degrading and shameful of a death it was. Jews of course were abhorred by it because they knew Deuteronomy taught that he who hangs upon a tree is cursed.

So it was bold and risky for Paul to describe the gospel specifically as the word of the “CROSS” because the Greeks found it extremely offensive and nonsensical to say that salvation comes from a condemned man who was crucified as a criminal. But for believers? But to us who are being saved, it is not foolishness, but it is the very power of God unto salvation. In fact, Romans 1:16 says that we are not to be ashamed of the cross, but to be unashamed. Paul writes in Romans 1:16 “*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*.” You would expect it to say that for us who are being saved, the word of the cross is the “wisdom” of God, in contrast to the word of the cross being “foolishness” to those who are perishing, but it doesn’t. It says for us it is the “power” of God, because the cross is not just God’s wisdom on display, it is also the very source of power for the believer to save him from his sins. And when it comes to deliverance and salvation, that is how God has always operated.

That’s why verse 19 says this… “*For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the cleverness of the clever I will set aside*.” That is a quote from Isaiah 29:14 which speaks to the Assyrian siege on Jerusalem where king Hezekiah reigned. The king of Assyria, Sennacherib, sent a huge army to besiege the city, 185,000 soldiers, and Sennacherib probably thought he was wise and clever to overtake so many towns and cities and manipulate the political situation in the surrounding countries. And Israel and Judah’s kings too relied on human wisdom, worldly wisdom, a wisdom that made sense to them, by making alliances with other nations like Egypt to fight off another nation. They failed to trust in the Lord as their defender and relied on human strength to outwit and out muscle their enemies. Yet, God protected His people, even though they did not deserve it, by sending one angel to slay the entire army of 185,000 Assyrian soldiers in one night, forcing them to return home to their home country to never come back. God in His wisdom destroyed the wisdom of the wise and set aside the cleverness of the clever.

Verse 20, Paul goes on “*Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world*?” And like a great street preacher going to the open streets of a city, it’s as if Paul steps up to the podium and asks the crowd, “Can any one of you come up to and tell me how human wisdom has made us any better or any less sinful as a society?” “Can any one of you give me the solution to end and prevent wars, murders, rape, and all crimes imaginable?” “Wise man” referred to the philosophers and great thinkers of the age. During Paul’s there were several Greek philosophical groups, one of the main ones being the Epicureans. The Epicureans believed life was finite, that life was all there is, no afterlife. And so because there is nothing to look forward to after you die, you should avoid as much pain as possible and pursue as much pleasure as possible. Does that not sound like the philosophy that the majority of this world believes in?

Of course a life that is called to deny oneself and to die to one’s own lustful pleasures would be foolish in the eyes of the Epicureans. But if everyone lived for themselves and their own selfish desires, it does no one any good. The “Scribes” referred to the so-called experts of the Law like the Pharisees who interpreted God’s Word according to man’s wisdom and traditions. But how has that turned out for God’s people? How has that helped anyone? All it has done is put more people in bondage under man made traditions. Or what about the “debater of this age?” Those are referring to intellectual debaters who are very good at debating others, but their reliance on their intellect and quickness of speech gets in the way of knowing the truth. I think about people like Ben Shapiro, very intelligent Jewish orthodox man, politically conservative, who is very skilled in debating others, yet I fear that his own intelligence, craftiness, and pride is getting in the way of the simplicity of trusting in Christ for his sins. But again, God designed salvation in this way where you must have your balloon of pride popped by the needle of humility in order for you to be small enough to fit through the narrow door and gate of salvation. That’s why in Matthew 11:25, Jesus praised His heavenly Father for the wisdom in His salvation saying, “*I praise You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and have revealed them to infants*.”

And this is where we will land the plane today, verse 21 “*For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased, through the foolishness of the message preached, to save those who believe*.” Because man is unable to do anything about his sinful condition and because man also chooses not rely on wisdom of God, but chooses to rely on its own wisdom, God ordained to save sinners through what the world would consider foolishness. How could the all-powerful God, who is spirit, and not flesh, who knew no sin take on a corrupted human flesh like us, to associate with us and ultimately die for our sins, even death on a cursed cross? That’s the wonder of the cross. It was “well pleasing” of God. It says in Isaiah 53:10 “*But Yahweh was pleased to crush Him, putting Him to grief”* Why would God lavish us with eternal life when we have done nothing but spit in His face, deserving eternal death? Human wisdom cannot answer that. That is why you need to trust in God’s wisdom and what God’s Word says, because if you do that God promises to reveal Himself to you not as crucified fool, but as the crucified Lord of glory who is able to save your soul from death. So don’t trust in your wisdom, your intellect, your strength, or the wisdom of this world because Proverbs 14:12 says “*there is way that seem right to a man, but in the end it leads to death*.” Trust in the wisdom of God’s Word by faith which can make you wise unto salvation. [pray]