

# “Jesus Christ and Him Crucified”

## The Fourth in a Series of Sermons on Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians

*Texts: 1 Corinthians 2:1-5; Exodus 4:1-17*

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Greeks (like those living in first century Corinth) love wisdom. They see Paul’s gospel of a crucified messiah as nothing but so much foolishness. Those Jews living in Corinth could not understand how God’s Messiah must suffer and die for our sins—when the Messiah was expected to be an all-conquering king who would lead Israel back to its former greatness. Therefore, for Jews, Paul’s gospel of a crucified Messiah as a stumbling block. Yet, according to Paul, the cross of Jesus Christ is the revelation of both the wisdom and power of God. And it is through the preaching of the cross that God is pleased to call elect Greeks and Jews to faith, while at the same time the cross exposes human wisdom for what it is—human wisdom. It is the cross which stumbles a Jew, confounds a Greek, but which is the message through which God saves sinners.

As we continue our series on Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, we are in that section of the first two chapters in which Paul explains *why* the Corinthian church has been plagued with division—the Corinthians are still thinking like pagans. At this point in their history, apparently, the members of this church are clear about the gospel. They understand that God saves sinners by grace alone, through faith alone, on account of Christ alone, apart from good works. Although false apostles will soon disrupt this church (something Paul will address in 2 Corinthians 11), at this point in their history, there was no organized group of false teachers distorting the gospel, as the Judaizers had done in the churches of Galatia.

The problem in Corinth is that this was a relatively new church—Paul had first preached Christ crucified to the Corinthians several years earlier. The members of this church were new Christians. Many in Corinth had responded to Paul’s preaching of the cross with faith, they were baptized and were now participating in the life of the church. But as new Christians in a new church with so much Christian doctrine still being new to them, the Corinthians were still thinking and acting like the Greek pagans they had been until quite recently. Although saved by the wisdom and power of God as revealed in the cross of Jesus Christ, the Corinthians still loved Greek wisdom, they still think like Greeks, and therefore they are still acting like those dependant upon human wisdom apart from the revelation of the wisdom of God.

Because the Greeks loved wisdom (or as we might call it “worldly” or “human” wisdom), they devoted themselves to various teachers within the church (including Paul, Peter, Apollos, and even Jesus) causing factions to form. “I follow Paul.” “I follow Peter.” “I follow Apollos.” There was even a faction contending that “we don’t belong to any faction, we follow Jesus.” Greeks loved the wise old sage, the clever spinner of tales, as well as the philosopher who apparently had all the answers to the questions of life. Just as the Corinthians were devoted to their favorite local philosopher or rhetorician (who was known for eloquence in public speech), they had become devoted to that Christian teacher (or leader) who had baptized them, even though that teacher would have frowned on this kind of devotion.

As we saw last time, Paul attributes this tendency in the church to divide into factions to the Corinthian’s love of worldly wisdom. Paul responds to this problem in two ways, first describing the problem, and then identifying its source. In verse 10 of chapter one Paul exhorts the Corinthians, “*I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment.*” The Corinthians are

divided and shouldn't be. They must confess a common faith, striving to be united in mind and purpose.

Then, in verse 18, Paul proclaims, *“for the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”* That very gospel which had saved members of this church was folly to their Greek compatriots who had not yet been enabled to believe the gospel by the power of God—specifically through the work of the Holy Spirit, as we will see next time. It is human sin which blinds people to the truth. And it is out of human sinfulness that prejudice toward the things of God arises. Paul's point is that those who love worldly wisdom hate the things of God, because the very notion that God is holy and that he will punish all human sin flies in the face of human wisdom.

It should strike us that although Greeks saw the cross as a word of folly, nevertheless, a growing (if struggling) church now existed in Corinth in the very heart of Greco-Roman paganism. Why is that? The cross may indeed be foolishness to a Greek, it may indeed be a stumbling block to a Jew, but to those who have been called by God to faith in Jesus Christ, the cross is the very power of God. Paul has identified the problem—human sin blinds people to truth, so that they turn to human wisdom for solutions to their problems. Paul moves on to explain that the message of the cross is God's chosen method to summon God's people to faith (the subject of our sermon this morning), yet in the balance of the chapter, Paul reminds us that only through the work of the Holy Spirit (our subject for next time) can Jews and Greeks come to see the cross for what it is—a demonstration of the wisdom and power of God.

In the closing words of chapter 1, Paul points out the irony of the fact that although Greeks see the cross as foolishness, God sees the so-called wisdom of the Greeks as nothing more than human foolishness. The Greeks claim to love wisdom. According to such wisdom, the cross is folly. Yet God says the so-called wisdom of the Greeks is the real folly. Mocking those who love such wisdom, and who take great pride in discovering the keys to a successful and happy life through the various pagan religions of the Greco-Roman world, God was pleased to create a church through the proclamation of a message which worldly-wise Greeks could not grasp. The very existence of a growing church in Corinth proves Paul's point. The cross is the demonstration of the wisdom and power of God. But that wisdom is the very thing that human or worldly wisdom refuses to acknowledge.

To make this same point from yet another perspective, Paul reminds the Corinthians in verses 26-29 of chapter 1, *“For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.”* Again mocking those who think themselves wise, God reveals his wisdom (the greatest of all treasures) to the very people whom the worldly-wise Corinthians regarded as crude, rude and contemptible. The gospel cannot be discovered by the philosopher, debater or the lover of wisdom no matter how wise about worldly things they may be. God must reveal true wisdom through what is preached—the account of a crucified and risen Messiah. And to the chagrin of the worldly-wise, God reveals his wisdom to the very people the worldly-wise despise—those not wise, not noble, not powerful. God has chosen to save such people to shame the wise.

While Paul is reminding the Corinthians that God mocks those outside the church who love worldly wisdom (the wise, the philosopher, the sage, the debater), and who in their so-called wisdom mock Christ and his cross, his main point is that since God calls the foolish and the weak so as to shame the wise, then the Corinthians need to begin to act in a spirit of humility. How can they form into factions around their favorite teachers if the whole idea of having a favorite teacher reflects the Greek love of wisdom and

devotion to particular celebrities? In this, the Corinthians were just like modern Americans. Greeks loved the articulate and dynamic speaker. The Corinthians judged public figures by how they looked, and by how well they kept the audience entertained. Because these things are all a matter of personal preference, soon the Corinthians were divided and fighting among themselves over matters of opinion. And this of course, is where worldly wisdom takes us. One opinion is as good as another.

That said, we need to understand that wisdom is not necessarily a bad thing *if* we are referring to that wisdom revealed by God—even when such wisdom is found in the natural order. What Paul is condemning is human wisdom when it is used as a technique to capture someone’s attention so as to convince them of something which is not true. While rhetoric (and the ability to debate or communicate well) is not evil in itself, the Greeks tended to substitute what they regarded as wisdom, for the wisdom God reveals in his word. Even Plato had written in the *Phaedo* that he longed for “a raft” of revelation—“some word of God.” He knew that the Greek fascination with the skill and eloquence of the speaker was misguided. Instead of seeking truth, or seeking to understand the problem of human sinfulness and God’s solution to it, the Greeks of Paul’s day substituted their own wisdom for God’s revelation. Then, based on that worldly wisdom, Greeks laughed at the cross because they thought it foolish. This is the kind of wisdom which Paul now condemns, and which God mocks.

The Greek didn’t ask whether Paul’s message could be true, and then evaluate the evidence and the truth of what the apostle proclaimed. Rather, Paul’s message didn’t make any sense, so the Greeks mocked it. Paul was a poor speaker and a scraggly Rabbi. He didn’t fit their expectations and cultural norms regarding who was wise and who wasn’t. Paul didn’t look like a philosopher. He didn’t speak like a skilled rhetorician. In fact, one ancient source (written about 160 A.D.) recounts Paul’s appearance as follows: “A man small in stature, bald-headed, crooked in legs, healthy, with eyebrows joining, nose rather long.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, this was not someone likely to impress a sophisticated pagan audience.

Add to this the fact that Paul’s message—the holy God had offered his own son as a sacrifice for sin—was an offence to those who were perfectly capable of offering sacrifices to the gods in any of the countless pagan temples in town. To argue that there was one true God, that he took to himself a human nature, and allowed himself to be crucified by the Romans, made little sense. Paul’s preaching was strange and different. Paul was strange and different. None of this fit with Greco-Roman expectations, therefore it was regarded as foolishness.<sup>2</sup> And yet, all the while God is mocking paganism by saving Greeks and Romans through Paul’s preaching, demonstrating yet again, that God’s wisdom shames the wise.

Those Corinthians who had listened to Paul, and were converted by the Holy Spirit, were now enabled to see the cross for what it was—God reconciling the world to himself in Christ. This was a message which created faith in the very person whom Paul was proclaiming (Jesus), while at the same time calling all who embraced Christ through faith to leave behind their pagan ways of thinking and doing. The Corinthians grasped the former (the gospel), but were struggling with the latter (giving up pagan ways).

The irony is that Paul was offering the Greeks and the Romans the very thing they claimed to love—true wisdom. But whenever the cross was preached and the wisdom of God in dealing with human sin was

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<sup>1</sup> From the *Acts of Paul*, Cited in Daniel J. Theron, The Evidence of Tradition (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 35.

<sup>2</sup> Barrett, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 68.

revealed (which is the fundamental problem in all of human life), the Greeks didn't want to hear Paul's gospel. It didn't meet their needs (or so they thought). It wasn't to their liking. In this the ancient Corinthians are exactly like modern Americans. They may claim to love wisdom. But God exposes the fact that the Greek quest for wisdom was nothing more than a clever excuse to reject that one truth people do not want to face—that we are guilt before a holy God.

**S**o, with this background in mind, we turn to our text as Paul recounts his own personal history with the Corinthian church in verses 1-2 of chapter two.

Paul writes, “*And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.*” In the Greek text, the emphatic *kago* (“and I”) indicates that Paul does not make an exception for himself. He did not come to the Corinthians as an eloquent orator, or as a wise sage, nor as a professional philosopher, dazzling the Corinthians with his compelling preaching, his wise advice, or with great abilities to answer the riddles of life. No, Paul came as the apostle to the Gentiles. He proclaimed the testimony about what God had done in Jesus Christ to save sinners from both the guilt and the power of sin. Although the preaching of Christ crucified perplexed (if not offended) the Greeks, and caused Jews to stumble, Paul preached the cross, regardless.

But why would the apostle preach a message which he knows is going to offend those to whom he is preaching? Paul knows that through the gospel God calls his people to faith. Therefore, Paul preached the message of the cross and the empty tomb. Jesus died in the sinner's place, bearing the wrath of God in his own body, and then God raised Jesus from the dead as proof of his victory over sin and its consequences. Paul's preaching amounted to recounting the facts of the gospel as Christ had commanded him to do, because this is the message through which the Holy Spirit demonstrates the wisdom and power of God, made manifest in the conversion of sinners.

In fact, in 1 Corinthians 15:3-8, when Paul defines the gospel as follows: “*For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.*” To preach the gospel (or to share Christ with your neighbor) is to tell people that they are sinners (which is the purpose of the law), and then lay out the facts recounted in the gospel. Through that simple message, God was pleased to call wise Greeks to faith in what they had previously regarded as folly.

Paul didn't focus upon the cultural expectations of his audience. Paul didn't find the hot topic of the day, and then tell jokes and use stories or anecdotes to keep the Corinthians in rapt attention. Paul didn't wear the distinctive attire or use the mannerisms of the philosopher or sage. But Paul is emphatic that he made it his single-minded purpose to concentrate all of his preaching on a particular message—“*Jesus Christ and him crucified.*” The term “crucified” is a perfect passive participle, which describes something done in the past which has effects that continue on into the present.<sup>3</sup> In other words what God did in Christ on a Roman cross, on a Friday afternoon just outside the city walls of Jerusalem about twenty years earlier, will continue to impact everyone who hears Paul's message. Then, as now, the preaching of Christ

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<sup>3</sup> Hays, First Corinthians, 35.

crucified summons all who hear it, to renounce their own righteousness, acknowledge their sin, and then humbly accept Christ's payment for our sins as the only means of entering heaven.

When it came to preaching, Paul eliminated everything else from his proclamation. No Greek attire, no Greek rhetoric, logic, or stories. In the first two verses of 1 Corinthians 2, Paul virtually repeats his statement made to the Galatians in Galatians 3:1: "*It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified.*" Because the cross is where the wisdom and the power of God is made manifest, Paul will preach Christ crucified and nothing else. To preach the cross is to describe the work of Christ so vividly and graphically, that it were as though Christ had been set before them on a billboard.

Once again this statement should be the basis for all subsequent Christian preaching and witness to non-Christians. God's wisdom and power are not manifest in tips for practical living (application-based or moralistic preaching), nor in therapeutic preaching (God wants you to be happy), in motivational preaching ("Get out there and be a champion for Christ"), nor in the wisdom of the sages or the eloquence of the orators (the reason why people pack-out Joel Osteen's basketball arena in Houston). God's demonstrates his wisdom and power in the preaching of Christ crucified, where Christ's righteousness, holiness and redemption is revealed for all to see.

Paul's assertion is remarkable because, apparently, the apostle was coming in for a fair bit of criticism from the Corinthians because he was not keeping people on the edge of their pews during his sermons. Paul was not particularly eloquent, nor was he able to impress people with his own wisdom. He was not a charismatic man, nor an exceptional leader. In 2 Corinthians 10:10, Paul confesses that "*they say, 'His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account.'*" As Paul himself puts it in verses 3-5 of 1 Corinthians 2, "*And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.*"

Paul admits to being nervous (perhaps), and was probably sick and certainly weary when he had been among the Corinthians a few years earlier—hence the reference to weakness and fear. Paul had preached in Thessalonica, Berea and Athens and was forced to flee to Corinth for his life. When he first arrived in the city he was in need of rest. Throughout all of this (as recounted in Acts 17-18) we see that Paul did not fear men, because he feared God. Nevertheless, Paul is human. He struggles with fear and human weaknesses just like everyone else. But it is in Paul's weakness that the power of God is made manifest.

Everything we know about Paul's life and ministry seems to indicate that Paul was not a particularly impressive speaker, and that he was painfully aware that people were criticizing him. His poor speaking style and lack of personal presence is what gave his enemies an open door to challenge his doctrine and his apostolic authority. In this, Paul is just like Moses (perhaps Israel's greatest historical figure), who likewise worried about his own unfitness to confront the Pharaoh as recounted in Exodus 4 (our Old Testament lesson), only to be reminded that God's ability to do as he promised did not depend upon Moses' eloquence. In fact, Moses difficulty in public speaking only made it all the more evident that God's power did not depend upon human efforts. Just as this was true for Moses, it was true for Paul. Paul may not have been an impressive figure or a dynamic speaker. But he did know the gospel of Christ crucified, and he knew God's power to convert sinners was tied to that message.

Therefore, Paul preached a very specific message (the cross). And so even though he was not worldly-wise, nor did he seek to tickle the ears of the Greeks in places like Corinth, nevertheless, Paul can speak of his preaching as accompanied by "*a demonstration of the Spirit and of power.*" Readers of 1

Corinthians have long debated what Paul means by this. The context tells us that Paul does not mean by this demonstration of the Spirit's power what we might call "signs and wonders" as contemporary Pentecostals contend. No doubt there were signs and wonders in the apostolic age. There may have been signs and wonders when Paul first came to Corinth. Paul will even mention signs and wonders later on in this letter in connection to the gifts of the Spirit. But signs and wonders are not mentioned in Luke's account of Paul's arrival in Corinth in Acts 18. Luke merely says that Paul went first to the synagogue and preached Christ to the Jews gathered there. Neither is there any hint that this is what Paul means here when he speaks of the demonstration of the Spirit's power.<sup>4</sup> Remember that while we live in the age of the Holy Spirit, the wonder of Pentecost is not that those assembled in the upper room spoke in tongues (as dramatic as that was), the wonder of Pentecost is that through the preaching of a fisherman (Peter), God converted some 3,000 people. The same holds true here.

What then does Paul mean when he speaks of a demonstration of the Spirit's power? As he just said, the Spirit's power is manifest in the fact that Jews and Greeks, who were dead in sin, and who could never understand God's wisdom if left to themselves, have now been united to Jesus Christ through faith. The demonstration of the Spirit's power was such that through the message of the cross, God exposed the worldly wisdom of the Greeks which kept people from the kingdom of God. The demonstration of the Spirit's power is seen in the fact that there is a growing church in Corinth! Through the scandalous message of the cross (where God's wisdom and power are revealed and wherein the Spirit manifests his power), God effectually called many Jews and Greeks to faith. This is how the power of Spirit is made manifest. The dead are raised, given new life and granted faith through the preaching of the cross.

When in verse 5 Paul writes "*that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God,*" we learn the reason as to why this is so.<sup>5</sup> Because Paul's preaching is not centered in human wisdom, eloquence, or persuasion, instead the Christian faith rests upon the person and work of Christ (the historical facts of the gospel), where God's wisdom and power are clearly revealed. Our faith rests upon God's power (his election and calling of sinners), his gift of faith and the subsequent justification and sanctification of sinners (by virtue of their union with Christ), and in the power of God who raised Jesus Christ from the grave. To put it simply-the preaching of the gospel is the demonstration of the Spirit and the power of God. It is through the preaching of a crucified Savior, that God gives life to the dead and saves the guiltiest of sinners. What the Greeks mock, God uses to save his people.

**W**hat, then, should we take with us from this passage?

There are three things. First, modern Americans are much like the Greeks of Paul's day. We too love worldly wisdom. Because we do, we too tend to evaluate preachers and sermons based upon how they make us feel—rather than whether or not the minister was faithful to the text he was preaching. We live in an age when people think preaching is boring, and even Christians are not really interested in doctrine or Scripture. So (using worldly wisdom), preaching becomes another form of entertainment. Was the preacher funny? Did the worship service keep us entertained? Were there practical tips for living a better life? Did I experience something which stirred my emotions? Beloved, these are the criteria of worldly wisdom. This is the very thing going on in Corinth and for which Paul was taking the

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<sup>4</sup> Contra Fee, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 95. Fee correctly regards this as conversion, but thinks it is evidenced by speaking in tongues as a demonstration of power.

<sup>5</sup> Morris, 1 Corinthians, 52.

Corinthians to task. We need to be discerning. But we must use the proper standard—God’s word.

Second, for Paul, everything centers upon the content of his message—Jesus Christ and him crucified. Whenever the word is opened and proclaimed, we are hearing wisdom from God—not human mere opinion. This is not an excuse to turn a sermon into a lecture, nor is it an excuse for the minister to be boring or ineffectual as a communicator. But it is to say, that the preaching of Christ is the means God himself has chosen to be the primary means of evangelism, and the means of creating faith in the hearts of his people. If you are concerned about evangelism, then focus on telling people the facts associated with the doing and dying of Jesus. This is what Paul did. This is what Paul tells us to do. You do not need to be a great speaker or a charismatic person. All you need to know is that God saves people through this message.

Finally, the message of Christ and him crucified is not just the test of orthodoxy and the basis for Christian preaching or evangelism. Whenever the cross of Jesus Christ is proclaimed, God summons his people to trust that this death saves us from our sins. We have heard the message of Christ and him crucified. We have been summoned. Through the suffering savior, God promises to forgive our sins and grant us eternal life. But God demands that we respond to this summons in faith. Beloved, there is only one thing which spares you from the wrath of God—Jesus Christ and him crucified. Do you believe this? If not, now is the time. If you do, then go from this place with a clear conscience and a heart filled with gratitude. For you have just witnessed a demonstration of the Spirit’s wisdom and power.