

The Folly of the Cross

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Our text is from the Epistle reading. **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.** Here ends our text.

We often think of the apostle Paul as such a successful missionary. He traveled from Jerusalem to Rome and probably to Spain. He planted churches across the Roman Empire. In the book of Acts he quickly rises from a spurned and suspicious convert to a renowned apostle with a seat at the Jerusalem Council. And why not? Compared to the other apostles, fishermen and tax collectors, he far exceeded them in education and knowledge and oratory skills. Paul was a lawyer and debater and persuader. He was familiar with both the Jewish laws and the Greek philosophy of the day. You'd think he could argue people into the kingdom of God. But often times Paul met with very little success in his evangelism efforts. He was persecuted by Jews and run out of town. He was laughed at by Gentiles and dismissed as a babbler. Things would always start out so well. He was making his connection with the Jews regarding the Law and the Prophets, all the prophecies of the Messiah. With the Greeks he started with his arguments from creation and natural law. But it seemed like whenever he got to the cross, he lost his audience. And that was the tragedy of it all. Because what Jesus did on the cross is what kept them from perishing. What Jesus did on the cross is what saved them. But when people heard it, it was foolishness to them. And things haven't changed any today. Paul's words in our text are still true. **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.**

When the apostle Paul traveled from city to city, he followed a particular pattern of evangelism, or preaching the Gospel. He first went to the Jews, those in the church, and then he went to the Gentiles, the unchurched. Paul would first seek out the local synagogue and if there wasn't a synagogue then he'd look for a gathering of Jewish proselytes. Paul could count on the Jews knowing the Old Testament Scriptures with God's promises and prophecies of the Messiah. But they often envisioned the Messiah as one who would solve their earthly problems and bless them with prosperity. If they obeyed God, his Messiah would bless them again. The Messiah would establish an earthly kingdom, reign like King David, and overthrow the Romans. But a Messiah that died at the hands of the Romans seemed foolish to them. That's no victory. Where were the earthly blessings?

Today, Christians often fall into the same thinking. What we really need is a Messiah that solves our earthly problems and brings us temporal blessings. We do what God wants, and he blesses us with stuff, health and wealth. We rub God's back, and he rubs ours. A prosperity Gospel. How can the cross help us in this life? That's foolish. Or, we need to look ahead to some kind of millennial reign of Christ on earth. What we really need is a Messiah who will overthrow secular and rogue governments and usher in the reign of the Church, a paradise here on earth, no more poverty or social injustice. The cross is history. We don't need to focus on that anymore. Let's look ahead to victory.

But when Paul argued with the Jews about why Christ had to suffer and die on the cross, they thought this was foolish too. Why would God have to die to save them? They believed that they were already saved by keeping the Law. They were still living under the Old Covenant. In the Old Covenant God said, "I will be your God and you will be my people, if you keep my Commandments." Yes, they were saved by grace. God chose them to be his people. But they were also saved by the Law, keeping the Commandments. And why would God give them the Law if they weren't able to keep it? No, they were saved by God's grace *plus* their own works. God and them working together. Now that made sense. That was Jewish wisdom. They contributed to their salvation, and they were proud of it. The preaching of the cross, Christ dying for all their sins, salvation by God's work alone, was rather humbling to them. It was foolishness to them.

Of course, Jewish wisdom is still alive and well today even within Christian churches. And the grace *plus* theology is still prevalent. God will forgive your sins, if you do penance. God first infuses you with grace which enables you to keep the Commandments and save yourself. God saves you through the Gospel, but you stay saved by keeping the Law. Or, it's your faith, your decision to choose God that saves you. Yes, God and you working together. Now that makes sense.

And the Jews were always demanding miraculous signs from Paul. They needed to see something fantastic before they'd consent to believe. It was only logical that Paul provide proof that he was speaking from God. The Jews demanded the same miraculous signs from Jesus. "Give us a sign to show by what authority you are doing

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1 Corinthians 1:18-31

these things. Give us a sign that we may see it and then believe in you.” They wanted proof. But Jesus said, “An adulterous and wicked generation asks for a sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah. As Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.” Jesus would give them no sign, no proof. The only sign he would give them was his crucifixion, death, and burial. And that’s the only sign Paul would give the Jews, the cross. But that was foolishness to them.

People today are still demanding signs. If I could just see a visible act of God working - someone babbling in tongues, a miraculous healing, an angel with a message from God – then I’d believe, then I’d have proof. And that’s only logical. To trust in an invisible God, to put your hope in just a myth passed down through the centuries is just foolishness. It makes sense to have some visible proof.

After the Jews ran Paul out of Thessalonica for his foolish preaching, he continued on his way to Athens which was full of idols. There he reasoned with the unchurched, the Gentile philosophers of the day, the Epicureans and Stoics. The Epicureans encouraged the pursuit of pleasure and tranquility, and the avoidance of pain and superstitious fears, especially the fear of death. To overcome the fear of death, they simply insisted that death meant nothingness, the dissolving of the body and soul. But Paul’s message of the cross, pain and suffering and death, didn’t suit them. Nor did the Resurrection of the dead and the final judgment. That put fear of death into their hearts. The Stoics believed that human beings could achieve their own freedom by living in a rational manner in harmony with nature. Each individual was in charge of his fate. Why would they need a God to die for them? In fact, with all the many powerful and immortal gods worshipped in Athens, this God of Paul’s, who became man and died at the hands of men on a cross like a common criminal, made no sense. That was weakness. These philosophers pursued worldly wisdom, but the cross was foolishness to them.

Today’s philosophies haven’t changed much. It’s all about living for one’s own pleasure and tranquility. Pain and death are swept under the rug and not discussed along with sin and guilt and its consequences. In America we’re proud of our rugged individualism and our own achievements. “I am the master of my fate . . . the captain of my soul.” It’s the wisdom of the world not the folly of the cross.

I’m sure there were times when Paul thought he could be more successful if he had a different message to preach. “Come on God, give me something I can work with here. Something that’s more attractive or logical, something that makes sense to the human way of thinking. Then I could persuade them. I could argue them into the kingdom of heaven.” And maybe you’ve thought that way, too, when you’re witnessing to a friend. A powerful God with all kinds of blessings - Laws for us to keep, morality, and good works to make the world a better place. That all sounds good until you get to the folly of the cross: our need for a Savior to die upon the cross for our sins. They don’t understand it. It’d be very tempting to leave that part out or get past the cross so we can get on talking about the Christian life. And some Christians, some pastors, do just that. Let’s get past the cross and on to wisdom for this life.

But Paul remained faithful to the message of the Gospel. He writes, “Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles.” And the cross is a stumbling block and folly to human wisdom and reason. For “The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.” The cross was foolishness to us until the Holy Spirit worked through the preaching of the Word to bring us to faith. That’s why we confess, “I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him, but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel.” He has called me to faith by the message that Jesus Christ was crucified for me.

God says, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.” It wasn’t according to the wisdom of man that God saved the world. It was according to his wisdom, who is Jesus Christ. And as foolish as it is - the all powerful God becoming man and then suffering and dying on the cross for his creation - the foolishness of God is wiser than men. For God chose the foolish things of this world to shame the wise. He chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong so that no one may boast before him. No one can say, “It was my own reason and strength or my own higher learning and wisdom that enabled me to understand this. It was all the work of God. **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** for our salvation. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.