

September 20/21, 2008

Foolishness or Power

1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5

Pastor Bryan Clark

If you watched the news at all this week, you're well aware of the fact that this has been an interesting week in the life of our government, in the life of our economy. In light of what's happened, I found these words interesting:

*"Is there any doubt that the handwriting is on the wall for where we are heading? If we look around, we will see the outcome of these trends in countries that are ahead of us in reaching the logical conclusions of such a cultural drift. We see in such cases, that manners have been corrupted, morality has sunk into depravity, indulgence is out of control and, above all, faith has been discredited and unbelief has become fashionable. When a culture reaches this point, it becomes so out of touch with truth that masses of people deny the outright existence of God. God's will for the nation has been abandoned and man has become his own God."*¹

He goes on to talk about the greatest enemy of a democracy is selfishness and in light of that, he says these words:

*"It is these attitudes that create a culture in which people don't care and can't love and in which leaders don't lead and the general population won't follow. Institutions are blamed for life circumstances and personal responsibility does not enter in to the equation. Problems are always someone else's fault. Sin and stupidity are never acknowledged, perhaps not even recognized. Where this is the case, there can be no healthy society. The opposite of selfishness is public spirit. Such is the foundation of political health and vitality. It energizes the attitude and actions that lead to the greatness of a nation."*²

I would say that writer is "spot on" and what's interesting about that is, those words were penned over 200 years ago by William Wilberforce, when he was seeking to get his country of England to stop trafficking in human slavery.

He identified exactly the issue that was the same 200 years ago, as it is today. At the core, it's selfishness, and selfishness is driven by our need to be our own god. You go all the way back to Genesis 3 and God tells us there's a great divide. The divide is between those people who will determine to be their own gods, to build their lives around their own ability to perform, which can only lead to selfishness, and the other pathway, the other fork in the road, are those people who will surrender to God.

Throughout the Bible those two pathways are described in many different ways. In our passage this morning, those two pathways are described as those who are perishing and those who are being saved. If you have a Bible, turn with us this morning to 1 Corinthians 1. Last week we started our study of the New Testament letter of 1 Corinthians. Paul began discussing an issue of factions or divisions in the church, built on a spiritual arrogance, with people saying, "I am of Paul," or, "I am of Cephas," or, "I am of Apollos," or, "I am of Christ," implying that somehow their group was superior to the other groups, and it was starting to cause breakdowns and factions within the church.

In our passage this morning, Paul will tell us why that is contrary to the message of the Gospel. The theme that we're looking at throughout this study is, "What does it mean to live like a Christian?" Paul will say that level of spiritual arrogance, that causes those factions, is totally contrary to the message of the Gospel. We pick it up in 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. (*NASB, 1 Corinthians 1:18)

When he says the "word of the cross," that's just kind of a synonym, a brief way of saying the message of the Gospel: the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. Often times the New Testament uses just the term "cross" as symbolic of the message of redemption. Like when we just sang about "the wonderful cross," we're not worshipping an instrument of death; it's symbolic of what was done on that cross. The message of the Gospel is the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus.

So, what he's saying is, to those who were perishing, to those who had rejected the message, to them it is utter foolishness; it is just simply silly; it's absolutely ridiculous! The conversation would go something like this, "*Do you people mean to tell me that you actually think that some Jewish Rabbi that lived 2000 years ago and was ultimately executed by the Romans, somehow, in some way, was actually God in the flesh, and His death somehow affects our lives today? That is probably the most ridiculous, ignorant thing I have ever heard!*"

That's what Paul is saying; to them it was utter foolishness. The only way you can believe that is to check your brains at the door, because that's pure nonsense. But, he goes on to say, to those who believe, it is the power of God unto salvation. We could spend the rest of the morning having one person after another step up and testify how the message of the Gospel, the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus, has radically changed their lives.

Two weeks ago, we saw and heard testimonies of people expressing how God has radically changed their lives and, a little bit later in the service, you're going to get a chance to see some of that again. To those who are perishing, it is foolishness; to those of us who believe, it is the power of God unto salvation. Verse 19:

**For it is written,
"I WILL DESTROY THE WISDOM OF THE WISE, AND THE CLEVERNESS
OF THE CLEVER I WILL SET ASIDE."**

It's a quote from the Old Testament, from Isaiah chapter 29, speaking specifically about religious cleverness, religious wisdom. We have to understand that what fuels religion is the desire to be our own god; it's the desire to have some basis by which we can perform **for** God so that we can demonstrate that we are good enough to be acceptable **to** God.

When we talk about the message of the Gospel, it is a message that is very simple. But it is very hard because it runs contrary to that desire to be our own god. "To be our own god" is driven by performance. Religion is driven by performance. If I tell you that salvation is purely a gift from God, it doesn't make sense, because nothing in our world is like that. We hear people say it all the time, "You don't get something for nothing. There's got to be more to it than that." So religion sees that. When you say the way to get to God is to "do this" and to "do that," people say, "Now that makes sense!" There has to be an element of performance. Therefore we get wise; we get clever in

our religion by offering something that makes sense to people. But, what God is saying to the prophet Isaiah is, "I'll have none of it!" And He's going to explain in a minute why that is the case.

Verse 20 is very interesting to think about:

Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? [The scribe would be like an expert in religion.] Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?

He's asking the question, "Where are these people?" With all this wisdom, with all this expertise, with all this that man thinks makes sense, really what he's asking is, "Show me a place where that is working." It's an interesting question to think about. Can you show me a place in the world where God has been removed and life is better instead of worse? We have this overwhelming need in our own country to get God out of everything. We need God out of the government; we need God out of the schools; we need God out of the conversation; we need God out of the public square. There's a huge difference between the freedom of religion and getting God out of our schools and our government and our public square.

So let me ask you a question, "Can you show me one place in the world where God has been removed and the situation has gotten better?" because I can show you a lot of examples where it has become dramatically worse. On the contrary, I will show you thousands and thousands and thousands of places where the Gospel of Jesus Christ is heard and believed, and life has radically changed for the better. Instead of despair there is hope; instead of death there is life. So it's a question to process. As we keep pushing God farther and farther out, let's ask the question, "Where is that working to the good of all people?" And the answer is, "Nowhere! Nowhere!!" That's the point he's trying to make here.

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.

Now, that's one of those verses, when you get done reading it you say, "Now what was that again?" It just kind of spirals through. In essence, what he's saying is this: that God is so infinitely wise that when God considered a way of salvation, knowing that we have this bent, because we're made in the image of God, to become our own gods, He must provide a way of salvation that doesn't have the slightest potential for us to think we performed in any way to achieve it, or it will feed this need we have to be God. Therefore God, in His wisdom, provided a salvation that was 100% devoid of any human performance, to the extent that the world would call it foolishness, but it would be the way of salvation.

This is the core to understanding why an "Arrogant Christian" is an oxymoron. It is absolutely contradictory to the message that is the wisdom of God. The message of salvation is a message of brokenness and humility. It's coming to the end of myself and recognizing that I do not have anything within me to perform in any way, that could ever possibly impress God, nothing. I am not my own god; I am totally in need of a Savior, "nothing of me; all of God". If you believe that, how could you possibly respond with arrogance? That's what He's saying; that's the wisdom of God in how He has offered salvation.

Verse 22:

For indeed Jews ask for signs, and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block, and to Gentiles foolishness... (vs. 22-23)

The Jews wanted the Messiah to be their King, filled with power, to overthrow the Roman government, to lead them to become a powerful nation again and, at the core of that belief was that desire to say, "We're better than you!" That's what they wanted; they wanted the Messiah to demonstrate Himself in power. The Greeks saw it differently. They wanted knowledge; they wanted wisdom; they wanted something that would be so impressive that everyone else would say, "That is far superior to anything else. You are obviously much more intelligent than the rest of the world."

Both of them wanted something that would put them in a position of superiority in a performance-based culture. But, what did they get? They got Christ crucified, a Messiah that was executed by the Roman government. The Jews would say, "*That wasn't very strong,*" and the Greeks would say, "*That wasn't very smart.*" There's nothing impressive about that in a performance-based culture. So he says, "to the Jews, a stumbling block." "Stumbling" is from the Greek word that we get our English word, "scandal". It was scandalous! Are you telling me that our Messiah was so weak that the Romans overpowered Him and executed Him on a cross? "*That's absolutely offensive; it is scandalous; I don't want to hear it,*" was the response of the Jews. And still many Jews, to this day, see it that way.

To the Greeks, he says, "It's foolishness!" They're so intellectually superior that they say, "*That's silly; that's nonsense! You're telling me that Rabbi was God? And the Romans nailed Him to a cross? I mean, come on! I mean, really! What kind of a pinhead do you have to be to believe that?*" This, of course, is more where we land in our culture today.

...but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. (vs. 24-25)

In other words, what he's saying is, at the end of the day, God's plan, to those who believe, is filled with power, unimaginable power! And it's filled with wisdom beyond what we could have ever imagined in terms of our ability to know and love God! At the end of the day, the very wisest, the very strongest that any of us as men and women could possibly accomplish, is nothing compared to the power and the wisdom of God.

Verse 26:

For consider your calling [or your salvation], brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised, God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, so that no man may boast before God. But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, so that, just as it is written, "LET HIM WHO BOASTS, BOAST IN THE LORD." (vs. 26-31)

You have to remember that Paul is addressing the Corinthians who were breaking into these factions in a very arrogant fashion saying, “I am of so and so”, and, “I am of so and so.” And what’s implied in that is, “*We are somehow superior to the other group*”. And Paul is now saying, “Hey folks, look into the mirror; look in the mirror and remember the Gospel. You weren’t wise; you weren’t noble; you weren’t anything! God has chosen to take the weak, the broken, the despairing, and radically change them and make them into His Bride, The Church.”

Therefore, there is no basis for spiritual pride; there is no basis for spiritual arrogance. We often refer to “us”, ourselves here, as sinners, misfits and losers. If you find that label offensive, you don’t understand the Gospel. Because every single one of us had to come to the end of ourselves and recognize, “*I have nothing to offer God! There is nothing in my performance that somehow makes me acceptable to God. I was nothing but a sinner, a misfit and a loser in the eyes of God, and the only thing that makes me other than that today, is the grace of God*”. And that’s what he’s saying; therefore there is no basis for boasting in ourselves.

One of the criticisms that people would have of the church is, they talk about people “in the church” sometimes don’t even live as good lives as people that “don’t go to church.” So there’s all this hypocrisy. But stop and think about that for a minute. If this message is true, isn’t that what you would expect? What I mean by that is, “Would you expect to find more sick people at a hospital or a museum?” Of course the church is filled with people that are struggling, with people that don’t get it right all the time, with people that are struggling to get through life and to live as God would have them live; that’s the whole point! We’re not claiming that we are self-righteous; we’re not claiming that we out perform anybody else. The church is filled with the broken, with the despairing, with the wounded, with those who crash and hit bottom. They simply couldn’t perform up to standard and are being changed radically by the power of God.

Certainly those people who are “outside the church” and are neck deep in religions and consider themselves to be high performers, are probably going to out perform the broken and the wounded and the despairing. High performing people love religion because it’s one more arena where they can get pats on the back and say, “You are a cut above! You are better than everyone else!” Highly successful people love religion. Jesus made that point with the rich young ruler. But when you think about it, it may very well be their success in the eyes of the world that leads them to the greatest failure in their lives, and that is their failure to understand their need for a Savior.

It’s very important that the world understands the Church of Jesus Christ does not claim to be better on the basis of our performance. We claim to be misfits, sinners and losers, changed by the power of Jesus! There is no place for pride and arrogance!

He says in verse 30,

But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness [that means the basis by which we stand right before God,] **and sanctification** [we’re set apart from the world,] **and redemption**, [we’re set free from the slavery of sin in order that we may boast in Christ].

It’s interesting to think about what Paul is saying here, in light of several things. One of the criticisms of our movement in the past was that there seemed to be a significant amount of arrogance. I would say that is a fair charge; I agree with that. And arrogance is completely inconsistent with the Gospel. What’s disturbing is, the generation that’s making those accusations,

in my opinion, speaks with just as much arrogance as the fundamentalists did. Having lived through that movement, I've got an antenna and I can feel it. And I'm telling you, they're just as arrogant as the fundamentalists were. Because we get into these fights and our temptation is to say, "*Our group is superior to your group!*" And, according to Paul, there is no basis for that. It needs to come from a heart of brokenness and humility. All the glory goes to Jesus!

You know by now, I have huge concerns with the Christian celebrity culture. In my opinion, we just simply take the performance culture of the world, we slap some Christian slogans on it, and it looks exactly the same! And I believe that is very offensive to God! Whether they're writers, whether they're preachers, whether they're musicians, what are we saying? Are we saying that they perform so well, that in some way they are superior? That they deserve our time and attention more than the person sitting next to you that serves in the nursery? I am saying, "Absolutely not! Absolutely not!" That value system is offensive to God and it's contradictory to the message that we preach.

I have a little bit of a habit of watching the preachers on the preaching channels on television, much to my family's dismay! (laughter) And you can't help but notice that even those rare times when they are proclaiming the message of the Gospel, they are doing so out on a platform of such arrogance. You think somehow the message doesn't line up with the messenger; it just shouldn't be!

Paul goes on to remind them of how he came to Corinth:

And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. And my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God. (vs. 2: 1-5)

Paul says, when he came to Corinth, he didn't come to be impressive; he didn't come with great oratory; he didn't come with impressive words; he didn't come in any way that the Greeks or the Jews found impressive at all. The Jews were offended; the Greeks thought he was ridiculous. And he came with fear and trembling, simply proclaiming a message that the world finds foolish. But, it is the power of God unto salvation to those who believe!

Boy, there are some significant applications to what he just said there. I understand, as a preacher, if my goal is to impress someone, I am going to lose my way, because the world does not find the message of the gospel impressive. They're not going to walk away saying, "That was really impressive!" They're gonna say, "That's stupid! That's ridiculous! That man checked his brains in at the door! How ignorant do you have to be to believe that?"

What happens I think to a lot of preachers is, they feel that. And so they slip back into a performance mentality because, "*I've got to find something that does impress because I want people to think I'm impressive.*" And so I move away from a topic that's not very impressive and start to talk about things that people say, "*Oh, that was really impressive,*" like helping you become prosperous, like fixing our government, like ten ways to fix your family, like how to smile more, like how to have a happier day. Things that even the world around us say, "*Now that was good!*" I would rather have ten people whose lives have been radically changed by the power of the Gospel, than a thousand who walk away feeling better, with no change.

When you think about this idea of spiritual arrogance, it's interesting to think about it in light of a movement, often entitled Lordship Salvation, a movement which I personally think is misnamed, but we're going to go with that for the sake of discussion. It's basically the idea that when you trust Jesus as Savior you also have to trust him as "Lord" and, if there isn't evidence of that in your life, then you're clearly not saved. The challenge is, "Who decides what that evidence is, and how much is enough, and who decides all of that?" And that's where it gets into some very difficult discussion.

But think of it like this: almost every person that I've known that really pushes that Lordship Salvation hard, in my opinion, demonstrates a spiritual arrogance in their spirit. And they would say something like this, *"If a person says that he or she has trusted Christ as Savior but they're engaged in 'this' behavior and 'that' behavior, and they're not doing 'this' and they're not doing 'that' (and all of those are exterior things), then clearly that's evidence that that's contradictory to the message; therefore, it's clear, you're not a Christian; you're out!"*

Let's turn that around a little bit. What if we turned that around and said, "But wait a minute. Doesn't Paul say that if in your heart you demonstrate arrogance and pride and spiritual superiority, doesn't he say that's contrary to the message of brokenness and humility of the Gospel? Therefore, you seem to be inconsistent with the Gospel; therefore, you must be out!"

The reality is spiritual arrogance is every bit as offensive to God as these external behaviors that we tend to focus so much time and attention on. At the end of the day, the message of the Gospel is not impressive to the world! I understand, as a preacher, I have to settle that. I have to understand that I have to get off of a performance-based way of identifying myself and understand that my cause is to present the message that the world finds silly, that will never impress the people of the world. But, to be faithful, I accept that. It isn't any different for you. You must understand that the greatest thing, the greatest roadblock to you sharing the Gospel with your friends and neighbors and work associates, is your concern of what they will think of you. And when you're thinking that way, you're back to a performance-based way of identifying yourself.

I am well aware of the fact that when I share the Gospel with them, they may think that's the silliest thing they've ever heard. They may laugh at me; they may make fun of me. I just accept that as part of the arrangement. But I also understand there will be those, whom God will open up their hearts, and they will hear and believe, and their lives will be radically changed forever.

One of the things I've come to understand over the years is, you cannot predict how anyone will respond. I've had people that I thought would absolutely grab hold of the Gospel and they laughed in my face. And I've had people that I thought would think this is the silliest thing they've ever heard, and they broke down in tears. You can't tell! The only way that you're really going to be effective in sharing the Gospel with other people is if you accept the fact that this message is foolishness to the world; I'm not going to impress anybody; they may very well laugh at me.

But, my sense of self is not based on my performance; it's based on my relationship with Christ as we faithfully present the message. For every ten that laugh, there will be that one who will listen. And for that one who will listen, to me, it's well worth the nine who laughed. The message of the Gospel is "foolishness to those who are perishing. But, it is the power of God unto salvation to those who believe."

Father, we are thankful for the message of the cross. Lord, we understand that the message of salvation runs contrary to everything that this culture's about, to the extent that it just sounds ridiculous to the world. Lord, we understand that religion is driven by a need to perform, but the Gospel is driven by a simple message of grace, a message of brokenness and humility. Lord, every person in this room that's trusted Jesus as Savior, struggles with spiritual arrogance. Lord, it oozes out of every single one of us. But Lord, it is so contradictory to the message we proclaim. Lord, our prayer this morning would be that You would convict us; You would allow us to see ourselves in the mirror; You would remind us who we were and who we have become in Christ. Lord, that there would only be one boast in our church, and that would be that we boast in Jesus our Savior. Lord, that is our sincere prayer. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

¹ *Real Christianity* by William Wilberforce, (Revised and Updated by Bob Beltz. Regal Books from Gospel Light), 2006; pg.148

² William Wilberforce, pg.153

Scripture taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE
Copyright 1960, 1962, 1963, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1987, 1988,
The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission
Lincoln Berean Church, 6400 S. 70th, Lincoln, NE 68516 (402) 483-6512
Copyright 2008 – Bryan Clark. All rights reserved.

September 20/21, 2008

Study Questions
Living Like Christians
Foolishness or Power
I Corinthians 1:18-2:5
Pastor Bryan Clark

Opening Discussion

1. In what ways does the culture reject the message of the Gospel as foolishness?
2. In what way is religion a reaction to the “foolishness” of the Gospel?
3. Was there a time when you thought the Gospel was silly or foolish? What changed your mind?
4. In what ways does a performance based value system affect our ability to clearly present the message of Jesus?

Bible Study

1. Read I Corinthians 1:18-31. According to Paul people divide into two groups, the perishing and those being saved. What is the difference between the two? How do these two groups manifest themselves in our culture today?
2. Can you identify one area of life today where the wisdom of the world is “working?” In other words, is there an area of our society where things are better because God has been “removed” and man’s wisdom is prevailing?
3. Can you point to any area of our world where the foolishness of the cross has made life better for anyone? How does this affirm what Paul says in 1:18-21?
4. According to 1:22 both the Jews and the Greeks wanted something that would clearly indicate their way was far superior to everyone else’s way (power or wisdom). In what ways can churches and religions get caught up in that same spirit today? Are we guilty at times of trying to “sell” the Gospel to make it more appealing?
5. Why was “Christ crucified” offensive to the Jews and foolish to the Greeks? Do you think people in our culture today are more offended as the Jews or think the message is silly like the Greeks?
6. Why is a prideful Christian an oxymoron? (1:26-31). What argument might we have as to why the behavior of Christians sometimes seems worse than unbelievers? (Hint: would you expect to find more sick people at a hospital or museum?)
7. Read I Corinthians 2:1-5. How did Paul apply his own teaching in Corinth? How do we process this text as it relates to our “Christian celebrity” culture today?

Application

1. Can we ever be effective in presenting the Gospel to others if we still buy into a performance based sense of self? Why or why not?
2. Can you know in advance if a person is going to respond to the Gospel by thinking it foolish or experiencing it as the power of God unto salvation?
3. Is there any way to keep people from viewing the Gospel as foolish and implying that we are simpletons for believing it? What do we learn from this?