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Sermon Notes

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The Foolishness of God, Part 1: The Cross of Christ

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

We come this morning to one of the greatest sections of scripture in celebrating the wisdom of God in the gospel...

We live in a world full of human arrogance... highly intelligent people who think that we have evolved to such a high level that all the insights of the ancient world are laughable compared to our superior intellect

For twenty centuries, the world has been scoffing at the gospel of Jesus Christ... either that or outraged by it

But this morning, we are going to celebrate Christ crucified as the power of God and the wisdom of God

Context: An immature and sinning church with many specific problems

The Apostle Paul's consistent agenda: to apply the gospel of Jesus Christ to solve all of their problems... the gospel of Christ crucified and resurrected is sufficient to produce a healthy, fruitful local church made up of holy, happy, fruitful Christians in a loving community with one another, standing strongly and boldly for Christ in a crooked and depraved generation.

The GOSPEL OF CHRIST IS ENOUGH!!

The first issue: divisions and factions in the church

1 Corinthians 1:11-12 ... there are quarrels among you. ¹² What I mean is this: One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas"; still another, "I follow Christ."

In Greek culture there was a tremendous love for human wisdom... it was the center in the ancient world of human philosophies organized around great philosophers; there were schools set up to drink in the wisdom of the masters—the school of **Aristotle**, the school of **Plato**, the school of

Epicurus, the school of the **Stoics**... these schools would argue and bicker amongst themselves as to which of them was the greatest

The Corinthian church was doing the standard Greek thing... lining up behind this or that expert thinker, "I am of this leader" "I am of that leader"

Paul deeply wants these Corinthians to understand the gospel, the message of a crucified Son of God, who by his weakness and death did the most awesome powerful act there has ever been

As Michael Card put it in his song, "El Shaddai,":

"Through the years you've made it clear,
That the time of Christ was near,
Though the people failed to see
What Messiah ought to be.
Though your Word contained the plan,
They just could not understand
**Your most awesome work was done
Through the frailty of your son.**"

I. The Human Race in Love with Its Own Wisdom

A. The Human Race Created in the Image of God

1. A great deal of the difference between us and the animals is in our ability to THINK... to reason... to ponder... to meditate... to consider and make choices based on the thought process
2. It was this very area that Satan attacked and corrupted in the Garden of Eden... tempting Adam with a piece of fruit that would make him WISE like God

B. The Spirit of the Tower of Babel

1. As sin developed, people used their ability to think and reason and plan and study to craft a culture of SELF-WORSHIP... at Babel, they studied the technology of bricks and learned how to build a skyscraper tower to make a name for themselves
2. But they forgot that the highest man ever reaches in science is still infinitely below his wisdom

C. The Love of Human Wisdom in Ancient Greece

1. The word "philosophy" is a Greek word meaning "love of wisdom"
2. The city of Athens was named after the Greek goddess of wisdom, Athena

3. The heritage of Greece was in their soaring and complex systems of human wisdom... some of the most famous names in the history of Philosophy
 - a. Socrates (469 BC -399 BC)
 - b. Plato (427 BC-347 BC)... Socrates' top student
 - c. Aristotle (384 BC -322 BC)... Plato's top student
4. Alexander the Great, himself a disciple of Aristotle, filled with zeal for the glory of Greece, spread Hellenism all over his empire
5. Paul himself, a Jew from Tarsus, was trained in the Greek language and wrote all his epistles in Greek, not in Hebrew or Aramaic
6. Athens was still filled with philosophers in Paul's day, as we saw Paul debating some of them on Mars Hill

Acts 17:18-21 A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babbler trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection. ¹⁹ Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the Areopagus, where they said to him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? ²⁰ You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we want to know what they mean." ²¹ (All the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there spent their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas.)

Paul preached his great "Mars Hill sermon" there recorded in Acts 17, but at the end, the philosophers SCORNED his message of a resurrected man

Acts 17:32 When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered, but others said, "We want to hear you again on this subject."

D. The Love of Human Wisdom Today

1. So also today... we are in awe of human intelligence, human wisdom, human education
2. People often think that "If only we had more education, the world would be MUCH BETTER OFF"
3. They forget that the Germany that Hitler took over was among the most educated in the world

They were at the pinnacle of almost every intellectual endeavor... some of the best physicists, chemists, biologists, writers, musicians, and artists in the

world were German... yet all that knowledge was harnessed to one of the most diabolically evil governmental systems in history

Steven Zipperstein wrote of the rise of Naziism:

“This all occurred in what was, or at least seemed by the late 19th century to be, Europe's most cultivated, certainly its best-educated country. Germany had the world's finest elementary school system, the highest literacy rate and the best universities; by 1913 more books were published annually in Germany than in any country in the world. Its technical skill, its industry, its relentless business savvy... marked it off as among modernity's singular successes.

SOON all that learning was being used to conquer the world and exterminate the Jewish people

Human wisdom and knowledge is harnessed to our corrupt nature... and yet...

4. The human race still delights in human philosophies

a. Materialism

Life consists in the material world... the metaphysical world cannot be proven, so it is not important; what you can sense with the five senses is all your life is or ever will be

b. Sensualism/hedonism

Saturate the senses with experiences that will please you... “Eat, drink, and be merry”; pursue pleasure of any sort you choose, as long as it doesn't hurt anyone else

c. Science

The ability to study the material world gives the human race all the knowledge it will need for success; the answer is more knowledge, more education, more insight; science is the crown jewel of the human race and has the power to conquer all of our problems

d. Evolution

Darwin's theory of origins has extended far beyond any boundaries he would have conceived, but has become a way of understanding all of human experience; we as the human race are continually evolving, developing,

leaving behind weaker expressions of humanity and getting stronger and better; raising ourselves from a pond of slime to travel to the moon and beyond

e. Psychology

Sigmund Freud developed the secular study of the human soul, and birthed a pseudo-science which is constantly developing; studying human beings based on their thought processes and dispositions, including their psychoses, fears, hopes, and habits... looking at how they were raised from infancy, what dreams they have, what struggles they experience

f. Relativity

Albert Einstein's theory of relativity began in the realm of physics and higher mathematics to explain the behavior of distant starlight in gravitational fields; popular explanations sought to explain motion relative to the observer's perspective, and the expression "Everything's relative" started to be a life philosophy for people who made no effort to understand the physics or math... just that your perspective affected everything

g. Postmodernism

Flowing from relativism, this is the last 20th century philosophy characterized by skepticism, subjectivity... metaphysical truth (like religion) cannot be known absolutely, but only as it appears to you... "That's good for you"

5. A World of Human Knowledge Right at Your Fingertips

- a. Digital age, hand-held devices, carry information right to your brain instantly
- b. So-called experts weigh in on all the current events and their significance
- c. Pundits speak and we listen... we can "Google" answers to any question we might have
- d. YouTube can give us how-to videos on almost anything

Nine steps on building a supercomputer

I actually Googled "How to perform hip replacement surgery on yourself," but came up empty... no one had any tips, at least not yet!

- e. We can become instant experts ourselves by the ease of our smartphones and our ability to tap into that seemingly limitless data base of knowledge

6. However... the ocean of data and human learning and opinion does not equal WISDOM... actually 1 Corinthians 1-3 will directly pit the wisdom of God vs. the wisdom of man; with the charge of FOOLISHNESS dogging the heels of the opponent... the worldly wise man charges God and his messengers (like the Apostle Paul) with FOOLISHNESS, and God makes the exact same charge against them—those who refuse the gospel and choose their own wisdom are eternally seen to be FOOLS
7. This is WAR, pure and simple... world-view war
8. And God is fighting with some shocking weapons: his own Son, bloody on a Roman cross; the Corinthian church, made up for the most part of the lowest levels of society; the Apostle Paul, whose whole ministry was based on unimpressive public speaking and humble hardworking service

E. God's Goal

1. He wants to save sinners in such a way that they are HUMBLED and give him all the glory and praise
2. So he shocks the polished thinkers of Greece and of the world by his apparent FOOLISHNESS
3. Three-fold foolishness
 - a. God's Foolishness #1: The Crucified Savior
 - b. God's Foolishness #2: The Corinthian Church
 - c. God's Foolishness #3: The Preaching of Paul

F. God's Goal: His Own Glory in Our Salvation

1 Corinthians 1:31 "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord."

II. The Cross: Foolishness or God's Power (vs. 18)

1 Corinthians 1:18 For 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.

- A. Every word in this verse is VITALLY IMPORTANT!!
- B. Understood in the FLOW of the chapter
 1. The verse begins with the connective "for"
 2. This should always cause us to look at what went before

1 Corinthians 1:17 For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel--not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

3. Paul is specifically distancing himself there from “words of human wisdom”... the polished presentation of human wisdom, of rhetorical skill... which would empty the cross of its power

C. The Message of the Cross

1. The Greek is specifically focused on the content... not the delivery
2. It is important for preachers to speak with clarity and passion and power
3. But WHAT they say—the content of the message—is infinitely more important than how polished is their presentation
4. The “message of the cross” is a simple shorthand for the gospel itself
 - a. The concept that God sent his Son into the world, incarnate... in human flesh... truly human... with flesh and blood and bones
 - b. This man lived a normal human life... he walked along dusty roads and sat down to talk with people; he got hungry and ate; he got thirsty and drank; he got tired and slept
 - c. However, he was also fully divine—truly Almighty God on earth; he did miracles: he walked on water, stilled a storm with a word; he healed all manner of illnesses, including opening the eyes of a man born blind, and raising from the dead a man who had died four days earlier; he never sinned
 - d. The message of the cross is that this God-man was actually nailed through his hands and feet and lifted up in front of everyone; he bled and died
 - e. And that this all was according to the scriptures; planned by God as an atoning sacrifice for our sins; that God transferred the guilt of human sinners onto him, and he died the penalty God requires of us...
 - f. But not only that, God raised Jesus Christ up from the grave on the third day, giving him a resurrection body that will never die again; and God ascended Jesus to his right hand, and he will come back someday to judge all people
 - g. And that if we BELIEVE this message of the cross, Almighty God will forgive us for all our sins, live within us by His Holy Spirit, transform us to be more and more holy, and then raise us up from the dead at the end of the world

h. This is what Paul means by “the message of the cross”

5. This very message is DIVIDES the human race into two very different categories... believers who are being saved and non-believers who are perishing

D. Foolishness to those who are Perishing

1. This “message of the cross” is FOOLISHNESS to those who are perishing
- a. Perishing means dying... “experiencing eternal loss”

Matthew 7:13-14 "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. ¹⁴ But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.

- b. The verb indicates that the perishing is going on right now... they are in the process of losing their souls eternally...
- c. Their pagan lifestyles, their sensual idolatrous ways are showing that destruction is at work in their minds and bodies
- d. When they hear the message of the cross, their darkened minds cannot comprehend it... it seems UTTERLY FOOLISH
- e. Why would God leave the perfect happiness of heaven and come down here in a human body? Why would he be born of a Jewish peasant girl, wrapped in rough linen cloths, and laid in a feeding trough? Then live a normal life filled with pain?
- f. Why would he allow himself to be arrested and tied up? If he was God, why didn't he break free and kill all his enemies?
- g. And who is it who dies on a Roman cross anyway? Two words: CRIMINAL SLAVES...
- h. No Roman citizen could ever be crucified; that was such a degrading way to die it was reserved for the lowest levels of society... and criminals—condemned by Roman justice
- i. How could a dead Jewish man on a Roman cross save the world?
- j. It seemed utterly foolish to those who were in the process of perishing

E. The Power of God for Us Who Are Being Saved

1. On the other hand, this simple message of Christ crucified and resurrected is the POWER OF GOD for our salvation

Romans 1:16 I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile

2. It is the most powerful thing in history... it changed the outcome for eternity for a multitude of sinners greater than anyone could count
3. It rescued us from an eternity in hell, and gave us an eternity in heaven
4. That is a POWERFUL thing!
5. It is powerful for US who ARE BEING SAVED
 - a. The present participle Paul uses here shows that our salvation is a process
 - b. We are NOT DONE being saved...
 - i) We “have been saved” in justification
 - ii) We “are being saved” daily in sanctification
 - iii) And We “will be saved” on judgment day and from the grave in glorification
 - c. And it is the message of the cross that will continue to save us every day for the rest of our lives

Tim Keller: “The cross is not the ABCs of the Christian life; it is the A to Z of the Christian life”

So... the human race is radically divided into two categories by the cross... those who are being saved by it, and those who consider it foolishness because they are perishing

And this is not a mere accident or coincidence... God actually planned it this way from before the creation of the world

III. God’s Destruction of Human Wisdom (vs. 19-21)

1 Corinthians 1:19 For it is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate."

A. God Planned to Humble the Human Mind by the Gospel

1. The message of the gospel is meant to make us all be spiritual beggars, people who humble ourselves and accept a message even a child could understand
2. He means to make the humblest believer wiser than the greatest super-genius unbeliever

B. The Quote from Isaiah

1. Paul reaches back seven centuries to the words of Isaiah the prophet, from Isaiah 29:14
2. The Jews of Isaiah's day were threatened by mighty Assyria, the most powerful nation on earth at that time
3. BUT, instead of turning to God and humbling themselves, they send emissaries to Egypt with gold and silver to make an alliance with the wise men of Egypt... the philosophers and sages
4. They trusted in human wisdom rather than the power of God
5. God saved Judah by a single angel who killed 185,000 Assyrian troops in a single night
6. All the plans and wisdom and intelligence of the experts in Isaiah's day meant NOTHING... God's plan alone succeeded

C. In this Context Here... Judgment Day Will Show How Futile the Scoffers Were

1. Stephen Hawking, the British physicist who just died recently stands as a prime example of a brilliant FOOL
2. He was an atheist who said this about the afterlife:

"I regard the brain as a computer which will stop working when its components fail. There is no heaven or afterlife for broken-down computers; that is a fairy story for people afraid of the dark."

3. History is full of scholars, skeptics, scientists, military conquerors, inventors, authors, CEOs and other great men and women who mocked Christ and the church and the gospel... they all thought they were smarter than that... they had a better way
 - a. I think of Voltaire, Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson, Mark Twain, Charles Darwin, Thomas Edison, Henry Ford, Mahatma Gandhi, Albert Einstein, and many others
 - b. Absolutely brilliant minds... but they all thought the gospel of Jesus Christ was foolishness
 - c. God promises to vindicate his Son on Judgment Day...

1 Corinthians 1:19 I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.

4. On that day, God will mock them... as Paul does with these series of questions:

1 Corinthians 1:20 Where 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?

5. Their brilliant mockery of Christianity, of Christ on the cross, will be exposed by the glory of Christ's role as Judge of all the earth

6. The wise man, the scholar, the philosopher of this age will be utterly humiliated when they hear these words

Matthew 25:41 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.

D. God's Wisdom Was to Make It Impossible to Find Him Unaided

1 Corinthians 1:21 For 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.

1. Putting it simply, it was very wise for God to HIDE HIMSELF from the scholars and scientists and philosophers of this age

2. The world, with all its brilliant philosophies, could never reason its way to God

The Greek thinkers (like Archimedes, Pythagoras) came up with stunningly accurate scientific and mathematical formulations

One of them, Eratosthenes, actually calculated the circumference of the earth without ever leaving Egypt... he was amazingly accurate, only about 15% off.

BUT none of the brilliant Greek thinkers, scholars, debaters, or scientists every THOUGHT THEIR WAY TO GOD... God hid himself from all of them

John 17:25 Righteous Father! The world has not known You!!

The great tragedy of the world... despite the overwhelming evidence of the existence of God, the world has not KNOWN God, and never will know God apart from his self-revelation in the message of the cross

"In the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know God..."

Given that God's purpose is to HUMBLE human arrogance, it was VERY WISE of God to reveal himself only to people who humble themselves like little children and believe the message of the cross

3. God is a God who hides himself

Isaiah 45:15 Truly you are a God who hides himself, O God and Savior of Israel.

4. Jesus CELEBRATED the fact that God hides himself!!

Matthew 11:25-26 At that time Jesus said, "I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. ²⁶ Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure.

5. God was PLEASED to reveal himself by this so-called “foolish” message of the cross

6. God was PLEASED also to SAVE everyone who believes in this message!

1 Corinthians 1:21 God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe.

God DELIGHTS in saving humble people who turn their backs on their own achievements and intellect and strength

Paul further heightens the point he is making in verses 22-25:

IV. Christ Crucified: Stumbling Block/Foolishness vs Power and Wisdom (vs. 22-25)

1 Corinthians 1:22-25 Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.

MORE NEXT WEEK!

V. Applications

A. Come to Christ!... and Stand in Awe of the Wisdom of God

Isaiah 55:8-9 "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD. ⁹ "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

Isaiah 55:6-7 Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near. ⁷ Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon.

B. Therefore, Trust God When It Seems Like He Doesn't Know What He's Doing

1. The foolishness of God is wiser than YOUR wisdom

2. The weakness of God is stronger than YOUR strength
3. When God has orchestrated some painful trial in your life, TRUST HIM... he knows what he's doing
4. Especially trust him to FINISH your salvation... to US who are BEING SAVED, the cross of Christ is the ONGOING power of your salvation
5. You will never graduate from the cross... the cross will continue to teach you how to think about life, death, and sin

C. Do Not Be Overly Impressed by Human Genius

1. It's easy to be overwhelmed by the incredible brilliance of these geniuses
2. I still have a hard time comprehending how Albert Einstein could sit in a Swiss patent office with paper and pen and write down the theory of relativity
3. The brilliance of Mozart in composing full pieces in his head before he wrote a single note on the page
4. The genius of Nobel prize-winning biologists and chemists and physicists will take your breath away
5. But if you are a Christian and they are not, you are infinitely WISER than they are
6. Remember that education alone is not the answer to the world's ills
 - a. The liberal elite sneers at less educated people and assumes that more and more money poured into government schooling will produce a more and more enlightened nation
 - b. While it is certainly better to be literate than illiterate, remember that some of the worst crimes ever affected on humanity have been done by highly intelligent, well-educated people
 - c. The goal is not intelligence but GOD'S WISDOM... and true wisdom is found in Christ