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Sermon Notes

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The Cross: Stumbling Block, Foolishness... or the Power and Wisdom of God

1 Corinthians 1:22-25

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.

1 Corinthians 1:23-24 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.

1 Corinthians 2:14 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.

Since the very beginning of Christianity, the church has had to endure the mockery of the world concerning our message. The “best and brightest” of the world have almost universally scoffed and scorned the idea of Jesus Christ and him crucified. The world’s laughter can be very painful to endure, and it can cause us to recoil and to doubt whether or not our faith is as foolish, as ridiculous as these brilliant despisers say it is.

The mocking sounds like this:

Voltaire: brilliant writer, philosopher, skeptic, moralist... lived during the 1700s, a contemporary of Benjamin Franklin’s... used satire and humor to mock the Christian faith

[Speaking of the Second Coming of Christ]: “Why had not Christ kept his promise to come in a cloud with power and great glory to establish the Kingdom of God before this generation shall pass away? What had detained him? Was the fog too thick?”

Thomas Jefferson openly defended the use of ridicule to mock Christianity and the Bible:

“Ridicule is the only weapon which can be used against unintelligible propositions. Ideas must be distinct before reason can act upon them; and

no man ever had a distinct idea of the trinity. It is the mere 'Abracadabra' of the charlatans calling themselves the priests of Jesus."

Mark Twain was obsessed with mocking and ridiculing the Bible, and Christ...

"If Christ has really been God, he could have proved it, since nothing is impossible with God. When God wants to prove that the sun and moon may be depended upon to do their work day and night, he has no difficulty about it. It is only when he apparently wants to prove a future life [beyond the grave] to us that his invention fails, and he comes up against a problem that is beyond the reach of his alleged omnipotence."

Thomas Edison, inventor of the light bulb, the phonograph and a thousand other patentable inventions:

"Nature is what we know. We do not know the gods of religions. And nature is not kind, or merciful, or loving. If God made me – the fabled God of the three qualities mercy, kindness, and love – he also made the fish I catch and eat. And where do his mercy, kindness and love for that fish come in? No, nature made us – nature did it all – not the gods of the religions... I cannot believe in the immortality of the soul; I am an aggregate of cells, as for instance New York City is an aggregate of individuals. Will New York City go to heaven? No, all this talk of existence beyond the grave is wrong; it is born in the imagination of men."

Steve Jobs, the recently deceased CEO of Apple, inventor of the iPhones and iPads that have changed the modern world and one of the most influential people of the late 20th and early 21st century was raised in a Lutheran, church-going home. But in 1968 when he was 13 years old, he saw a photograph in an issue of Life Magazine of a pair of starving children in Biafra, Africa who were suffering because of a famine there... Jobs was understandably and deeply troubled by this photo and went to his Lutheran pastor for an explanation; Jobs held up one finger and said, "Did God know I would hold up this finger before I did?" The pastor rightly said, "Yes, God knows everything." Then Jobs produced the photo of the starving children and said, "Well, does God know about this and what's going to happen to these children?" The pastor said simply, "Steve, I know you don't understand, but, yes, God knew about this." But the pastor gave no biblical explanation of the problem of evil and suffering and how the cross of Christ is God's remedy to all the evils of this world. The young, brilliant, searching soul of Steve Jobs announced he could never have anything to do with worshiping such a God, and he never went back to church again. Jobs pursued spirituality – Buddhism, gurus, hallucinogenic drugs... he didn't mock Jesus, but sought to live like a Jesus he could accept and who lived in the real world as he understood it

I could multiply such stories of amazingly brilliant men and women who rejected biblical Christianity and who find the cross foolishness

The college campuses of 21st century America are home to some of the most aggressive mockers of Christianity. At Princeton University, a professor of philosophy named Richard Rorty openly declared to Christian parents his commitment to mock their faith and teach them a whole new set of morals:

“... we try to arrange things so that students who enter as bigoted, homophobic, religious fundamentalists will leave college with views more like our own ... we do our best to convince these students of the benefits of secularization. ... So we are going to go right on trying to discredit you in the eyes of your children, trying to strip your fundamentalist religious community of dignity, trying to make your views seem silly rather than discussable. We are not so inclusivist as to tolerate intolerance such as yours ... I think those students are lucky to find themselves under the benevolent [domination] of people like me, and to have escaped the grip of their frightening, vicious, dangerous parents ...”

For us as Christians, it can be very distressing to learn that people vastly more intelligent than we are, who have discovered things and invented things and written things and painted things that are pure genius and who have shaped the human world as we know it think that the message of Christ and him crucified is worthy of MOCKERY...

The Apostle Paul had to face that mockery in his day... when he preached the gospel in Athens, the brilliant philosophers there MOCKED him personally “What is this BABBLER trying to say?”

Even worse, they mocked the message of the cross and the resurrection:

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."

Paul addresses this directly in the text we’re looking at this morning:

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.

I. We Preach Christ Crucified (vs. 23)

A. What is the “Message of the Cross?” (vs. 18)

1. Paul says “we preach Christ crucified...”
2. This is the center of the gospel which God ordained for the salvation of the world
3. Christ = the Anointed One
 - a. Jewish heritage is a SUPERNATURAL one

The Jewish religion is a SUPERNATURAL religion based on miracles and prophecies; Moses was a figure of prophecy, for God had promised Abraham that his descendants would be enslaved 400 years and then God would deliver them; Moses made prophecies that came true; and especially Moses was identified as their deliverer by miracles, signs and wonders... a staff turned into a serpent; his hand turned leprous and then was healed; Moses performed ten miraculous plagues on Egypt, then led the Jewish nation through the Red Sea; Moses fed the people with miraculous manna from heaven and water from a rock

- a. The Jews were promised a Son of David who would sit on David’s throne and rule the world

The next great leader in Israel’s history was King David; he did no miracles; but God made a prophetic promise to him to raise up his son (descendent)

1 Chronicles 17:14 I will set him over my house and my kingdom forever; his throne will be established forever."

When the Jews were expelled from the Promised Land because of their sins, their desire for the Messiah greatly increased and they were deeply expectant for the Messiah to come and destroy their gentile enemies and rule the world

John 4:25 The woman said, "I know that Messiah" (called Christ) "is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us."

John 7:27 When the Christ comes, no one will know where he is from.

John 7:31 many in the crowd put their faith in him. They said, "When the Christ comes, will he do more miraculous signs than this man?"

- a. The “Messiah” literally means “The Anointed One”... the “Christ” is the Greek word for “Anointed One”... All the Kings of the Jews were anointed with oil as a sign of their selection by God for that role... and as a symbol of the influence of the Holy Spirit on them to fulfill their role with wisdom

- d. He was a figure of PROPHECY whom the Jews were waiting for
- 4. At the right time, God fulfilled his promise by sending his Son, Jesus to be the Christ

Matthew 1:1 A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham:

- 5. But Jesus was much more than merely the Son of David... he was also the Son of God; as his mother, the Virgin Mary was told by the angel:

Luke 1:35 "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.

- 6. God anointed Jesus with the Holy Spirit and he did many miracles proving his supernatural identity

Matthew 4:24 News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed, and he healed them.

- 7. These miracles IDENTIFIED Jesus as divine, as supernatural, as worthy of faith
- 8. But the central reason Jesus came was to die as an atoning sacrifice for our sins; as John the Baptist said about him

John 1:29 "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

- a. This language hearkens back to the lessons of the animal sacrificial system
- b. Animals were killed, their blood was poured out on the altar to teach three lessons
- c. Lesson #1: All sins deserve the death penalty... and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins
- d. Lesson #2: The death penalty can be paid by a substitute... essential to this idea is that GUILT CAN BE TRANSFERRED from the sinner to the substitute
- e. Lesson #3: The substitute cannot be an animal... the whole system was just SYMBOLIC
- 9. The substitution of Jesus Christ under the penalty of our sins is the essence of the message of the cross

Isaiah 53:5-6 he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are

healed. ⁶ We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

10. This is the MESSAGE OF THE CROSS... this is what the Jews found to be a stumbling block and Greek found foolishness

B. Why Did Paul Preach It?

1. Paul went about from place to place preaching this message
2. He went to Jewish synagogues first... and tried to explain this message of the cross of Christ to them
3. He went to the Gentile marketplaces day after day and preached this message of the cross of Christ to them
4. WHY? Because God has willed that sinners are made right by HEARING the words of this message and BELIEVING that these words are true

Romans 3:23-25 all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. ²⁵ God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood.

Romans 3:28 we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from observing the law.

Romans 10:17 faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ

Romans 10:8-10 "The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart," that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming: ⁹ That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰ For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.

Romans 10:13 Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

Now, that word has to be proclaimed for people to be saved:

Romans 10:14-15 How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? ¹⁵ And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!"

5. So... that's why Paul preached this gospel message all over the world

6. Paul's mission was to go from place to place and preach this message of the cross of Christ

1 Corinthians 1:23 We preach Christ crucified...

But NEITHER Jews nor Greeks were ready to receive such a message!

1 Corinthians 1:22 Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom

C. Preaching to a Hostile Audience Everywhere He Went

1. The Jews DEMAND miraculous signs

- a. As we said, the Jewish religion was a supernatural religion... an interference by Almighty God in the normal affairs of life
- b. God birthed the Jewish nation by a man 100 years old, Abraham, who had a barren wife, Sarah... their son Isaac was a miracle baby
- c. So also God did miracles through Moses to deliver the Jewish nation from slavery in Egypt as we have said
- d. Again and again, God raised up prophets, many of whom did miraculous signs and wonders: Elijah and Elisha performed mighty signs to show God was with them
- e. So when Jesus came making an amazing claim about himself, the Jews DEMANDED to see miracles to prove himself
- f. Jesus did more miracles than can be counted or cataloged, but it was never enough

Matthew 12:38-40 Then some of the Pharisees and teachers of the law said to him, "Teacher, we want to see a miraculous sign from you." ³⁹ He answered, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. ⁴⁰ For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.

- g. Yet the signs Jesus did WERE valid proof of his claim to be God in the flesh

John 14:11 Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves.

2. When Paul preached the gospel, he was also empowered to do SOME miracles to prove the message he preached

3. But still, it was never enough... the Jewish skeptics were DEMANDING more and more displays of miracles... and just as in the case of Jesus' ministry, they did not produce faith; Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead after four days, and the Jewish opponents of Jesus decided they needed to KILL LAZARUS as well as Jesus!
4. Paul says Greeks on the other hand are looking for WISDOM
 - a. By this, he means a polished system of human philosophy dressed in smooth rhetoric
 - b. Fine-sounding words and lofty philosophical ideas
5. But what BOTH Jewish skeptics and Greek skeptics did not realize is that Christ crucified is the answer to BOTH... the most powerful miracle that has ever been done, and the greatest display of WISDOM in human history

II. Jewish Rejection: The Cross is a Stumbling Block

1 Corinthians 1:23 we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews

- A. The Message of a Crucified Messiah was DEEPLY OFFENSIVE to the Jewish People...
 1. So much so that Paul frequently started riots wherever he preached
 2. His Jewish opponents got so violent that they were screaming for his death in Jerusalem... earlier, some of them were so dedicated to his death that they swore to stop eating until they could assassinate Paul
- B. First, the Incarnation Itself... the Idea that Almighty God Could Become HUMAN
 1. The Greek philosopher types found this absurd, since they were so hostile to the physical world and thought why would a god want to take on a human body and suffer all these miseries?
 2. But the Greek mythologies were well familiar with gods and goddesses taking on human bodies
 3. The Jews were utterly horrified by Jesus' claim to be God in the flesh

John 10:30 I and the Father are one.

John 10:31-33 Again the Jews picked up stones to stone him, ³² but Jesus said to them, "I have shown you many great miracles from the Father. For which of these do you stone me?" ³³ "We are not stoning you for any of these," replied the Jews, "but for blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God."

4. The Jews had been taught very clearly to hate all false gods and new religions... even if the person did miracles!!

Deuteronomy 13:1-5 *If a prophet, or one who foretells by dreams, appears among you and announces to you a miraculous sign or wonder, ² and if the sign or wonder of which he has spoken takes place, and he says, "Let us follow other gods" (gods you have not known) "and let us worship them," ³ you must not listen to the words of that prophet or dreamer. The LORD your God is testing you to find out whether you love him with all your heart and with all your soul... That prophet or dreamer must be put to death, because he preached rebellion against the LORD your God*

The Jews saw Jesus' miracles, but they also heard his claim to be God

C. But Even Worse Was the Idea of a Crucified Messiah

1. The Messiah, the Son of David, was supposed to conquer all the Gentile powers and rule the world in a Jewish throne from the city of Jerusalem

Psalm 72:8-11 *He will rule from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth. ⁹ The desert tribes will bow before him and his enemies will lick the dust. ... All kings will bow down to him and all nations will serve him.*

2. When Jesus was arrested, condemned, beaten, and then nailed to a ROMAN CROSS, that was absolute conclusive proof to the Jewish nation that Jesus COULD NOT BE THE CHRIST! There was no way he could be the KING

John 19:19-21 *Pilate had a notice prepared and fastened to the cross. It read: JESUS OF NAZARETH, THE KING OF THE JEWS. ²⁰ Many of the Jews read this sign, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and the sign was written in Aramaic, Latin and Greek. ²¹ The chief priests of the Jews protested to Pilate, "Do not write 'The King of the Jews,' but that this man claimed to be king of the Jews."*

D. The Cross was the Curse of God!

1. Clearest proof of all... Jesus died hanging on a tree

Deuteronomy 21:22-23 *If a man guilty of a capital offense is put to death and his body is hung on a tree, ²³ you must not leave his body on the tree overnight. Be sure to bury him that same day, because anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse.*

2. There was NO WAY the Jews could accept the Son of David, the crown jewel of their race being hung on a bloody cross under the wrath and curse of God
3. The Messiah was the "Blessed One"... not the "Cursed One"

E. How Paul Worked It Out

1. Before his conversion, Paul himself was filled with hatred for this message... he did everything he could to destroy the church
2. But suddenly, on the Road to Damascus, everything changed in an instant
3. Paul was struck to the ground by an overpowering, blinding light... the radiant glory of God
4. And he heard a voice saying, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" "Who are you, Lord?" Paul asked. Then the answer that changed Paul's life forever: "I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting."
5. In an instant, it was clear that Jesus was God, glorious, radiant, alive, having been raised from the dead
6. What was no so clear was all the theology... how could you hang as a CURSE on a tree
7. The doctrine of SUBSTITUTION came through by the Holy Spirit

Galatians 3:13 Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree."

8. This is the ultimate power and wisdom of the cross... this overcame the STUMBLING BLOCK of the cross for Paul

III. Greek Rejection: The Cross is Foolishness

1 Corinthians 1:23 we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews, and FOOLISHNESS to Gentiles

- A. For the Greeks, the Cross was FOOLISHNESS
- B. It made NO SENSE why God would take on a human body and be physically miserable when he could be totally free from animal passions in heaven
- C. The Idea that God would be born of a Jewish maiden in some backwater of the Roman Empire made no sense
- D. The idea of repentance and faith being the ground of our forgiveness... utterly foolish

IV. For the Called: The Cross is the Power and Wisdom of God

1 Corinthians 1:23-24 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.

A. The Sovereign Calling of God is EVERYTHING here!

1. For those whom God has called, everything changes
2. Suddenly, the ugliest thing imaginable becomes the most beautiful thing in history... a bloody dead man on a wooden cross is the greatest display of glory there has ever been... a perfect display of all the attributes of God—the love of God, the justice of God, the patience of God and... especially here, the POWER OF GOD and the WISDOM OF GOD
3. The calling of God on a human heart changes forever that person's perception of the cross
4. What does it mean, "to those whom God has called?"
5. There are TWO CALLS in the gospel... the external audible call of the words of the gospel, and the internal sovereign call of the Holy Spirit
6. When the words of the gospel are preached, there is a pull in the words, but our sin natures will resist that pull

B. The Irresistible Call of the Holy Spirit

1. God has a power to CALL THINGS that don't yet exist, and MAKE them exist!
2. When God says, "Let there be light!" there is light
3. When God says "Let the waters be gathered into one place and let dry ground appear," BEHOLD it happens
4. When God says to a barren couple, "A year from now I will return and Sarah will have a son", nothing can stop it from happening
5. When Jesus calls into Lazarus's tomb and says "Lazarus, come forth" with the CALL comes LIFE and the power to obey

Romans 4:17 the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were.

6. The Holy Spirit is the one who works this powerful change in our hearts to see the WISDOM and the POWER of God in the cross of Christ

1 Corinthians 2:14 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.

Turning this around, the person WITH the Spirit of God DOES accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are NO LONGER foolishness to him but have become wisdom, the cross of Christ is NO LONGER weakness or a stumbling block, but has become the POWER OF GOD to save their souls... so the Spirit enables the person to UNDERSTAND the cross of Christ and discern it spiritually

That's what it means to be CALLED by GOD

C. The "Called" are BOTH Jews and Greeks

1. There are a small number of Jewish people around the world who have been called by the Holy Spirit to believe in Christ
2. There is a huge number—literally millions and millions—of Gentiles around the world who have been called by the Holy Spirit to believe in Christ
3. For these called, the cross of Christ has become WISDOM from God and POWER from God

V. The Superiority of God's Wisdom and Power

1 Corinthians 1:25 For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.

A. In the End, God is going to WIN THIS CONTEST... this WAR of WORLDVIEWS... his wisdom and power will be totally vindicated at the end of the world

B. Even tiniest bit of wisdom from God has depths to it that we can scarcely imagine

Luke 12:27-28 "Consider how the lilies grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you, not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. ²⁸ If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today, and tomorrow is thrown into the fire

If you sit and study a wildflower for a long time, you will become more and more amazed at the intricacies and complexities of these beautiful creations... God lavished wisdom in the color and symmetry and biological functions of each part of a wildflower

Man's wisdom cannot come close to what God has done

Man studies as an observer and discovered and cataloger... not as a creator...
 God CREATED the wildflowers and all the other living things on earth...
 we just barely scratch the surface of understanding what God has done

- C. Fundamentally, though... this is talking about the CROSS: What APPEARS to be foolishness on the part of God is actually INFINITE WISDOM... when we are all in heaven, praising God for our salvation with perfect humility, we will see the wisdom of God in humbling us by the cross
- D. And when we have been rescued from all of Satan's clever and vicious attacks, and our faith has survived it all and we have been pulled FORCEFULLY from all the lusts and attractions and eddies and currents and whirlpools of this world's wickedness and have made it safely to the New Heavens and New Earth, and we realize it was the POWER OF THE CROSS that got us there... and not just us, but literally hundreds of millions of people, we will know how powerful the cross of Jesus Christ really was

VI. Applications

A. If you are not yet a Christian... I am SO DELIGHTED you are here!!

1. Do you feel the CALL of God on your soul to believe in Christ?
2. Do you see the cross differently now than when you walked in here an hour ago? Do you now see it as a display of God's love for you as a sinner? Do you see it as a display of God's power to save sinners from all over the world from eternity in hell? Do you now see the cross of Christ as extremely wise in that God is saving sinners in a way that humbles them? Do you therefore see the cross of Christ—ugly and bloody and rough and wooden—as actually BEAUTIFUL? This is the CALL of the Holy Spirit in your life. TRUST in CHRIST right now! Look to him and trust him to save you! Don't wait, don't delay! This is exactly what it looks like

B. If you are a Christian... I am also SO DELIGHTED you are here!!

1. Be confident in the cross of Christ... despite the high-level MOCKERY of the world by super geniuses and clever entertainers who are much smarter than us... despite that, God's wisdom and power in the cross of Christ WILL BE VINDICATED on Judgment Day... be CONFIDENT! Don't let their mockery intimidate you!
2. See the WISDOM of God in humbling human pride... and let the cross of Christ humble you more; be more and more humble in your own eyes... this is the essence of WISDOM
3. Trust in the POWER of God to finish saving you! "He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the Day of Christ Jesus!" (Phil. 1:6);

“No one can snatch you out of God’s hand!” (John 10:28-29) because he is GREATER than everyone

4. SPEAK Christ crucified to your unsaved friends and coworkers and fellow students at school and your neighbors... EXPECT that many will STUMBLE over the stumbling stone, or MOCK it as foolish; the gospel is the only power of God in the world for saving souls... TRUST in the message of the cross to save people, and do not be ASHAMED of the gospel of God
5. This sermon teaches us that GOD’S WISDOM and POWER are surprising and offensive to our natural minds; so that means sometimes what God chooses to do in our lives might seem FOOLISH or cause us to STUMBLE... Trust God’s wisdom and power in your life when he brings suffering into your life; when your hurting, confused, struggling spiritually, wondering why God isn’t giving you the job you want or the healing your loved one needs... remember the lesson of the cross... God’s ways are not our ways, and his power is made perfect in weakness
6. MISSIONS: this one message is the same for sinners all over the world! Let’s be more and more active in missions... supporting the missionaries we have sent out with encouragement