

1 Corinthians 1:17-20 (NIV)

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

46-01-01-The Foolishness of the Gospel

Gospel, foolishness, power, human wisdom, preaching
1 Cor 1:17-20

It may seem foolish, but God invested everything in a simple message.

INTRODUCTION: (read **text**)

–In this sermon series on the *Gospel*, we've looked at "*the heart of the Gospel*" and "*the sharing of the Gospel*." Today: **title**.

–**v.17a**, "*For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel...*" [**Early Catholic missionaries to Asia** baptized many converts. But because Christ's death repulsed Asians, they failed to preach the Cross, and their work dwindled. Later when evangelical missionaries came preaching "Christ crucified," an Asian Church began to grow. Today the world's largest congregation is in Seoul, Korea. And the Church in China grew 50 times larger under Communist persecution.] **Baptism or church membership doesn't bring salvation. *Preaching the Cross* is the means by which God has decided to save souls. **HOM.idea. Human wisdom often questions God's method. But human wisdom has also created...****

I. An Ineffective Gospel– 17b, "...not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power."

- A. Why can't we ***tone down*** the message ("*You know... so we won't turn people off.*")? **It doesn't work, because...**
1. Downplaying Christ's sacrifice on the Cross diminishes our view of the God's holiness– **Lev 11:45**, I am the LORD who brought you up out of Egypt to be your God; therefore be holy, because I am holy.
 2. Ignoring the divine judgment of the Cross doesn't *elevate* but *lowers* our view of the love of God– **Rom 5:8**, But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.
- B. **It doesn't work to *reduce* the message of the Cross to a moral example to follow.** (*Taking up our crosses leads nowhere*, unless we have surrendered to Christ and are following Him.)
- C. It doesn't help to ***dress up*** the Cross in popular trends & opinions:
1. Using politically correct words: "*Decorate it a bit, to make it presentable!*" [**An old master artist** found observers more attracted to the vases on the table he'd painted in a "Last Supper" scene than they were to Christ's face, so he immediately *struck them out of the painting*.]
 2. Using philosophically correct words: "*All is relative, so don't be dogmatic! Absolutes offend people.*" (Change *theology* to please *modern thinking*, and we trade truth's power for popular lies.)

TRANS: Is it *foolish*, for God to put all His eggs in the a single *Gospel* basket? No! *Good ideas* have emptied the *Good News* of God's power. **Toning** it down, **reducing** its message, or **decorating** it, doesn't **work!** A Cross cluttered by human wisdom is ineffective. Paul says in **1 Cor 2:1-2**, When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. **But, even if preached simply, the truth isn't always well received.** *For some, it's...*

II. An Unsuccessful Gospel— v.18a, *For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing...*

A. A choice is involved—a choice with consequences:

1. Part of the *message* is that those who reject it are perishing
 - a. Jesus said this emphatically— John 8:24, “I told you that you would die in your sins; if you do not believe that I am the one I claim to be, you will indeed die in your sins.” (His Cross saves those who are perishing.)
 - b. And Jesus didn't hesitate to describe what perishing meant— Mat 25:41, “Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.’”
2. It's folly itself to think *the message of the cross is foolishness!* [Hitler tried doing away with the Cross in Germany. His plan for a *National Reich Church* stated: “*the Christian cross must be removed from all churches, cathedrals, and chapels.... It must be superseded by the only unconquerable symbol, the swastika.*” He was wrong! So are all who think the Cross and its message to be *foolishness*. Their own folly will eventually be exposed!]

B. Paul knew his audience: Greeks & Jews, not racial categories, but— **v.22**, *Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom.* (Not much has changed from Paul's day: many still seek a *supernatural proofs* or *intellectual answers.*) **What did Paul say to that?**

TRANS: **v.23**, *but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles...* Yet, why is the Gospel sometimes unsuccessful with people, even when it's presented logically or accompanied by powerful manifestations? It might be that they've got another agenda: not really seeking to know or do God's will, but to maintain their own will, their own sovereignty. For this reason, *they consider it...*

III. A Foolish Gospel

A. The gift of human reason is abused when it takes the place of God.

[During the French Revolution, *humanistic rationalism* became a new religion. The new goddess “Reason” was proclaimed in various churches in France.]

- B. When human reason becomes an idol, it must be *brought down*, so that the human soul can look up— v.19, *For it is written: “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.”*
- C. God's strategy often lets human wisdom fizzle out on it own— v.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?*
 1. “**Where is the wise man?**”
 - a. [Gotthold Lessing, a German playwright and philosopher of the 1700s, after trying fruitlessly to create a morality independent of divine revelation, finally admitted, “*If any one can convince me that Christianity is true, he will confer on me the greatest benefit that one can offer to another.*”]
 - b. God's wisdom does what human wisdom can't [Augustine wrote: “*I have read in Plato and Cicero sayings that are very wise and very beautiful; but I never read in either of them: “Come unto me all ye that labour and are heavy laden.”*]
 2. “**Where is the scholar?**” [Many 19th Century scholars studied for years and wrote volumes to prove that many of the OT stories were made-up fictions, only to have their own ideas proven fictitious by the discoveries of modern archaeology. Paul described these foolish, forgotten scholars in 2 Tim 3:7, “*always learning but never able to acknowledge the truth.*”]
 3. “**Where is the philosopher of this age?**” – Today's popular philosophy is New Age thinking (or old-age pantheism: the idea that God is everything, that all distinctions are only appearances or illusion.)
 - a. New-agers say, “*God and I are one; therefore, all is peace.*” (But they gain no true peace until they admit, “*I'm not God!*”)
 - b. They say, “*God is everything; no do or don't, right or wrong.*” (Eve fell for such words, “*Did God really say, ‘You must not eat...?’*”)

CONCLUSION:

–But **v.20's** last question is, “*Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?*” How did He do it? Foolish as it might seem, God invested everything in a message: the Gospel. Later in this epistle, Paul says, “We are fools for Christ...” Embrace the Cross, and you may be called one. –I say, let's be holy fools; let's embrace what is called foolish by those who've been fooled by the deceiver. And let's be like God, investing everything in His Gospel message to a lost world, because for those “*who are being saved,*” “*the message of the cross . . . is the power of God.*”