

Jason Upchurch - 1 Corinthians 1:18-25 - God Gets Glory by Saving Losers - Part 1

Well, this passage of Scripture is going to be a lot of fun. We're going to spend 2 weeks unpacking the reality that God saves losers with a foolish gospel message. That's really the long and the short of it. That's the big takeaway. So if you came this morning for a pep talk, you will most likely be disappointed. But my hope is that you will find greater encouragement in the power of God to save sinners.

There are 2 truths that Paul is going to put together here through the end of the chapter. The first is that the message of the gospel is foolishness to the unbelieving world. And second, that those who believe that message - you and I - are largely from unimpressive backgrounds. We're not wise or strong or of nobility.

Which is why it's only a little tongue in cheek that I say that God saves losers with a foolish gospel message. This morning we will focus on the reality that the gospel message we believe is foolishness. And next week we'll look more at the fact that the people who believe the gospel are considered nothings by the world.

But first, why is Paul even talking about this? He was just urging the church to not be divided. Why is he now talking about the gospel being foolishness and the people who believe it being nobodys?

Well, this section is sort of a tangent that comes from something he says in **Vs. 17. Read**

So Paul says Christ sent him to preach the gospel. And there were 2 conditions. First, baptism was not intrinsic to the gospel message. And second, when he preached the gospel message eloquence wasn't the priority. In fact, it seems as though he was told to not be eloquent.

What does that have to do with divisions? Well, remember some people are clamoring over Paul, some over Apollos and others. And he's saying, "Look: even how I preached the gospel to you is evidence that I am nothing special. I wasn't a great preacher, I didn't use fancy words or rhetoric so that when you believed you would know for sure that it was the work of God in you, not the work of Paul."

So this section from here to the end of the chapter is Paul talking about how he's not to be followed as some great orator. No, what saved the Corinthians is what saves us: the gospel message that looks foolish to the world, but in actuality has massive power to save. And they don't need to clamor over Paul or Barnabas or Cephas or whoever because all they're doing is preaching the same gospel that's foolishness to the world.

Whether it's Paul or Cephas or me or speakers at camp or you guys, we're all preaching the same gospel message that the world views as foolish. This has huge implications in our evangelism by the way, which is really what Paul is talking about. So a lot of my application this morning is going to be about evangelism because that's really what Paul is getting at. When he preaches the gospel, it's foolishness to unbelievers. But he keeps preaching it anyway.

1) The gospel message is foolishness to the world. Read 18

What is the Word of the cross? The word of the cross is what we usually refer to as the gospel. You could call it the message of salvation or eternal life. Here Paul calls it the word of the cross. Why? Because everything we believe revolves around the cross - the crucifixion of Jesus. The cross is at the very center of all that we believe.

In terms of what we believe as Christians, there's a whole lot we could talk about. We could talk about the inerrancy of the Bible, the days of creation, discipleship, the importance of marriage, the atrocities of abortion; a whole bunch of different things. But the one thing that holds all of it together is what happened at the cross. If you remove the cross or misunderstand the cross, everything else falls apart.

It's like our solar system: there's a lot of things floating around our solar system, planets, moons, satellites, comets - but at the center of it all is the sun. If the sun were to suddenly disappear or go supernova or some big change happen, the rest of our solar system would be destroyed.

That's what the cross is to Christianity. At the center of everything we are about is the cross. All of Bible history, all of theology, all of eternity is held together by the inescapable gravitational pull of Calvary. Everything circles around the cross of Jesus Christ. Because it is at the cross that the most amazing thing took place: the God man bore the wrath of God for filthy sinners as he hung and died.

Col. 1:20: Jesus reconciled to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

That doesn't mean everyone is saved, what that means is the entire created cosmos - physical and spiritual - will ultimately come into order in the New Heavens and the New Earth because of the blood that Jesus shed on the cross.

That's the point of the gospel, how we got eternal life, our only hope is faith in what took place on the cross: that the God-man, Jesus, died in our place for our sins to satisfy God's just wrath. That might seem simple or repetitive to us, but all of eternity, all of history, all of God's work hinges on the cross.

So he's talking about the gospel when he says the word of the cross. And he says that the word of the cross is what? Foolishness. This is the Greek word *moria* (μωρία) where we get our word moron. The word of the cross - the gospel - is moronic to those who are perishing. It makes absolutely no sense at all. It's Gibberish.

This is why you hear people scoffing at God calling him the Flying Spaghetti Monster or a fairy tale or whatever. They're perception of Christianity is that the whole thing is foolish.

Notice that Paul phrases this in kind of an unusual way. I think this is important for us to understand. **Read 18**

NKJV, NIV, KASB all the same: there are 2 groups - those who are perishing and those who are being saved. These are groups from God's perspective. It's like there's a line going to heaven and a line going to hell. Those who ultimately end up in heaven will view the word of the cross as power and those who ultimately view it as wisdom will end up in hell. And it's not always easy to tell who is who.

In LA there's this crazy interchange in downtown called the East LA interchange. It's the busiest interchange in the world where two freeways meet two other freeways. 550,000 cars go through it each day. And it's crazy because if you're on one of these freeways you really have no idea where anyone is going. Blinkers mean nothing, brake lights are a luxury. You'll get cut off five times by the same person who's lost. The person in the far right lane may stay in the far right lane and take the exit. Or they may suddenly decide to cross 6 lanes of traffic to go the other direction at the last minute. You really have no idea where anyone is going until they've actually taken the exit. Only God knows where everyone is going.

That's how it is when we preach the gospel. We just preach the gospel to all people and he does the work. Sometimes they look like they're about to take a turn for the gospel and they never do. Others seem like they are careening toward hell when all of a sudden Jesus grabs the wheel. Other people are on the heaven path from very early on, others just the opposite. But we don't know. And so we just preach.

But what we do know is that for those who are perishing - those who will never trust in Christ - the gospel is folly.

Here's the huge evangelism implications: For those who are perishing - those who will ultimately end up in hell - there's nothing we can do to make the gospel seem better than it is. We can't make it sound more impressive. We can't make it seem more interesting or intellectually satisfying. We can't make it more fun or more attractive.

You can't tell enough jokes, you can't answer enough scoffing questions, you can't make church fun enough, or offer enough proof of the existence of God. You can't perfect your presentation of the gospel enough to satisfy them. They will never be satisfied. Because they are on the highway to hell. **Look at 2:14-16. Read**

Same truth. The natural person - the unbeliever - does not accept the things of God. Why not? Because the things of God are foolishness to them. God's wisdom is only understood when the Holy Spirit allows us to

discern them. It's like watching a 3D movie. If you've got the 3D glasses it makes sense and it's cool. If you don't have them you're wondering why you're watching a blurry movie.

That's how it is with the Spirit. Unbelievers can understand the gospel. They can understand all the truths. But unless the Spirit opens their eyes to love Jesus and love the gospel, they will think it's foolish. Which means if you understand and love the gospel it's because the Holy Spirit by his own will has given you the ability to truly love it.

Let me give you one more analogy. **Turn to 2 Corinthians 2:14-17.** We have the exact same truth but Paul uses an analogy of smell. And he's talking about preaching the gospel to these same two groups of people: those who are perishing and those who are being saved. **Read 14-17**

As we walk through the world as Christians we give off an aroma. It's the same aroma everywhere we go. But some people love it - it's like Christmas tree smell with cinnamon and spice in the winter. For other people it's like when you're walking by a river and you smell dead, spoiled fish.

Paul says as Christians we just give off an aroma as we preach and live out the gospel. And we can't change the aroma for people. If we stink it's because people hate the gospel and are perishing. If we smell lovely it's because the Spirit has saved them.

So imagine you're having a conversation with someone about the gospel. They ask you what the gospel is and a crash course in what you believe about the Bible.

- So way back in the beginning God made a man named Adam and his wife Eve and set them in a Garden to test them.
- To test them?
- Yeah, they were to keep the Garden but they ended up eating a piece of fruit that they shouldn't so they were sentenced to die.
- God was going to kill them because they ate fruit?
- Yes.
- What kind of fruit?
- We don't know but because they ate that fruit they died and that's also why we die.
- We die because Adam ate some fruit? And we don't even know what kind of fruit it was?
- Right.
- Didn't God know Adam would eat the fruit?
- Yes! But he needed to test him.
- So God knew Adam would eat the fruit, but put the tree there anyway knowing that he would eat it?
- Yep.
- And how long ago was this?
- Oh, right after creation, like 6,000 years ago.
- You don't believe in evolution that millions of scholars believe in?
- No, of course not.
- So you don't believe in evolution but believe a story about a man in a Garden because some guy who didn't have indoor plumbing wrote the story down 4,000 years ago.
- Yep. But that's not all. That same God is holy and because we are sinners if left to ourselves we will be judged for our sins and go to hell.
- You believe in hell? This loving God has an eternal fire prepared for people who aren't perfect?
- Yeah, pretty much. And that same loving God sent Jesus to live a perfect life for us, and die on the cross in our place for our sins.
- Wait, God sent God to earth?
- Yeah.
- I thought you only believed in one God.
- We do, but there's 3 persons.
- Three persons, one God?
- Yep.
- And God came to earth to die?
- Absolutely but he didn't stay dead. He rose from the grave three days later and then ascended into heaven.

- So he woke back up, then went up into heaven.
- Yeah, and that's where he's at now reigning from the throne.
- So how do you suppose a person gets to heaven?
- We simply trust that Jesus is the Lord that died for our sins, that rose again.
- You don't have to do anything to go to heaven?
- Not only do we not have to do anything to go to heaven, we can't do anything to have eternal life.
- Aren't there a lot of ways to get to heaven?
- No, there's only one way - believing in Jesus.
- So God saved people from himself by sending his Son to die on a cross for sins? That's the whole message and the only message?

For the person who is perishing, that message will sound like foolishness. There's nothing you can do to make that message sound better or more intelligent. You can't make church happy enough, you can't make Jesus loving enough. If they are on the road to hell, if they are part of the ones who are perishing, it will be foolishness.

But for those who are being saved that message is what? Power. That message is everything.

Rom. 1:16: I am not ashamed of the gospel for it is the power of God unto salvation, first for the Jew and also for the Greek.

It's power. The same thing they scoff at is our only hope.

Now, let's go back to the same guy asking all those questions earlier. What if they genuinely have questions about creation or logic or other religions or specifics on the Trinity? Do we just go "You know what, you're other going to believe this or you're not so me explaining things to you doesn't matter?" No of course not.

Because we don't know which lane people will end up on. If someone has questions, we should do our best to answer them. There are some people who will ultimately in the group that is being saved that wrestle with the truths of the gospel for a long time. But we need to understand that if at the end of the day, if we're being gentle and kind and representing the truth the best we know it, then if they still reject the gospel it wasn't because of us. It was because of them.

And listen carefully, someone's initial response to hearing that message doesn't mean anything. Many people get excited about Jesus the first time they hear about him, then later walk away. Others seem uninterested yet the Lord is working in their heart. I know at camp people often talk about how many people professed Jesus during a week. You know what I wonder? How many kids go home and lay awake at night thinking about the truths they heard and are saved later. Sometimes the gospel takes a long time to bear fruit.

So the gospel is foolishness to the world.

2) God designed it that way. This is not an accident. Or as programmers say: this isn't a bug, it's feature. **Read 19-24**

So why do those who are perishing view the gospel as folly? Because that's exactly what God has always done. **Vs. 19** is actually a quote from **Isa. 29:14**. God has never done things that seem wise according to the world's standards. Not in Isaiah's day, and certainly not with Jesus.

No one anticipated a suffering Messiah. No one anticipated the God-man would die. No one saw that the Jewish Christ would bring more Gentiles than Jews into the Kingdom. But this was always God's plan.

And what Paul reveals here is that God did all this to show just how foolish human wisdom is. Through the cross, which is the message Paul preaches, God simultaneously confounded Jews and Gentiles. And it makes God happy to do that. **Read 21**

Do you realize that when we preach the gospel message - that is utterly contrary to what the world likes - when we preach that message and someone comes to faith in Jesus, God smiles. Because it drives the world batty. It drives unbelieving Jews batty and it drives unbelieving Gentiles batty. It's like killing 2 birds with one stone.

Jews want signs, Paul says. **Read 22**

They always wanted signs that Jesus was from God. And it didn't matter how many signs Jesus did they were never satisfied.

Remember when Jesus fed the 5,000 men plus women and children then that night walked on water and calmed the storm? Remember what the Jews wanted from Jesus the next morning? A sign. He just catered a football stadium from a couple fish and a couple loaves of bread but they want a sign.

And when he did do signs - like raising Lazarus or healing the man born blind or healing the man on the Sabbath - they thought he had a demon. He couldn't win for losing. "Show us a sign!" He does "That sign is from Satan."

The Greeks were different. They didn't need signs, they wanted to hang out all day and talk about philosophy.

Athens, just 30 miles away from Corinth, was sort of the hub of philosophy. **Acts 17:21** says: "Now, the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new."

That's all they did all day. They wanted to argue about metaphysics, and language and the meaning of words, natural law and the gods.

The Greeks wanted some great philosophical truth that stood at the center of reality. They wanted great truths about how the universe worked and how we were to live.

So when Paul walks up and says: "Here's a little philosophical nugget for you: You need to repent because a dead guy came back to life and will judge the entire world because he's actually not just a man, he's also God" - you know what they did? They mocked him. "Paul you're a mad man talking about resurrection." You know what others did? Some wanted to hear more.

Some who heard the word of the cross were perishing, some were being saved.

The word of the cross confounds all people because the sign that we got isn't the sign anyone expected. And the wisdom we got isn't the wisdom anyone could have come up with. **Read 23-24**

If you are called - if you are part of the group that is being saved - Jesus is your everything. Jesus is all of our wisdom. We don't need philosophy to help us understand the truths that really matter.

To quote Vizzini in the Princess Bride: Ever heard of Plato, Aristotle, Socrates? Morons. Not because we are wise, but because Christ is our wisdom. And God has done this to his glory. **Read 20**

We don't need psychology to help us understand how we function s humans. We have Jesus. We don't need speaking coaches to help us better convey the gospel message. Paul preached it in utter weakness and people got saved. It's not the messenger - it's the message that has power.

That's secret sauce we have here. You can be the youngest baby in Jesus - 8 years old and just saved - and you have more wisdom in Christ than a Harvard professor with 3 PhDs who pretends he's an atheist. There are no real atheists - only fools who suppress the truth in their unrighteousness.

The fool says in his heart what? There is no God. They know better. Every time they sin and there is a pang of guilt in the conscience they know they will give an account.

And God is up in heaven laughing that an 8 year old with a child's understanding of the gospel and the boldness of a lion can speak eternal truths that raise the dead and all a Harvard professor can do is tickle ears.

That's wisdom. And that's power.

I remember in high school I went to a youth camp where the speaker was talking about how his family was out at dinner one night. The waitress noticed that the 5 year old prayed for the food and she thought that was cool so she struck up a conversation with him. He's was 5. And the 5 year old told her the gospel message - and at the table the woman gave her life to Christ. A 5 year old simply telling the same gospel message you and I have heard a thousand times. God uses this foolishness to raise the dead. **Read 26**

This last sentence here is really tongue in cheek. We could put air quotes around "foolishness of God" and "weakness of God." From a merely human perspective the gospel we have is foolish and weak. But we know what it really is.

There is a chemical element called Cesium. Cesium is a strange element. It's actually a metal that is highly explosive when exposed to water. On the periodic table it's at the bottom left, just above francium. You can go online and watch all kinds of videos of people taking very small bits of Caesium and destroying plastic buckets of water. We're talking a teaspoon obliterating a 5 gallon bucket in a violent reaction.

In the 1980's as Russia was becoming more and more unstable people began smuggling chemicals out of Russia to sell on the black market. They often had no idea what the chemical did, but they could make a lot of money. Well, the Germans tracked one man who was fleeing Russia by way of Germany with a suitcase full of Cesium. When they apprehended him it was pouring down rain. They asked him about the contents of the suitcase. He knew it was valuable but had no idea what it was. There was enough Cesium in the suitcase to level the train station.

You guys, the word of the cross that we have - the gospel - is like that Cesium. We have no idea the power we possess in the gospel. It's not our power - it's God's power. We might not think it has power because we don't always see a waitress come to faith right in front of us or lives radically transformed instantaneously.

But the message of risen Messiah has exploded from 12 men hiding in a room to billions of followers of Jesus around the world. Billions who are being saved because God in his wisdom has called us.

So go be a fool for Jesus. Preach the foolishness of God. Because it's wiser than men. And preach the weakness of God, because it's stronger than men.

Pray