

brentwood baptist

BRENTWOOD SUMMER SERIES
THE CENTRALITY OF THE CROSS
1 CORINTHIANS 1:18-31
6/28/2020

MAIN POINT

We can only trust and boast in Christ and the work He did on the cross.

INTRODUCTION

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

What are the most popular or recognizable brands that you can think of? Where do you primarily see their logos or slogans?

How does an image or logo become a widespread symbol of a company or product?

Ask everyone to bring a symbol of what they follow: sports teams, college, automobile, etc. Then present a cross necklace or framed cross from your home as the strong symbol of Christ we are to follow.

What has the cross symbolized? What are some ways it has been used in the past? How is it used today?

There are brands and logos that you can recognize in every corner of the world. Coca-Cola, Pepsi, Nike, and Apple have become ubiquitous on this planet. The brands symbolize something. It may be happiness, fitness, or coolness. The cross today can mean anything from a fashion statement to a hate sign. It can be a form of devotion or a powerful proclamation from the top of a steeple. For the Romans, it was a symbol of power. They used it to instill fear in people in or near their empire. Yet the work of Christ turned the symbol of the cross upside-down.

UNDERSTANDING

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ 1 CORINTHIANS 1:18-25.

How would you describe the wisdom of the world? What does that type of wisdom look like today?

What could make wisdom look foolish?

Why does the cross look foolish to the wise?

Paul explained that the world's wisdom was unable to find ultimate reality, namely God Himself. As hard as they tried to raise themselves to heights of wisdom, the greatest religious leaders and philosophers of the world did not know God. In opposition to the efforts of sinful humanity, God was pleased to choose another way of salvation for those who believe. In the world's terms, the way of salvation through the gospel is viewed as the foolishness of what was preached. Here Paul contended that God's sovereign pleasure was to choose something that the wise of this world would consider foolish—the crucified Savior. By ordaining this seemingly foolish means of salvation, God made the world's so-called wisdom to be foolishness.

What was the focus of the Greeks? How do we look for wisdom as the Greeks did?

What was the focus for the Jews? How do we look for signs like the Jews?

How did the cross address both Jews and Greeks?

In contrast to the standards of judgment used by Jews and Greeks, the apostle said he simply preached Christ crucified. The Jews understood the cross of Christ as a demonstration that Christ was cursed of God, not blessed as they expected the Messiah to be. Many Gentiles, in turn, could hardly have imagined a more ridiculous religion than one that proclaimed salvation through the death of one man on a Roman cross. A God who could not overcome His human enemies and who died at their hands like a common thief was not a God one should reasonably trust for salvation.

Although most Jews and Gentiles rejected the true gospel because it didn't meet their standards of judgment, one group of people joyfully accepted the gospel of the cross: those whom God had called to Himself by the power of His Spirit. When God's grace touched their lives, their old standards of judgment fell away. They saw with new eyes and understood that the gospel of the crucified Christ was the power of God that could rescue them from the dominion of sin and from divine judgment.

HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ 1 CORINTHIANS 1:26-31.

How might being called “chosen” both humble and encourage the Corinthian believers? How does it humble and encourage you in the midst of a world that finds the Gospel foolish?

God chose as His people those whom the world didn't respect. Most Corinthian believers represented the foolish, weak, lowly, and things that are not (i.e., count for nothing) in the eyes of the world. Paul described the Corinthians as “things” in order to indicate how little the world thought of their condition. Even so, there was a divine purpose in all of this. God planned to shame those whom the world considered wise and strong. Although the Corinthians appeared foolish and weak to the unbelieving world when they trusted in Christ, they were not foolish for believing the gospel. Instead, the world was shown to be foolish and weak.

Why are God and the cross the only things we should boast in? What keeps us from boasting only in God?

Paul did not use these unflattering descriptions of the Corinthians to belittle them, but to remind them that they had no basis for boasting. When the Corinthians first experienced the gospel in their lives, they did not feel superior to one another and they were not divided. From God's perspective, nothing had changed between that time and the time Paul wrote—they still had no reason to boast, to divide, or to quarrel. Paul reminded them of this so they would abandon those things that caused them to treat one another disdainfully.

APPLICATION

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

How does the truth of the gospel defuse your tendency to focus on yourself? How can you keep that truth central this week?

Is there anything you might be doing subconsciously as a way to earn righteousness? What do you need to do differently to approach that area of your life appropriately?

How can you be purposeful about boasting in the cross this week?

PRAYER

As you close in prayer, ask that the reality of God's gift of salvation will lead to gratitude and trust. Thank Jesus for meeting our need and taking upon Himself the penalty and punishment for our sins. Pray that God will give us such understanding and humble appreciation for His gospel that we will be compelled to share it with others.

COMMENTARY

1 CORINTHIANS 1:18-31

1:18-19. The cross divides the human race between those who are perishing, to whom the cross is foolishness (lit "stupidity"), and those who are being saved, to whom the cross is wisdom and power. Paul supported this truth by quoting Isa 29:14, where God warned the unbelieving leaders of Jerusalem who considered themselves wise. God's judgment will expose all pretensions to human wisdom not anchored in Christ.

1:21. Paul introduced in this verse a key paradox of the gospel. The Greeks, including most Corinthian Christians, valued wisdom. The Greeks embraced philosophy, a word that literally means a love of wisdom. Ironically, God's ways are not accessible through worldly wisdom.

God's wisdom is found in the foolishness of the message preached. God's Son becoming a human and dying on a cross for the sins of humanity sounded foolish to the Greeks. Moreover, the idea of Jesus' resurrection from the dead seemed ridiculous to them (see

Acts 17:18,32). The paradox in this verse is that God used “foolish” truth to become the means of salvation for those who believe. This offer from God takes the focus off of human achievement and wisdom. In Christ, God did for us what we couldn’t do for ourselves.

1:22. The typical Jewish view in the first-century world was a division of people into two kinds: Jews and Greeks (that is, Gentiles). Paul followed these categories in this verse. His purpose was to illustrate the inadequacy of both systems of thought. The Jewish passion was for signs. Throughout Israelite history, God had provided signs through His messengers who represented Him. During Jesus’ ministry, the Jewish leadership demanded signs from Jesus to authenticate His claims.

We have already mentioned the Greek love of philosophy or wisdom. Their culture was highly focused on learning and exploration. They produced advances in such areas as science, mathematics, and architecture.

Again, the paradox was that both these views fell into a kind of idolatry. They could not deliver salvation from sin. Neither could they produce, in the Corinthians’ specific situation, a unified church. Both the Greek and Jewish worldviews focused on human achievement as the fountain of truth.

1:23. When Paul preached in the city of Athens, the epicenter of Greek culture, his message to the philosophers there was focused on the inadequacy of idolatry, the coming judgment, and the resurrection of the dead (see Acts 17:29-31). When he left Athens and came to Corinth, however, Paul determined that he would focus on Christ crucified. This new focus seems to have been a careful and intentional shift in emphasis (see 1 Cor. 2:1-2.)

Without question, the gospel makes little sense from a worldly perspective. It was a stumbling block to the Jews because in their thinking the Messiah wasn’t supposed to die on a cross. It was foolishness to the Gentiles because it sounded hopelessly weak and illogical.

1:24. Those who are called refers to people who have accepted God’s offer of salvation. It is the equivalent of “us who are being saved” in 1:18 and “those who believe” in 1:21.

As noted earlier, at one time in his life Paul divided the world into Jews and Greeks. As a Christian, he used those designations only to emphasize their common need of salvation and the one way by which people in both groups could be saved. Differences among people such as ethnicity and social class are inconsequential compared to the fundamental spiritual need all individuals have.

1:25. God’s working through the weak and scandalous illustrates an important point. If we were trying to accomplish something great, we would put forth our best example of power. When God accomplished something great, He did so by using an apparent defeat to bring about the greatest victory. His purpose was to illustrate human inadequacy. His foolishness and weakness transcend our wisdom and strength.

1:26. The foolishness of the gospel is matched by the apparent foolishness of those who accept the gospel. “Your calling” refers to the calling by God to become Christians, and none of the Corinthians brought an impressive resume. The phrase “not many” suggests that some Corinthian church members may have been part of the city’s nobility. However, Paul declared that from a human perspective they were not wise, powerful, or of noble birth. They were not saved because they were elite persons.

1:27. God used a consistent strategy. He used the weakness and foolishness of the cross to bring about the offer of salvation. Did He use this strategy to save only the strong and capable? No. Instead God chose the world’s foolish things. This term refers to the people who accept the invitation to salvation. From the world’s perspective they appear foolish, but not from God’s view.

Likewise God chose the world’s weak things (the Corinthian Christians). They were weak in that they could not accomplish salvation in their own strength. They were entirely reliant on God. God’s purpose was to shame the wise and the strong. In other words, God once again demonstrated His power by using what appeared to be weak. This strategy undermines all human confidence and pride, and that was one of Paul’s major aims in the letter.

1:28. God’s strategy is fully revealed in this verse. Paul drove home the inadequacy of human effort with three terms: “insignificant” ... “despised” ... “viewed as nothing.” We human beings bring nothing to the table except our spiritual bankruptcy. God needs nothing that we have.

The real focus at this point, however, is the implication of our inadequacy in the life of the church. The Corinthians’ main problem wasn’t a misunderstanding of salvation but rather factions in the church. However, by emphasizing human inadequacy in salvation Paul laid the groundwork for undermining the Corinthians’ efforts to form factions among themselves. Paul’s reasoning was as follows: How foolish to take a gift we received but didn’t deserve and couldn’t earn; then begin to rank ourselves in terms of human importance and taste!

Ironically, the Corinthian Christians had begun to think of themselves as something. Paul was no longer aiming at the Greek philosopher who trusted in wisdom or at the Jewish leader who trusted in righteousness. Paul’s goal was urging the Corinthian Christians to lay aside their pride-filled disunity and to embrace one another. By their disharmony they were acting like the worldly wise and strong who did not realize their need for the gospel.

1:29. This verse refers to both Christians and non-Christians. If no one can boast before God, then the Corinthian Christians shouldn’t boast before one another or claim superiority in some allegiance or gift.

1:30. The gift of salvation came from Him (Christ), not by virtue of human effort. It is by God’s work alone that any of us are in Christ Jesus. That Jesus “for us became wisdom from God” means that He is the Source of God’s wisdom on our behalf. Paul added three further descriptions, each of which focuses on some aspect of salvation. Righteousness

refers to our right standing before God. “Sanctification” refers to our being made holy by the sacrifice of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit. “Redemption” refers to our liberation from the bondage and guilt of sin.

1:31. Paul’s aim was to show that we can only boast in the Lord. We cannot boast in anything we have been given. If we are to boast, we must boast of the Giver.