

The Foolishness of God

1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5

Introduction

Children: We talked last week about the importance of the message rather than the messenger. In fact, one truth of Scripture is that **God can use a simple message from a trusting messenger to communicate his love to the world.**

- Preacher was getting his microphone on and got tangled up in the cord. He nearly tripped and was flailing around. A little girl in the third row leaned toward her mother and whispered, "If he gets loose, will he hurt us?" "Out of the mouths of babes." Wiser than she knows.
 - Faith like a child. ¹ O LORD, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens. ² Out of the mouth of babies and infants, you have established strength because of your foes, to still the enemy and the avenger (Ps 8:1-2).
- Sometimes kids are better at telling the truth because they aren't trying to play by the rules (e.g., "that ship has sailed").
- Their unsophistication and "weakness" is actually a strength. We'll see that today. **In God's economy the weakest and most dependent are the most useful for him.**

^{1:18} For the word of the cross is folly 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, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." ²⁰ Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹ For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. ²² For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. ²⁶ For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; ²⁸ God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, ²⁹ so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. ³⁰ And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, ³¹ so that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord." ^{2:1} And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. ² For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. ³ And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, ⁴ and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of

the Spirit and of power, ⁵ so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.¹

1. The Foolishness of the Cross (vv. 18-25)

^{1:18} For the word of the cross is folly 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, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.” ²⁰ Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹ For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. ²² For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

Perspective: The “message” of the cross is folly (μωρίαν, moron) to the world. But to those of us on the other side of the cross, it is the “power of God.”

- The world looks at the cross and sees “foolish weakness.” The believer looks at the cross and sees “powerful wisdom.”

When you look at the plan of God, are you perplexed by his strategy or astounded by his wisdom?

- Too many fail to recognize the truth of the gospel because it doesn't fit their pre-existing categories. We are prone to worship ourselves and expect God to conform to our desires. Truth does not exist only according to your pre-determined desires (e.g., “nothing weakens the word truth like adding “your” to it”; the gospel is *the* truth not just “your” truth). Tell the judge “I swear to tell ‘my’ truth.” We are our own gods (e.g., I could never believe in a God who would...).
- How can a loving God send anyone to hell? Good, important, and tough question. But no one ever asks how a just God can let a sinner like me into his kingdom. We always start with the arrogant assumption that we are good enough

¹ ^{1:18} Ὁ λόγος γὰρ ὁ τοῦ σταυροῦ τοῖς μὲν ἀπολλυμένοις μωρία ἐστίν, τοῖς δὲ σωζομένοις ἡμῖν δύναμις θεοῦ ἐστίν. ¹⁹ γέγραπται γάρ, Ἀπολῶ τὴν σοφίαν τῶν σοφῶν καὶ τὴν σύνεσιν τῶν συνετῶν ἀθετήσω. ²⁰ ποῦ σοφός; ποῦ γραμματεὺς; ποῦ συζητητὴς τοῦ αἰῶνος τούτου; οὐχὶ ἐμώρανεν ὁ θεὸς τὴν σοφίαν τοῦ κόσμου; ²¹ ἐπειδὴ γὰρ ἐν τῇ σοφίᾳ τοῦ θεοῦ οὐκ ἔγνω ὁ κόσμος διὰ τῆς σοφίας τὸν θεόν, εὐδόκησεν ὁ θεὸς διὰ τῆς μωρίας τοῦ κηρύγματος σώσαι τοὺς πιστεύοντας. ²² ἐπειδὴ καὶ Ἰουδαῖοι σημεῖα αἰτοῦσιν καὶ Ἕλληνες σοφίαν ζητοῦσιν, ²³ ἡμεῖς δὲ κηρύσσομεν Χριστὸν ἐσταυρωμένον, Ἰουδαίοις μὲν σκάνδαλον, ἔθνεσιν δὲ μωρίαν, ²⁴ αὐτοῖς δὲ τοῖς κλητοῖς, Ἰουδαίοις τε καὶ Ἕλλησιν, Χριστὸν θεοῦ δύναμιν καὶ θεοῦ σοφίαν. ²⁵ ὅτι τὸ μωρὸν τοῦ θεοῦ σοφώτερον τῶν ἀνθρώπων ἐστίν καὶ τὸ ἀσθενὲς τοῦ θεοῦ ἰσχυρότερον τῶν ἀνθρώπων. ²⁶ Βλέπετε γὰρ τὴν κλησιν ὑμῶν, ἀδελφοί, ὅτι οὐ πολλοὶ σοφοὶ κατὰ σάρκα, οὐ πολλοὶ δυνατοί, οὐ πολλοὶ εὐγενεῖς. ²⁷ ἀλλὰ τὰ μωρὰ τοῦ κόσμου ἐξελέξατο ὁ θεός, ἵνα καταισχύνη τοὺς σοφοὺς, καὶ τὰ ἀσθενῆ τοῦ κόσμου ἐξελέξατο ὁ θεός, ἵνα καταισχύνη τὰ ἰσχυρά, ²⁸ καὶ τὰ ἀγενῆ τοῦ κόσμου καὶ τὰ ἐξουθενημένα ἐξελέξατο ὁ θεός, τὰ μὴ ὄντα, ἵνα τὰ ὄντα καταργήσῃ, ²⁹ ὅπως μὴ καυχῆσθαι πᾶσα σὰρξ ἐνώπιον τοῦ θεοῦ. ³⁰ ἐξ αὐτοῦ δὲ ἡμεῖς ἐστε ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ, ὃς ἐγενήθη σοφία ἡμῖν ἀπὸ θεοῦ, δικαιοσύνη τε καὶ ἁγιασμός καὶ ἀπολύτρωσις, ³¹ ἵνα καθὼς γέγραπται, Ὁ καυχώμενος ἐν κυρίῳ καυχάσθω. ^{2:1} Κἀγὼ ἐλθὼν πρὸς ὑμᾶς, ἀδελφοί, ἦλθον οὐ καθ' ὑπεροχὴν λόγου ἢ σοφίας καταγγέλλων ὑμῖν τὸ μυστήριον τοῦ θεοῦ. ² οὐ γὰρ ἔκρινά τι εἰδέναι ἐν ὑμῖν εἰ μὴ Ἰησοῦν Χριστὸν καὶ τοῦτον ἐσταυρωμένον. ³ κἀγὼ ἐν ἀσθενείᾳ καὶ ἐν φόβῳ καὶ ἐν τρόμῳ πολλῶν ἐγενόμην πρὸς ὑμᾶς, ⁴ καὶ ὁ λόγος μου καὶ τὸ κήρυγμά μου οὐκ ἐν πειθοῖ[ς] σοφίας [λόγοις] ἀλλ' ἐν ἀποδείξει πνεύματος καὶ δυνάμει, ⁵ ἵνα ἡ πίστις ὑμῶν μὴ ᾖ ἐν σοφίᾳ ἀνθρώπων ἀλλ' ἐν δυνάμει θεοῦ.

and entitled to salvation when the thing we need to acknowledge is that we are sinful and desperately in need of his grace.

Why is the Cross Foolish?: If it was up to you, how would you save the world? (e.g., build your game character). Military leader, most intelligent, sophisticated, successful? You wouldn't choose an itinerant evangelist who was executed by the state as a criminal. Own prejudgment *blocks* from seeing God.

- I think we forget just how ignominious (humiliating, shameful, undignified, disgraceful) crucifixion was. We see the cross all around us. It's worn as jewelry. People get it tattooed. This is an instrument of execution (not unlike an electric chair or gas chamber).
- Crucifixion in Roman times was applied mostly to slaves, disgraced soldiers, Christians and foreigners. Only very rarely would Roman citizens be crucified because it was such a barbaric, publicly shameful practice.
- Paul's gospel message strikes most people as foolishness. "To proclaim a crucified Jew from some backwater of the empire as 'a divine being sent on earth, God's son, Lord of all and the coming judge of the world, must have been thought by any educated [person] to be utter "madness"" (Hengel, Garland). Look at his ministry: his family rejected him, his disciples deserted him, and he had no land or wealth but lived off of the generosity of strangers.
- And I think for many, the cross is as repugnant to modern sensibilities as ancient ones. We like the respected, the powerful, the successful. We want winners.

The Way of Jesus: The way of Jesus can never court worldly approval. Love your enemies. Bless those who persecute you. Blessed are the poor. The first will be last. The way I p is down. Salvation through sacrifice not success. These are not the mantras of self-help gurus and prosperity preachers.

Nullify: God's ways are not only *not* our ways, but our ways often prevent us from seeing his ways. God does things differently.

- Paul quotes **Isaiah 29:14**: For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart."
 - In Isaiah's day, the Israelites were trying to save themselves through clever political maneuvering and shrewd alliances. Rather than trust God, they thought they could save themselves by becoming allies with Egypt (against the Assyrians).
- God warns them not to do this. Not only will it not work but it will work *against* the plan of God.
 - He promises to "destroy, thwart, and nullify" human attempts at salvation.
 - He is trying to get our attention so we can see that **the only way to salvation is through him**, so he does it in such a way that all human achievement and effort is invalid.
- The cross forces humility and prevents self-glorification.

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?

- Where is the wise person? Is it the Greek philosopher or the Jewish scribe? Is it the smooth-tongued public speaker?
 - They are searching for eternal truth through the lens of human wisdom.
 - Greek culture had their own version of Ted Talks, philosophers and rhetoricians who could captivate a crowd. But they valued style more than substance.
 - Who is this for us? Successful celebrity, powerful politician, brilliant scientist, enlightened professor, or charismatic preacher?

For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.

- The power of the cross is meant to confound and confront culture. All our education (technology, money, conquest) will not get us to God. Time will tell how dumb we are
 - Only God can get us to God. And he's using the cross to make sure that we don't rely on the wrong thing (i.e., us).

The Way of the World: For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom.

- Notice that the different types of people in Corinth (Jews and Greeks) have a **particular type of Savior they are looking for**.
 - The Jews wanted an apocalyptic warrior to fight against the Roman government.
 - The Greeks wanted a sophisticated, smooth-talking, philosopher.
 - *What they got was a crucified Christ.* They didn't get what they wanted but what they needed. They didn't need a powerful warrior or a clever orator, they needed God himself to become flesh and sacrifice himself for their sins.
- They weren't open to hearing God as he speaks or seeing God as he reveals himself but they demanded he show up the way they wanted. They wanted God to work on their terms. They wanted to be in control, they wanted to be God!
 - How often do we go to God demanding he do something a certain way rather than trusting him even when we can't see the path forward?

Beautiful Paradox of the Cross: For the residents of Corinth, a crucified Lord was an oxymoron (e.g., jumbo shrimp, government intelligence, decaf coffee). The cross is a paradox. It's beautiful and brutal at once.

- The symbol of shame becomes the sign of salvation. The instrument of torture becomes the means of redemption. The thing meant to bring terror and pain has brought us to God. Jesus has transformed the idea of the cross from an object of ridicule to the hallmark of glory.
- **But too many in Corinth and too many in our world are not humble enough to see it.** They are blinded by the method of God's love.
 - So the cross divides into **two groups**, (1) those who are saved and can see it as salvation and (2) those who are perishing and see it as foolishness.

Trips You Up: Rather than trying to win people according to human methods, we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles. The word "stumbling block" is where

we get the English word “scandal” from (σκάνδαλον). It occurs all through the Bible to describe something that is an offense, hindrance, or trap. It describes something that will **trip you up**.

- What trips you up from following God?

2. The Weakness of the Church (vv. 26-31)

²⁶ For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; ²⁸ God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, ²⁹ so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. ³⁰ And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, ³¹ so that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

The People God Uses: Look at your own life. Not many were wise, powerful, or noble (according to human standards). I think Paul just called us foolish 🤡.

- We can't have it both ways. If we want to be useful in the KoG then we have to be willing to accept being seen as foolish in the eyes of the world.
 - “Am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God?” (Gal 1:10).
- There are no little people in God's kingdom. No one is too far gone. No one is too insignificant. No one's past is too damning. God uses a talking donkey (and apparently he still thinks that's a winning strategy).
 - Look at Jesus' genealogy. Rahab the former prostitute. Ruth the widow immigrant. David the shepherd. Mary the unwed teenager.

Anti-Intellectual?: *Sidenote* The gospel is not *anti-intellectual* (Paul himself is clearly smart and has amazing rhetorical skill).

- Jesus tells us to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your **mind**” (Matt 22:37).
 - “Your heart cannot love what your brain does not know” (Wilkin).
- When Paul says the cross is foolishness, he's not saying that you have to be dumb to believe it or check your brain at the door of the church. The cross is foolish from the perspective of the world but that doesn't mean it's incoherent, irrational, or stupid.
 - He's saying that **the wisdom of the cross is impossible to see when your eyes are blinded by self-centered sin**.
 - The cross opposes the kind of arrogant intellectualism that thinks it is above and against God (rather than surrendered and serving God).
 - Our society has told us that intelligence and education are *the* path to wisdom and success. With enough information we can “make the world a better place.” Information helps us but, if the internet has proven anything, more information does not equate to more wisdom. We are living in the information age but it certainly seems we are more unwise and unwell than (possibly) ever before (we have confused technological advance with wisdom). E.g., chronological

snobbery; Babylonian trigonometry 3500 years ago; we study calculus, Isaac Newton discovered it in the 17th century).

- The biggest fool is the person who thinks they are wise. Realizing your foolishness is the sign of true wisdom. Admitting your weakness is evidence of proper thinking. This is why humility is central to faithful living.

Self-Sufficient or God-Dependent: God chooses weakness to make sure we see his strength on display (e.g., clever sermon to crickets or terrible sermon to great response; “the Word works but not according to our schedule”).

- God will make himself unignorable. Either you humble yourself or God will humble you. Either you embrace your weakness or God will expose it.
- And the beauty of the gospel is that God uses our weaknesses to accomplish his purposes.
 - **Weakness is not a bug, it’s a feature. God designed us to be dependent on him. Are you feeling weak?** Good! You are the perfect candidate for God to use.
 - Human strength can actually get in the way of salvation because it blinds you of your need for Jesus.
- We know God can use our strength but what he really wants is our weakness. Then there is no doubt it’s him working (e.g., heard a story of an alcoholic father who saw a sporting event with a man dressed as a clown holding a sign that said Romans 10:9-10).

Eliminate Human Boasting: ²⁸ God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, ²⁹ so that no human being might boast in the presence of God... ³¹ so that, as it is written, “**Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord**”

- Quoting either Jeremiah 9 or Hannah in 1 Samuel 2 (or both), Paul is showing that the very **heart of the gospel** is a call for the humble to find hope in a strong God.
- As a result, anyone who is truly in Christ has no reason to boast in *anything* but the grace of God. There is no room in God’s economy for self-congratulation.
 - Pride kills the church but humility builds it.

The Gospel: ³⁰ And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption

- It is God that has brought you salvation (not yourself). The righteousness, holiness, and redemption of Christ is a **gift of God**. You can only have those things because of grace. You *received them freely* (you didn’t earn them).
- This is the gospel, “but God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved” (Eph 2:4-5). The gospel is not us searching for God, but God finding us. The gospel is that we have no righteousness of our own but God makes us righteous in Christ. The gospel shows that we deserve death for our sin but Christ pays the penalty so we can have life. He finds us, he meet us, he sustains us.
- **What do you boast in?** Your hustle, kindness, accomplishments, intelligence, family, tradition, cleverness, faithfulness, morality, good intentions? Or do you boast in Christ?

3. The Power of God (vv. 1-5)

^{2:1} And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. ² For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. ³ And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, ⁴ and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, ⁵ so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

Decide: The gospel reality calls us to make a **decision** of how we will live. Are we going to be weak in the eyes of the world and strong in God? Or strong in the eyes of the world and weak in God. **What decision will you make?** For I **decided** to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

- Do you think if you had \$50,000 you'd be more content? Or more useful to the KoG?

Catfish: Manti Te'o. Do we hide our weakness, put on makeup, dress it up, use some slight of hand? Do we try to convince people that it is "cool" to be a Christian, that God will fulfill all of their wishes and desires? Or do we give them the life-transforming power of the gospel?

- If we lie and cajole and manipulate, then they have hope in a false thing or they discover the truth and realize they were lied to.

Where's the Power: We acknowledge our weakness with no pretenses. We're not perfect. We don't have all the right answers, but we know the God who changes lives. All we have to offer is the gospel. We cling to a simple faith that the resurrected Lord is alive and is working through his Spirit in us.

- We are not dependent on ourselves to make our lives good (we will surely fail), we rely completely on him.
- We are broken people loved by a gracious God.

Conclusion

The Gift of Weakness: Your weakness is a gift that keeps you dependent on God. You and I can either lie to ourselves and try to master our own lives or we can be honest and surrender to Christ and receive his grace, forgiveness, and power. God takes away our ability to boast so we can depend on him.

- I think God is calling us as a church to radical dependence on him. He's calling us to simple obedience and faith that looks foolish to the world.
 - Will we go where he calls us to go and do what he calls us to do.
- It starts with admitting your weakness and trusting in Jesus. "I can't do it, I need you Jesus. I'm tired of trying to do it on my own."