

The Foolishness of the Cross

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Date: 29 January 2023

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[0 : 00] The New York City subway has often been referred to affectionately and proudly by New Yorkers as the great equalizer. And that is because it doesn't matter if you're rich or poor, it doesn't matter where you live, it doesn't matter your race or ethnicity, except for probably the ultra, ultra rich, everybody in New York takes the subway.

And there was an article in the New York Times Magazine in 2018 that writes about this idea of the subway being the great equalizer. And the author says, New York subway carries close to 6 million people every day.

It may no longer be a technological marvel, but it continues to perform a daily magic trick. It brings people together, but it also spreads them out. It has no zones and no hours of operation. It connects rich and poor neighborhoods alike. The subway has never been segregated. It is always open. And the fair is always the same no matter how far you need to go.

In New York, movement anywhere, anytime is a right. And I think this idea of the subway as this great equalizer represents a deep longing that many people have in our culture, which is to have unity and equality among great diversity and division.

[1 : 19] And this longing, I think, reaches back to our country's founding and our heritage of democracy. It's written and stamped on our money. E pluribus unum, out of many, one. And it continues to exist today, this longing for a great equalizer in a society that continues to be divided around things like class and politics and race.

Division and disunity are ancient problems. They were a problem in Corinth in the Corinthian church. And in our passage this morning, in 1 Corinthians chapter 1, Paul is addressing a particular kind of division, a particular kind of conflict that is beginning to splinter the community at the church in Corinth.

People have started to rally around and to identify themselves over certain leaders like Paul and Apollos and Peter. And they've started to say to one another, I follow Paul.

I follow Apollos. I follow Peter. And it's began to develop these different factions. And Paul addresses this splintering.

He addresses this conflict and division head on throughout this letter, but initially here in 1 Corinthians chapter 1. And what's interesting is he doesn't just tell them to just stop arguing and get along.

[2 : 34] He doesn't just tell them to be unified and stop being divided. He tells them that their behavior actually isn't in line with the gospel, that actually their conflict and their division specifically isn't in line with the cross.

The cross is the very thing that brought them together and united them together in the first place. And the cross alone, Paul argues to them, has the power to be the great equalizer amidst their division and conflict.

And I think this has enormous, this passage has enormous significance for us today, for our church, and for the world. So we're going to see three things here in 1 Corinthians 1 this morning. We're going to see, first of all, humanity's search for wisdom and power.

Secondly, the irony of God. And finally, the foolishness and weakness of the cross. So first of all, humanity's search for wisdom and power.

Verse 18, Paul says, And here he's quoting Isaiah 29.

[3 : 46] I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart. Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age?

And then in verse 22, for Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom. And Paul here is addressing two of the main cultural values, two of the main cultural pursuits of his day.

In Corinth, you had both Greco-Roman and Jewish cultures mixing together, and they also mixed together in the church. You had both Greco-Roman cultures and Jewish cultures in the church. And at the center of Greco-Roman culture was the search for wisdom, and at the center of Jewish culture was the search for power. The Greco-Roman culture was, of course, shaped by the great Greek philosophers, those like Socrates and Plato and Aristotle.

Later on, you had the Epicureans and Stoics and lots of other schools of philosophy started up. And they were all trying to understand how to understand the world rationally. And then once you understand the rationally, how does that then equip you to live a good life?

[4 : 50] It was pursuing these transcendental ideas of truth and goodness and beauty. That was Greek philosophy. But you also had the popular orators. You had the skilled rhetoricians, these gifted speakers who shaped the popular wisdom of the day.

These were the TED Talk speakers of the day. They were skilled in the art of rhetoric and debate. And the most popular orators were kind of like the professional athletes and musicians and actors. They received the kind of praise and attention and money that actors and athletes get today. And they were sometimes more influential in shaping public opinion than sometimes the great philosophers.

In the Jewish culture, you had scribes and religious teachers. These were the experts in the law. These were the Bible scholars and the theologians of the day. And they were focused not so much on abstract philosophical wisdom, but on the great and powerful acts of God in the story of Israel. And the hope for these powerful acts to be renewed in a coming Messiah who would be both a political and a military leader who would overthrow Rome. Wisdom and power. And Paul is addressing these cultural values of wisdom and power of Jews and Greeks, not only as representatives of their culture, but actually as representatives of human culture, of all of human history.

[6 : 10] Power and wisdom are central values in our culture. We have our places of wisdom and knowledge. We have our universities. We have our philosophers, our academics and scholars who write books and do research.

But perhaps more than ever, we have our own leaders of popular wisdom, don't we? We have our TED Talk speakers. We have our TikTok videos, our social media influencers, our YouTube stars, who can often shape the wisdom of popular culture, sometimes even more than the most accomplished and erudite scholars.

And of course, we can't talk about our culture, we can't talk about our city without talking about power, can we? We live in the seat of power in one of the most powerful nations on earth.

If you want to get rich and famous, move to LA or New York or Nashville, the centers of Hollywood and finance and music. But if you want access to power, come to Washington, D.C., right?

Wisdom and power are two of the main cultural pursuits in Corinth in the first century, two of the main cultural pursuits in D.C. and two of the main cultural pursuits in all of human history.

[7 : 21] But as Paul shows us, there is actually a great irony in these pursuits. If you pursue wisdom and power for their own sake, if you pursue them for their own sake, you end up in a deeply ironic place.

And so that's the second thing that we see. We see the irony of God. The irony of God. There are two great ironies in this passage that Paul points out for us.

And the first irony is this. The first irony is that wisdom pursued for its own sake leads to ignorance. Wisdom pursued for its own sake leads to ignorance.

Verse 20, has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom. What does this mean?

Does this mean that somehow Christianity is anti-intellectual or anti-rational? No, it doesn't mean that. We know this because Paul here in this letter is trying to make a rational, intelligible argument.

[8 : 25] We also know that from the book of Acts that Paul reasoned and debated in the public square. Paul himself was not anti-intellectual. Neither is the Christian faith. We know from the great intellectual tradition of the church, some of the great thinkers and philosophers throughout the age have been Christians.

People from the church fathers, Anselm, Augustine, Jerome, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Cranmer, and on and on and on and on we could go. It doesn't mean that Christianity is anti-intellectual.

Does this then mean that as Christians we're to reject wisdom and thought from other traditions or other sources? Again, no, this is not what it means because part of being a Christian, part of believing in the Bible is believing in common grace.

This idea that people are made in the image of God and because they're made in the image of God, everybody has an innate ability to discover truth and goodness and beauty about the world.

And therefore, everybody, whether they're Christian or not, everybody has the ability to get part of the story right. And so as Christians, we should be quick to learn from all the different sources that we can.

[9 : 36] We should be quick to learn wherever there is truth, wherever there is goodness, wherever there is beauty. So it doesn't mean that Christianity is anti-intellectual. It doesn't mean that we can't learn from other sources. So what does it mean? It means that wisdom and knowledge pursued for its own sake, wisdom and knowledge pursued on its own, doesn't lead us to know God.

We can't know God through pure intellect or pure reason and science, empirical observation alone. Despite all the great traditions of all the great philosophers, thinkers, intellectuals over all the centuries, despite all the great insights of the world religions, all its teachers, despite all of the great research of the modern university, all of the information that's available to us through the internet, despite all of that, we can't know God in a real and personal way just through reason alone.

You can be the smartest person in the world and yet not know God. You can understand and observe everything there is to observe about the world empirically through science and yet not know God.

C.S. Lewis captures this well in an article that he wrote in February 1963. The Russian space program had recently sent cosmonauts into outer space, and at the time, the Kremlin produced a propaganda campaign that at the time included a poster, and the poster was a picture of a cosmonaut in outer space saying, there is no God.

And the idea is that, you know, we went to outer space, we didn't see God, and therefore that's proof that God doesn't exist. And C.S. Lewis responds in this article, and he says this.

[11 : 19] He says, The Russians, I am told, report that they have not found God in outer space. But looking for God or for heaven by exploring space is like reading or seeing all of Shakespeare's plays in the hope that you will find Shakespeare as one of the characters.

Shakespeare is in one sense present at every moment in every play, but he is never present in the same way as Lady Macbeth. My point is that if God does exist, he is related to the universe more as an author is related to a play than as one object in the universe is related to another.

If God created the universe, he created space and time. And therefore, to look for him as one item within the framework from which he himself invented is nonsensical. Do you hear what he's saying? He's saying to try to know God solely through reason or science alone is like Hamlet trying to know Shakespeare. If Hamlet were to know Shakespeare, the only way that could happen is if Shakespeare revealed himself, if he wrote himself into Hamlet's story.

And that is what we believe that God did in Jesus Christ. He revealed himself by writing himself into our story. So that's the first irony. The first irony is that wisdom pursued for its own sake leads to ignorance.

[12 : 40] On our own, we actually can't know the most basic thing about the world, who its creator is, who God is. But there's a second great irony. And the second great irony is that power pursued for its own sake leads to weakness.

Power pursued for its own sake leads to weakness. When people pursue power for power's sake, when people pursue power because they want control and power, what happens? What happens is a long list of history's greatest tragedies.

The most extreme examples are the Hitlers and the Stalins and the Pol Potts of the world. But we can think about this on a smaller level too. When people pursue power because they want power, it creates damage and abuse.

It fractures society. It makes it weaker. Do I need to provide examples? I don't think I do. I don't think I do. This is why I think the idea of the New York City subway as the great equalizer is something that really resonates with people on a really deep level because we know how deeply divided our world is.

And we know that in large part that is due to the misuse of power, the abuse of power. And at the root of all this, at the root of pursuing wisdom for its own sake, at the root of pursuing power for its own sake, at the root of all that is human pride.

[14:02] It's pride. When you pursue wisdom because you want to be smarter than others, when you pursue power because you want to be in control of others, you are placing yourself at the center of the universe.

And when you place yourself at the center of the universe rather than God, you end up in a place of ignorance. You end up in a place of weakness.

Now listen, before you say, yeah, you know, this is what non-Christians do. This is what unsaved people do. This is what people outside the church do. Before you say that, remember, Paul is addressing conflict in the church.

He's addressing Christians. He's talking to Christians who aren't living in line with the gospel, who still need to think out the implications of the gospel for their own situation.

They're still operating by human standards of worldly power and wisdom. When they say, I follow Paul, I follow Peter, I follow Apollos, they're operating by worldly power and wisdom, and it's splintering their community.

[15:06] It's dividing their community. And the same temptations face us today. If you're a Christian, you need the gospel to help you think through how to deal with wisdom and power just as much as anyone else does.

And so a question for us is, both inside the church and outside the church, is that if wisdom pursued for its own sake leads to ignorance, if power pursued for its own sake leads to weakness, then where do true power and true wisdom come from?

Where do you find true power? Where do you find true wisdom? And the answer, as we'll see in the text, is that true power and true wisdom come from the foolishness and the weakness of the cross.

In verse 21, Paul continues, and he says, Christ crucified.

Christ crucified. The idea that a man who lived 2,000 years ago is the clue to the meaning of all history. That him dying a criminal's death on a Roman instrument of execution and torture is what brings salvation and life to the whole world.

[16:38] That that is the key to the fulfillment of our desires. That is the key to the renewal of creation. If you think about it in those terms, it sounds absolutely crazy.

It sounds utterly foolish. At face value, the death of Jesus Christ on the cross doesn't look like power and wisdom. It looks like weakness and death and failure.

It looks absurd. But the God of the Bible is the master of dramatic irony because he is the master storyteller. He is the one who is able to take what looks like death and bring life.

He is able to take what looks like suffering and bring joy. And this is what Paul says in verse 25. In the cross, we see a God who is so infinitely powerful that he defeats his enemies through an act of weakness and suffering.

In the cross, we see a God who is so infinitely wise that he can reveal the fullest truth about himself. He can reveal the fullest truth about the world in an act that looks like foolishness, in an act that looks crazy.

[17:55] And that is because the infinite power and the infinite wisdom of God is this. Christ crucified in our place.

Christ in our place. That is where you find the infinite power and wisdom of God. At the cross, our sins are forgiven and paid for through the shedding of his blood.

At the cross, all the powers of evil are defeated through his love. At the cross, death is conquered through the resurrection. Listen to the way that John Calvin puts it.

He says this. It follows that every good thing we could think or desire is to be found in Jesus Christ. For he was sold to buy us back. Captive to deliver us.

Condemned to absolve us. He was made a curse for our blessing. Sin offering for our righteousness. Marred that we may be made fair. He died for our life.

[18:54] So that by him, fury is made gentle. Wrath appeased. Darkness turned to light. Fear reassured. Despised despised. Debt canceled.

Labor lightened. Sadness made merry. Misfortune made fortunate. Difficulty easy. Disorder ordered. Division united. Rebellion subjected. Intimidation intimidated.

Ambush uncovered. Assault assailed. Force forced back. Combat combated. War warred against. Vengeance avenged. Torment tormented. Damnation damned.

The abyss sunk into the abyss. Hell transfixed. Death dead. Mortality made immortal.

In short, mercy has swallowed up all misery. And goodness, all misfortune. That is where you find the infinite power and wisdom of God.

[19 : 51] Christ in our place. And listen, this is foolishness. If you think that basically at your core you're a good person.

This is a scandal if you're living a self-sufficient life. If you're seeking to pull yourselves up by your bootstraps. This is crazy. This is foolishness. If there's not a holy God.

And your sin doesn't separate you from him. This is a scandal. But if you know you need mercy. If you know that you need your sins forgiven. If you know that you need rescuing. If you know that you need a righteousness, not your own. If you know that.

If you know that. The cross is power. The cross is wisdom from God. Christ in our place. In the final six verses, Paul reminds the Corinthians that they weren't saved.

[20 : 53] Because of anything that they could take pride in or boast in. But because of the power and wisdom of God. Verse 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. 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.

God chose what is low and despised in the world. Even things that are not. To bring to nothing things that are. So that no human being might boast in the presence of God. And because of him, you are in Christ Jesus.

Who became to us wisdom from God. Righteousness and sanctification and redemption. So that as it is written. Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord. And this is why the cross of Jesus Christ.

Is the great equalizer. This is why Jesus Christ. Is the true and better New York City subway.

Because at the foot of the cross.

[21 : 57] No one can boast. All human pride is a race. No matter how smart you are. No matter how many degrees you have. No matter how much money you have. No matter what your last name is. No matter what neighborhood you're from.

No one can boast in their own self-sufficiency. No one can be. At the center of the universe. At the foot of the cross. The cross shows us. That we are all equally sinners.

And that we are all equally deserving of judgment. And yet if we believe what Christ did for us by faith. If we believe that he did it for us.

If we believe that the cross is him in our place. We are also equally loved by God. And forgiven. We are also equally set right with him. We also all equally have his righteousness.

And this is radical equality. This is radical equality. The ground is level. The ground is flat. At the foot of the cross. Nobody is higher than anyone else.

[22 : 58] And because the cross creates this kind of radical equality. It completely turns the tables. On how we think about power and wisdom. It completely turns the tables.

About how we think about power and wisdom. It completely subverts our categories. And it defines for us. What true wisdom and true power are. Wisdom isn't determined by how smart we are.

The cross shows us what true wisdom look like. What true wisdom looks like. True wisdom is love made flesh. Those who are truly wise are those who are skilled in the art of love.

Why? Because the cross is the greatest demonstration of God's wisdom there ever was. Wisdom isn't about the number of degrees we have. Wisdom is about love in action.

It's about love made flesh. The cross also shows us what true power is. True power is not determined by money or status or titles. The cross shows us that true power is the ability and the willingness to suffer for the sake of others.

[24 : 05] Perhaps even unjustly. Why? Because the cross is the greatest demonstration of God's power. And at the cross we see God who is dying for his enemies.

Forgiving his enemies. You know a lot of people in our culture when they look at the Bible's teaching or Christian teaching about things like sin and atonement and judgment.

They look at it and they think it's foolish. They think it's antiquated. They think it is morally regressive or perhaps even harmful. You know we're more enlightened now.

We've moved on to more positive and wiser things. But imagine a world. Imagine a world where people thought about wisdom and power through the lens of the cross.

Imagine that kind of world. Imagine politicians who would willingly lose elections because they refused to speak poorly of those running against them. Because they'd rather love their enemies

than hold the power of office.

[25 : 10] Can you imagine a world like that? Imagine CEOs who cared more about the flourishing of their own employees than their own paychecks or personal ambitions. Imagine millionaires and billionaires who willingly gave away their money to the poor to clothe them and feed them.

Not because they were mandated. Not because they were forced to but because they wanted to. Because they thought about their own power through the lens of the cross. Imagine scholars and university professors who thought about their primary goal not as to gain status or to impart information.

But to show students how what they are learning equips them to love. Imagine if city planners and shopkeepers and artists, musicians and filmmakers, baristas, educators, policy directors, lawyers, mayors, landlords, and bus drivers.

Imagine if all of them thought about wisdom and power through the lens of the cross. Imagine if us if we are ■■■■■ with a direct tinh moment. If we look at the Toist, the virus, committed■, democratization, parking lot.

In particular ways to transmit that we had through the parade in the 90s, our primary goal is to increase the ■■■■. seit■■■■, ilde estabanza, alternately, act Sanskrit,ely tekrar through the sample, period,■ Alex podcast, in modernization of 117 lives before 321.

[26 : 27] And if you know your American history, you know that that is the height of the Civil War, the most divided time in the history of our country. And there were three founding members of this church that could not have represented the divisions of the country at that time more.

You had A.G. Edwards, who was on the side of the North. He was a brigadier general in the Union Army. He would later serve as Lincoln's assistant secretary of the U.S. Treasury.

And A.G. Edwards, as some of you might know, founded a financial firm that would eventually become Wells Fargo. You had Edward Burdell. Edward Burdell was a businessman who was a Southerner.

He was a Confederate. His son fought on the side of the Confederacy and died in the Battle of Fredericksburg. And then you had Mary Jane Townsend. And Mary Jane Townsend was a runaway slave who made her way to St. Louis where she found work as a cook.

And she became a ministry leader in the church. And she organized a Sunday school for black Americans who were flooding into the city. And she helped start a foundation to provide housing, support, and education for young black women in St. Louis.

[27 : 32] And these three were some of the three founding members of the church. And every Sunday, these three worshiped together at Memorial Presbyterian Church, a Union Army general, a Confederate, and a runaway slave.

And at the time, the way that the church did communion was they had a common cup. And every Sunday, A.G. Edwards and Edward Burdell and Mary Jane Townsend, three people who could not, in the world's eyes, were enemies, in the world's eyes, could not have represented the divisions in society more.

All three of them drank from the same common cup. The cup that represented the blood of Jesus Christ poured out at the cross.

People with nothing in common, people who, in the world's eyes, should have been enemies. Coming together in radical gospel equality, radical gospel unity, coming together as one family, overcoming the divisions of the 1860s.

Why? Because of the power of the cross. Because of the wisdom of the cross. And this is what it means that the cross of Jesus Christ is the great equalizer.

[28 : 47] Before the cross, there is radical equality. No one can boast before God. No one can boast before others. And if we were to think through the implications of that, if we were to let that transform us, if we were to think about power and wisdom as we live our lives, if we were to let our institutions be shaped by that, it would utterly transform the world.

Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Father in heaven, thank you that mercy has swallowed up misery at the cross.

Thank you that at the cross we see true power and true wisdom put on display, Christ crucified in our place. Lord, help us to see that for ourselves.

Help us to see that for our world. Lord, would the power and the wisdom of the cross shape us deeply and form us deeply. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Amen. Amen. property for the Holy Spirit. Amen. Just like this mountain, we ask for our ways to look into it again. Unfortunately, we're able to share our story with a beautiful purpose. For political treatment, we have another ■■ for us to attend the kingdom, is pointedly with a circle with our students to attend the kingdom and are called by the school of mother, as big children of mother, as big as small as a mother, what you're doing.

[30 : 05] How much fun you make? Yeah. Good job. Let's pray. What are those them?

monies to happen in the Bible?