

Imperfect Church - Perfect Saviour (4): The Sophistication of the Cross

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[0 : 00] Every imperfect church is imperfect in its own imperfect ways. If we're applying the standards of the Bible to our church, we are imperfect. But if we're applying to our church the standards of the world around us, we're not imperfect. We're just plain stupid. We lack sophistication in the true sense of the word where sophistication means to be wise. We preach a message which is absurd to the world around us, how the death of a Jewish man 2,000 years ago on a Roman cross has the power to change the world. We freely admit our weaknesses, but we speak of the cross on which Jesus died as the power and the wisdom of God.

To the world around us, it's weak and it's foolish. We lack sophistication because the cross we proclaim lacks sophistication. To the world around us, it's all so much foolishness. Now, this is no new thing. The world's been saying these things about the church for thousands of years. And sometimes, as it was at the church in Corinth, Christians have been duped by the world and began to subtly change their message and their methods. The foolishness of the simple message of the cross is replaced by philosophical discourse, and the preachers of the cross become charismatic auditors, the match of anything the world can provide. The result is a church which looks just like the world and a message preached by the church which changes nothing. Well, in this passage, the Apostle Paul is defending the simplicity of the message of the gospel against all sophisticated opponents and showing how the divisions in the church in Corinth all trace their origin to worldly conceptions of the gospel against all the way. And the gospel is a very short step from being relevant to our society, which is what we should be, to giving our society a message it wants to hear in a way it wants to hear it, which is what we should not be. Paul uses three arguments here to point to the power and wisdom of the message of the cross of Jesus Christ. He talks first of the word of the cross in verse 18 through 25. He talks secondly of the worth of the called in verse 26 through 29. And thirdly, the wealth of the Christian in verse 30 through 31. Take it as read, the world thinks our message and methods are foolish and weak. It always has and it always will.

[3 : 19] But to we who believe, the gospel is the wisdom and power of God. First of all then, from verse 18 through 25, the word of the cross. The section is dominated by the words in the first verse, verse 18, for the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it's the power of God. You'll see here a sharp division between those who are perishing and those who are being saved. They may not be divided ethnically or culturally, but in this one important thing, but in this one important thing, they are polar opposites.

One is perishing, one is being saved. There can be no more absolute division between two groups as there is between these two, those who are perishing and those who are being saved.

It's as if an axe has divided a block of wood into two. One section is destined to be burned in a fire, the other section is to be carved into a stunning sculpture to stand in Buckingham Palace for the pleasure of King Charles. What divides these two groups isn't the luck of the draw or who drew the shortest straw. What divides them is their attitude to the word of the cross of Jesus Christ, the message of salvation by faith alone in the crucified Jewish Messiah Jesus Christ. Those who are perishing consider that message to be foolishness, dismissing it as so much stupidity and weakness that anyone could believe a convicted criminal crucified on a hill just outside Jerusalem 2,000 years ago is Lord and King, and through whom by faith there is forgiveness and eternal life. Well, that's a message of folly and foolishness to those who are perishing. Far better a word of human strength and human wisdom, salvation at the point of a sword, or the rhetoric of human auditory. But those who are being saved consider that message of the cross, the power of God,

clinging to it as God's victory over human sin and death. They have discovered that there is no more powerful agent of change in the world as the proclamation of the cross. For them, human strength is weakness, and human wisdom is foolishness.

For them, life begins and ends of the cross on which their Lord and Savior gave Himself to take away their sins and give them eternal life. Now, the city of Corinth was a cultural melting pot. The Greeks had their philosophers where, you know, the word philosophy means a lover of wisdom, and they drew their ideas from Plato and Aristotle and other famous pre-BC philosophers. [6:40] But as Paul says in verse 21, important verse this, the world did not know God through wisdom. The world did not know God through wisdom. No matter how hard you study the works of Plato, and no matter how closely you follow the teachings of Aristotle, they will not lead you to God.

They will not. The philosophers, orators, and debaters of Paul's day were trained in the art of public speaking. They knew how to frame their arguments and to wow the crowds. They were charismatic speakers whose speeches. They were trained in the Greek fathers. Unfortunately, some of the Christians in the Corinthian church were taken in both by the message they delivered and the method of their delivery. For these Greek philosophers, the idea of a spiritual God becoming flesh and blood was ludicrous.

That such a divine being should die on a cross utterly foolish. And furthermore, they required rational and logical proof before they believed such a thing was true.

For these Gentile lovers of wisdom, these philosophers, the message of the cross was stupidity. As Paul says of them in verse 23, the message of Christ crucified was foolishness to them.

Literally to believe such a thing was moronic. The Greek word for fool is moron. The city of Corinth also contained a large Jewish population.

[8:25] If the message of the cross drove the Greek philosophers mad, it sent the Jewish scribes into hysterics. They were brought up on a steady diet of rabbinic teaching, which portrayed the Jewish Messiah as being an earthly king and a military leader. He would, by means of the sword, liberate Israel from all its enemies and establish an earthly kingdom greater even than that of King David.

They spoke forcefully. They were quick to anger, and they whipped up crowds into national frenzies. Think of the Nuremberg rallies. For them, the message of the cross was weakness. Later in verse 23, Paul says that the message of Christ crucified was to them a stumbling block. It was a scandal. That's what the word stumbling block is originally in the language, scandalizo, scandal. The idea that the Messiah should not establish an earthly kingdom, but should die upon a cross was disgusting. And the teaching that a man is saved purely on the basis of his faith and not his Jewish ethnicity and obedience to the laws of the rabbis, well, that just scandalized them. So, for the philosophers... Sophie, you're not a philosopher, but your name comes from Sophos, wisdom. You're a wise person.

For the philosophers, the word of the cross was unsophisticated foolishness. For the Jews, the word of the cross was unspeakable weakness. To go back to the verse at the head of our passage, for the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it's the power of God. Paul preached Christ crucified because in the seeming weakness foolishness and foolishness of the cross is salvation for all who believe.

God's way of salvation does not consist in human wisdom, lest the wise should boast in their wisdom. It doesn't consist in human strength, lest the strong should boast in their strength.

[10:41] It consists in what, from a human perspective, is the weakest and most foolish of all things, a God becoming flesh, the Messiah dying as a criminal on a Roman cross.

Let's put it like this. One cannot think one's way into Christian salvation, salvation. And one cannot force one's way into Christian salvation. One is saved by the cross of Jesus. The path to salvation doesn't lie to the halls of the philosophers or the battlefields of the military. The path to salvation rests in our faith in the word of the cross, Christ and Him crucified.

From a worldly perspective, it's such an unsophisticated message. It's so very foolish, so very weak. But from God's point of view, the cross is the wisdom and power of God unto salvation.

Its proclamation by unsophisticated preachers, untrained in the techniques of the Greek philosophers, is, from a human perspective, is, from a human perspective, so very idiotic.

But in God's wisdom and power, the preaching of the word of the cross by those whom God has called and gifted, that is the method of salvation. Some in the church in Corinth may have preferred the philosophical reasoning of the greatest preacher in the early church, Apollos.

[12:18] Others may have appreciated more the Jewish background and ethnicity of the father of the early church, Peter. But in this section, Paul is warning these Christians that the preacher of the gospel comes a very distant second to the word of the cross. He reminds them that the world will never, ever appreciate the message of Christ and Him crucified.

What is of primary importance is that the word is preached with simplicity and clarity, not with philosophical precision or militant frenzy.

Preach the word and let God do His work, for this word is the power of God and the wisdom of God. It is God's way of salvation. It represents God's destruction of those who are wise in their own eyes. Well, how do we apply this situation today? Well, out of the many possibilities, let me suggest just one. Accept, accept that the word of the cross is foolishness and weakness to the world around us. Accept it. Rather than appealing to the world by removing the scandal of the cross from our preaching and replacing it with the philosophy of religious thought, we must double down as a church on the simplicity of the good news of Jesus Christ.

[13:58] Rather than trying to appeal to the world by making our message political or militant, we proclaim Christ and Him crucified.

We're going to double down in doing this, not because we're stubborn Neanderthals, but because according to Paul in 1 Corinthians 1.18, it is this message and preaching the message, preaching the method by which people are saved.

And it's because it is through this foolish and weak word of the cross that God is most glorified. Let's not allow the world to change what we preach or how we preach it.

Rather, let's allow what we preach to change the world. And it will. It will.

The word of the cross. Well, secondly, in verses 26 through 29, we have the worth of the called.

The worth of the called. Let's suppose you're putting together a group of people through whom you want to change the world.

[15:16] You'd choose people with different gifts. There'd be those among them who were hyper-intelligent and were quickly able to analyze problems and suggest answers.

You'd choose some rich people who could bankroll your ideas and add their considerable financial weight. Then there would be influencers.

Those who were able, through the force of their skills in communication, to win other people to your position. You'd want also some prominent figures in society, sportsmen or actors to whom people could look up.

And lastly, you might want to choose some physically perfect specimens just to give the impression of your ideas becoming a pathway to becoming superhuman.

In a word, if you were going to put together a group of people through whom you wanted to change the world without defending Matthias, you'd act like a presidential hopeful on his or her campaign trail.

[16:18] Right? You probably wouldn't choose weak people, insignificant people, common people, or foolish people.

If you wanted to choose a message which would change the world, you most definitely wouldn't choose the word of the cross. If you wanted to choose a method to get that message across, you definitely wouldn't choose preaching.

And if you wanted a people through whom you could change the world, you wouldn't choose those God has chosen. The Corinthian Christians only had to look at themselves to see the proof of this.

Not many of you are wise. Not many of you powerful. Not many of you of noble birth. According to Paul in verse 27, 28, the people whom God called were foolish, weak, low, despised, nothings.

They were not the best specimens of humanity. They were common people. No better, no worse than everybody else. God chose people to proclaim the message of the cross we would never have chosen.

[17:35] Jesus' disciples were no great examples of manhood. None of them would have noble birth, wealthy, or particularly well-educated.

They were common men. But with them, or more accurately, with the message they preached, God changed the world forever. When I was in school, the bigger, faster, more skillful boys were always picked first for the football team.

Which is why I was in it. No, that's not true. What Paul is saying is that God doesn't pick big, fast, skillful players for His team.

He picks normal people. No better, no worse than anyone else. But why does He do that? Why doesn't He do what presidential hopefuls on their campaign trails do?

He does it, according to verse 29, so that no human being may boast in the presence of God. No human being, by virtue of his or her position in society, by virtue of what he or she has achieved, may earn salvation.

[18 : 50] God is not respected of persons. Human wealth, nobility, strength, wisdom, it doesn't impress Him. It doesn't intimidate Him.

The cross of Jesus is the ultimate expression of God's wisdom and strength. It was the wealthy, the wise, and the noble of this world, according to this world's values, who put Jesus to death in the first place.

God's way of salvation consists in everything this world despises, the way of humility and weakness, the way of foolishness and humiliation.

You know, we might be impressed by the rich and famous, but not God. It was the rich and famous who crucified Christ.

The wisdom and power of God is expressed in His salvation of common people. It was the wise and strong, according to this world's estimation, who were executing the first Christians.

[19 : 56] These people were boasting of their status in society and their achievements. They thought these things would earn salvation for them. But God's way of salvation is by rejecting our own righteousness and by faith embracing the sacrifice on the cross of a humiliated Christ.

If there was any other, then a human being may have cause to boast before God and claim the glory for Himself. But God will share His glory with no man.

God called common people like us so that no human being may boast in His presence. The Corinthian church, as so many churches today, are fixated by what we call the cult of the personality, the charismatic, good-looking, wealthy, orator of noble blood and of a regal cut. Such a fixation is the diametric opposite of the word of the cross. We might think to ourselves, without being too self-deprecating, if only Crow Road had a more dynamic, good-looking pastor, younger, better at public speaking, we'd be far more successful as a church.

If only He would adopt modes of communication which are more relevant to today's society, Twitter, and all these things, we'd have more people who came to church.

[21 : 36] If only He would dial down on sin and the cross and death and dial up living your best life now, the church would be packed out every Sunday. We don't want a Samuel Rutherford who was nicknamed the short man who could not bow.

We don't want the famous hymn writer Isaac Watts who, according to his biography, and I quote, was so ugly that he couldn't find a wife. What Paul is saying is that the word of the cross, it's the word of the cross which is of primary importance, not the worldly wisdom or strength of the preacher.

Oh, let's stop being fixated with the charisma, dynamism, rhetorical skill, and good looks of the preacher. Almost without exception, in our own day, the most dynamic ministers end up being puffed up with so much self-importance they end up preaching themselves rather than the cross. After all, according to the Scriptures, Jesus was despised, weak, and very ordinary looking. And as a kind of post-it note to self, there is nothing more distasteful than a middle-aged white man like myself trying to pretend he's kicked back cool and in with the culture of the day in the pulpit. Listen to what the Puritan John Flavel said. We must preach a crucified Christ in a crucified style. We must preach a crucified Christ in a crucified style.

[23 : 26] Let's not be deceived by being impressed by sophisticated preachers who'd be just as much at home in a presidential campaign as they are in a pulpit.

Let's be impressed only by the glory and wisdom of God in the cross of Christ. Even when preached by common men with no other special skills other than that God has called them and that they love the word of the cross.

For in there they find the power and the wisdom of God. Well, third and lastly, we're going to look in verse 30 and 31 at the wealth of the Christian.

The wealth of the Christian. In what does the wealth of this church consist? Is it that we have gifted and dynamic leaders?

That's what we're told today in Reformed circles. That if the church has got good leaders then it's a healthy church, a good church.

[24 : 31] Now, no doubt there's a grain of truth here. As preachers, everyone can become a better preacher. And yet, surely the wealth of the church and of us as individual Christians does not rest on human wisdom, ability, and power.

Surely it rests only in this, the proclamation of the word of the cross. In verses 30 and 31, we're told where our wisdom, strength, and wealth as a church rests.

Because of God, you are in Christ Jesus who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption, so that it's written, let the one who boasts boast of the Lord.

Wisdom from God isn't found in Plato or Aristotle. It isn't found in any worldly philosophy. It is found only in Jesus Christ.

Righteousness from God isn't found in human religion with all its practices. It is found only in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Holiness from God isn't found in any human effort to cleanse oneself and be a better person.

[25 : 47] It is found only in that holiness which is ours by faith in Jesus Christ. Redemption from God isn't found in any acts of human strength or military victory.

It is found only in the cross of Jesus Christ. We have these words, don't we? Only in Jesus Christ. This is where the wealth, wisdom, strength of the church and the individual Christian rests. Nothing of ourselves. It is all only in Jesus Christ.

You know, I think we've probably as a church sung this hymn to death, but that's because it is absolutely true. In Christ alone my hope is found.

In Christ alone my hope is found. The wealth and strength and wisdom of the church does not rest in the charisma, dynamism, strategic ability of its leaders.

[26 : 51] if we should think even for one moment that if we become more sophisticated we will attract more people to the unsophisticated message of the cross, we're fooling ourselves.

But Paul's point is this, the very thing the world thinks of as being idiotic and foolish, the word of the cross, it is the wisdom and power of the church and of the Christian.

Through faith in a crucified Christ we have all we could ever need, all we could ever want, all we could ever dream. We have access to the treasures of the infinite God in heaven, the King of kings, the Lord of the universe, the God of heaven and earth himself.

All his treasure houses. The wisdom and power of this world is nothing compared to the infinite glory and beauty of our God.

And through faith in Christ Jesus it's all ours, every last bit of it. The death of a Jewish man on a cross two thousand years ago renders the wealth of this world nothing but poverty.

[28 : 15] The wisdom of this world nothing but foolishness. The power of this world nothing but weakness. And the status of this world nothing but common. But it renders the poor of this world rich, the weak of this world strong, the foolish of this world wise, and the common of this world noble.

The word of the cross is God's power and wisdom, so that we may not boast in ourselves but in Christ alone. I want to close tonight by quoting our mission director, David Meredith.

I'll never forget these words. At the funeral of a former minister of ours, the Reverend Ronald Mackay, in the Free North Church in Inverness.

And David Meredith said of Ronnie, and I'm not going to put David's accent on because I can't, the thing about Ronnie was that he never stood in front of the word, he always stood behind it.

He never stood in front of the word, he always stood behind it. What kind of preachers do we want? What kind of message do we want?

[29 : 33] What kind of people do we want to be? Those who put our status, gifts, and wisdom before the word, or those who want to proclaim the word of the cross?

The famous Moravian pietist Nicholas van Zinzendorf's motto in life was this, preach the gospel, die, and to be forgotten.

And to be forgotten.