

# A Foolish but Powerful Gospel

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[ 0 : 00 ] My home group has been studying 1 Corinthians for about six months now, and we're about to finish it this Tuesday night. And it's an extraordinary church.

If by extraordinary, we mean extraordinarily messed up. So if this was the 9 a.m. Corinthian service, there'd be one parishioner over there holding hands with his mother-in-law, and everyone would be happy about that.

That's chapter five. The people in the back row, you guys are suing all the people in the middle rows for fraud. That's chapter six. All the husbands, you'd be on that side of the room because you hate sort of icky physical contact.

You can't be bothered to sleep with your wives anymore. That's chapter seven. All the wives, you couldn't care less because you've long since thrown away your wedding rings. You don't listen to your husbands anymore. That's chapter 11.

In the middle of the service, an Anglo-Saxon person would stand up and start speaking Mandarin to impress all the Chinese people. That's chapter 12. And there'd be no music of any kind because all the musicians and singers were too hurt that they weren't asked to be readers or prayers.

[ 1 : 08 ] That's chapter 12. And the truth is, look, only half the church would be here today because only half the church liked the way I preach. The other half liked the way Andrew Price preaches.

And so they haven't even bothered to turn up today. So that's chapter one today. They're an extraordinarily messed up church. Now, Corinth is Corinth. We are HTD.

Okay? Just want to put that out there. We in this room, we are not messed up. Okay? But in issue after issue, we will glimpse ourselves in them.

We'll be tempted to react the way they did when faced with a similar issue. Their city, Corinth, was effectively built on a canal. And that meant the traders and the merchants, rather than sail all the way around the bottom of Greece, would just cut nine miles across this canal road.

It saved everyone tons of time and money. And that meant that the city was rich and successful. And they had everything a big city has.

[ 2 : 16 ] So all the latest ideas, all the cleverest thinkers, every culture under the sun, and every religion in the empire. It was all there in big, impressive Corinth.

And in a city where being impressive is everything, is this small church struggling with how unimpressive they look.

Their people weren't impressive. Verse 26 tells us, Not many of you were wise by human standards. Not many were influential. Not many were of noble birth.

Their message seems ridiculous too. They are struggling with how unimpressive their Christianity looks. And there's loads more to say about the Corinthian problem.

But for today, we're going to consider how insecure they were. Because like everything else in Corinth, why is the gospel not more impressive?

[ 3 : 19 ] Why is the gospel not more impressive like everything out there? And I've put that, I guess, that premise or that question at the top of your handouts.

You see, if the gospel is powerful to save, why don't more people in Corinth believe? If the gospel is true, why are we a laughing stock?

If the gospel is powerful, why aren't more people persuaded to join our ranks? Why is the gospel not more impressive?

Maybe something has gone wrong. And so last week, to feel more secure about their faith and their Christianity, they brought out the polish. They wanted to shine their Christianity into something really impressive, like everything else in the city around them.

And so they started from the top with their leaders. You see, the apostle Paul had become an embarrassment. Chapter 2, verse 1, Paul says he did not come, excuse me, with eloquence or human wisdom.

[ 4 : 27 ] In Greco-Roman Corinth, they prized excellence in speech and reasoning and debating skills. Eloquence and wisdom are really high commodities.

But in verse 4, we learn that Paul's message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words. All of this helps to explain why the Corinthians were fighting over better, more impressive looking leaders.

See, they didn't feel secure enough in their spirituality with unimpressive Paul. And so chapter 1, verse 12, last week, some of them said, I'm going to follow Apollos instead.

Acts chapter 18 tells us that Apollos, he was very polished, elegant speech, excellent Bible teacher. If we all follow Apollos, maybe we'll feel more secure about our Christian faith.

We won't seem as laughable to those around us. And Paul says, no. He says, no. And he warns them in verse 17, the end of our passage from last week.

[ 5 : 40 ] He says, Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel. Not with wisdom and eloquence, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

You see, to trust in an apostle's eloquence and not his gospel message is something the world would do. That is a worldly way of thinking.

Trusting in impressive worldly polish. And Paul warns that that empties the cross of Christ of its power. Let me say again, we are HTD.

We are not messed up Corinth. But we will glimpse ourselves in them. So, when we look at the laughing stock that Jesus and his church are to Melbourne out there, when we think about how everyone in this city rejects biblical truth, when we think that everyone in Melbourne values being rich and successful and impressive and polished, yet we have to follow or take up our crosses, and most importantly for us here today, when our families reject Jesus, as loads of our families have, the pressure for us to polish Christianity into something that would really impress them is very real and tempting.

And so we need to listen today. And so Paul gives them and us three facts. Three facts, so they will throw away the Christian polish.

[ 7 : 24 ] Three facts to stop us feeling more secure by how impressive Christianity seems to the world outside. And so if you've got a handout, I've put the facts on there.

Please keep the handout there. That'll tell you where I'm going and keep your passages open. That would really help me as we go along. So, fact number one, the gospel looks foolish and weak.

That is a fact. The gospel looks foolish and weak. And that is because of verse 18. Have a look down. Verse 18. For the message of the cross, the gospel, is foolishness to those who are perishing.

You see, in Melbourne, to make Easter about anything other than chocolate and a couple of days off work is foolishness. Look also at verse 23.

But we, Christians, or an Apostle, we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles. When Paul preached the good news about Jesus in the public square, all the Jews heard was a stumbling block.

[ 8 : 34 ] They couldn't get over. All the Greeks heard was foolish gibberish. Here's a slide on the screen. This is 2,000-year-old graffiti from the Roman Empire.

Someone was mocking a Christian called Alexamenos. And I wrote the inscription. It says, Alexamenos worships his God. And you can see they gave Jesus on the cross the head of a donkey to show how foolish they think it is to trust in or put all your hope in the cross.

That is 2,000-year-old graffiti. Thanks, Gwyneth. Verse 22 says that Jews demand signs. If you Christians want to impress us, get your Jesus just to show up here and do one of his great signs. Then we'll believe. It says that Greeks demand wisdom. If you want to persuade us, give us wise words, eloquent speech, that's the polish we really respond to.

But Paul's foolish message to both of them is of a God who comes to earth to die for their sins in weakness. Our world today still says that this message is foolishness.

[ 9 : 57 ] When we tell people about Jesus, we should be prepared to say, look, if you follow Jesus, no one is ever going to say, wow, you follow Jesus?

That's amazing. You're amazing. Verse 18 says, the message of the cross is foolishness. To say that we in this room trust in Jesus is to say we are fools.

It's the same thing. You're really saying that humiliated figure on the cross is your God? Yeah, that's what I'm saying. And the moment when he dies, that's the rescue?

Yeah, that's what I'm saying. And you're saying that God chose the weakest thing in the world to demonstrate his power? Yeah, I guess that's what I'm saying.

Fact one, the gospel looks foolish and weak to the world. But, fact number two, really, the gospel is wise and powerful.

[11:02] Verse 24, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, that's everyone, Christ, the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom.

And the weakness of God is stronger than human strength. See, God at his most stupid is wiser than the world. God at his most weak dying on a cross is more powerful than the world.

If you believe fact one but don't know fact two, you will reach for the polish. You'll want to improve your foolish-looking Christianity into something that is more impressive to the world and to yourself.

Paul warns, all you'll end up doing is emptying the cross of its power. And that is bad. That is bad because the gospel is already strong enough.

Because God's weakness is stronger than human strength. You see, even when we get stumped by clever questions about why God allows evil and suffering or people stump us with questions about why it is Christians do so much damage in the world or explain the Holy Trinity to me.

[12:28] Even when they stump us with all that and think how clever they are, all the clever atheists, all the clever people in the world one day will say, Jesus, you are king and you are powerful enough for me.

And they will say, Jesus, you are right and you are wise enough for me. You see, the gospel doesn't sound wise to clever people of the world but it does save.

The gospel doesn't sound powerful to the powerful people of the world but it does rescue from perishing. See, if you want to know how wise and powerful the gospel is, the test is whether it saves people from perishing not whether it impresses them.

I'll say that again. If you want to know how wise and powerful the gospel is, the test is whether it saves people from perishing and not whether it impresses people.

Fact one, the gospel looks foolish and weak but fact two, the gospel is wise and strong because verse 25 says the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

[13:49] You see, all people in the world, there are two kinds of people in the world. Everyone's got a version of this. There are two kinds of people in the world. So, my favourite author is Mark Twain. He said, there are those who accomplish things and those who claim to accomplish things and Twain says the first group is less crowded.

There are two kinds of people in the world. There are those people who squeeze the toothpaste from the bottom and those irritating people who don't. There are those who are mourning people like my three-year-old son, RJ, and there are those who aren't, like me, which always ends in one person's tears.

Mine, of course. The Corinthians thought, you're either a Paul person or an Apollos or Cephas person. And God weighs into this, I guess, kind of discussion in verse 18.

He says, there are those who hear the message of the cross, no matter how many times you explain it to them, they think it's foolishness. They are fact one people and they are perishing.

And then there are those of us who see the message of the cross and think, that is God's power to save me.

[15:04] We are fact two people. We are saved. And it makes us wonder, why is it that when we hear the good news about Jesus and the Bible, we think, wow, genius.

God, you are amazing. But our family and friends, when they hear the exact same message, they think, that is ridiculous. Why has God organized the universe and salvation this way?

And the answer is fact number three. In verse 18, God intended a right and a wrong reaction to Jesus' gospel.

And the reason why is verse 19. For or because it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, the intelligence of the intelligent, I will frustrate.

That was from Isaiah 29, which is our first reading. It was about a city so proud by how impressive they were that God said, if I'm going to save you, I need to do it in a way so you're not trusting in how impressive you are.

[16:16] I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, the intelligence of the intelligent, I will frustrate. See, God wanted to thwart the cleverness of the clever.

So he chose a method of salvation that opposes human pride. You see, when it comes to salvation, the big problem is not sin and the devil because Jesus' cross has dealt with them.

When it comes to salvation, the big problem is human pride. Verse 20, where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law?

Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? You see, to those who fancy themselves, who proudly trust in their big brains, what is their answer to eternal salvation?

Where is the teacher? Where is the philosopher of this age when it comes to matters of God and human perishing? Communism, capitalism, multiculturalism, pluralism, conservatism, liberalism, feminism, humanism.

[17:29] Come and tell us, how can our families be saved? Where is the wise person? See, to proud, self-righteous people, they demand signs and wisdom.

If God can satisfy me with the appropriate signs or the wise words, then I'll believe. As if they're the examiner and God is somehow sitting their test or that they're the judge and God is in the dock. It's the other way around. He's not going to answer people, answer proud curiosity just to satisfy people. He's not in other people's courtroom.

We're all in his. Have a look at verse 27. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise.

God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things and the things that are not to nullify the things that are.

[18:38] Why? Verse 29. So that no one may boast before him. If people are going to be saved, they're going to have to humble themselves and put their trust in a weak and foolish looking saviour who died for them.

That way no one can pat themselves on the back at their own salvation. You see, God wanted to ensure that no one in heaven can say, I am made righteous because my big brain figured out the Bible.

That empties the cross of its power. Paul, he's on the same wavelength as God. You see, Paul knows what the market wants. He knows that the Jews demand signs.

Did you know that Paul has such amazing gifts of healing that one day he healed a person back from death? He brought them back to life? In the ancient world, if you had a disease, you literally had to touch Paul's hanky, and you'd be healed, that's Acts 19 and 20, Paul could do all the signs that would impress the Jews.

We're told the Greeks demanded wisdom. Paul was professionally trained in rhetoric and debate, professionally trained as a Pharisee in the scriptures. He could provide all the polished and eloquent arguments you wanted.

[19:57] He knows the markets want signs and wisdom and he can do it all. But instead, have a look at 2 verse 2. For I resolved, or I decided, to know nothing while I was with you, except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

He chose to make himself look weak and fearful, just so his message would be clear. It's all about Jesus Christ and him crucified. And he knows that doing it that way will make the Jews trip over. He knows that doing it that way will make him a laughing stock to the Greeks. But Paul wanted to ensure, along with God, that no one can say, I am made holy.

I am more spiritual because I follow Paul, or I follow Apollos, or I follow Cephas. God wanted to ensure that no one could say, I am redeemed because I am at HTD, the powerhouse of eastern suburbs Christianity.

See, to do that is to empty the cross of its power. Verse 30, it is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, Jesus who has become for us wisdom from God.

[21:16] That is, Jesus is our righteousness, holiness, and redemption. Therefore, as it is written, let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord. Boast in Jesus, if you are going to boast.

Think of all the rescues God has in his rescue toolbox. Noah and the flood, parting of the Red Sea, Daniel and the lion's den, his friends from the fiery furnace, rescuing Israel from exile, all of Jesus' miracles, all of them very, very impressive by any standard.

But God reaches to the bottom of his rescue toolbox and picks out a tiny, dusty little crucifix. And he says, let's save the world this way.

Let's save the world this way because this will put an end to human pride. God's rescue. And in Corinth, he proves this point by choosing the least impressive group of saddos, the most foolish sounding message, and the least impressive leader, and he gave them every spiritual blessing, and he rescued them from perishing.

And that means that only humble people will accept God's rescue. Proud people who think they know better, they will despise the gospel and not be saved.

[ 22 : 49 ] For those here who wouldn't call yourselves Christians, there is no path to Jesus, no path out of perishing that doesn't involve you humbling yourself before God.

God has deliberately designed it that way so that verse 29 there will be salvation without human boasting. So that our righteousness, holiness, and redemption only comes from Jesus, verse 30. So that in verse 31 salvation will only be boasting in the Lord. And that doesn't mean that no one will be saved.

It seems quite a tight set of limitations. Paul saved thousands, remember? Paul never expects small results. But if people can only be saved by humbling themselves, it stops us trusting in impressive polish by things that we would be proud of according to worldly standards.

people around us. You see, the Corinthians were well aware of fact number one, how weak they were.

[ 24 : 11 ] They didn't know fact two, so they got out the polish, and they had no idea about fact number three, that God organized the universe this way to undo human pride, to stop us trusting in polished Christianity.

And like the Corinthians, we too are tempted to reach for the polish, to make the gospel seem more impressive for ourselves and for those we know who aren't saved.

because the polish makes us feel more certain that that will win people over, rather than trusting in a foolish sounding cross.

And so as we get near the end, I just want to give us some examples of what trusting in the polish looks like. So these are examples of, I guess, trusting in the polish, and there's probably no one here who's innocent of all this, so we all do it.

Let's just put our hands up. Me, worst of all. So I want to be humble about how I say it, but here are some examples of trusting in the polish rather than the gospel.

[ 25 : 24 ] So when our sense of security as Christians come from how impressive our preachers sound, or how middle class our church is, or how many people are in our pews, that is trusting in the polish.

When we think about our family and friends who aren't saved, we're all tempted to wish that there were more sophisticated Christians, more clever Christians, more rich and successful Christians, more famous Christians, Christians with better answers, because all of that stuff will win them.

You want an impressive Christian? Wait, I'll go and find one for you, if that's what it'll take. You want a Christian who's a famous athlete? I'll grab Gary Ablett or Israel Folau, and I'll show them to you.

You want rich and successful Christians? I'll get them for you. You want Christians with really good arguments? I'll find one on YouTube. If that's what it will take to save you, to make you believe, that is trusting in the polish.

Imagine if there was ever a program on the ABC, and you saw the program and it presented a clever answer to every question Melbourne had about God, and we think, wow, that's the one thing they really need.

[ 26 : 40 ] They really need to show that ABC program every day. That is trusting in the polish, because you know that as soon as you say, look, the heart of Christianity is actually a man dying on a cross for you, that they'll think we're fools.

And so we never say it. We just keep pointing them to impressive-looking ABC programs. See, trusting in a more snazzy church service, more pomp and ceremony, cutting edge cultural engagement, the best arguments, the best music, all of that stuff makes us feel wise and strong as Christians.

It's so impressive. It's so polished compared to the world. And it might attract people through our doors. It might fill our pews in some way, but it doesn't rely on God's wisdom and power, and that means it won't save people.

And so here are some suggestions for us to finish. Again, let's be humble about this as we go. Some suggestions to finish.

Don't look at the church diary and see when your favourite preacher is speaking and only make an effort then. I know for a fact that people have told me that that's what people do.

[ 28 : 02 ] Don't trust in an elegant turn of phrase, trust in the Bible and the actual words of the message. I was almost tempted to turn up today in board shorts and flip-flops rather than a jacket and tie.

Another suggestion, do not stop evangelising your family and friends until you've told them about the cross of Jesus. That is where the power is.

don't wait to speak to them until you've made yourself look good enough to them, until you've built up enough of a friendship, until you think it's the right time or they're ready to listen.

The power to save them is 100% in the message of the cross and that means there's no right time. There's no right person. It's for all of us at any time.

It is not our job to polish Christianity, to make it seem more impressive from a worldly point of view. It's our job just to tell people about Jesus and to trust in God to bring the power as he says he will.

[ 29 : 22 ] So verse 18, the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to those of us who are being saved, it is the power of God.

So let us pray. Our Father God, we declare that our salvation is 100% because of Jesus and his cross, that our redemption and holiness and righteousness is just because of him and not from our worldly polish.

Help us to always believe that. Help us to act like that. Please help us to put away the polish.

Please help us to stop measuring our Christianity by worldly standards and we beg you that our family and friends who don't know Jesus would see his message of the cross and see it as the power of God.

We beg you for these things in Jesus' name. Amen.