

God's Way vs the World's Way

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[0 : 00] My Bible study groups, we're about to study 1 Corinthians in our studies, and it's an extraordinary church. If by extraordinary, we mean extraordinarily messed up.

If this was the 9 a.m. Corinthian service, there'd be one gentleman over there who's sleeping with his mother-in-law, and everyone else in the church is happy about it.

That's chapter 5. The people in the back row, you'll be suing all the people in the front row for fraud.

That's chapter 6. The husbands, you'll be on this side of the room because you hate physical contact and affection with your wives.

That's chapter 7. All the wives, well, you couldn't care less anyway because you've long since thrown away your wedding rings. That's chapter 11. In the middle of the service, a white Australian person would stand up and start speaking Mandarin just to impress all the Chinese people in the room.

That's chapter 12. There'd be no music in the church. Bruce, Annette, they were too hurt to turn up today because they weren't asked to do the sermon instead of me.

[1 : 06] That's chapter 12. But the truth is only half the church would be here today because only half the people like how I preach. The other half prefer Andrew Price.

And so the church is only half full today, and that is our passage today. They were an extraordinary church. If by extraordinary, we mean extraordinarily messed up.

Now, they are Corinth and we are HCD. We are not them. But we will glimpse ourselves in them in this passage today.

Corinth, just in case you don't know, Corinth was a rich and successful city. They had everything a successful big city has, all the best thinkers, all the cleverest ideas, all the cultures, and of course, every religion of the empire.

It was all there in cosmopolitan Corinth. And in a city where being impressive was everything is this messed up church of unimpressive believers.

[2 : 07] Look at verse 26. Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards. Not many were influential.

Not many were of noble birth. And that left the Corinthians feeling insecure. They struggled with how impressive they were in a rich and successful city.

You see, they thought, if the gospel is wise, why are we a laughingstock? If the gospel is powerful, why aren't more people joining our ranks?

If the gospel is true, why don't more people believe? Perhaps something has gone wrong with the message. So to make themselves feel more comfortable and secure, they brought out the polish. They brought out the polish. They wanted to buff and shine Christianity into something more attractive and appealing so they wouldn't feel so insecure.

[3 : 06] They'd lost confidence in the word. And they started with their leaders, which for them meant the apostle Paul. You see, Paul had become an embarrassment in Corinth because Corinth loved impressive speakers, wise rhetoric and clever sounding philosophy.

But when Paul turned up, chapter two, verse one, chapter two, verse one, I did not come with eloquence or wisdom as I proclaim to you the testimony about God.

For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words.

And it's surprising, isn't it? That that is how a Paul sermon would have sounded. It's no wonder in chapter one that they tried to follow a Paulus instead.

Acts chapter 18, just in case you don't know, Acts 18 says that a Paulus was an eloquent speaker and he was a great Bible teacher. If we all follow a Paulus, maybe we won't feel like such a laughingstock.

[4 : 15] We'll feel more secure in our faith and comfortable in a city like this. And Paul says, no. He says, no. Verse 17, top of the page.

For 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. To trust in a preacher's eloquence is the way of the world.

And Paul warns that it empties the cross of its power. It's like saying we don't need Jesus to die for us because we've got slick preaching instead. Remember, they are Corinth.

We are HCD. We are not them. But we will glimpse ourselves in them. And so, if we're worried why Christianity is not taken seriously in Melbourne, if we're worried why people don't seem to go to church anymore, if we're worried about why our loved ones don't know Jesus, if we've lost confidence in the word, we'll reach for the polish.

The pressure to try and shine Jesus and his gospel into something more appealing is very real. We need to listen to Paul today.

[5 : 30] And what he does, he gives them and us three facts. Three facts, so we'll throw the polish away. Three facts to make us feel secure as Christians in a rich and successful city.

And firstly, fact one, the gospel looks weak and foolish. And that is a fact because, verse 18, the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing.

You see, Paul's message is about a God who comes to earth to die in weakness on a cross. And on face value, it sounds foolish.

Verse 22 says, Jews demand signs. Did you know that Paul once brought a man back from the dead in Acts 19? Verse 22 says that Greeks demand wisdom.

Did you know that Paul was trained in the best schools of rhetoric? He was a Pharisee in the scriptures. He knows what the market wants, signs and wonders, bells and whistles, and he can do it all.

[6 : 37] But instead, he chose to look weak and foolish because, verse 23, he preached Christ crucified. He preached about an old rugged cross.

Even though it would be a stumbling block to the Jews, even though it would send the Gentiles unpacking, laughing at how foolish foolish it sounds. And to believe in the same gospel as Paul is to declare yourself a fool in this city as well.

It's the same thing. You see, in Melbourne, to make Easter about anything more than chocolate or some days off work is to be a fool. You're really saying that that humiliated figure on a cross is your God?

Yeah, that's what I'm saying. And that moment when they killed him, that that's the big rescue? Yes, that's what we believe. And that God chose the weakest thing in the world, a man dying on a cross, to demonstrate his power?

Yes, that's what I'm saying. Fact one, the gospel looks weak and foolish, but really, fact two, it is wise and powerful.

[7 : 50] Look at verse 24. But to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, 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.

You see, God at his most foolish is still wiser than the world. God at his weakest, on a cross, is still stronger than human strength.

If you believe fact one, but don't know fact two, you'll reach for the polish. You'll want to make the gospel seem more attractive to the world, but all you'll do is empty the cross of its power.

You see, when the atheists poke fun at Christianity, when clever people discount the role of the church, you need to know where the power is.

verse 24, Christ, the power of God and the wisdom of God. You see, the gospel sounds foolish to clever people of the world, but it does save them.

[8 : 55] The gospel looks weak to powerful people, but it's strong enough to forgive them of their sins. If you want to feel secure about Christianity, the test is not whether it impresses people, but whether it saves them from perishing.

Fact one, the gospel looks weak and foolish, but really, fact two, it is wise and powerful. And you can see this in verse 18. For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing. It's fact one. But to us who are being saved, it is fact two, it is the power of God. You see, there are people who hear the gospel and think, wow, that is foolish. They are fact one people and they are perishing.

And then there's us who hear the gospel and see it as the power of God. We are fact two people and we are saved.

And it might make you wonder, why does salvation work in that way? Why is it when we hear the gospel, we think, wow, that is genius. But when our loved ones hear it, they think, wow, that is stupid.

[10:06] Why has God organized salvation like this? And the answer is fact number three. It is deliberate to oppose human pride.

You see, God intended a right and a wrong reaction to verse 18, to the gospel. And verse 19 tells us why. For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, the intelligence of the intelligent, I will frustrate.

That is a quote from Isaiah 29, our Old Testament reading. It's about a city so arrogant, God said, if I'm going to save you, I have to do it in a way that works oppositely to your big egos.

It seems that the problem with being saved is not necessarily people's atheism, but their 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 the world? God, at his most foolish, is still wiser than the world.

[11:16] Communism, capitalism, socialism, feminism, what is their answer to eternal salvation? Liberalism, conservatism, environmentalism, self-ism, come and tell us how our loved ones can be saved.

Wisdom and success, power and philosophy, come and fix the burdens we carry for our loved ones. God wanted to undo the ways of the world.

Verse 27, he 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.

Why? 29, so that no one may boast before him. You see, God wanted to undo the cleverness of the clever. God chose a method of salvation that opposes human pride.

He wanted to ensure that no one in heaven could say, I'm here because I was so intelligent, because I was such a good person already, or I was rich and successful. He wanted to ensure that no one in heaven could say, I'm saved because I follow Paul or I follow Apollos or I follow Andrew or I follow Vijay.

[12:36] That sort of jostling, it empties the cross of its power. It says, we don't need Jesus to die because we went to HTD after all. For those here who wouldn't call themselves Christians, there is no path to God, no path out of perishing that doesn't involve you humbling yourself before Jesus and his cross.

And that is deliberate. Verse 29, so that no one may boast before him. So we're clear, verse 30, that our righteousness, holiness and redemption come only from Jesus Christ.

Verse 31, so that no one, so that the one who boasts, boasts only in the Lord. It seems that the big problem with salvation is not necessarily people's atheism, but their big egos and human pride.

Think of all the rescues that God has in his rescue toolbox. Noah's Ark, the parting of the Red Sea, Daniel in the lion's den, his friends from the fiery furnace, all of them very impressive by human standards.

But God reaches to the bottom of his rescue toolbox and picks out a tiny, dusty little cross and says, you know what, let's save the world this way because this will undo human pride.

[14:01] And that is genius. genius. That is genius because it means only humble people will be saved. And in Corinth, he proves that point by choosing the most messed up group of Christians, the most foolish sounding message and the most mumbling, bumbling apostle and he saves a whole church and sets them aside for glory and for his service.

You see, the Corinthians were well aware of fact one. They felt insecure in their city but they didn't know fact two and so they reached for the polish.

They tried to shine up Christianity with eloquent preachers and they had no idea about fact three. God organized things like this deliberately to oppose human pride and like them, when we feel unimpressive in this city, it is tempting to reach for the polish, isn't it?

The pressure to make Christianity seem more appealing just so we don't feel as insecure is very real. And so here are some examples of trusting in the polish rather than the gospel.

When our sense of security as a church comes from how eloquent our preachers sound, how middle class we are, how many people are in the pews, that is polish.

[15:27] When we think about our loved ones who aren't saved, it's tempting to wish that they were more sophisticated Christians, more rich and successful Christians, more famous, more public celebrity Christians because we think somewhere, oh, that is what will persuade them.

That is polish. Perhaps we see a movie or a TV show on the ABC and we think, wow, this is the thing that will really persuade Melbourne to believe.

That is trusting in polish because we know as soon as we mention that old rugged cross and Christ crucified, our friends will walk away scoffing and so we never mention it but just keep pointing them back to that TV show instead.

A snazzy church service, an emotionally charged meeting, cultural engagement, the best arguments, the best music, these are good and useful in their place.

They make us feel secure because they're so impressive in this city and while they might attract people through our doors, they won't save anyone. It's easy to forget, isn't it, that the power to save people is in the message of Jesus Christ and him crucified.

[16:40] It's easy, isn't it, to lose confidence in the word. In St. Paul's Cathedral right now, I don't know if you know this, in St. Paul's Cathedral right now is a massive art installation.

I should have put a photo of it but I don't, sorry. It's a massive art installation of the globe, of the earth and it's enormous and it's just sort of above the pews like just hanging from the roof and I was going to talk about it last week when we were talking about idolatry with the Ten Commandments because the name of the globe that they've given, the earth, they've called it Gaia.

Gaia is the pagan goddess of the earth and apart from putting a graven image of a pagan goddess in a Christian cathedral, apart from seeming to replace a father god with a mother earth, the goal of the art piece was to raise awareness for climate action.

The idea is that it will get more people into the pews but my worry is that St. Paul's are feeling the pinch of being irrelevant in a city that's diverse and always changing.

My worry is that they're trying to polish Christianity into something more relevant and appealing. My worry is that they've lost confidence in the power of the gospel.

[18:04] It's easy, isn't it, to lose confidence in the word, in that same old message. And so here are some more pointed applications for us to finish.

Firstly, don't worry when your least favourite preacher steps to the pulpit on a Sunday. An elegant turn of phrase is just polish.

That's all it is. The power is in the message, not in the man. Secondly, don't stop evangelising your loved ones until you've told them about Jesus Christ crucified, Jesus cross.

I realise some of you can't get out and about to evangelise, so in your prayers, don't just pray for a good moral Christian to come across the path of your loved ones.

Pray for a good moral Christian who's bold and willing to speak about Jesus' death and resurrection. The power to save, because it's 100% in the gospel, there's no right time, there's no right person, and actually I think that's quite a relief, it's quite liberating that Christians, we can just open our mouths and speak and God will do everything else because his spirit is in the words.

[19:22] And now, I'm not playing down the value of building friendships and gaining trust over time, of course that's important, but important because they win us a hearing when we speak about Jesus.

It's important for Christians to be good and kind and winsome and servant hearted, but eventually we'll have to open our mouths and proclaim the gospel if people are to be saved.

Finally, don't lose confidence in the word. There will always be a latest thing, an attractive thing, a revolutionary thing, a thing that makes us go, wow, this is what will really win Melbourne for Christ and we'll feel the pressure to get on board and change everything we do in this church and whatever they're thinking it might be good and fine and useful, but the power to save is 100% in the message of Jesus and him crucified.

If we don't talk about him, no one else will. We need to be clear what we're doing. It's not our job to look wise and impressive or seem relevant to the city, but to give our lives to the gospel. It sounds weak. We might look foolish, but it is God's power to save. Fact one, the gospel looks weak and foolish.

[20 : 46] Fact two, really, the gospel is wise and strong. Why? Fact three, God did this deliberately to oppose human pride.

Verse 18, for the message of the old rugged cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God.

So let's pray. Let's pray. Father, thank you so much that the power to save us is 100% in the words about Jesus.

It's in the gospel. Help us to be clear about that, Father. Help us when we feel the pressure of being irrelevant in a city like ours.

Help us when we feel tempted to try and buff and shine Christianity to look more appealing. Help us to be clear, Father, that you have done things deliberately like this to oppose human pride.

[21 : 50] Father, please give us confidence in your word, confidence in the message about Jesus. And please, would we be bold to speak this to our loved ones, to the people of Melbourne, so that they too can be saved from perishing.

We need your help, Father, in Jesus' name. Amen.