1 Corinthians 1:18-25 AM

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Preacher: Canon David Short

[0:00] Well, it's great to welcome you this morning. If you're visiting, this is where we open our Bibles back to the reading of 1 Corinthians on page 952.

If you're online, it's great to have you with us as well. This passage today, 1 Corinthians 1, verses 18 to 25, takes us right into the beating heart of Christianity.
I couldn't have a more central, wonderful, brilliant passage about the cross of Jesus Christ, the heart of God's purpose for the world, for you and for me, the place he reveals his grace and his love and his justice and his wisdom and his mercy and his power.
And we've been praying together that God's grace would overflow from this passage to us for his own glory. Just to remind you, Paul is writing to his beloved Corinthians.
I say beloved because he does love them, even though they're doing everything they possibly can to stop that. They are a congregation of wealthy, arrogant, selfish, people filled with pride.
[1:17] And I will avoid the obvious thing to say next.

And in the couple of years that he's left, they've started to drift and they're shifting their focus from Jesus to themselves. And as part of that, they want to minimize the cross of Jesus.
The cross of Jesus is not playing well in Corinth. So last week we came to the first big issue. Lots of issues in the church. Many, many, many. Unlike us.
This, that was a joke. First big issue. They're fighting and biting and they're dividing. They're publicly arguing over who is the most impressive and inspiring preacher.
Which one should they get behind to give them the best chance of reaching pagan Corinth? Pagan Corinth, which is all about what's outwardly impressive. And as we saw last week, that's all based on human pride and competition.
[2:20] Now, just in case you think this is historically interesting, this is a constant temptation for us as Christians. To imagine that if we just had people who are more clever, more powerful, more attractive and more exciting in our church, apart from us, we would be able to attract and draw other people and then change the city for Jesus.

That what's holding us back is our ordinariness, our dullness, how unimpressive we are. And if we could just find a way of making the gospel a little more attractive or finding more attractive people, it would work.
And this is very important because what Paul does in this passage is practical. This is not a philosophical passage. This is not, you know, a general comment on the cross in the abstract.
It is a piercing call to the Corinthians to come back to God's priority. In Paul's view, if we lose the centrality of the cross of Jesus Christ, we are in danger of losing Christ himself.
And it's quite amazing to me the way that Paul does this here. He does two things. The first thing he does is he shows how the cross satisfies our deepest human aspirations.
[3:47] And then secondly, he shows us why God's chosen to do it this way. So let's have a look at these two things together. Firstly, then, the cross satisfies the deepest human inspirations.

Look down at verse 22. I'm starting halfway through the passage. The verse reads, For Jews, the word isn't demand. They ask for signs and Greeks seek wisdom.
The apostle is not looking down on Jews and Greeks. He's looking at the spiritual search of the hearts of all human beings. And these two desires for signs and for wisdom are emblematic of all human aspirations.
So you take the desire for signs. Signs are what is supernatural. What's from the other side? That takes up a huge part of our life here in Vancouver.
I think it's what's behind some of the outdoor pursuits. The fascination with sci-fi or zombies or the vampire march that goes on. You know the official slogan.

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[4:56] Well, you do. Probably the official slogan for BC is supernatural British Columbia. And I think that's because the sheer beauty of the mountains and the forest and the rivers and the ocean give us this sense that there's something more.

There's something other. So when Paul says the Jews asks for signs, he's including everyone who is searching for the supernatural themselves.
Because this is a fundamental human aspiration. It's deeper than prosperity. It's even deeper than happiness. It's the search for what is behind it. And when he says that Greeks seek wisdom, the word wisdom is the practical word.
It's wisdom for what makes the world go round. It's the desire for understanding what works in life, in love, in family.
What's going to enable us to live life to the full? What's going to enable me to master what's set before me in my circumstances? So that I can deal with the approval, disapproval of others.
[6:02] This is the question of why am I here? What am I supposed to do? Where have I come from? Where am I going? And these two human longings for signs of the supernatural and for wisdom to know who we are and why we're here stand for all human heart aspirations.

So what did the apostle do when he arrived in Corinth those years before? Did he march up to the Acre Corinth to the temple of Aphrodite and start a miracle campaign to steal all the followers of Aphrodite to follow Christ?
Did he stand up to the priest? Did he stand up in the marketplace and show the brilliance of his mind and the depth of his education and the virtuosity of his philosophical arguments?
No, look down at verse 23, the very next line. What he did is this. He said, He's saying that the place that God has chosen to satisfy our deepest aspirations is in the cross of Jesus Christ.
And the way God does it is by overturning all our views of wisdom and power. That in the weakness of the execution and dying of Jesus, God is doing his most powerful thing.
[7:43] That in the humiliation of the suffering of this crucified man giving himself, God is working his greatest wisdom. God is doing his most powerful thing.

He is still the throne from which Christ rules the world. And I mean, I wish we could spend more time on this, but what power there is in the death of Jesus.
I mean, power to bring us back into fellowship with God. Power to forgive everything I've done past, present and future. Power to give me a hope of eternal life.
Power to enable me to deal with suffering in a completely new way. Power to bring me into the new creation with a new life. And what wisdom of God is there in the cross?
Just unraveling what we think is wisdom. Because it's there in the cross I find out who I am and who God is and why I am here and what my life is for.
[9:13] There's the wisdom of God revealed in the cross of Christ, which is higher and wider and deeper and longer than any of us could imagine. And in the cross of Jesus Christ, it's revealed that the cross, his cross becomes our way of life.

That if I want to save my life, I lose it and take up his cross and live a cross-shaped life of self-giving. And that's where meaning comes from, he says. And this is the way that God's strength comes to us in weakness.
Now, if you like, people say it this way, that the cross of Christ answers our desires by subverting our desires.
Do you remember when Jesus was teaching the crowds on the mountain? He taught them the beatitudes, blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn. It's hard to believe that in Vancouver, isn't it?
I mean, we'd much prefer blessed are the self-confident or blessed are the popular, blessed are the positive thinkers. But it's only the power of the cross that enables us to say, blessed are you who suffer or who weep, who are persecuted for righteousness' sake.
[10:27] Because the cross of Christ erupts into our world with something completely new, completely overturning the way that we like to put life together.

Because the normal way that we try and satisfy our desires is through our performance. We base our status on how we perform and then we compare ourselves to others.
And I believe I'm okay if I'm a good person or I'm achieving something, then I have worth. Or if I'm working for a good cause, I'm making a contribution. And the only limiting factor to my success is my own lack of effort.

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And I can achieve pretty well anything I want to if I'm desperate enough. And I rate my success and my performance by how I'm doing in comparison with others.
There's a book written by a Harvard prof called The Tyranny of Merit. This is about the performance narrative that we're all living with today. This week in the New York Times, they published a wonderful article called Being 13.
[11:32] And it followed three teenage girls and their iPhones and how they used social media. And the girls had to convince their parents that they needed phones, which I thought was an interesting slip-up by our children's minister this morning, asking the kids if they used their cell phones.

Anyway, I'll talk to them about that later. Halfway through the year, the girls reported that they're constantly confronted with images of people who seem prettier and richer and more fashionable and more popular.
And that if they make just one mistake, it plunges them into eternal humiliation in front of thousands. To say nothing of the dating apps that create performance-based markets based on narrow bands of features.
But the cross overthrows the performance narrative. And it replaces it with a grace narrative. That the Son of God has come from heaven to do for us what we could never do for ourselves.
To take our sins into himself and die for us to offer us a new life, grace and forgiveness and his constant love. And the more I'm hypnotized by my own performance and cleverness, the more impenetrable and disinterested I will be in the cross of Jesus Christ.
[12:59] It just will seem like the most foolish place to look for power and wisdom. But God says it's the gate to all who want to know my power and wisdom.

All of this is to say why it's just crazy for the Corinthians to minimize the cross or to marginalize the cross.
Because it's only through the cross that God is going to take the arrogance of the Corinthians and the arrogance of those around us and the arrogance in our own hearts and create a humility that's ready to receive his grace.
I mean, it's not hard to imagine the Corinthians talking amongst themselves saying, look, we just need something a little more credible in Corinth.
I mean, by then the cross was not a piece of jewelry. It wasn't something cozy. It comes straight out of the chamber of horrors. It's an electric chair.
[13:56] It's a hangman's noose. It's the symbol of Rome's ultimate power. It's a torture instrument. It's why it's a stumbling block to so many. You know, in the Anglican church, over many years, churches have been demoralized by years of ineffective outreach.

And churches will do almost anything to draw people back to church rather than preach the cross of Christ. The latest liturgy that's been released by the Vancouver Diocese is a liturgy for the blessing of animals.
And Satan has 10,000 strategies to move the cross out of the center to do anything that will make us seem more relevant or more appealing.
But look at how Paul answers this in verse 25. He says, Because it's not that God's wisdom is just like human wisdom ramped up a couple of steps.
It's of a different order altogether. And the power of God is not like human power just made a couple of million times over. Because the cross of Jesus Christ, the power and wisdom of God, is able to take us out of our performance story into the story of grace and to satisfy our deepest needs.
[15:20] Number two, why did God choose to do it this way? I mean, if the cross is so fantastic, why don't more people come to faith? Why don't more of our friends automatically see it?

If this is the antidote to self-centered fighting and factionalism and pride, if this is the source of grace and forgiveness, why don't more people come to faith in Christ?
And the reason, Paul says, is because of this overturn, because it overturns our pride. It overturns every human value system.
So go back to the first verse in the passage, verse 18. For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to those who are being saved, it is the power of God.
It's interesting, Paul had just said in the previous verse that he avoided preaching with any cleverness or sophisticated eloquence. He deliberately chose a style of preaching that wouldn't draw anything away from the message of the cross.

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[16:28] And next week, we're going to go on to see how the community of the church reflects the cross by its very weakness. But what Paul does in verse 18 is he says there are two diametrically opposite responses to the cross of Jesus Christ.

On the one side, there's a group called the perishing. And by the way, these two groups, perishing and saved, we keep wanting to create a middle group, won't allow us to do it.
To those who are perishing, the cross is ridiculous, shameful, gruesome, disgusting, madness to think that God had anything to do with it. And I just point out that this word perishing, it's a very solemn word.
This is the word that Jesus uses. If you lose your life, if you want to gain your life, you have to lose your life, otherwise they will perish. To perish is worse than death.
It means eternal exclusion from the presence of God. And Paul is saying that those who are perishing, to those who are perishing, the cross is foolishness. Because it keeps telling us we're not wise, we're not powerful.
[17:46] It exposes our animosity to God. It says you will never reach God by your cleverness or by your own wisdom. That all your performance is shot through with pride and with idols and with arrogance.

And you need to repent not only of your badness, but of your goodness and trust Christ alone. But to those of us who are being saved, says the Apostle Paul, the word of the cross is the very power of God.
Power to save millions, to bring about a mighty miracle of new birth and new life and new hope to enable us to see who God is.
And God deliberately offers salvation to his world in this way because it doesn't leave any room for human glory or human boasting.
He's not doing it to be nasty. Just think about it for a moment. Just imagine that salvation was through human wisdom. It would give those of us in the congregation who are smarty pants a big advantage.
[18:56] Those with high IQs. You would have a leg up and we'd have to depend on you in a different way. And salvation would then become for the smart and the elite and the educated.

But the way God has done it means that the cross is available to all. God's desire is that all would be saved and it has pleased him through this foolish message preached by foolish preachers to foolish people to bring about the greatest reversal possible from life to death.
Everybody's saying all the wisdom of this world cannot solve the problem of how to know God. If we were able to gather all the most brilliant scientists, biggest brains and philosophers in the world for an hour's conversation, it would be very interesting, I'm sure.
But we would not get one centimetre closer to God because God has chosen to reveal himself to babies and to children through the cross. That's what pleases him.
You see, down in verse 19, it is written in the Old Testament, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart. Verse 20, where is the one who is wise?
[20:15] Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? Don't get me wrong, Paul is not anti-intellectual, he's not anti-learning, but he's very clear that the cross is anti-pride.

It opposes every self-centred thought and way of life that there is. And God has deliberately set it up this way so that no one can find God using their own wisdom.
And that means that so much that passes for religion in our world today is just poison because it's based on pride. But what God offers us in this cross is humbling to our pride that he has done it all.
Verse 21, Since in the wisdom of the world the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the foolishness of what we preach to save those who believe.
Nothing abstract or theoretical. The real person, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, dying in our place.
And in doing it, he puts every other wisdom into foolishness and every other power into weakness and everything to do with pride in ourselves comes to nothing in the presence of the cross.
[21:34] I heard an illustration this week of the cross. The guy said, the cross is like a little key put in someone's hand, a little cheap piece of metal put in someone's hand.

And some look at it and say, it's cheap, it's unattractive, I'm not going to use it. But those who take it, put it in the lock of their prison door and find, it opens the prison door and they find a palace and they take the key and they open the door and it enters into the palace as well.

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And that's because the cross is much more than just a remedy for sin. It's not just where God atones for my sin. It's the basis of a new identity and a new hope. It's the place of ongoing transforming power.
It constantly reshapes us daily. In my own pastoral ministry and in my own life, it is the cross of Jesus Christ that comes back again and again and again as the only thing I have to say to myself and the only thing I have to say to others who are suffering in extremis.
It's not just something that took place back then. It's something that has ongoing active power.
Finish with this, that's why Paul in verse 18 calls the word of the cross, the power of God to those who are being saved, not to those who are just saved as a one-off because the cross isn't a one-off inoculation.
[23:06] It's the ongoing dynamic of Christian life and growth which means we're either drawing nearer the cross of Christ or drawing away from it. We're either moving closer to salvation or closer to perishing day by day.

So, the apostle pleads with the Corinthians to come back to the cross. He wants them to stake their lives and their future in the church in Corinth on the cross of Jesus Christ.
And I think we need to pray for each other, for the churches in the Anglican network in Canada that we would hold the cross at the centre of our faith and our life and our preaching and our worship that we would not be ashamed to confess the faith of Christ crucified.
And each of us daily look to Christ and his cross and to experience more of the greatness of his power and his wisdom as it does the painful thing of breaking down our pride and the joyful thing of raising our hearts in praise to God and to Christ who has, through his cross, been made our wisdom our righteousness and our sanctification.
Amen.

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