

Text: 1 Cor. 1:18-31

Title: What is the word of the cross?

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Place: NBBC

Introduction: Our country is divided on many political issues today, and one of those is what to do about illegal immigration. What both sides do agree on in this hotly contested debate is that nobody wants the name of their program to be, "Amnesty for all illegal aliens." While a proposed solution might actually be amnesty, it is not called that, because everyone involved in the debate understands that amnesty is an approach to illegal immigration that invalidates and undermines the legal path to citizenship for immigrants. To provide amnesty for people here illegally is to undermine the whole point of having laws on immigration in the first place.

This sense of invalidation or of undermining something good and wonderful, like legal immigration, is the idea behind Paul's concern about the one true way that God has provided for us to obtain citizenship in the kingdom of heaven. That one way is the cross of Christ. But we saw last week that Paul said in verse 17 of this chapter that he was concerned as a gospel preacher that the cross of Christ not be undermined or invalidated with what he called *the wisdom of words*.

His point was that making the gospel a celebration of the style of a man's presentation undermines the true path of the word of the cross to the human heart. The brothers and sisters of the Corinthian church had begun to glory in the gifts and talents of men, including themselves, and Paul saw in all of this something that invalidated the one thing that had the power to save the sinner from sin – Calvary.

Having touched on that truth, Paul now goes on to explain why this is so. The reason an emphasis on human ingenuity invalidates the cross of Christ has to do with the nature of the

relationship between the word of the cross and the wisdom of man. Paul begins with the words, "For the word of the cross is," and I would like the focus of our study of this passage this morning to be, "What is the word of the cross?" Notice 4 things with me.

I. The word of the cross is the difference between perishing and being saved (v. 18).

Illustration: When I studied statistics in business school I was taught the importance of understanding whether a set contained categories that were mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive. To say that the categories are mutually exclusive is to say that there is no overlap between them, that no member of one category is also a member of the other. To say that the categories are collectively exhaustive is to say that all possible members must fit into one of these two categories, that there is no third category possible.

Application: We are prone to put people into categories that are mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive. Paul had grown up doing this. The categories of his upbringing were Jews and Gentiles. The Jews were good, and the Gentiles were bad.

Around here we might find the categories highlander and flatlander useful. You are either one or the other, not both, and if a flatlander, that is not good. Where I come from, you are either a city kid or a country boy. Maybe you have used the mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive categories of young people and old people. I have heard the similar categories young fundamentalist and old fundamentalist, and I recently was told that I had graduated into the old fundamentalist group.

Paul uses two mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive categories to understand the human race in this passage, and

they are the only two that really matter: those who are perishing and those who are being saved. Those who are perishing are in that category because the word of the cross is foolishness to them. Those who are being saved are in that category because the word of the cross is for them the power of God. The word of the cross is simply the gospel – that Christ died on the cross for our sins according to the scriptures, was buried, and is risen. If that is foolishness to you this morning, you are perishing. If that is the power of God that saves to you this morning, you are being saved. It is that simple and that significant.

Before we leave this point, notice with me two more things about these categories:

1. If the word of the cross is foolishness to you this morning, it is in part because Satan wants to destroy your soul (2 Cor. 4:3-4). Viewing the cross as foolishness is the result of a supernatural blinding, not a healthy skepticism.

2. If the word of the cross is the power of God to you this morning, you have a responsibility as a witness of that power (2 Cor. 2:14-17). Viewing the cross as the power of God is never a personal, isolated, secret part of our lives. God desires to put His power on display for His honor and glory.

II. The word of the cross is the difference between worldly wisdom and responding in faith to preaching (vv. 19-25).

Illustration: We have a cross at the front of our sanctuary this morning. We know churches that include the word *Calvary* in their name. Some of you wear gold crosses around your neck. No one attending the church of Corinth would have ever proposed that a cross like ours be placed at the front of their meeting place. No proposal would surface at any business meeting suggesting that the name of the church somehow include the word *Calvary*. No sister in Christ would have taken

the shocking step of putting a cross around her neck. The cross did not become a symbol of Christian devotion until well after the first century church had passed. The brutality of crucifixion was far too real to them for this kind of symbolism.

Application: What has not changed since the first century is the way that the preaching of the cross is viewed. As you sit here under the ministry of the Word of the cross this morning, you can perhaps think of a number of people who believe that you have to be out of your mind wasting a Sunday morning to do this. But you and I are not out of our minds to listen to the preaching of the word of the cross this morning, and we know that because of what Paul says about it in our passage. Notice three things with me.

1. It pleases the Lord to use the preaching of Christ crucified (v. 21). The Lord takes great pleasure in using preaching. He expects those who hear the preaching of the cross to respond in faith.

There is some disagreement in the commentaries about whether this word *preaching* refers strictly to the message preached as some of the newer translations indicate or to the act of preaching, which includes the message preached as indicated by the KJV, but I believe that the second of these understandings is correct. Clearly, preaching is nothing more than speaking if its content is not the message that must be preached, the word of God and the gospel of Jesus Christ.

But God is pleased by more than the content of the message; He is also pleased by the heralding of that message (note the distinction between the message and the act of preaching in 1 Cor. 2:4). The Lord would not be as pleased for me this morning to simply email you the text of my sermon. That might save us all a lot of time and trouble, but God is pleased to use preaching, and so it ought to please us to see Him use preaching in our lives.

2. It will not please sinful man to hear the preaching of Christ crucified (vv. 22-23). Crucifixion was not an entertaining topic in the first century world. That the Messiah was brutally crucified because of the wickedness of the sin of man was an offense to the Jew, who expected better things from their Messiah, and to the Greek, who thought better things about the nature of man. When sinful man hears the word of the cross, he hears something that he is not looking for, something that he does not want to hear. That it took the cross to save us is an offense to many who believe they are ok without that.

3. When it comes to preaching the word of the cross, what pleases God is more important than what pleases man (vv. 19-21, 24-25; Isa. 29:9-14). The Isaiah passage speaks to Israel's unwillingness to respond correctly to the preachers God had sent to her. She responded with pride and hypocrisy. Those who are called respond with humility and honesty (vv. 24-25).

That response is wonderfully captured in Isaac Watts's "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross":

"When I survey the wondrous cross
on which the Prince of Glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
and poor contempt on all my pride.

"Forbid it Lord that I should boast,
save in the death of Christ, my God;
All the vain things that charm me most —
I sacrifice them to His blood.

"See from His head, His hands, His feet,
sorrow and love flow mingled down;
Did e'er such love and sorrow meet,
or thorns compose so rich a crown?

"Were the whole realm of nature mine,

that were a present far too small;
Love so amazing so divine,
demands my soul, my life, my all.”

The word of the cross is the difference between worldly wisdom and the faith that saves. What do you believe about the cross?

III. The word of the cross is the difference between election and humiliation (vv. 26-29).

Illustration: The earliest known comprehensive attack on the Christian faith was a second century work titled, *The True Word*, by a Greek Philosopher named Celsus. One of the things this attack claimed to be wrong with Christianity was exactly what Paul mentions in this context:

“Their injunctions are like this. ‘Let no one educated, no one wise, no one sensible draw near. For these abilities are thought by us to be evils. But as for anyone ignorant, anyone stupid, anyone uneducated, anyone who is a child, let him come boldly.’ By the fact that they themselves admit that these people are worthy of their God, they show that they want and are able to convince only the foolish, dishonorable and stupid, and only slaves, women, and children.”

Application: Christians hear the criticism of Celsus today, and so many of them try to show that it is the rich and famous, the strong and powerful, the athletic and talented, and the well-known and famous who are Christians.

Paul would never have taken this approach. He concedes Celsus’s point. He admits that the ranks of local churches are not made up of many known for human wisdom, political power and influence, excessive wealth, or noble pedigree. God has rather chosen the foolish, the weak, and those who do not come from important and prestigious families (*base* is the op-

posite of *well-born*). Paul tells us that God did so for three reasons:

1. To show that in salvation God chooses us, not we Him, (“God has chosen”).
2. To show that God has the power to humiliate the proud (“in order that He might humiliate and set aside”). God is not indifferent to the proud. He shall deal with them.
3. To show that no mere human flesh should boast in anything but Him (v. 29).

In what do we make our boast? Do we possess the thankful spirit of one chosen by God, or do we find in our hearts the contempt of Celsus for all things Christian?

IV. The word of the cross is the difference between being in Christ and being outside of Him (vv. 30-31).

Application: Here again Paul presents to us two mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive options. These options do not overlap, and there is no third option available to us.

On the one hand, to be in Christ is to have true wisdom and to have true wisdom is to be justified before God’s law, holy in God’s presence, and redeemed by God’s grace. The Corinthians had forgotten the nature of true wisdom. They thought it meant being able to promote their giftedness or following their favorite human leader.

Paul says, “No, that is not what wisdom is all about.” Wisdom is being thankful that you are righteous, holy, and redeemed by grace in Christ. When we boast as those in Christ, it is always a boast in the Lord who has done all this for us.

Conclusion: And so as those who are in Christ, not outside of Christ, as those whom God has elected and so will not humiliate, as those who respond in faith to preaching rejecting the influence of worldly wisdom, and as those who are no longer perishing because we are now being saved, may we remember what the word of the cross is, what it means, and what it can do for others who are in the other category.

Jesus told His disciples to take up their cross daily and follow Him. His people are people of the cross. To the Jews a stumbling block, to the Greeks an offence, but to you and I the power of God. Let's live in that power and proclaim the cross boldly to the Jews and Greeks of our day.

“A man came—I think it was actually in Philadelphia—on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, ‘Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.’ That is the distinction—the sermon, and the ‘lightning and the thunder.’ To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters.”

—David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

Preachers and Preaching