

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

How to Witness with Power

As we continue through the book of 1 Corinthians, it will be helpful to review where we left off. In verse 17, Paul ended by telling the church his purpose in life. **17 For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.** I want to focus on what Paul says at the end of this verse. It is the springboard that will guide our lesson today. Paul was not sent to baptize—but to preach the gospel. Okay, here's the kicker: Not with words of eloquent wisdom; lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its *power*. When Paul uses the term eloquent wisdom he is referring to the wisdom of the world. Okay, here what's going on: The Corinthians were very much influenced by their culture. In their day, two things were elevated, wisdom and knowledge. There was a rich heritage when it came to thinkers like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. Consequently, the church would be cautious when they shared about Christ because they did not want to seem unwise and without knowledge. But what happened was the gospel of Christ was watered down. They would smooth the edges or omit important information about the gospel. The most important one revolving around the resurrection of the dead, which Paul goes on to discuss at length in chapter 15. Some even went so far as to say that the dead in Christ were not raised, while others dismissed its importance altogether. Thus the cross of Christ was emptied of its power. All because they did not want to be marginalized by their culture and labeled as unintelligent and simple minded.

I think we do this in our culture today. We minimize the gospel because we don't want others to think we are nut cases. If you've ever shared your faith you know what I am talking about. Sometimes you can't help but think, "I must sound like an idiot right now. This person must think I've lost my mind."

This is what Paul is getting at in verse 17. Paul said he was put on earth to preach the cross of Christ—not with eloquent wisdom because he did not want the cross of Christ to be emptied of its power! A good question to ask is whether or not the cross of Christ is being emptied of its power when we share. It is so easy to water down the gospel because you don't want to sound foolish or offend someone. Let's look at verse 18.

18 For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. 19 For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart."

According to Merriam Webster's Dictionary, the word folly is defined as one who has a lack of good sense and foresight. Paul is saying the word of God is folly to those who are perishing. It doesn't make sense to non-Christians because it sounds like a mythological parable. You might as well be talking a foreign language.

When I was 10 and visiting Munich Germany with my parents, my grandmother woke me up at 5am and asked in her broken English if I wanted some fish sticks. She said it like this: Kene, do you vant some friststicks! I politely said, "no thanks," but she didn't seem to like my answer. So I did what any 10 year old boy would do in a confusing situation, I yelled for my mommy. "Mom, grandma keeps trying to get me to eat some fish sticks for breakfast. I don't like fish sticks and it is 5am in the morning." My mom then translates our conversation to my relatives—who for some reason unknown to mankind—were also up eating fish sticks at 5am in the morning. There was a big chorus of laughter. Belly laughs! It turned out that my grandma's broken English wasn't so broken after all. Frishstich means breakfast in German. What sounded like nonsense actually made sense.

Likewise, the gospel saves those who understand its language; but is without sense to those who are perishing. If you think about it we do believe some wild things.

Let's think about it! We believe that sin is the greatest threat to mankind; not nuclear weapons; not Extra Terrestrials from outer space, not Osama Bin Laden; not Rosie O'Donnell as host of *The View*. In fact, we believe every evil revolves around sin. Terrorists, child molesters, murderers, school shootings, you name it. But sin is just not reserved for just those people. Sin is the problem for everyone. We believe everyone is born a sinner—which means we don't seek God; which makes us evil, wicked, and rebellious in His eyes. We believe no one will ever get it to heaven on their own. That's offensive!

We also believe that Jesus is God incarnate and that God was born in a place where animals feed because he did not make reservations at Motel 6. We believe Jesus—the god man, was born to a woman who had never slept with a guy. Try telling your future spouse, “Honey, looks can be deceiving. Yes, I am pregnant *but I never slept with anyone*. The baby belongs to the man upstairs. Now how about that backrub?”

We believe that Jesus was perfect and never sinned, ever! Not as a frustrated baby; not as a defiant toddler. Not as a peer pressured boy; not as a teenager who thinks the world revolves around him. He was the perfect kid from start to finish. When he grew up and was asked “Jesus what are you going to do with your life, he had an unusual ambition. He didn't want to get a real job or get married and have little Jesus' running around the home. His goal was to die for mankind, take on their sins, and tell people to believe in him because he would rise from the dead.

So in a nutshell: All you have to do is believe Jesus is God; that he was born to a woman who swears she never slept with anyone, that he never sinned, even though he had brothers, that he took upon himself your sins—even the ones your wife doesn't know about; that he was crucified on a cross voluntarily for you, that he was raised from the dead, that you are a rebellious and wicked sinner headed for hell without Christ. If you believe that, repent from your wicked ways, turn to Jesus and follow him, and you will be saved. Any questions!

Try telling that to Naturalist Nate. He will think you aren't in touch with the real world. The gospel is a mythological fairytale to those who don't believe.

Paul backs up his thought with an Old Testament quote from the book of Isaiah. *For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”*

His point is simple: The gospel message doesn't seem to fit in with the advanced wisdom and knowledge of the culture. For those that are deemed wise, the gospel seems to be a primitive concept reserved for the simple-minded. Yet throughout history God has destroyed the wisdom of the wise. He has acted outside our understanding of wisdom and logic. Paul picks this up in verse 20.

20 Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? 21 For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.

The problem with the conventional wisdom of our culture is that it attempts to explain life without God. In their search for meaning; they have not been able to find God within their scientific paradigm. The scientific community prides itself in being able to explain the sun, quasars, and distant galaxies. It has observed patterns like the 2nd law of thermodynamics—without mention of God. They have sent satellites to explore distant planets like Mars and Jupiter. They have amassed a ton of wisdom. Paul says, in the wisdom of God; the world did not know Him through their wisdom. In Paul's day, there were two groups of people resistant to the gospel of Christ, the Jews and the Greeks.

22 For Jews demand signs (That is, miracles) and Greeks seek wisdom, 23 but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles

The Jews simply found it hard to accept a Messiah that would die on a cross without freeing the Jews from Roman occupation and establishing the nation of Israel as *the* world power. They were looking to experience the glory days of Israel under King David and Solomon. That's why the cross was a stumbling block to them.

When it came to the Greeks, the resurrection of the dead was not in line with conventional wisdom. In some parts, the Greeks believed the body was evil. Therefore, the idea that the spirit would choose to remain in a resurrected evil body was absurd. When the body was a corpse they believed the spirit was finally free the corruption of evil.

,24 but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25 For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

Note the emphasis once again on divine calling. While there are many Jews and Greeks who reject Christ crucified; there are both Jews and Greeks who have been divinely called by God. In that sense, Christ is the power of God. The "foolishness of the gospel" is wise in comparison to mankind. Likewise the weakness displayed by a crucified Messiah turns out in the end to be stronger than man. In the end it has the power to save. Like the song says, there is power in the blood of Jesus. In the next section Paul wants the church to reflect on their own conversion experience.

26 For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. This does not mean that no one in the church was wise, or powerful, or of noble birth. There were some—but there weren't *many*. Most were average Joe's or even lower in stature.

27 But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; 28 God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, 29 so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. 30 And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, 31 so that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

In this last section Paul gives God the credit; not man. Notice the emphasis on God's choosing. God chose the weak to shame the strong. God chose what is low and despised. God chose the Corinthians who were in Christ. In the end, Christ represents the wisdom of God. It is through God's wisdom that Christ became our righteousness, our redemption, and our sanctification. As Christians we are not called to boast in our own abilities or wisdom. We aren't supposed to toot our own horn. *We are to boast in the Lord.*

The important question we must ask ourselves is what it means to boast in the Lord. It means that when we share the gospel of Jesus Christ we aren't supposed to cut corners. Don't worry about sounding crazy. Don't try and use conventional wisdom to explain the cross of Christ. Share Christ crucified with no reservations. Tell them the whole story. Tell them God's story. Boast in the Lord! Let the Spirit do the rest.

You see the world will never find Christ if we allow the Cross of Christ to be emptied of its power. The world will never find God on their own because they are looking for Him in the wrong places. You know where you find Christ? You find him through the presentation of the gospel. If you look through the book of Acts you will find plenty of conversions. The conversions at Pentecost, the conversions at the synagogues and public squares. You will find the conversions of the Samaritans, the conversion of the apostle Paul. You will even find the conversion of the Gentiles. What is the common denominator? All came to faith because they heard the gospel of Christ presented with power. Some came to Christ in the middle of a gospel presentation. You cannot find God outside of the gospel. Christ crucified represents the wisdom of God. So when you share your faith remember to boast in what the Lord has done. That's where the wise people of this age will finally find Christ. We must never empty the cross of its power.