

The Foolishness of Christianity

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[0 : 00] This week we'll continue in 1 Corinthians chapter 1, and starting in verse 17, we read, 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.

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. For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.

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? 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.

For Jews demand signs, and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews, and folly to Gentiles. But to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. This is the word of God. For the foolishness of God, and the truth is the word of God.

[1 : 40] This morning I want to ask you a similar but slightly different question, and that is, how do you feel about church, particularly when it seems unexciting?

Somewhat boring. When it seems out of date with modern times. Friends, how do you feel about preaching? Some bald old guy standing up on stage for 30 minutes, speaking a monologue without any discussion.

What's up with that? Surely it's time for us to modernize things a little bit better. No more monologues. More discussion. Surely the time has come for us to be a bit more entertaining.

A bit more interesting. Maybe we should try church in the metaverse. We should all come with our AR goggles or stay at home and do church in the metaverse. And maybe, maybe church needs to be a little bit more lighthearted.

We don't need to be so serious. There's enough sadness and difficulty in the world as there is. Life is hard enough as it is. Why do we need to come to church and talk about things like sin and death and repentance?

[2 : 49] Friends, isn't it time that church got a bit more practical? I mean, enough of one guy telling us for 30 minutes about God. Surely we should do workshops on how to make life work.

And how to raise our kids and save money for our retirement. And advance in our careers. And care for the environment. Surely the whole Jesus dying on the cross and sin and repentance thing.

And salvation and judgment. And never mind heaven and hell. That way, way out of date. Isn't it time the church had a bit of a modern makeover? Or at least a software update.

Friends, if you've ever thought such thoughts, you may be surprised to know that you're not the first one that's had such thoughts. In fact, those thoughts, those conversations are as old as Christianity themselves.

Because in the very first century, the Christians in those days, or at least the people that are part of the church, were having similar thoughts. Similar conversations.

[3 : 52] Maybe not the metaverse one. Okay? But at least the other conversations. And in this passage, the Apostle Paul is going to address some of that.

And he's going to tell us what the church is all about. And why it is that it does what it does. And so, look with me at verse 17.

If you've got your Bible or your bulletin, look at verse 17. Paul writes and he says, Christ did not send me to baptize people. He means there, start a religious gathering.

Start a community of religious folk. Create a movement. No, he called me to preach the gospel. And not with words of eloquent wisdom. You could say, but with simplicity and clarity.

Lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. Paul tells us here that Christianity, tells the Corinthians, Christianity is not a self-help mechanism or a religion.

[4 : 52] It's not good advice on how to live your best life now. Actually, at the heart of Christianity is a proclamation, a declaration. Good news about how to be saved from futility and vanity.

And even more so, destruction. How to know God personally. And to know the God that made you and loves you. And designed for your life to correspond with his plan.

That's what this passage is about. Paul wants to urge us to, as counterintuitive as it is, he wants us to embrace the old, old message of Jesus and the cross.

Now, before we look into it, one objection you may have. You may say, okay, but that was the apostle Paul. I mean, look what he says here. He says, for Christ did not send me.

So maybe that's just Paul's calling. Or maybe that's Paul's personality type. Or maybe those are Paul's ideas about church. But what's to say that we, in modern 21st century Hong Kong, should think of our church the way that he thought of our church.

[5 : 57] And maybe we've got a different calling. But if you'll notice, as we work through this passage, one of the things I want you to see, Paul's reason here is not based on personality or personal preference.

It's based on the understanding of who God is. And secondly, how God works in the world. Okay? So, let's dive into this passage.

And in this passage, we're going to see a sustained contrast between two things. On the one hand, our way of thinking versus God's way of thinking.

Our way of viewing the world and God's way of viewing the world. How we naturally think and how God thinks about things.

And what we're going to see here is that God's way of working and thinking is completely different, even in verse two hours. Okay? So, the two contrasts is the wisdom of the world and the upside down wisdom of God.

[6 : 59] So, let's look at the first one, the wisdom of the world. Now, if you'll remember, this book is written to a church in the city of Corinth. Corinth is a city, a Greek city in the ancient Roman Empire.

So, it's got these two influences, two cultures, Greek culture and Roman culture. And for Greeks, philosophy, human wisdom, oratory, and wonderful speaking are extremely, extremely important.

The kind of people that everybody in Corinth looked up to weren't necessarily the richest or the wealthiest. They were the most sophisticated, the most educated.

Those that were considered wise in their culture. So, in Corinth, the cultural currency of the day was wisdom, sophistication. Okay?

That's what made you a cultural elite. Now, just a quick sidebar here. The Bible has a lot to say about wisdom. In fact, there's a couple of books in the Old Testament that we call the wisdom literature.

[8 : 04] The Bible says we should get wisdom. But the Bible's understanding of wisdom is life orientated around how God has designed life to work.

So, the Bible says wisdom is to know how God has organized life to work. And then to the skill of doing life according to God's blueprint or God's plan.

And God's blueprint or plan is to have God at the center of our lives. That's why the Bible says the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. Now, the kind of wisdom that the Greeks were interested in was a very different kind of wisdom.

Their kind of wisdom was more about sophistication. Heirs and graces. Speaking in a certain kind of tone or kind of philosophical musings about life.

That didn't have any practical reality on the ground. And so, that's the kind of wisdom that the Greeks loved and valued. So, the Greeks loved wisdom and sophistication and education.

[9 : 05] Now, the Romans, the other people in the city, what was their cultural currency? It wasn't wisdom or education. It was power. It was influence. It was might, right? What is the Roman Empire built on?

The ability to destroy your enemies. Defeat them. So, here you have these two kind of cultural currencies. Wisdom and power. Might. Now, look what Paul has to say about this.

Paul is going to tell us that in God's economy, the things that we tend to value and esteem and put so much weight and emphasis on, the things we hope in, in God's economy, when you look at the world through God's spectacles, actually, they look entirely different.

They're upside down. Look at what he says here. Look at verse 19. Quoting Isaiah, he says, God says, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise. And the discernment of the discerning, or the intelligence of the intelligent, I will thwart.

Thwart means to frustrate or obstruct. Verse 20. Indeed, where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater or the philosopher of our age?

[10 : 12] Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For, in the wisdom of God, the world does not even know God through its wisdom. So Paul's saying here, all these things that the cultural elites are admired and loved for, and even they get some kind of celebrity status, and they're all revered for these things, because of their great learning and their oratory and their ability to speak and their sophistication.

He says, what has it really given them? At the end of the day, what do they have? And the answer? Nothing. Foolishness. A pile of hot air.

Vanity. Verse 20. Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? Paul says, you're running after these things, and you think these things are going to make you great? And what does God say about them?

Hot air. Nothing. In fact, Paul says more than that. He says, it's not just a pile of hot air. It's actually dangerous. It's destructive. Paul says, it's not just that it gives you nothing.

It puts you on a collision course with God himself. Look at verse 19. God says, I, God, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise. I will frustrate the intelligence and their plans.

[11 : 29] God says, he's going to take this kind of thinking, he's going to turn it upside down in his head, and we're going to find ourselves on a collision course with God himself. Look what he says. Even more sadly, Paul says, this kind of thinking actually stops us from knowing God.

Verse 21. He says, for the world cannot know God through human wisdom. Remember, the Greeks in the ancient world, their aim and philosophy was to try to know and to understand the thinking of the gods and the thinking of the deities.

And they were philosophizing and thinking, what would the gods want us to know and think? And Paul says that when your thinking is like that, actually, it stops you from knowing God.

You get more and more lost in all your philosophizing. So, it's kind of like this. It's like, imagine you are stuck in a snowstorm in the mountains, right?

You're in the mountains and there's a snowstorm that's brewing. And you think, I know how to get home. I've just got to go down this path, left at the tree, right at the big rock, and I'll get my way home.

[12 : 37] And actually, not knowing that the further you go down, the more lost you are becoming. Paul says that in their culture, they are philosophizing and thinking and wondering and seeking wisdom.

And they're actually getting more and more lost. You cannot know God. But ultimately, he says, the great problem with human wisdom, with trying to do life in our own way, it leads to this separation from the God who made us to know Him and love Him and encounter Him.

Look at verse 18. He says, for the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing. Perishing means eternal destiny away from God.

Verse 17 says, the wisdom of man empties the cross of its saving power. You see what Paul is saying here? Here in this culture, there's this cultural currency.

If only we can get more wisdom, more sophistication, more education. We will make it in life. Life will work. We will be successful. And Paul is saying, actually, as you pursue that, you're going to go further and further into the woods.

[13 : 45] Deeper and deeper into the snowstorm. You are going to get more and more lost. And what you're going to find is that God Himself is going to be opposed to you. Now, I know that we have some friends here this morning that are students, HKU students of philosophy and even a professor of philosophy here.

Well, friends, I hope you can see that what the Apostle Paul is saying here. He's not critiquing the academic field of philosophy. He's not critiquing education at all.

What Paul is asking us here is, what are the cultural currencies of our city? What are the cultural currencies of our day? That our city says, if you can get this, you will have made it in life.

If you can attain more of this, what Jeremy said, if you can obtain your more, this will make you your life work. Friends, in what realms of life are we adopting the thinking of our city, seeking to become more impressive, more powerful, more set apart according to values of our culture?

Friends, how many of us spend countless weekends doing 400 million cultural engagements in order to get our three-year-old child into the very best primary school possible, so that they can get into the very best secondary school, so that they can get into the very best university, so that in the thinking of our city and our peers and our culture, we will have made it?

[15 : 16] Friends, how many of us are pushing ourselves physically and emotionally and financially and destroying our mental health to get one more degree, one more qualification, one more accreditation on our resume, or to get that promotion, so that finally we would have made it?

Friends, how many of us are getting ourselves into debt, buying things we don't really need, going on trips we can't really afford, living a lifestyle that we can't really sustain, in order to look impressive to our colleagues, our friends, our neighbors?

You see what Paul was telling us here? Paul was saying, seeking to be wise and sophisticated and impressive and brilliant, in the eyes of our society, of our culture, will destroy us.

It will eat you alive. And we think that we are being wise, but actually we're going to become fools. We think that we are earning social capital and credit, but we're going to be ruined.

You think you're becoming impressive and remarkable and outstanding, but these things will leave you empty and weak and miserable. Friends, human wisdom, trying to make life according to our own brilliance, is a sure fire way to a vain and an empty life.

[16 : 37] I wonder how many of us feel that this morning. Friends, maybe you come here this morning and you feel empty. You've chased down and maybe you even succeeded, maybe you've even obtained.

The things that our city tells you will give you meaning and purpose, and yet it feels so empty. Friends, maybe you've spent years coming across as impressive, smart, someone that has it all together, and yet you feel lame, fake, stupid, weak.

Friends, maybe you're a Christian this morning, but if you're honest, you actually spend your life chasing the things that our society tells you to chase. And so you're a Christian, but the things that really drive you are the things that drive our city.

And your spiritual life feels empty. It feels weak. It feels meaningless. And you wonder, does Christianity actually work? Friends, and you wonder whether your faith makes any difference at all, because your life is the same as your secular friends.

And so the question is, is there another way? Well, this passage tells us there is another way. And yet, it's the most counterintuitive, the most upside-down way imaginable.

[17 : 52] And that is to embrace the upside-down wisdom of God. Look at what Paul says here. Contrast to the wisdom of the world, and the philosophy of humanistic thinking, and power plays, which promises so much, but leaves us empty, powerless and poor, there is another way.

And that is to come and see life as God has orientated it, and God has designed it, which primarily means having God at the center, to receive it and embrace what God says really matters.

And yet, it's so counterintuitive. It's countercultural. Because God says at the heart of His revelation about how life works, stands a crucified Messiah, a Savior who looks weak and unimpressive, that to make life work, you need to embrace the Creator's vision, the Creator's blueprint for life.

And in order to do that, you need to embrace the heart of life, stands a crucified Messiah. Now, you may think, Kevin, that is ridiculous. I mean, we live in the 21st century, life is so much more scientific and modern.

We've proved already that people don't die and rise again. That is the most ridiculous thing you can imagine. But as I said earlier, that's exactly what the ancient world thought. Just by the way, it's not only modern people that think dead people don't rise from the grave.

[19 : 17] Even people in the 1st century thought that as well, right? That's not a modern notion. But remember, for the Greeks, no wise or sophisticated or educated person would ever allow themselves to get in a position where they were tried and condemned and then crucified on a cross.

I mean, only stupid people did that. Only low-class plebs did that. No wise person would ever allow themselves to get crucified. Who on earth would follow Jesus?

That's the most foolish thing you can do. And for the Romans, what do they think? Which powerful person is ever going to allow themselves to be condemned and crucified on a Roman cross?

Only weak people did that. Only defeated people. Only shameful people did that. Why on earth would anyone choose to follow, never mind worship, someone like that? And yet look at what Paul says.

Look at verse 18. He says, For the word of the cross or the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it's the power of God.

[20 : 25] Verse 21. For since, or although, the world did not know God through its own wisdom, it pleased God through the foolishness of what we preach to save those who believe.

And what is it that they preach? Verse 23. We preach Christ crucified. Admittedly, a stumbling block to Jews, foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ, crucified Christ, is the power of God and the wisdom of God.

Friends, you see what the Bible is saying here? The Bible is saying, how does God deal with the lostness and the futility and the emptiness of our world and the emptiness of our souls and the vanity trap in which we find ourselves?

How does God deal with this? He sends a savior. He sends a rescuer. He sends a messiah. But he sends one that will undermine and confront and frustrate and challenge all our ideas of what a messiah and a rescuer should be like.

He sends us one who is weak and powerless. One who looks pathetic and unsophisticated. He sends us a savior who looks vulnerable and weak and unoppressive.

[21 : 43] Who was killed by his enemies and shamed on the Roman cross. And then God says, trust him. Bank your life on him. Give everything you have over to him.

Give yourself completely to him. He is your hope in life and in death. And friends, because as unimpressive and as foolish and as pathetic as he may seem, he holds the key to life.

And he holds the power to the life that you want to live. He reveals God's true wisdom. And therefore, knowing him and embracing him and surrendering him is the only way to know God and the life that God has planned for us.

Verse 22. Some people demand signs. Other people seek wisdom. But we proclaim Christ crucified. Yes, a stumbling block to some people, foolishness to others.

That's true. But to those who are called, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

[22 : 49] Friends, embrace Christ. Okay, so what should we do with this? What does this actually mean for us in our day and age? Well, great question. Let me give us two things to think about. First is this.

If you are going to know God deeply, you must be willing to be surprised by him. Okay? If you are going to know God deeply, if you are going to center your life on God and live life according to his blueprint, you must be willing to be surprised by God.

The Greeks thought that the problem with the world was that people didn't think enough. If only people thought a bit more clearly, life would make sense and life would work. If only we got more education.

The Romans thought the problem with the world is that there's not enough power in the world. We're not in control. If only we can defeat those pesky rebellions, we will make life work and get a utopia.

And if you ask people today, what do we need to make life, the world a better place? You'll get all sorts of kinds of interesting answers. More education, more human rights, equal access to education and water and food and sanitation and all those things.

[23 : 56] And those are all good answers. But Paul's point here is none of those things lead to the blueprint about how life is meant to work as God has designed it.

If you're going to discover life as God has designed it, you must be willing to be surprised by finding that God's ways of thinking is counterintuitive. The God of all creation comes along and he says, I'm going to put the world right again.

I'm going to fix the problems with this world and I'm going to bring it back Eden again. But I'm going to do it through the weakness and the foolishness and the powerlessness of my son Jesus dying on the cross.

And to our modern minds, that doesn't make any sense at all. But that's how God works. Friends, if you're going to know God, you've got to be willing to be surprised by him. But here's the second thing. If you're going to know God, you must be willing to be challenged by him.

Not only surprised, but challenged and personally challenged. What I mean by that is this. You must reckon with what God says about Jesus and the cross.

[25 : 04] Elsewhere in the New Testament, the Apostle Paul writes, he says, the saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance. Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners of whom I am the worst.

Okay? Now, as you heard last week, actually I am the worst, Kevin, of all sinners. But Jesus Christ came into the world not to teach us how to be wise, not to make life work, but to save sinners.

And what that means is Jesus' verdict in the world is that all of us here are in deep trouble apart from his saving grace. In the first century, every Jew knew what the problem with the world was.

The problem with the world was those Romans. I almost said something else. Those Romans, they were the problem with the world. They were corrupt, they were brutal, they were unfair, they were power hungry, and what we really need, what God's people need, is a Messiah like Moses rescued people from Egypt.

We need a Messiah that's going to save us from those horrible Romans. But the message of Christianity, the message of Jesus, is we don't need political liberation. We don't need economic liberation.

[26 : 16] We don't even need mental health liberation. What we need is to be saved from the slavery of sin and idolatry and self-centeredness that is destroying us.

The problem with the world and the problem of each one of us is that we keep on coming against the problem of our hearts. And Jesus came in the world not simply to comfort us, but to save us.

To save us. That's what our passage says, right? Verse 18. The word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing. To us who are being saved. It's a power. Power that will turn your life around.

Friends, save from what? Save from emptiness and futility and vanity and depression and anxiety. Yes, yes, yes. But more than that, save from our sins. Save from hell.

Save from perishing. Friends, unless you see yourself not just as somebody weak, but as a rebel against God, the cross will always just be seen as a good example.

[27 : 19] How to forgive our enemies. How to turn the other cheek. But it will be emptied of its power. And your Christian faith will be weak and meaningless and vain.

And only if you see yourself as somebody that has rebelled against God and Jesus came to die for you and for me to save us for our sins. That's where the power is.

That's where God changes us. So dear friends, as we come to a conclusion, how do you feel about church? How do you feel about church when it seems unoppressive? How do you feel about church when it seems out of date?

And what do you think about an old bald guy standing up week in, week out, speaking for 30 minutes about Jesus and the cross? Friends, do you feel the church needs to get a bit more practical? Leave all that Jesus dying on the cross stuff to other people.

Maybe we need to have more workshops on how to make life work, how to advance our careers, how to raise children and care for the environment and save for the future.

Friends, as long as this church shall stand and as long as this house will be visited by worshipers, I propose, along with my friend Charles Spurgeon, that the ministry of this house should be Jesus Christ and Christ crucified.

[28 : 31] That we should week in and week out gather to tell one another and to sing songs and to take communion and to proclaim to one another that the center of life, that life works when Christ and Christ crucified is at the center and that God is the one that we need.

And so this week again, as you go into the great city of Hong Kong, the greatest city in the world, Jonathan, as you go into the great city of Hong Kong, what message are you going to trust?

What wisdom are you going to put your hope and your confidence in? Friends, what source of power are you going to look to to get you through this week? Here's what 1 Corinthians will tell us.

When life is hard and our job is on the line and our boss is difficult and parenting is hard and money is short, embrace the apparent foolishness of Christ and the cross. Embrace the upside down wisdom of putting Jesus at the center of your life.

For humanistic thinking will be discarded and one day will perish. But those who embrace Christ and his upside down wisdom and salvation plan will know the wisdom of God and the power of God and will experience his life transforming power and be saved.

[29 : 45] Let's pray together. Lord Jesus Christ, the old, old message of the cross. Father, we confess, I confess, God, sometimes I feel like, okay, I've heard that enough, I know it enough.

Yes, let's move on to more exciting things. Jesus, won't you forgive us? But more than that, won't you also help us? God, help us to see you for who you really are.

Help us to see that wisdom and power and strength. And the secret to life is to really to come back to that old message. As upside down, as counterintuitive, as countercultural as it seems, Jesus, you are what we need.

God, this morning, we want to freshly surrender to you and bow down to you. We want to embrace the message of the cross. We want to embrace, God, that only by coming to you can we be saved and only by centering our lives on you can we discover the blueprint of life.

Won't you help us this morning? God, for those of us that are Christians, but if we're honest, we've been living according to the wisdom of this world, won't you help us, God? Won't you help us to once again center our lives on you?

[30 : 59] Jesus, come and have your way. We pray this in your great and wonderful name. Amen. Amen.