

OFFENDED BY THE CROSS

1 Corinthians 1:18–31

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1 Corinthians 1:18–31 (NIV)

“For the message of the cross is foolishness 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; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.’ Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know Him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, 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 man’s wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man’s strength. Brothers, 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. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.

Therefore, as it is written: ‘Let him who boasts boast in the Lord.’”

As we have begun looking at the Corinthian letter, we have noted that the immediate problem in the Corinthian church was the problem of division. Verse 9 of chapter 1 finds Paul saying that

OFFENDED BY THE CROSS

I Corinthians 1:18–31

God has called us into *koinonia* or fellowship with His Son, Christ Jesus. But that fellowship was being destroyed by division. It was being destroyed, in verse 22, by those that had a real problem of ego, wanting to identify with a group in the body ahead of their identification with Jesus.

When such groups begin boasting in their leaders or in their wisdom, Paul indicates that this is to rob the cross of Jesus Christ of its power.

He develops that theme in verse 17, about robbing the cross of Christ of its power through our foolish boasting and through our false claim to wisdom, he develops that theme of the foolishness of the cross in the verses that I have just read. In our day, the cross has become a beautiful symbol. We have the symbol of the cross in the sanctuary. We have a tall tower outside with the cross, which stands high and can be seen from various points, several blocks away. We have beautiful crosses that serve for us as necklaces or as a decoration on rings or as bracelets. We have crosses which serve as logos on windows and decals on bumper stickers and the like. The cross has become for us a beautiful symbol of God's love.

But in the first century world, for the Christians to use it was for them to recreate and represent a horror. For the early Christians to have used the cross as we have used it would have been tantamount to our using the electric chair as a symbol of God's love. Suppose, indeed, we substituted the symbolism of the cross with the symbolism of the electric chair. Then we would begin to get an idea of what Paul meant in 1 Corinthians 1, when he talked about the foolishness of the cross. Imagine if in our sanctuary, instead of the cross, we had a vacated electric chair, with its cords and belts and ropes dangling out as esthetic religious symbolism. If instead of the cross out front we had a larger-than-life sized electric chair at the top of the tower, proclaiming by that our identification with someone who had been condemned by the judicial system, and declaring, on the basis of that, that this condemned man was indeed not guilty and his life meant

OFFENDED BY THE CROSS

I Corinthians 1:18–31

freedom for the world and forgiveness for sins. We get, then, an idea of the foolishness of the cross.

Paul here speaks, not so much of the foolishness of the symbol of the cross, which I have just addressed. The symbol itself was offensive in the first-century context. But the foolishness of the cross dealt with in these verses has to do with the offense of the cross in terms of its message.

It's offense in terms of the effect that it has had and its offense in the examples which represent the work of the cross in the world.

Verses 18 and 19 tell us that the message of the cross is an offense, for it is the power of God unto salvation. There is no middle ground in respect to the cross. If we understand what the cross means, it will either offend us or we will embrace it as the power of God. I speak to you, for a few moments, on the very offensiveness of the message of the cross.

These elements of the message of the cross are unmistakable when we look at the New Testament.

I. The first element of the message of the cross is that man, on his own, is not good enough for God.

That is why God sent His Son into the world—to redeem us from our sins. Without the cross, we are not prepared to meet God. “There is none righteous, not even one” (Romans 3:10). “All have sinned and come short of God’s glory” (Romans 3:23). The anger that is in your life without the cross is unacceptable to God. The lust, the hatred, the striving, the ego-centeredness. All of these, which mark characteristics of the sin in our life, are not acceptable to God. God, who is in moral and spiritual purity, will not meet us on our terms. We are not equals with God. We are not in a position of dictating to God. We’re not in a position of commending to God our worth as a

OFFENDED BY THE CROSS

I Corinthians 1:18–31

person. Without the cross, we have all sinned and fallen short of God's glory and there is no hope for salvation. I want to submit to you that that is an offensive word.

The finest person deserves death at God's hand. That's the message of the cross. That is what people do not like about the cross. It condemns our righteousness. It casts aspersions on all of our good efforts. It wipes all of our good efforts out and calls them totally worthless in God's sight. They don't mean a thing. You can live morally. You can live good. You can live righteously. You can be a good citizen. You can be a model leader in the community. But from God's point of view, it means nothing in terms of your relationship with Him.

Matthew Henry has said it well, "There is no little sin against God because there is no little God to sin against." Jesus said, "I have come to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10).

The first element of the message of the cross is that none of us are in a position to meet God.

II. The second message of the cross begins to turn into good news: Jesus came from the Father to die in our place, to take the punishment of exclusion and separation from God.

Very simply involved in the cross is the whole doctrine and teaching of substitution. Someone morally pure substituted His life for us, gave Himself up so that our sins might be forgiven.

Again, this is offensive. This is a scandalizing message because there were those who would look at Jesus and say, "He lived to give us a good example. He gave us sound, ethical, moral precepts." But that is not what Jesus said about His identity. He, in fact, on His own testimony, said, "The Son of Man must suffer" (Mark 8:31). It is a necessity—a must. "The Son of man came to give His life as a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:28). Isaiah says, "The Lord laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:6). Peter says, "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree" (1 Peter 2:24). In 1 Corinthians 15:3, Paul says, "Christ died for our sins according to the

OFFENDED BY THE CROSS

I Corinthians 1:18–31

Scripture.” Again, in 2 Corinthians 5:21, he says, “God made him to be sin who knew no sin so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

Jesus has come to die in our place. And therefore, to let us go free of judgment, of punishment, and of the wrath of God. His righteousness, the righteousness of that one man. God in the flesh, Christ Jesus. His righteous one is greater than all the defilement and sin in the whole human race.

I was struck, this week again, in looking at the Gospel of Mark, where in Mark 1, Jesus comes to this leper, this man Luke identifies as “full of leprosy.” The terminal stages of his illness. He is a person who, because of his leprosy, had been excluded from society. No one had touched him.

He has not been allowed to mingle among the ordinary human beings of this world. He has been excluded from community, cast out of the city, left to wander in his rags, living in caves and crying out with his hand over his face when he comes within a hundred yards of someone else, “Unclean! Unclean!” He comes to Jesus and says, “If You will, You can make me clean” (Mark 1:40). And Jesus, moved with compassion, stretches out His hand and touches him.

I think that, right there, is immensely significant because under the law, the old way, the touching of someone defiled would mean that the person who is undefiled would be defiled. If a leper touches me, I then become defiled. But when Jesus touches the leper, that which is defiled becomes clean. Instead of His being tainted, His health taints the unhealthy. His health drives out the unhealthiness. And the sacrificial life of Christ on the cross does exactly this with our sin. When we place our sin upon Jesus, His life flows into us.

III. The third thing that is offensive about the cross, the message of the cross, is that our response to the cross determines our destiny.

Paul here describes, and Jesus did the same thing, all of humanity as divided into two classes. It is not man and woman. It’s not black and white or some other ethnic division. It is not a

OFFENDED BY THE CROSS

I Corinthians 1:18–31

language group. It is not boys and girls or children and adults. It is all humanity divided into two classes—those who are perishing and those who are being saved. The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing. But to us, who are being saved, it is the power of God.

Two classes—the perishing and the saved.

This word “perishing” is the same word employed by Jesus in Luke 15 to describe the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. All of these are perished. “For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found” (Luke 15:24). To be perishing is to be in the act and the process of being lost. Paul here, by the way, does not say the message of the cross is foolishness to all of those who will eventually perish. Rather, he uses a present participle: “those who are perishing.” There’s a false idea that, down the road someday, if you do not receive the cross, you will perish. But already, if you have not received the cross, you are in the act of perishing. And if you have received the message of the cross, the proclamation that Jesus died for your sins, you are in the act of being saved. Not “saved someday,” you hope. But now, moving towards salvation.

I was in an ordination quiz session for someone who was being ordained for the ministry. They were asked, “Are there any heresies to which you hold?” He said, “I don’t hold any heresies, but if there is one doctrine I could remove from Scripture, it would be the doctrine of eternal judgment.”

I think we could look at Scripture and say God feels the same way. That is why He has chosen to deal with it in the cross of Jesus Christ. He will not give up His justice. But He will let His justice be intersected by the death of a perfect substitute, who bears His anger or His wrath against sin and who allows us to receive Him, to go free. It is a message which goes to the heart

OFFENDED BY THE CROSS

I Corinthians 1:18–31

of the Old Testament, not just the New Testament. “Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins” (Leviticus 17:11).

There’s one other element about the offense of the cross. It’s this statement:

IV. God is free to act as He sees best.

That is another offense of the cross. We talk a great deal about how free man is. But the Scripture approaches it from the standpoint of, how free is God? God is free to act as God sees best. Therefore, chapter 1:19 of 1 Corinthians is a quotation from Isaiah 29:14, declaring that God is free to act. “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise. The intelligence of the intelligence I will frustrate.”

This passage, by the way, that Paul quotes from Isaiah, has a fascinating historical setting. It came at a time when the northern areas of Judah were being attacked by Assyria. Hezekiah was the king of the day, and he gathered his generals and his politicians and leading strategists around him to try to find a way out of the encirclement of Assyria. It sounds like the Middle East today. Some of the options that were put before him were to get into league with Egypt, in order to find a way back from the imminent invasion that was coming from the north, from Assyria. While they are trying to solve this tremendous problem politically, God speaks through the prophet Isaiah, in Isaiah 29:14, and says, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.” That is, I will put the plans of all the political counselors to naught. Assyria went ahead and came to Jerusalem and surrounded the city, taunted its citizens, mocked Hezekiah publicly, sent Hezekiah a letter saying, “Your days are numbered, Hezekiah. You’re finished.” Hezekiah spreads the letter out before God (Isaiah 37:14), and God, in one evening, sends an angel, and a hundred and eighty-five thousand Assyrians fall dead in their tents in one night and Israel is delivered. Because the Lord chose to

OFFENDED BY THE CROSS

I Corinthians 1:18–31

deliver His people on that occasion, not through the political wisdom of man but through the intervention of His power. In short, God did what He wanted to do and He didn't ask for any human help.

That's exactly what Paul is saying about the cross. God has done what He purposed to do and has given us a way of salvation.

This is the message of the cross. If you are outside of Christ and you do not feel any sense of the Holy Spirit convicting you of your sin, then the cross is an offense for you and it is ridiculous and it is foolish. But it is exactly the heart of the Christian gospel. The good news begins with the fact that God seriously takes our sin and our sin has excluded us from His presence and only Jesus Christ can give His life as a ransom for us. That is the message of the cross.

The effect of the cross, the effect that it has on the world also carries its offenses (verses 20–24).

V. The effect of the cross is that it makes foolish the wisdom of the world.

Paul begins by asking these rhetorical questions. Where is the wise man? He uses the word *sophia*. We have the word “philosophy.” Philosophy is simply two Greek words—the love of wisdom. “Where is the philosopher?” Paul says. “Where is the scribe?” The word here is the same word translated throughout the Gospel as the word “scribe.” “Philosopher” might refer more to the person in the Gentile world who is educated with great human learning, and “scribe” represents one who is knowledgeable of the religious world. Where is the debater of this world? That is, Paul is saying, “When God acted, none of them had any clue as to what was going to go on. God has made it foolish.”

God has made foolish, in fact, the wisdom of the world, that is, religious wisdom. Paul says, in verse 22, “Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block for Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.” Religious wisdom agrees that

OFFENDED BY THE CROSS

I Corinthians 1:18–31

the cross is a stumbling block. All religions, no matter what they are, whether it's Islam or Judaism or Buddhism or Taoism or Marxism, all religions look at the cross and agree in their judgment, that it is an offense. It is an error. It is a stumbling stone.

And secular wisdom looks at the cross the same way. Paul is writing at a time when the Greek schools of philosophy have broken up in splinters—Plato and Aristotle have been long gone from the scene. Their disciples carried on several centuries, generations of disciples have split and fragmented into many different parts. Paul is saying, as he looks over five centuries of Greek learning and philosophy, what has it produced? What wisdom has it produced? What unification and knowledge has it produced? Has it brought knowledge of God that is agreed upon? No. No one can agree. What has wisdom done? The world, through wisdom, did not know God. That is a very true statement.

Will Durant in *The Story of Civilization* tells the story of William James who was one of America's great philosophers. This note was found on William James' desk after his death—he wrote, “There is no conclusion. What has been concluded that we might conclude in regard to it? There are no fortunes to be told and there is no advice to be given. Farewell.” The world, in its wisdom, knew not God.

Remember Elvis Presley's last great hit, a Paul Anka song “I Did It My Way”: “Now the end is near, so I face the final curtain, my friend, I'll say it clear. I'll state my case, of which I'm certain. I've lived a life that's full. I've traveled each and every highway. And more, much more than this, I did it my way. Yes there were times I'm sure you knew, when I bit off more than I could chew, but through it all, when there was doubt, I ate it up and spit it out. I faced it all and I stood tall and did it my way. I've loved, I've laughed and cried. I've had my fill, my share of losing, now as tears subside, I find it all so amusing. To think I did all that, and my, I say not in a

OFFENDED BY THE CROSS

I Corinthians 1:18–31

shy way. Oh no. Oh no, not me. I did it my way. So what is a man, what has he got? If not himself when he has not to say the things he truly feels and not the one of one who kneels. Let the record show I took the blows and did it my way.” How better to have said, and making no judgment on Elvis Presley’s destiny (that’s God’s business, not mine)—but how better it would be if we would sing the song “Have Thine Own Way, Lord. Thou art the potter, I am the clay.” Secular wisdom has no answers to the questions of origin—where did I come from? No answer to the question of purpose—why am I here? And no answer to the question of destiny—where am I going? The world, through wisdom, did not know God. And the cross, then, answers these, and in so doing, becomes an offense in the world.

Some years ago, an archeological dig turned up a crude drawing in the ancient ruins of a building in Rome, probably dated from the second century. The drawing was of a man’s body hanging on a cross. But the body had the head of an ass. To the left of the cross, in the drawing, is the figure of a young man with his hand raised as if he is worshipping the person being crucified. That particular drawing was found in a room beneath the imperial palace, which had probably been used as a prison. No doubt one of the young prisoners had come to faith in Christ and was ridiculed for his faith by other prisoners, and perhaps guards themselves. They saw his worship of someone who would die on a cross as nothing more than the wild and stupid act of an ass. The cross is foolishness in the world. The effect of the cross is that it negated the wisdom of the world.

VI. And the effect of the cross means that God, on His own, chose the way of salvation.

Verse 21 says, “In the wisdom of God, the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believed.” What a fantastic message! God was pleased. Remember the words which the Father spoke when Jesus

OFFENDED BY THE CROSS

I Corinthians 1:18–31

was baptized, “Thou art My beloved Son. With Thee I am well pleased” (Luke 3:22). That word “pleased” is the same word used there. It means “to consider good.” Jesus is giving His life for us, and the Father looks upon that as something He is pleased with. He is pleased to save us via the cross, and no other way. It well pleased God to save us through the foolishness of preaching. I’ve heard that text, probably used wrongly a number of times by persons such as myself, who had indicated that through the foolishness of preaching one was saved. Therefore, the preaching was “what one is doing right now,” the methodology. So I’m going to murder the king’s English and act in any antics that I want, because God has chosen something as stupid as what I am doing—preaching—to save the world. By the way, God does use people who do stupid things. There would be no hope if He didn’t. In fact, the word Paul is using here, on this particular occasion, does not mean “preaching” in terms of style. It means “preaching” in terms of content. He has chosen, through the foolishness of what was preached—that is, of what is being preached—all have sinned and come short of the glory of God. Jesus came to save the lost. Through His death, we have our sins forgiven. Our sins are placed upon Him in the cross because He rose again, physically, from the dead. He bears witness and attests to the reality of all that He has said and done. This is the preaching of the cross. That is God’s message—to declare to us Christ.

Our response, then, is to embrace the cross—it must be one of belief. God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached, to save those who believed. The emphasis here is on a present continuous action, not some past “has believed.” But those “who believe.” Paul is saying here that what man, by his thoughts, did not accomplish, God has done. And what the religious world, through superior moral effort, could not do, God has done.

OFFENDED BY THE CROSS

I Corinthians 1:18–31

Verses 26–31 tell us further about the offense of the cross, through the examples of salvation, through the cross. In the world, there's not a very impressive exhibition of what God has done on the cross. We are the exhibition of what He has done, and we're not very impressive. That's kind of a blow at the pride of believers, as well. But this was a Corinthian problem. The Corinthian problem was wisdom, and "who's smartest" and "who's the best teacher" and "who can be the best teacher" and "who can be in as a Christian." Paul's saying, "Back off!" It's like a group of sixth graders arguing over who is the smartest person in the world, you or me? Maybe they're smart in sixth-grade terms, but measured against the totality, they're not very smart. Paul says to these Corinthians who prided themselves in wisdom, "You're not very impressive examples of human wisdom. Just a few among you are impressive." "Most of you," he says, "are non-wise, non-noble. And non-entities." "He chose the things that are not to put to shame the things that are" (1 Corinthians 1:28).

Not many were impressive. This goes for us, as well. No many of you are wise or powerful or noble, as the world counts it.

Lady Huntington—who was a friend of George Whitfield and the Wesley brothers, during the great revival—was a very wealthy and influential person in England. She used to say that she was going to heaven by an "M." She said she was thankful that the Scripture did not say here, "Not any of you are wise," or "not any of you are influential." But rather "not many." Therefore, she was going to heaven by an "M."

Paul's saying, if you really want to know what wisdom is, fellow Christians, our wisdom is in Christ. In that wisdom we see what God is about. But in the wisdom of Christ, we have righteousness, holiness, and redemption. The very root of the word "righteousness" is the word "right." A casual surface way of looking at it should tell us immediately that, in Christ, we are

OFFENDED BY THE CROSS

I Corinthians 1:18–31

right. Not only does righteousness involve that, but it has to do with a sense of worth and worthiness before God. Do we lack identity as an individual? Do we lack self-esteem? Do we lack confidence? Are we acceptable to God and to ourselves? Righteousness is the foundation of life. It is a gift of God, through Christ on the cross. Our righteousness is in Him, not in ourselves. Our holiness, our sanctification, our being set apart is in Christ. Our redemption, our being bought back. We're familiar with the term "redemption" through pawn-shop kinds of transactions, where you buy back something which has been put out. We have been lost through sin. But Jesus has come and, through the cross, bought us back, has purchased us with His blood. He's bought us as a ransom.

We have all of this in the Lord. Therefore, Paul is saying to the Corinthians and saying to us, "Why do you boast in yourself, since you've really not had anything to do with who you are, because it's been God's initiative? Your responsibility has been simply to believe. Therefore, let him who boasts boast in the Lord, not in himself." This theme of boasting, Paul will deal with as we look at the Scripture more next week.

In your heart of hearts—where you make your decisions, where your emotions flow—you, like me, may not understand all that is involved in the cross of Jesus Christ. You, and I, perhaps, by human wisdom could have advised God to do it another way. The point is, from the Scripture, God did not leave it up to human intelligence or wisdom. He did not seek counsel when He offered His plan of salvation. As His own free gift of grace and through His freedom of power, of choice, He gave us His righteous Son on the cross, to die for us. In our heart of hearts, we must decide whether that, for us, then becomes the power of God in salvation—that act of self-giving love, which totally transforms us and makes us adore and worship God. Or whether that act of giving becomes for us foolishness, becomes for us something we are contemptuous of.

OFFENDED BY THE CROSS

I Corinthians 1:18–31

There is no middle ground in respect to the cross. It is not a pretty symbol, if you will. It is something which we may either reject—and therefore perish, or the cross and its message is that which we will accept—and be saved.

Closing Prayer

Our Lord, this is Your Word. I today have simply been a means, a conduit, for Your gospel to flow. It is Your Spirit that applies it to our hearts. I pray, Lord, first for those in this room who are believers, who with me, from time to time, face the temptation of standing on some self-effort or prideful moment which could commend us or credential, which would make us look good. But, Lord, as we come to the cross, we return again to the fact that if we are to boast, it is in You. Because You have given Your life for us and You have brought something to pass that we could never have done on our own. We want to praise You this morning, because You died for us. We will be with You eternally, not because we were ever good enough, but because You loved us enough that You sent Your Son to die for us. I pray as well, Lord, for those who are in this audience today who may have never embraced the message of the cross. They are still struggling to get right with You on the basis of some effort which they will make or are making. On the basis of hoping that, someday, they will be able to get things together. Lord, we'll never be able to get things together without You. This is why You have come, that we might be forgiven of our sins and that we might have life and have it more abundantly. So may that person, in their heart of hearts, have the courage today to respond to You and to become a believer in Your work and in Your life.