

WELCOME

Good morning church! I'm Chris Martin, and I'm a staff pastor here, and it truly is my pleasure to open up God's Word with you this morning.

If you've got your Bibles, and I hope you do, please open them up to 1 Corinthians chapter 1. 1 Corinthians 1. That's where we're going to be.

We want every person to have a hand on their Bible, so if you don't have one, grab one of the hard-backed black one under every chair. You can open your phone or tablet. 1 Corinthians 1.

If you open a black one from under your chair, 1 Corinthians is on [page 952](#).

INTRODUCTION: SOPHISTRY

In the first century, there was a movement in Greco-Roman culture called Sophistry,

- based on the Greek word *sophia*,
- which is translated 'wisdom' in our Bibles.
- From *sophia*, we get the word 'sophisticated',
- and the idea of learned, cultured, people.

Now, the idea of Sophistry, to the Greeks, was a mishmash of philosophy mixed with eloquence and Greek rhetoric.

- It was taking philosophical ideas,
- and then mixing it
- with the art of speaking well.
- And there were teachers in this movement,
- who were called Sophists.

And Sophists would travel all over the empire, speaking at various cities.

- A sophist would show up,
- go to the amphitheater in the city center,
- and the whole town would come out
- to hear him speak on anything from philosophy...
 - to ethics
 - to politics
 - to the gods.

And this was one of the main sources of entertainment in this culture. It was mass entertainment, and as a result, the Sophists were famous.ⁱ

ILLUSTRATION: TED

Maybe the closest thing we have today are Ted talks. Ok?

- They address a wide range of topics,
- and the speakers are given a maximum of 18 minutes
- to present their ideas
- in the most innovative and engaging ways they can.

And by 2012 TED talks had reached 1 billion views online, so it seems that Sophistry is still alive and well in our society.ⁱⁱ

EXPLAIN: SOPHISTS

Now, sophistry was known for being

- more about style than substance.
- More about eloquence than content.
- More about entertainment than truth.

And very regularly a citizen would have a favorite sophist, who they were known as ‘disciples’ of.

And a disciple of a certain sophist would say things like,

- *“I follow Lucian”*
- *“Well, I follow Plutarch.”* ⁱⁱⁱ

And we think that’s what had begun to sneak into the church at Corinth.

- They were behaving more like the disciples of the Sophists,
- than the disciples of Christ they were supposed to be.
- So, they were saying things like,
 - *“I follow Paul...”*
 - *well, I follow Apollos...”*
- just like the Sophists.

And last week Eric ended on verse 17, which reads:

1 CORINTHIANS 1:17

[17] For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom (*sophia*), lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

Now, Paul isn’t blasting good speaking here, ok? He’s not saying that the only way to preach the cross of Christ faithfully is to be

- really boring
- and lackluster
- and average.

No! In fact, commentators believe that Apollos was a very dynamic speaker...much better than Paul was. And Paul's not like,

- “Apollos should really dial it back a bit,
- because he's just too good at preaching the Gospel.
- Everyone wants to hear him preach instead of me,
- And I've had enough!”

Not at all. What Paul is taking on here is what was pervasive in the Corinthian culture...

- a great desire to be entertained...
- but a lack of desire for the truth.

This is why he says, I didn't come with that kind of *sophia*, but with the cross, and its power.

TRANSITION

Now, in our text today, Paul continues his thought, and his assault on the movement of sophistry.

- And what he does is he picks up the theme of wisdom
- and runs with it.
- He begins to compare and contrast
- the wisdom of the sophists
- with the wisdom of God.

And he exposes such a chasm between these two *sophias*, that ultimately,

- one looks foolish...
- one looks weak...
- one is not wisdom at all.

So, let's jump into it. 1 Corinthians 1:18.

1 CORINTHIANS 1:18a

[18] For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing,

EXPLAIN: FOLLY OF THE CROSS

Paul starts by admitting that the word of the cross, the message of the Gospel, is folly, or foolishness, to those who aren't saved.

Which I just love! I love how unbelievably honest the scriptures are, to the point where they say, "Yeah...some of this stuff is really hard to believe!"

- To non-Christians,
- Paul admits
- this whole Jesus dying on the cross to save sinners,
- is foolish.

But this isn't feigned humility. Ok? He's not trying to win people over with sympathy points here!

- Remember the city he's walking into...
- remember the culture he's walking into...ok?
- Corinth was progressive.
- Corinth was wealthy.
- Corinth was a hub.
- Corinth was on the map.

This wasn't

- some backwoods,
- one-horse town,
- where they might respect
- a sort of spin
- on the simple,
- mid-America,
- bumpkin act.

This was up-and-coming Corinth! And what does Paul preach? The cross!

- He proclaimed that a crucified Jew
- from some remote part of the empire
- is THE DIVINE SENT TO EARTH!
- God's very Son!
- Lord of all!
- And the coming judge of the world!

It's craziness!

And notice, he doesn't say 'the word of the resurrection'! He says **the word of the cross**! Not to say that the resurrection was of less importance.

Not at all, but instead of focusing on the victorious resurrection, which the Corinthians may have loved, he focuses on the cross.

- The cross was a particularly cruel and shameful death,
- Which, as a rule, was reserved for hardened criminals...
- irredeemable slaves...
- and rebels against the Roman state.
- It was actually illegal to crucify a Roman Citizen. ^{iv}

This message would have been, without qualification, folly...foolishness to any sensible citizen in the city of Corinth.

Think about it!

- The cross represents painful death and profound humiliation.
- It calls into question conventional wisdom
- about power and the divine.
- THE GODS WERE SUPPOSED TO BE POWERFUL!

And Paul is proclaiming

- that the most powerful God
- appears to be the most powerless.

This would have been ridiculous. But he goes on.

1 CORINTHIANS 1:18

[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.

Now, again, this is brilliant.

- First, Paul doesn't say 'to us who ARE saved',
- no, he says 'to us who are BEING saved'.

Now remember a couple weeks ago when we talked about progressive sanctification. This is a call back to the idea.

If you are in Christ, are you saved, or are you being saved?

Yes!

- Again, you are fully justified in Christ,
- sanctified progressively,
- and one day you will be glorified,
- made perfect in him.
- And that is the Salvation process.

So, to us who are being saved, this foolish, counter-intuitive, offensive message is actually power!

And then Paul caps his argument by quoting from the Old Testament, actually the prophet Isaiah. He says in verse 19

1 CORINTHIANS 1:19

[19] For it is written,

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,

and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”

Paul is essentially putting an exclamation point on his argument by saying that God will actually destroy the worldly wisdom.

- All human wisdom
- that fails to take God into account
- is not,
- in fact,
- wisdom.

ILLUSTRATION: ME

Maybe some of you have a story like mine, but before Jesus saved me I really thought Christianity was kinda nuts.

- I was in high school,
- and I thought myself to be pretty intellectual.
- I was a pretty good student.
- I would read books and talk with friends.
 - We'd smoke clove cigarettes
 - and drink pots of chai tea
 - and wear jackets with elbow patches on them...
- Right? Like, pretend to be a sophisticated intellectual!

And when I first started to hear about Jesus, I was just baffled by how idiotic it all sounded!

- I mean, it sounded narrow minded.
 - Jesus is the only way to get to God?
- It sounded foolish.
 - Miracles?
 - Resurrection?
 - Ascension?

That's crazy. I mean think about this...what we believe is kinda nuts!

ILLUSTRATION: MODERN STORY

I've done this before, but imagine if the story of Christianity was translated into our modern day. Ok?

Somebody knocks on your door. [knock]

And let's just assume you don't hunker down and pretend not to be home. "Just shhhh...don't move!!! They'll go away."

But you open the door.

- *"Yes, hello, I'm here to tell you about God."*

And you're like,

- *"Ok. Tell me about God."*

They say:

- *"Great, well, the Son of God was born...*
- *in a small town...*
- *on the Western slope...*
- *to a sixteen-year-old virgin girl."*

You're like,

- *"Didn't your parents ever have*
- *'the talk' with you...*
- *cause that ain't how that works!"*

But he goes on,

- *"And that son,*
- *he never went to college.*
- *Never travelled outside of Colorado.*
- *Never wrote a book or anything like that,*
- *cause he was too busy working construction."*

You're like,

- *"Wait, God was a construction worker?"*
- *"Oh yeah, he was a great carpenter!*
- *And he dabbled in home brewing on the weekends...*
- *He brought the best beer to parties!*

And then he started doing miracles.

- *He walked across the Chatfield reservoir.*
- *He took a Chipotle burrito and fed a whole Broncos game.*

A friend of his in Boulder died,

- *it took him three days to walk there,*
 - *they were worried about the body starting to stink...*
 - *but he was like, 'Nah, that's just Boulder...'*
- *and he brought him back to life.*
- *It was really cool!"*

"But then he was arrested,

- *and was given the death penalty...*
- *lethal injection.*
- *It was really sad.*

But then three days later he came back from the dead.

- *And he's God.*
- *And we follow him*
- *You wanna to join us?"*

I mean, you'd be like,

"Bro, I know weed's legal, but you should really cut back."

TRANSITION

See, it's folly. The cross, to those who are perishing, it's foolish. But to those of us who are being saved...it's power.

The Greek word for *power* here is where we get the word dynamite from.

- It's power...
- it's explosive...
- it's dynamite.

But Paul goes further. Verse 20.

1 CORINTHIANS 1:20

[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?

EXPLAIN

He takes them all on.

- Where is the one who is wise?
 - The sophists.
- Where is the scribe?
 - This is a reference to the elite,
 - learned,
 - Jewish scholars of the day.
 - So, he's not limiting his argument just to the Greeks.
 - Paul is an equal-opportunity offender!

- **Where is the debater?**
 - Remember, this was a form of entertainment.
 - He's kinda saying...
 - *where are the celebrities?*
 - *the famous?*
 - *the powerful?*
 - *the culture-makers?*

Now, Paul is not anti-intellectual. Ok.

Sometimes Christians have been accused of being anti-intellectual.

Right?

We don't help with our little phrases such as:

- 'Just let go and let God.'
- or 'God said it...I believe it...That settles it.'

Now, there is some truth to those statements,

- but they have been used to prop up some sort of mindless,
- robotic,
 - "I FOLLOW JESUS"
- blind faith
- where Christians are supposed to
- check their brains at the door,
- and just trust.

ILLUSTRATION: EDUCATED

I'm just finished a book called *Educated*...anybody read this thing?
It's a best seller...Do y'all read? No? It's super interesting.

- It's the memoirs of a gal who was raised
- in a fundamentalist Mormon home,
- where they didn't believe in formal education,
- or really in the government...
- or in modern medicine,
- just like, homeopathic salves and essential oils...
 - save me your emails, ok!
 - I just read it...I didn't write it!
- And in almost everything they just "trusted God"
- which led to some really interesting...
- and tragic events in their family.

EXPLAIN: PAUL'S BRILLIANCE

But that's not Paul.

- Paul was an elite intellectual of his day.
- He was a Pharisee...
- He studied under a guy called Gamaliel...
 - who holds the reputation
 - for being one of the greatest teachers
 - in all the annals of Judaism.

Paul's a hoss!

In fact, modern law schools, such as Harvard, have been known to require their students to do in-depth studies of his letter to the Romans because of its masterful logic.

- Paul isn't anti-intellectual...rather,
- Paul is rejecting certain traditions of reason,
- both Jewish and Greek,
- that don't take the Gospel into account.

He goes on. Verse 21.

1 CORINTHIANS 1:21

[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.

EXPLAIN: SAVING

Now, this part can be confusing, but it's hugely important...and here's his point:

- you cannot come to know God through the wisdom of the world.
- One scholar put it like this:
- *"God was wise enough not to let human wisdom be the key to knowing God."*^v

God leveled the playing field.

- I don't care what your IQ is...
- what you scored on the ACT...
- where your degree is from...

- For all our progress, and intelligence.
- For all our enlightenment, and education.
- For all our ingenuity, and creativity.
- Human beings are unable
- to come to a saving knowledge of God
- without the wisdom of God.

ILLUSTRATION: MOVIE

There's a romantic comedy that Maryse loves, and I put up with, alright? It's called *New in Town*. Anyone seen this thing? Don't. OK? 28% on Rotten Tomatoes. That's not good!

But one of the jokes between two characters goes like this:

- one says, *"Can I ask you a personal question..."*
 - *Have you found Jesus?"*
- and the other replies, *"Well, I didn't know he went missing..."*
- Which is supposed to be funny.
- Alright, it's a rom com...what do you expect?

But the flaw is actually in the question.

- You don't find him.
- He reveals himself to you.
- It may seem like you stumble upon him...
- but in fact,
- he's been whispering...
- and calling...
- and wooing to you.

This is why we don't think Christianity qualifies as a religion. Because you may have heard this about religion: religion is man's search for God.

But in the Gospel all that is flipped on its head,

- because the Gospel tell the story of God coming to find us.
- To be with us.
- To reveal himself to us.
- And to rescue and redeem us.

Salvation is only through the foolishness of the cross.

But Paul gets even more specific in verse 22:

1 CORINTHIANS 1:22

[22] For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom,

EXPLAIN: THE JEWS

These were the two groupings of the people of Paul's day. There were the Jews and the Gentiles or Greeks.

- The Jews were God's chosen people,
- with God's covenant,
- and God's law at their hands.

And then there was everybody else.

And remember, the church in Corinth is the first church made up of predominantly, what group? The Gentiles...yeah...the Greeks.

But Paul says that **the Jews demand signs.**

- They want impressive spectacles.
- The Jews expect God to verify religious claims
- with compelling proofs.

And listen, this is a common theme from the Jews to Jesus during his life.

Here are just a few examples:

SLIDE MATTHEW 12:38

[38] Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, "Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you."

SLIDE MATTHEW 16:1

[1] And the Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test him they asked him to show them a sign from heaven.

SLIDE JOHN 6:30

[30] So they said to him, "Then what sign do you do, that we may see and believe you? What work do you perform?"

SLIDE MARK 8:11–12

[11] The Pharisees came and began to argue with him, seeking from him a sign from heaven to test him. [12] And he sighed deeply in his spirit [which is the part that stands out to me...he sighed deeply in his spirit...I'm not sure what that means, but when Jesus does it...it's not a good thing!] and said, "Why does this generation seek a sign? Truly, I say to you, no sign will be given to this generation."

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EXPLAIN: THE JEWS

The sign they actually received was the cross. But they despise the cross.

You see,

- the Jewish people weren't looking for the Messiah
- to come like Jesus came...
- to die on the cross.

They were looking for a Davidic leader.

- Someone who would throw off
- the oppression of the Romans,
- just as king David had thrown off
- the oppression of the Philistines.
- They wanted a savior who would take up his kingly rule
- by dethroning Caesar,
- and establishing Israel as a free
- and powerful people once again.

The sign they were seeking was mighty, triumphalistic...one that would rescue Israel from slavery.

- They weren't looking for a suffering servant.
- They weren't looking at the cross as the place
- where freedom was found from
- the ultimate slavery of sin and death.

The Jews demand signs...and it's not just them!

You ever say,

- *"if God would just do something miraculous...*
- *Then I'd believe."*
- I have!
- And let me ask you this...
- would you really believe?
- You don't think you'd try to convince yourself
- That you hadn't seen what you saw?

The Jews demand signs...

EXPLAIN: THE GREEKS

But the Greeks seem wisdom...there's our word again. *Sophia*.

- The Greeks want a god who makes sense to them.
- A god who fits human sensibilities.
- A god who fits our minds,
- and our judgments,
- and our expectations,
- and our categories.

And this, too, is alive and well today!

Have you ever heard someone say, *“I would never believe in a god who does this...or that...”*

The one I hear most often is, *“How could a loving God send anyone to hell?”*

And listen, that’s a difficult question. And there are, I think, compelling biblical answers to that question.

But I heard another pastor say this,

- “the fascinating thing
- is that in all my years of ministry,
- I’ve never heard the reverse question.
- *How could a just God allow me into heaven?”*
- And he points out the hypocritical nature of human reasoning,
- and the immense arrogance associated with it.

You see,

- when we start defining what kind of god, God can be,
- based on our human sensibilities...
- *God would never do this...*
- *God would only do this...*
- the question becomes...
- who’s god in that scenario?
- God...
- or you?
- Don’t you see the arrogance here?
- Do you realize that’s Greek thinking?

The Jews demand signs. The Greeks seek wisdom. Verse 23

1 CORINTHIANS 1:23

[23] but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles,

EXPLAIN: OXYMORON

This doesn't pack as much of a punch today as it did back then. But Paul just preached something shocking. A crucified Christ. A crucified messiah.

This was an oxymoron. Two things put together that don't go together. Ok. It made no sense. It's like...

- Freezer burn.
- Soft rock.
- Tight slacks.
- Government efficiency.
- Adorable cat.

Ok? A crucified Christ just didn't make sense.

It says this was **a stumbling block to the Jews**. The Greek word for stumbling block is *skandalon*, where we get our word scandal.

- It was scandalous to the Jews
- that the Christ...
- the Messiah...
- would be crucified.

Now, that's not just because of what I said previously about their misplaced ideas around a Davidic successor. But in Deuteronomy 21:22-23 we read this:

SLIDE DEUTERONOMY 21:22–23

[22] “And if a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, [23] his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God. You shall not defile your land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance.

The crucified Christ was a scandal to the Jews because they believe he was cursed.

- For those who think that God must not be weak,
 - the cross is an affront to God's majesty.
- It is insulting to link God with weakness.
- More than that...
- it is scandalous.

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And the Gentiles, the Greeks, think it's folly.

- Some translations say foolishness.
- The Greek word is *moria*,
- where we get the English word moron.

So, when I call people morons, ease up alright? Paul did it first!

The Gentiles think it's moronic for God to let his Son die to save others.

These are the people of the pantheon.

- Of Zeus
- and Poseidon
- and Ares
- and Apollo.
- Gods of strength.
- Gods of war.
- Gods of might.

They had no framework for the God Isaiah prophesied about:

SLIDE ISAIAH 53:4–5

[4] Surely he has borne our griefs

and carried our sorrows;

yet we esteemed him stricken,

smitten by God, and afflicted.

[5] But he was pierced for our transgressions;

he was crushed for our iniquities;

upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,

and with his wounds we are healed.

The cross is scandalous. The cross is foolishness. It was then, and it is today. Verse 24

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1 CORINTHIANS 1:24

[24] but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

To those who are called. Who is he talking about?

- Us. Yes!
- You!
- Me!
- If you are here, then you are called.
- Some of you HAVE responded to that call,
- while others HAVE NOT,
- but I believe you are being called,
- or you wouldn't be here!

This message of the cross trips some up, but in others, it is power and wisdom!

- A different kind of power from the miracles the Jews demanded.
- And a different kind of wisdom from the kind the Greeks were looking for.

And then I love verse 25

1 CORINTHIANS 1:25

[25] For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

What a great verse! He's essentially saying that

- God on his worst day...
- if he could have a worst day...
- is wiser and stronger.

Don't you see the brilliant rhetoric here.

- God can't be foolish.
- God can't be weak.
- But we ascribe that to him.

So, God is redefining those terms.

- We think it's foolish for God to sacrifice his son for us,
 - but his foolishness is the greatest wisdom in the world.
- We think it's weakness for God to let his son...
- be humiliated,
- and betrayed,
- and crucified.
 - But it's God's weakness where power is found.

CONCLUSION

To God, power and wisdom, are found in a crucified Messiah. And just think about the ramifications of this!

- If we live in a universe where God was crucified...
 - what does that say about violence?
- If we live in a universe where God was poor...
 - what does that say about money?
- If we live in a universe where God was tortured...
 - what does that say about love?
- If we live in a universe where God was betrayed...
 - what does that say about relationships?
- And if we live in a universe where God rose from the grave...
 - what does that say about death?

APPLICATIONS

Now, I just want to ask one more question here. Who is Paul writing to?

- To the city of Corinth,
- or the church in Corinth?
- This isn't a trick question. The church.

He's writing all of this to a church...

- who had begun to believe there was a better wisdom out there.
- That there was more power to be had in the world.
- They were beginning to believe that the world had it right,
- and the message of the cross...
- well, it looked more and more moronic to them. Foolish. Folly.

NON-BELIEVER

And so, I want to ask you something. First, maybe for some of you, you've never even considered the cross, and the wisdom and power of God displayed there.

- Maybe like me, it's all seemed foolish to you.
- Maybe you've never believed in what Jesus has done for you.

But for some reason today...

- it doesn't seem so moronic...
- it doesn't seem so foolish...
- the cross isn't full of folly...

Instead, you might feel like it beckons to you, today.

- To believe.
- To take a step of faith.

And I would propose that this is no coincidence, or accident, but rather, that God is calling you.

There's a great theological term for this: the effectual call of God.

- God wooing at you...
- calling to you....
- seeking you out.

And maybe the message for you is...

- don't neglect this call,
- but rather,
- lean into God.
- You need only say,
- *"Jesus, I give you my life."*

BELIEVERS

But for a lot of you in here, you have already responded to that call. You, like the Christians in Corinth, are already BEING saved...

- But as you work,
- and watch the news,
- and talk with people...
- man, wisdom of this world can seem so appealing,
- and the wisdom of the cross
- can often seem a bit foolish.

But the call to us is to trust the gospel once again.

- That it is not in power that God moves...
- it is through weakness.
- But that weakness is stronger...
- and wiser...
- than even the best that the world has to offer.

So, remember the cross.

- Remember the crucified Christ,
- a stumbling block to the Jews
- and foolishness to the Greeks,
- but to those who are being saved,
- it is the very power of God.

Let's pray.

COMMUNION

We respond in 4 ways:

- Communion
- Tithes & offerings
- Prayer
- Singing

1 CORINTHIANS 11:23–26 – WORDS OF INSTITUTION

[23] For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, [24] and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, “This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” [25] In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” [26] For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

ⁱ David E. Garland, 1 Corinthians.

ⁱⁱ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/TED_\(conference\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/TED_(conference))

ⁱⁱⁱ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_Sophistic

^{iv} Martin Hengel, Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross.

^v Wedderburn, A.J.M. 1973.