

## The Folly of the Cross

Sermon preached by Pastor C. John Steer  
Autumn Ridge Church, Rochester, MN  
March 26-27, 2011

No. 1: The Cross  
Scripture: 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5

Today we start a short series on *The Cross of Christ*. There are three good reasons for doing this.

### First, **IT IS LENT**

This is the period leading up to Good Friday and Easter when we reflect on the meaning of the cross.

### Second, **IT IS THE THEME OF THE GOSPELS**

All four gospels devote more space to the crucifixion than any other event in the life of Jesus.

### Third, **IT IS THE PREACHING OF THE APOSTLES**

They are constantly speaking about the cross.

Paul never mentions Christmas once in his preaching or his writing. It is the cross that is central.

No matter what the problem facing the New Testament church it almost appears that the answer is always the cross.

This, of course, is the reason why the cross is the symbol of the Christian faith. Yet the preacher of the cross is aware that the wider world looks on and says, "This is foolishness. This is absurd."

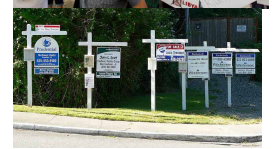
Two main objections are leveled against the preaching of the cross.

### The first is that **IT IS NOT PRACTICAL**

"What are you Christians thinking?"

Don't you know that there are huge problems in the world that need to be addressed.

There has been a terrible earthquake in Japan.  
There is a civil war in Libya.  
There is starvation in Africa.  
There is high unemployment in our own country.  
Peoples' homes are in foreclosure.  
Families are under pressure.  
Marriages are breaking up."



“Those are the practical problems you preachers should be dealing with not talking about an event that happened 2000 years ago.  
It is foolish to talk about the cross to suffering people today.”

A second objection to the cross is that **IT IS NOT SOPHISTICATED**

It is unintelligent. It is pre-scientific.

The story of the cross might have been alright for primitive people. But we live in enlightened days.

We need solutions based on empirical research.

How can the death of one man in the first century possibly have any relevance for people in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? It is all foolishness.

It might surprise these critics to find the Apostle Paul agrees with them. He writes to the Corinthians and says, **“For the message of the cross is foolishness.” (1 Corinthians 1:18)**

So that is where we will start.

We will look today at **THE FOLLY OF THE CROSS.**

So please turn to 1 Corinthians chapter 1 in your Bible and take out your message outline.

In this passage Paul recognizes that while the cross may appear to be folly there are some sound reasons why the cross must be at the center of our life.

The first of these is that **THE CROSS IS A TEST OF OUR SPIRITUAL CONDITION**

Paul writes, **“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.” (v 18)**

Here is a very simple test.

What do we think of the cross?

What is our attitude to the grand truth that Jesus, the eternal Son of God, died on Calvary to atone for our sins? If we think it is silly then we are perishing.

That is a very serious state to be in because it means we are useless.

Think of the rubber hose on your car.

Your mechanic tells you it has perished.

It might look all right on the outside but it is useless.

It can't perform the function for which it was made.

That describes a person who is perishing.

Our lives are useless to God.

We are lost.

Jesus came to save that situation.

John tells us, **“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16)**

So here is the test of our spiritual condition.  
 If we think the death of Jesus is foolish we are perishing.  
 But if when we think of the cross we are filled with gratitude.  
 We may even find tears coming to our eyes.  
 Then that is a very good sign.  
 It means we are being saved. We are the recipient of God’s power which comes to us through the cross.  
 We are able to sing, “At the cross, at the cross where I first saw the light, and the burden of my heart rolled away, it was there by faith I received my sight.”

Second the cross must be central because **THE CROSS IS THE WAY TO GOD**  
 Paul asks, **“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.” (v 20-21)**

Paul is telling us that all the wisdom and all the cleverness and all the knowledge of the world cannot get us to God.  
 T.S. Elliot acknowledges this sad state of affairs in his poem *Choruses from the Rock*. Elliot writes:

“All our knowledge brings us nearer to our ignorance,  
 All our ignorance brings us nearer to death,  
 but nearness to death, no nearer to God.  
 Where is the life we have lost in living?”

Now this is not to depreciate the mind that God has given us. Used properly human wisdom has brought many benefits to the world.

When we use our minds to look at the universe we see evidence of design so we can draw the conclusion that there must be a designer.  
 But our logic can only take us so far.  
 It can not tell us what sort of God made the world or whether he is distant or accessible.

It is the cross that reveals the character of God.  
 So John can say, **“This is love: not that we love God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. (1 John 4:10)**  
 It is the cross that tells us that God is love.

A common picture of God is that he sits at the top of a mountain and through our efforts and our cleverness we climb up towards him.

We may all take different paths and those represent the different religions of the world but sooner or later we will arrive at the summit where we will find truth and enlightenment.

But Paul is telling us we can never know God this way.  
We are incapable of climbing that mountain.  
We neither have the strength nor the wisdom because we are spiritually dead.

We are in a grave at the bottom of the hill.  
It is Jesus who leaves the summit of glory and comes down the mountain to us.  
It is his cross and resurrection that gives us eternal life.

The cross may seem a strange way to save us but it is God's way.  
It is God's wisdom and when you are perishing you don't care what shape the salvation comes in.

Last week I was in Guinea.  
It is a country where many people get malaria and every year thousands of people die.  
I didn't want that to happen to me and so I slept under a mosquito net.

Now a mosquito net doesn't look like it can save anybody. It is just a few yards of muslin that you can stuff in your pocket.  
In my arrogance I could say, "I'm not putting my trust in that net." But that would be folly.  
It can save me from dreadful pain and suffering.

The cross of Jesus was just two bits of rough hewn wood nailed together. There was nothing unusual about it.  
If we had the actual cross here today we would notice nothing special.

It is the one who hung on that cross who is special.  
It is his death that gives us life and takes us to the Father. That is why we sing with such gratitude, "Thank you for the cross. Thank you for the cross my friend."

Then the cross must be central for the **CROSS HUMBLER OUR PRIDE**  
Paul explains, "**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.**" (v 22-25)

In Corinth the population was made up of two types of people. You were either a Jew or a Greek.

Both of these groups had a problem with the cross.

The Jews had a problem because their concept of a Messiah was of a powerful liberator who would perform all sorts of signs and wonders for the benefit of the Jewish people.

The one thing the Messiah would not do was to die on a cross.

That was particularly problematic for Jews because the Old Testament law said,

**"Anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse." (Deuteronomy 21:23)**

For the Jew the cross disproved that Jesus was the coming Messiah.

But their expectations were based on a false understanding of the Old Testament.

If they had read Isaiah carefully they would see that the Messiah was the suffering servant.

But it is very humbling to admit you are wrong.

We all have false ideas about God and it is not easy to abandon them.

Then the cross was a problem for the Greeks because they found it impossible to think of God in personal terms. For Greeks it was essential that God was unable to feel.

So a God who suffers is a contradiction.

Their gods were detached and removed.

Jesus just didn't fit with their ideas of divinity.

The cross still doesn't fit in with our ideas of God.

For many people they are their own God.

Atheist Ayn Rand wrote, "Now I see the face of God, and I raise this God over the earth. This God who men have sought since men came into being, this God who will grant them joy and peace and pride. This God, this one word "I"."

Well if I am God I don't need the cross.

It humbles me to acknowledge that I do.



Paul acknowledges that the cross is a stumbling block.

The word is skandalon from which we get our word scandal. And it is a scandal that God should suffer capital punishment at the hands of unjust men.

It is a truth that people trip over.

But that doesn't mean we can remove it.

There are some things churches do which create a barrier to unbelievers which can and should be removed.

Last weekend our team from Autumn Ridge worshiped at a church in the mountains of Guinea that is comprised of converts from Islam.

They would find it culturally difficult walking into a church with pews and an organ. So the missionaries have removed those stumbling blocks. Instead we met in a bare room. We sat on mats on a concrete floor.



Following the custom of the mosque the men were separated from the women. When we knelt to pray we touched our heads to the ground.

As I was the speaker I dressed in a Boubou because that is how the Imam would dress in the mosque. It was a wonderful experience although after 90 minutes of sitting cross legged on concrete I never though I would walk again.



It is necessary for the church to examine what it does and remove any unnecessary and unbiblical stumbling blocks.

If people can't come to church on Sunday morning then let's have a service on Saturday night.

If they don't relate to one style of music we can try another. If people don't want to wear a suit they can come in shorts and a t-shirt.

None of these things matter.

But the cross is a God-given stumbling block.

We do trip over it.

When we do so we fall to our knees and we are humbled by the sheer power and wisdom of God.

Next we see that **THE CROSS LIFTS UP THE LOWLY**

**"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." (v 26-31)**

Paul now invites the Corinthian congregation to reflect on their identity. There were a few influential members but for the most part these believers came from the lower classes. A good number of them were slaves.

It wouldn't be too strong to say they were the dregs of society.

One of the early enemies of the church was a man called Celsus. In 170 AD he wrote witheringly about the sort of people who were attracted to Christ.

"Let no cultured person draw near, none wise, none sensible . . . but if any man is ignorant, if any is wanting in sense and culture let him come boldly."

Celsus sees this as a black mark for the church.

Paul sees it as a reason for boasting.

Not only were the Corinthians socially inferior they were spiritually inferior.

Later in the letter Paul reminds them that they had been idolaters, adulterers, prostitutes, drunkards and swindlers. (1 Corinthians 6:9-11)

But these are the very sort of people the cross lifts up.

It is those at the bottom who are grateful to be raised with Christ.

William Barclay tells the story of a man who had been a drunkard and who was captured by Christ.

His work mates knew about his conversion and they used to try and provoke him.

They said, "Surely a sensible man like you cannot believe in the miracles of the Bible. You cannot believe that this Jesus of yours turned water into wine."

The man replied, "Whether he turned water into wine, I don't know but in my house I have seen him turn beer into furniture."

The cross had lifted him up.

Finally we see **THE CROSS IS AN ENCOURAGEMENT TO WITNESS**

Paul asks the Corinthians to recall his first visit to them. He writes, **"When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God.**

**For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.**

**I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling.**

**My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power." (2:1-5)**

Paul is contrasting his speaking style with the professional orators of his day.

They didn't have the final four tournaments in Corinth. Instead the superstars of those days were the orators.

These were men who dedicated their life to developing new ideas and expressing them in clever ways.

The Greeks were intoxicated with fine words. They were not so much concerned with truth as with novelty.

These orators were so popular that if word got out that one of them was going to speak in the city square, businesses would empty, government would come to a standstill as everyone rushed to hear them.

Paul is saying "I didn't preach to you like that."

He is not suggesting that he was sloppy or unprepared. He did the best he could but he wasn't a dynamic speaker.

We know from contemporary descriptions that Paul was a short, bald, bandy-legged man.

His power didn't come from his appearance but his message which was the cross of Christ.

That is what transformed the lives of these Corinthians.

Before Paul came to Corinth he had been in Athens. There he tried a new approach. He debated with the philosophers about the unknown God. It was one of the very few times Paul failed as an evangelist. We can imagine him walking from Athens to Corinth and reflecting on what went wrong. He says to himself, "Never again. From now on I am going to be myself. I am going to preach Jesus Christ and him crucified."

I would suggest this is very encouraging news for us as we think about our own witness for Christ. We all know evangelism is immensely hard. Many of us shake in our shoes at the thought of it. One of the reasons for our fear is that we feel we are not equipped. We are not gifted. We know we can't write like Ravi Zacharias or Dinesh D'Souza.

We know we can't preach like John Piper or John MacArthur.

But the good news is we don't have to.

The power is in the cross and when we share that message of Jesus Christ and him crucified, however haltingly and imperfectly God can use it.

So here is what we have discovered.

The cross was offensive in Paul's day.

Not much has changed in 2000 years.

After a legal battle lasting more than two decades the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled last month that a war memorial cross in California is unconstitutional. The 43 foot cross erected in 1913 on Mount Soledad sends the wrong message said the Judge.



It is not just America. When Patricia Gearing's daughter died of Batten's Disease in 1998 her grave in the cemetery in the small seaside town of Maplethorpe in England was marked by a simple cross.

Before long Mrs. Gearing was instructed by the local authorities to remove it because an "excessive use of the supreme Christian symbol is undesirable." The family was given permission to erect a headstone featuring Mickey Mouse instead.

We wonder if it is the cross or the authorities who are foolish.

We began by reflecting that there are some who see the cross as folly because it is not practical.

They tell us instead to focus on the suffering in society and the breakdown of the family. They ask, "Does God not care about these things?"

He does very much but his answer to these problems is the cross.

When we grasp the message of the cross we see exactly how we are to respond to those who are suffering because we see what God did for us in our need.

When we watch what Jesus did on the cross we will know how to help our homes.

Paul tells husbands that the way to have a passionate marriage is to **"Love your wives just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her."**  
**(Ephesians 5:25)**

The cross speaks against selfishness.

It tells us how to deal with our enemies.

Jesus hanging on the cross prayed, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

Here is the amazing truth. When we understand that the cross is central then other problems are resolved.

For the cross will transform a family and a community and a society and ultimately the cross will transform the world.