

Verses 18 to 25 are the logical outworking of Paul's statement in the previous verse. ¹⁷*For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.* In other words, Paul intentionally focused on proclaiming what Christ had done on the cross for us and expected that the power of that sacrificial act of love would bring about the conversion of the soul. Paul did not rely on eloquence or rhetorical skill, but simply presented the wonder of Jesus' sacrifice (1 Corinthians 2:4,5ⁱ).

He goes on to write, 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.* 1 Corinthians 1:18 If you talk someone into belief, they can be talked out of it. But when people are confronted with the love of God demonstrated on the cross, and the Holy Spirit helps them see what Jesus did for us, that which we could not do for ourselves, then the power of that truth grips our hearts. The cross demonstrates the justice we deserve, and that is convicting. But it also demonstrates the love of God that would go to such an extent to save us (John 15:13ⁱⁱ). That is humbling but also incredibly attractive (John 12:32ⁱⁱⁱ).

The world makes a concerted effort to attack the real meaning of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. Skeptics ask, "What kind of a God would brutally kill His child?" It is an overly simplistic attack, but it demonstrates how the world (those who are perishing) looks at the cross as foolishness. The answer to their question is easy: a **God who will not compromise justice and loves us with great compassion, who knew the Son would rise, and planned the incredible good that would come of the one day of suffering.** But that honest answer won't change a heart. It would be better to ask how God the Father and the Son could love us in our sinful condition so much that they would agree that the Son must lay down His life to save us so that justice could be met and yet mercy and love prevail (Psalm 85:10^{iv}; Romans 5:8^v).

Antagonists are often unreasonable and only thinking of the next line of attack. Only the Holy Spirit can give the right words or illustrations that will break through the walls of doubt put up by unbelievers to have them consider the love of God. Sometimes a true story, even a personal one has more power to make a person pay attention than a reasoned argument does. The gospel seems so clear and wonderful to us because our eyes have been opened (Luke 19:23^{vi}).

The world of Paul's day divided the world into Romans and barbarians, slave or free, or from the Jewish perspective Jews and Gentiles. Paul sees as God sees, that there are only those who are perishing and those who are being saved. Do you see the world like that? When we are born-again, race, gender, nationality, and social status become inconsequential. Our only distinction is whether a person is in Christ or is perishing. Denominational labels should not cause us to categorize, but instead want to know if the person is being saved or is perishing (2 Corinthians 2:15,16^{vii}).

Notice that we are *being* saved (Acts 2:47^{viii}). Here again is this concept of now and not yet. God has saved us and calls us sanctified because of what Jesus has done for us. We are clothed in Christ. But at the same time, we are being saved. We are called to be saints (verse 2^{ix}) and are in the process of sanctification. From the eternal eyes of God, the work is complete. From our position here in time we are looking forward to the day when we see Him face to face and the work is complete (1 John 3:2^x).

19 For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." 1 Corinthians 1:19 Paul always proves his point by quoting Scripture (John 17:17^{xi}). We should do the same. His point from Isaiah 29 is that it is not wisdom that converts us, but rather it is the power of the cross. In Isaiah 29 God was rebuking the Jews for their routine obedience without the heart being engaged in worship (Isaiah 29:13^{xii}). To the ungodly it was a warning (Isaiah 29:15,16^{xiii}). And to those who would hear and believe it was full of promise. (See Isaiah 29:17 to the end of the chapter.) Paul quoted verse 14 which warned that God was doing something the wise and the discerning would miss altogether. It was true then and it was being repeated in an even more significant way in the cross.

What wise or discerning person stood on Calvary as Jesus died and declared it to be our means of salvation, even when Jesus quoted the beginning of Psalm 22^{xiv} to help them see it? What wise and discerning man was waiting at the tomb for the resurrection even though Jesus predicted it multiple times (Mark 8:31^{xv}, 10:34^{xvi}). The wisest men at the time were supposed to be the members of the Sanhedrin in which only two out of the seventy could see the signs that Jesus demonstrated showing He was the Messiah (John 3:2^{xvii}). Even then they did not realize what He had done on the cross. And so it is today. The vast majority of scholars scoff at the thought of Jesus dying for our sins.

I participated in a debate with three other members of the clergy. They scoffed at my insistence that Jesus gave Himself for our sins though it is clearly proclaimed in the Scriptures and by Jesus Himself (Matthew 20:28^{xviii}, John 10:15^{xix}). They saw me as a fool. And they fulfilled the 2700 year old prophecy, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise." *The place where God has supremely destroyed all human arrogance and pretension is the cross.*^{xx}

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? 1 Corinthians 1:20 The promise in Isaiah 29 was to the disabled, meek, and poor. How many times has the wisdom of the world been wrong? Those of you who are old enough remember a time when climatologists were predicting a new ice age. Then it was global warming. Sometimes that didn't seem to fit their predictions, so they call it climate change. This last season was the coldest Antarctica weather on record. Hmmm? Yet, half the time they can't predict the weather next week. When I was in college, my chemistry professor started off the year by telling us that our textbook would be out of date in three years. In other words, we think we've got it all figured out until we find out more information that contradicts what we thought we knew for certain.

The prevailing philosophies of the world are ever changing, but one thing never changes: the Word of God (Psalm 119:85^{xxi}). I am not suggesting education is pointless. It is very useful, but we must recognize it is ever changing and what we think about the physical world and the philosophies of man often turn out to be the real foolishness.

What is certain and infinitely more important is what God has done for us, the prophecies fulfilled in Jesus, the offer of forgiveness provided in the cross, and spiritual life! Blinded to these wonders and gift of all gifts, those who are perishing destroy their own lives indulging in destructive physical pleasures they laud as self-actualizing (Ephesians 4:19^{xxii}).

Every poll on relationships has shown that lifelong heterosexual relationships that are faithful to each other are the happiest and most fulfilled. Why do cultures around the

world ignore that verifiable fact? It is because we have a sinful nature that rebels against God. What do you know? The Bible is true. God made foolish the wisdom of this world!

We have been watching the Truth Project on Friday evenings. In one of our recent episodes, we saw that microscopic cells have thousands of various micro bots, each with a specific design and function. Several scientists were quoted as saying that although we see design throughout, we must continually remind ourselves that it all came about accidentally. The alternative is to admit the obvious, that there is a designer. Confessing themselves to be wise they became fools.

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. 1 Corinthians 1:21 No one using the wisdom of man could ever have predicted or imagined the wonder of what God has done for us in Jesus. Only by revelation of the Spirit did the prophets foretell it (1 Peter 1:10,11). And even after the fact, man's wisdom cannot understand it. But when we proclaim the gospel to a heart that has been prepared to hear by the work of the Spirit there is joy and transformation. Eyes are opened as Isaiah predicted in that same chapter quoted above (Isaiah 29:18^{xxiii}). I once was blind but now I see. Deaf ears suddenly hear! While Jesus fulfilled it literally, I believe Isaiah meant spiritually. But remember that Jews see a connection between the physical and the spiritual. We are transferred from the domain of Satan into the kingdom of God as adopted sons and daughters, princes and princesses (Colossians 1:13^{xxiv}).

God was not looking for the brightest and best to convey His message. He picked a Christian killer, some fishermen, a tax collector and the like so that we would not lean on the wisdom of men (1 Corinthians 1:28,29^{xxv}). It seemed like folly to start His kingdom with these men and this message of grace through the cross. But that is just the kind of message fallen mankind needs. This is just the kind of salvation that is for the least of these, for the simple, for the sin sick, for those who realize that there is no other hope for them.

The world says a god who would sacrifice his son is horrible. We see a God who so loved the us that He gave His only Son to save us, knowing His death would defeat death and give us eternal life (John 3:16^{xxvi}). What a contrast in perspectives! They say our belief is folly. We see their rejection of this most magnanimous gift is utter folly.

²² For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, 1 Corinthians 1:22 Jews wanted signs like those God gave to Moses to be convinced that Jesus was the Messiah. They asked Him a number of times, "What sign do you give that we might believe" (John 2:18^{xxvii}; 6:30^{xxviii}).

They saw incredible signs. Jesus was always doing healing miracles. Moses was given two signs, a leprous hand and a rod that turned into a snake and back to a rod. The Messiah was predicted to be like Moses (Deuteronomy 18:15^{xxix}), so they wanted a similar kind of signs as those God gave to Moses. (Matthew 12:38^{xxx}; Mark 8:11,12^{xxxi}; Luke 11:16^{xxxii}; John 2:18^{xxxiii}). Moses showed them a leprous hand and it turned whole, and his rod became a snake and back to a rod. (See Exodus 4.) Jesus said no sign would be given, except the sign of Jonah (Matthew 12:39^{xxxiv}). And yet, Jesus fulfilled so many prophecies that should have been signs to the Jews who knew the Scriptures. In the Gospel of John, John refers to those miracles as signs. Nicodemus told Jesus they knew no one could perform the miraculous *signs* that Jesus was doing unless God was with

him. While Jesus did give them conclusive signs, they were seeking signs that benefited them such as the ousting of the Roman empire and freedom from taxation.

If Jesus performed signs on demand, He would be performing to be assessed by man. Jesus only acted at the Father's leading. *Thus the demand for signs becomes the prototype of every condition human beings raise as a barrier to being open to God. "I will devote myself to this God if he heals my child. I will follow this Jesus if I can maintain my independence. I will happily become a Christian if God proves himself to me. I will turn from my sin and read the Bible if my marriage gets sorted out to my satisfaction. I will acknowledge Jesus as Lord if he performs the kind of miracle, on demand, that removes all doubt." In every case, I am assessing him; he is not assessing me. I am not coming to him on his terms; rather, I am stipulating terms that he must accept if he wants the privilege of my company. "Jews demand miraculous signs."^{xxv}*

Greeks, on the other hand, were influenced by logic and rhetoric that fit into their structured philosophies. The gospel is quite logical, but logic relies on a common understanding of facts, and Greeks had a preconceived idea of what the facts should be. Jews and Greeks had a different worldview based on their differing understanding of basic facts. Who is God? What is He or they like? What does he/they expect of us? etc. Since Jesus didn't follow their assumptions of the facts, they considered Christians foolish. A God who would die on a criminal's cross seemed ridiculous to Greeks. The Greco-Roman gods were aloof and more concerned about themselves than mankind, so those who were in that culture asked why a god would allow himself to be crucified. It was unthinkable to them. Both Jews and Greeks were looking for a god who would fit their preconceived notions. Both wanted a god they could examine and approve of. The creature is telling the Creator what He should be like is delusional arrogance.

²³ *but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles,* 1 Corinthians 1:23 To both Jew and Gentile a crucified messiah seemed an unacceptable concept, an oxymoron. Jews knew to be hung on a tree (crucified) meant to be cursed (Deuteronomy 21:23^{xxxvi}). They just didn't see it was for their sins Jesus was under that curse. Etched in plaster around A.D. 200 is one of the earliest pictures of Jesus on the cross. It was of a man with a donkey head on a cross. Below it was a man worshiping. The graffiti read, "Alexamenos worships his God." It was a mockery of his belief in a crucified God. It perfectly displays what Paul was writing here. The word Paul used translated "folly" can also be translated as "mania." Gentiles didn't just see Christians as misled fools, but rather as dangerous maniacs who worshiped a dead criminal. That sentiment is still around in many parts of the world.

²⁴ *but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.* 1 Corinthians 1:24 To us whose eyes are opened by the grace of God and power of the Holy Spirit, we see the cross as the most wondrous display of love the world will ever witness. It demonstrates the power of God to enter His creation and save lost sinners in the midst of their rebellion. It shows the wisdom of God in making what seemed impossible an accomplished fact. To reconcile justice and grace took the incredible wisdom and love of God. Praise God!

²⁵ *For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.* 1 Corinthians 1:25 God's thoughts are so much higher than our own. We could never have imagined a way that justice and love could meet. We could never have hoped for such a great display of love from our Creator. We would never think of

death being defeated by entering into death. How great is our God (Romans 11:33-36^{xxxvii})!

Paul has clearly identified a dividing line in the world. There are those who think God becoming man to die for us is foolishness. And there are those of us who see it as the greatest display of love possible. Pride will keep the former thinking that they are good enough for God. The conviction of the Holy Spirit and resulting humility has the latter ever thankful that their sins have been removed as far as the east is from the west (Psalm 103:12^{xxxviii}). To which group do you belong? The only ones in-between are those in the valley of decision, and they will end up on one side or the other.

No mere human, in his or her right mind or otherwise, would have dreamed up God's scheme for redemption—through a crucified Messiah. It is too preposterous, too humiliating, for a God.^{xxxix} I would add that such an understanding of what justice should demand and of the depravity of our sins is also too humiliating for us to think it fair to us. That is why we balk at the concept of hell. Such great love is also hard for us to fathom because we personally fall so short of it and don't have anything else to which we can relate it to other than the perfect marriage of which there are so few (Ephesians 5:32^{xl}).

Think of the irony of what Paul is declaring. The Jews wanted signs of a powerful deliverer Messiah on the line of Moses or David. God sent His only Son and through the cross delivered us from our greatest enemy, death and hell (Revelation 1:18^{xli}). That is infinitely more power than any Jewish hero displayed. The Greeks take pride in their wisdom, and in the cross we see the wisdom that is way beyond what the world's wisest can comprehend. God demonstrated His great wisdom and power by meeting both the demand for justice and His love for mankind through the cross.

This is much more radical than saying that God has more wisdom than human beings, or that he is stronger than human beings—as if we are dealing with mere degrees of wisdom and power. No, we are dealing with polar opposites. Human “wisdom” and “strength” are, from God's perspective, rebellious folly and moral weakness. And the moment when God most dramatically discloses his own wisdom and strength, the moment when his own dear Son is crucified—although it is laughed out of court by the tawdry “wisdom” of this rebellious world, by the pathetic “strength” of the self-deceived—is nevertheless the moment of divine wisdom and divine power. “For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength” (1:25).^{xlii}

My prayer is that you have received the invitation from God and had your eyes opened to the wonder of the power and wisdom of God displayed on the cross that you might be born from above and filled with the love of God.

Questions

- 1 Why did Paul rely on the message of the cross?
- 2 What are the two categories of people in the world?
- 3 How does Isaiah 29:14 shed light on Paul's claim?
- 4 Give a couple examples of the foolishness of the world.
- 5 Why did Jesus pick such lame disciples? 6 What is the great contrast in perspectives?
- 7 What is wrong with demanding a sign for proof?
- 8 How does pride keep people from the cross?
- 9 What is the irony of Paul's declaration? 10 Do you agree with the last quote?

ⁱ **1 Corinthians 2:4-5 (ESV)** ⁴ and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, ⁵ so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

ⁱⁱ **John 15:13 (ESV)** ¹³ Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.

ⁱⁱⁱ **John 12:32 (ESV)** ³² And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.”

^{iv} **Psalms 85:10 (ESV)** ¹⁰ Steadfast love and faithfulness meet; righteousness and peace kiss each other.

^v **Romans 5:8 (ESV)** ⁸ but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

^{vi} **Luke 10:23 (ESV)** ²³ Then turning to the disciples he said privately, “Blessed are the eyes that see what you see!

^{vii} **2 Corinthians 2:15-16 (ESV)** ¹⁵ For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, ¹⁶ to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things?

^{viii} **Acts 2:47 (ESV)** ⁴⁷ praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

^{ix} **1 Corinthians 1:2 (ESV)** ² To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours:

^x **1 John 3:2 (ESV)** ² Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.

^{xi} **John 17:17 (ESV)** ¹⁷ Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.

^{xii} **Isaiah 29:13 (ESV)** ¹³ And the Lord said: “Because this people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, and their fear of me is a commandment taught by men,

^{xiii} **Isaiah 29:15-16 (ESV)** ¹⁵ Ah, you who hide deep from the LORD your counsel, whose deeds are in the dark, and who say, “Who sees us? Who knows us?” ¹⁶ You turn things upside down! Shall the potter be regarded as the clay, that the thing made should say of its maker, “He did not make me”; or the thing formed say of him who formed it, “He has no understanding”?

^{xiv} **Psalms 22:1 (ESV)** ¹ My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning?

^{xv} **Mark 8:31 (ESV)** ³¹ And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again.

^{xvi} **Mark 10:34 (ESV)** ³⁴ And they will mock him and spit on him, and flog him and kill him. And after three days he will rise.”

^{xvii} **John 3:2 (ESV)** ² This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him.”

^{xviii} **Matthew 20:28 (ESV)** ²⁸ even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

^{xix} **John 10:15 (ESV)** ¹⁵ just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep.

^{xx} Carson, D. A. (2004). [*The Cross and Christian Ministry: Leadership Lessons from 1 Corinthians*](#) (p. 15). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

^{xxi} **Psalms 119:89 (ESV)**

⁸⁹ Forever, O LORD, your word is firmly fixed in the heavens.

^{xxii} **Ephesians 4:19 (NIV)** ¹⁹ Having lost all sensitivity, they have given themselves over to sensuality so as to indulge in every kind of impurity, with a continual lust for more.

^{xxiii} **Isaiah 29:18 (ESV)** ¹⁸ In that day the deaf shall hear the words of a book, and out of their gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see.

^{xxiv} **Colossians 1:13 (ESV)** ¹³ He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son,

^{xxv} **1 Corinthians 1:28-29 (ESV)** ²⁸ God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, ²⁹ so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.

^{xxvi} **John 3:16 (ESV)** ¹⁶ “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

^{xxvii} **John 2:18 (ESV)** ¹⁸ So the Jews said to him, “What sign do you show us for doing these things?”

^{xxviii} **John 6:30 (ESV)** ³⁰ So they said to him, “Then what sign do you do, that we may see and believe you? What work do you perform?”

^{xxix} **Deuteronomy 18:15 (ESV)** ¹⁵ “The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen—

^{xxx} **Matthew 12:38 (ESV)** ³⁸ Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, “Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you.”

^{xxxi} **Mark 8:11-12 (ESV)** 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 and said, “Why does this generation seek a sign? Truly, I say to you, no sign will be given to this generation.”

^{xxxii} **Luke 11:16 (ESV)** ¹⁶ while others, to test him, kept seeking from him a sign from heaven.

^{xxxiii} **John 2:18 (ESV)** ¹⁸ So the Jews said to him, “What sign do you show us for doing these things?”

^{xxxiv} **Matthew 12:39 (ESV)** ³⁹ But he answered them, “An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.

^{xxxv} Carson, D. A. (2004). *The Cross and Christian Ministry: Leadership Lessons from 1 Corinthians* (p. 21). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

^{xxxvi} **Deuteronomy 21:23 (ESV)** 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.

^{xxxvii} **Romans 11:33-36 (ESV)** ³³ Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! ³⁴ “For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?” ³⁵ “Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?” ³⁶ For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen.

^{xxxviii} **Psalms 103:12 (ESV)** ¹² as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us.

^{xxxix} Preaching the Word - 1 Corinthians: The Word of the Cross.

^{xl} **Ephesians 5:32 (ESV)** ³² This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church.

^{xli} **Revelation 1:18 (ESV)** ¹⁸ and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.

^{xlii} Carson, D. A. (2004). *The Cross and Christian Ministry: Leadership Lessons from 1 Corinthians* (p. 25). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.