

## *To God Alone Be The Glory*

It's interesting to listen in on conversations about sports. Sports enthusiasts have a language all their own. There are the names and nicknames of teams, players, and coaches. Then there are the strategies for winning games and seasons. I love it when sports enthusiasts start talking to me about how the NFL draft is going or who made it to the sweet-sixteen and the final-four because then I get to do my impression of the way a cow looks when you try to tell it about sports. It's not that I'm ignorant about sports. I played football and ran track in high school. But I mention sports because the pervasive love of sports seems to have captured the majority of people in the majority of cultures today, and this can help us crack open today's sermon text.

You see, sports is to people in our day what wisdom was to those who lived in Corinth around the time of Christ. If sports isn't your thing, then perhaps this comparison will help: in Corinth they liked wisdom as much as we enjoy a nice house or a nice car or a nice, quiet, relaxing day. To the Corinthians, life's highest goal was to gain wisdom, the kind of wisdom that contributes to good people leading a good life and having a good society. Now, wisdom is good, and sports can be a fine pastime, and nice things are a gracious blessing from God. But when sports enthusiasm or any other worldly pursuit gets in the way of

growing closer to God through his Word, then we are making the same kind of mistake that the Corinthians made when they pursued mere, human wisdom and rejected God's wisdom.

Worldly pursuits always turn out to be less than the glorious treasure most people consider them to be. That's why Jesus taught us, "*Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it*" (Matthew 7:13-14). In other words, any worldly pursuit which squeezes God out of our heart, whether it's coin collecting or gardening or playing cards or learning to play guitar—any of these can lead to hell as easily as any other form of rejecting Jesus. The apostle Paul puts it this way: <sup>18</sup>*The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing. While we find it astounding how many people want nothing to do with the Jesus revealed in the Bible, they find it astounding that we hang our hopes on a religion that seems ready to judge everyone, ourselves included. And yet there are lots of spiritual people who want to hang on to Jesus in some fashion. And so many create a Jesus in their own image, tolerant of whatever they want to tolerate. Others are so confident they are right with God, they never give a second thought to how much they still need Jesus to wash them clean of sin each day. All this contributes to why so many won't listen to anyone who wants to focus on the cross of Christ as the means God employs to*

redeem sinners. To many, this kind of salvation is the silliest thing they ever heard. That's why Paul says, <sup>18</sup>*The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing. But to those who are being saved, [the cross] is the power of God.*

Almost everyone in the world agrees that no one is perfect. But through the message about Jesus' cross, the Lord has taught us to see ourselves as much worse off than 'not quite perfect.' For this reason we admit every week during worship that we are sinners. The world rejects this as foolish. I'm thinking now of several people who took me aside in my early years as a pastor to convince me that I should not tell people, least of all the children, that they are sinners. "It will ruin their self-image. If they believe you, they will never amount to anything." And you know, if that's all that the message of the cross taught, they'd be right. But listen to the rest of the message: God has freed us from all our sins through the blood of Jesus shed on the cross. When this part of the message gets hold of our hearts, we set out to do our best at life. We strive for a good life and a good society. We amount to something, and then some. But we do it from our thanks, to glorify God and to serve others. We do it because God purified us through Christ's death on the cross. The message of the cross, consistently applied, leads toward the kind of society that most of the world craves but won't pursue through Jesus. As less and less of the world follows Jesus, look at the moral decay, and look at all the wise

people frustrated that they can't do enough to turn it around, and look how many people become cynical about even trying. This is why Paul quotes the Lord (saying through Isaiah): <sup>19</sup>*I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.*

Let's stop for a moment. I want to ask you about your education. Everyone, please put one hand over your chest like this for five seconds. If you have a PhD or a Master's Degree, open your hand all the way, otherwise make a fist. Way fewer than half of us have advanced degrees. It was similar in the Corinthian congregation—few highly educated. That's why Paul asks: <sup>20</sup>*Where is the wise person? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age?* Not usually in churches where people cling to the cross. Yet Christian churches tend to be populated with people who love all kinds of education anyway, because Solomon teaches them to love wisdom, and because education helps them to be more effective in their service to their fellow human beings, to Christ, and to his church. And the "wise" people—the highly educated? Aren't they often the ones running around saying we evolved from lower forms of life, which is genetically impossible, that the world is billions of years old, which is scientifically impossible, that all religions are of equal value, which is philosophically impossible. Even a little education is enough to see this. <sup>20b</sup>*Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?*

The wisdom of the world is especially seen in how people like to view

themselves. All world religions and quite a few Christian denominations teach or insinuate that you can do something to help avert a disastrous afterlife for yourself. The Bible teaches we can't (Ephesians 2:1, Romans 8:7, 1 Corinthians 12:3). But when God saw we were headed for hell, completely unable to save ourselves, he sent his Son to die in our place. Somehow the Holy Spirit makes this idea make sense to us. To make this happen, the Holy Spirit had to come inside our hearts (minds) and make logic serve our faith. The cross of Christ can never make sense to those whose logic is ruler of their hearts. But share the message of sin and grace with people, and the Holy Spirit brings some of them to faith in Jesus. Paul says it this way: <sup>21</sup>*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.* That's quite mouthful. Or rather a brain-ful. Paul is reminding us that no matter how much people study the earth and the stars, they can never fully figure out what God is like. Yes, if they make room in their hearts for the possibility that a god exists, they can figure out that God is powerful, kind, wise, and that he hates sin. But the only way they can know that from eternity God planned to save the world by having his own Son die on a cross in their place is through the gospel, the message of the cross. Listen to Paul say it again. <sup>21</sup>*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.*

How helpful is that when it comes to sharing Jesus with others?! First, it reminds us that we are to share the message about sin and grace. If we believers won't do this, how will anyone else be brought to faith in Jesus? Second, it reminds us that we aren't the ones who do the actual convincing, the actual changing of hearts. God does that. Third, it sets our expectations for how most people will receive us. Jesus' cross is foolishness to everyone who refuses to believe. But somehow, with some people, this foolishness of God saves them. Again: <sup>21</sup>*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.* That's a Bible verse worth memorizing!

<sup>22</sup>*Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom.* The Greeks who lived in Corinth and Athens enjoyed sitting around all day and discussing ideas. Yet the closest any of the Greek philosophers got to the truth of salvation was Plato, who, as I remember, questioned how one could know he had ever done enough to appease the gods. None of the Greek philosophers, however, dreamed that even one of their gods would substitute his own son to save wretches who were hostile toward the gods. That would be utter foolishness. \* And the Jews of Jesus' day were no better off. After Jesus healed the sick, made the blind see, fed the 5000, and preached the good news, they demanded a sign from him to prove that he was the Messiah. What were all those miracles Jesus had already done!? But they wanted a different kind of sign,

because they wanted a different kind of Messiah. We see the same kind of thing today. If Jesus can't fix people's marriage or their finances by the end of the week,... if Jesus can't make church people treat others nice,... if Jesus can't bring world peace, forget him. They don't want a Savior from sin because they're convinced they aren't that bad.

<sup>22</sup>*Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom*, and people today want solutions to their earthly problems, <sup>23</sup>*but WE PREACH CHRIST CRUCIFIED*. Jesus died on a cross for you. He is the only way to heaven. His blood is the only thing valuable enough to satisfy the debt we amassed by our sins. \* If that doesn't impress and amaze you, then you are likely in as much spiritual danger as the Jews of Paul's day. A little snotty-ness, a little bending of the rules, a little greed, a tidbit of gossip, a little disrespect for those God placed over you, a little stubbornness when yielding is called for, a little taking of something that isn't really yours... Not repenting for any of these is enough to bring unending torment in hell. On the other hand, the sins of those who have done the worst are just as forgiven by God as the sins people consider trifling.

If you felt the slightest objection in your mind to those statements, then you can understand why the cross is so offensive and foolish to Jews and Gentiles and people today. Christ's cross is like a big tripwire that our sinful flesh keeps stumbling over no matter how high we lift our feet to get over it.

<sup>24</sup>*But to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks and people today, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.* <sup>25</sup>*For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.* To those who want to contribute their own goodness to salvation, God says, "No, that crucified and risen man there is my Son. He paid it all for you. Your goodness isn't good enough to help because it's still tainted by your sinfulness. Offering me your works as payment for your sins is like trying to wash off dirt with mud." \* To those who want the Lord to change his standards and allow them and their very nice friends and family to enter heaven apart from faith in Jesus, the Lord says, "Look, just receive my Son's blood as payment for your sins. That is my appointed way into heaven, and only that. I want absolutely everyone in heaven with me. I included you. Don't exclude yourself by disliking how I saved you." \* To those who want to attend a church that makes them feel better about themselves, the Lord says, "Good! Look to me as the source of all goodness. You won't find anything good in yourself unless I put it there first. And I do that only through the proclamation that my Son Jesus is your Savior. This will make you feel better." \* To those who think that style is more important than substance, the Lord says, "Pay attention to the words. It doesn't matter whether they are proclaimed with flare or flatly. The gospel, the good news about Jesus, is the powerful thing through which I intend to change your heart and wash you clean in my sight every day." That, dear friends, is why **WE PREACH CHRIST CRUCIFIED**.