

“The Folly of Faith?”—1 Corinthians 1:18-21

The text for this sermon, the theme of which is, “The Folly of Faith?”, is 1 Corinthians 1:18-21 → *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. For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.” 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? 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.* This is the text.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ Jesus:

Grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord (cf. 1Timothy 1:2).

“How foolish can you be?” “It’s just silly to think that way.” “Well, that’s just ridiculous!” “That doesn’t make any sense at all!” Phrases such as these are common place in your daily interactions as you process other people’s words and actions. While such phrases are thought within split seconds they may flow off your lips as quickly as

the words hit your ears. They depict the struggle to understand the concepts and actions of others which seem rather foolish to you. They are used to point out the folly of other people's ways of thinking or decisions they make. Unfortunately they imply that what the other person thinks as expressed by what he says or does is downright stupid. It is foolish.

Folly is defined in the dictionary as a "lack of good sense or normal prudence and foresight." (Merriam-Webster, I. © 1996 Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (10th ed.). Springfield, MA.) "Good sense?" Is that like "common sense?" Seems rather hard to find a common ground for "good sense" in many discussions. "Normal prudence and foresight?" What does one do with that concept as you strive to figure out what's "normal" anymore, especially with all the concepts of "new normals" flying around today? I wonder how many of those people you encounter in your day would consider it prudent to trust in the crucified Jesus to avoid eternal suffering in hell, where, as Jesus described, *their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched* (cf. Mark 9:48).

Verse 18 of our text says *the word of the cross of Jesus Christ is folly*, but not to everyone. *It is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.* Why does the crucifixion of Jesus appear to be foolishness, lacking good sense or

normal prudence and foresight to some, but displaying *the power of God* to others? One might say the obvious answer is faith. *Those who are perishing* do not believe in Jesus while those *who are being saved* do. However, faith itself may seem like folly to many people.

Faith is a very interesting concept in daily usage. You may hear people ask questions such as: “Do you believe there is a god?” “Do you believe in angels or demons?” “Do you believe in spirits . . . in miracles . . .?” I wonder if the intent of such questions is to determine your opinion based upon some kind of conclusions you’ve made from your learning or experiences. It seems that is how the word “believe” is used in those contexts. In that case, “faith” is not folly because it is based upon conclusions which make sense to you and have been verified to your satisfaction. This is why people can actually engage in “religious” discussions quite easily. All it requires is the sharing of opinions and how you’ve arrived at them. The faith connected with *the word of the cross* requires you to look past your cognitive analysis to your sinful heart and life.

The reason *the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing* is because of sinful arrogance fueled by subjective knowledge. In our text, Paul harkened back to Isaiah’s day when God’s people were defining their relationship with Him on their own terms, developing their own interpretations of His commandments based on their own

conclusions. The LORD said through Isaiah: *Therefore, behold, I will again do wonderful things with this people, with wonder upon wonder; and the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the discernment of their discerning men shall be hidden* (cf. Isaiah 29:14). God promised to perform *wonderful things . . . with wonder upon wonder* so that they would get off their “high horse” and humble themselves before Him as their Maker and Savior from sin. The *wonderful things* are what He accomplished through His Son, Jesus, through the cross.

Thus, Paul strives to get his hearers to consider themselves in light of the wonders God performed in their lives in Jesus, rather than their wonderful works or wonderful knowledge or wonderful vocations in life or whatever looked wonderful from a worldly perspective. His questions in verse 20 of our text probe deep into the prideful heart: *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?* The challenge to our faith which these questions place before us who are steeped in a world where expertise, influence and ability is judged by academia and certificates of achievement is huge. Face it, the wisdom and knowledge of experts in the world is pretty important to us. The real challenge is not to give in to the satanic delusion that faith is understood according to such wisdom.

The wisdom of the world is much more than simple academia and

knowledgeable expertise. From Scripture's perspective it is actually a wisdom which feeds the sinful nature without recognizing that sinful nature at all. From a spiritual perspective *the wisdom of the world* will leave a person in the darkness of his sin even as he thinks he's living an enlightened life. *The wisdom of the world* redefines faith from trust in the Lord Jesus Christ to simple knowledge and acknowledgment of His Person & Work. This is why Jesus rebuked the scribes in John 5:39-40, saying, *you diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about Me, yet you refuse to come to Me to have life.* (NIV)

Thus, Paul says in verse 21 of our text: *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.* Faith, that is, believing in Jesus, is trusting in His sacrifice on the cross as needed in your life to turn aside God's just wrath upon your sin. The cross displays your salvation **on God's terms**, not yours.

Faith created in your heart by the Holy Spirit clings to the cross of Jesus as it lays bare your sins **and** your lays before you your Savior from eternal punishment in hell because of those sins. *The wisdom of the world* views the cross of Jesus Christ and see it as a stumbling block to faith. In 1 Corinthians 1:22-24 Paul talks about people who *demand signs* or *seek wisdom* to verify faith. Instead, *we preach Christ*

crucified, a stumbling block to those who demand signs and folly to those who seek wisdom. But to those who are called, . . . Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

There are many times when I will hold up my crucifix in front of a person and ask, “What do you see?” The most common response is, “I see Jesus hanging on a cross.” When I probe further by asking, “Do you see anything else?” many will begin to act like it’s a trick question and wonder what they’re missing, searching for a deeper more hidden meaning. They might continue to describe what He’s wearing or the agony depicted by the artist. It is natural to fall back on the depths of your own wisdom to describe what is depicted in this crucifix and come up with a real “spiritual” or “theological” answer, maybe even feeling like you’re missing something you should be seeing.

Faith in Jesus sees your sins. Faith in Jesus knows that the cross lays bare your sins with no wisdom, works or worthiness which can hide your shame before God. Faith in Jesus also sees God’s *wonder upon wonder* in His grace. The Holy Spirit’s gift of faith in Jesus sees your Savior and trusts His suffering the depths of God’s wrath upon your sin for you, in your place. Faith in Jesus kneels at the foot of His cross in humility confessing that *the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men* (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:25). Faith in Jesus stands at the foot of His cross, thankful that *it*

pleased God through the folly of the Gospel preached to save you.

May you always confess with the apostle Paul

in the words of Romans 1:16 →

I am not ashamed of the gospel,

for it is the power of God

for salvation to everyone who believes.

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