

# Paul's Preaching 1 Corinthians 1:17-31

by J.R. Miller

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*The gospel seems foolish to the world, but to those who accept it, it proves to have in it all the power of God, by which lost souls are forgiven, renewed, lifted up to life and saved eternally.*

**Scripture:** 1 Corinthians 1:17

**Topics:** "The Power of the Gospel", "Humility in Salvation"

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## Description

J.R. Miller emphasizes the essence of Paul's message in 1 Corinthians 1:17-31, highlighting the contrast between worldly wisdom and the simplicity of the gospel. He warns against the danger of obscuring the cross with eloquent rhetoric, which can lead listeners to miss the true message of salvation. Miller illustrates that while the gospel may seem foolish to the wise, it is the very power of God for those who believe. He reminds us that God intentionally chooses the weak and despised to confound the wise, ensuring that all glory for salvation belongs to Him alone. Ultimately, our righteousness and redemption come solely through Christ, and we must boast only in the Lord.

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## Transcript

The First Epistle to the Corinthians was written from Ephesus in the spring of A.D. 57. The apostle had heard that dissensions were troubling the church at Corinth, and he wrote to them giving many exhortations and commands. Early in the letter he stated his conception of his mission, "Christ sent me to preach the gospel: not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect." As if one should prepare a fountain of pure, fresh water by a great highway, to give drink to the weary pilgrims who pass by--but should plant so many lovely trees and flowers about the fountain as to hide it from the eyes of those whom it was designed to refresh. That is the danger when men use the wisdom of this world in preaching the gospel; the perishing ones who listen are too often charmed by the beautiful flowers of rhetoric or poetry or science with which the cross is ornamented, and fail to see the cross itself!

The story is familiar of the artist who had painted his picture of the Last Supper, and then called his friends to look at it. He had tried to make the Master's face the central object of attraction, and was pained to hear his friends praise this and that subordinate feature in the picture, while they did not speak of the Blessed Face. Taking his brush he erased from the canvas the features that had won the beholders, that nothing might keep any eye from the Savior himself. Those of us who teach and preach need to learn this lesson well, lest in our desire to make our lessons and sermons attractive, we hide the Redeemer and the cross which we desire all to see.

"The preaching of the cross is to those who perish, foolishness." There is nothing grand or noble about this way of salvation, to proud human wisdom. In the gospel, men have no chance to display their own power or wealth or skill. If heaven could be gotten by philosophical or scientific research, or won in battle by brave deeds, or achieved by power, or bought with money--the world would have been far readier to accept it. The very simplicity of the gospel makes it appear foolishness to the world's wise men; then its ignominy adds to the impression.

What makes it all the sadder, is that it is to perishing souls, the cross seems foolishness. If it were to some unfallen race, it would not matter so much; but here it leads the lost to reject the only way of salvation that ever has been or will be offered to them. It is as if starving men were to refuse bread, because it was not offered in dainty forms on delicate plates; or, as if drowning men were to reject rescue, because the lifeboat was not decorated in an artistic way, or was rowed by rough, weather beaten sailors, and not by kid-gloved gentlemen. Surely the "foolishness" is not in the gospel--but in the rejecters.

"But unto us who are saved--it is the power of God" Naaman first scorned the idea of washing in Jordan to be healed of leprosy; it was foolishness to him. Afterwards, however, he found this washing "the power of God"--that is, being God's appointed way, God used it to work a cure. The sprinkling of a lamb's blood on the doorpost seemed a foolish thing to do, yet it was God's way, and it became the power of God in saving from death the first born of a nation.

The gospel way of salvation seems foolishness to proud human wisdom--but to those who accept it, it proves to have in it all the power of God, by which lost souls are forgiven, renewed, lifted up to life and saved eternally. God does not present his blessings in forms to attract worldly eyes. They often appear to such unlovely, undesirable. But when they are once accepted, their beauty and worth appear.

"Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?" We need only to run our eyes over the history of the world to see that this is true. Wise men have been doing their best for ages--but what have they accomplished to bless mankind? They have discovered no way of salvation. With all their philosophies they have failed to make men any better. The days when mere human wisdom had reached its highest achievements, the days of the glory of ancient Greece and Rome, saw the world at its worst, morally. All that boasted wisdom, God has shown to be only foolishness. The gospel light proves all the world's philosophies and systems of religion, to be utter folly. The history of human science is full also of illustration. Men have announced discovery after discovery and theory after theory, only to have them swept away by the discoveries and theories of the next generation. The history of the progress of the natural sciences would furnish a splendid commentary on this verse.

"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." God gave men a chance to know him, and to find out the way to him. He gave them four thousand years for their wisdom to do its best. But at the end of that time they had not brought the world to God. Then he revealed his way. The cross was set up, and Jesus died upon it. Then the disciples were sent out to tell men of this way. Human wisdom was altogether ignored. Instead of great philosophers, a few humble men, fishermen and others were appointed to do the preaching. Instead of teaching systems of worldly philosophy, they were to go and tell the simple story of the cross, and tell it, too, not in dress of human wisdom--but in simple words that would not hide the cross itself. And by this men were to be saved; not merely instructed, or refined, or cultured--but saved, lifted up out of condemnation, made children of God and heirs of heaven, transformed into Christ's likeness, and exalted to glory.

"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." It is not any wise, mighty or noble are called--but not many. Lady Huntingdon thanked God for this one letter m, because it told her she was not excluded by her rank; not many noble are found among the called--but there are some, showing that if they will only accept of Christ crucified, the highest in rank will be saved.

"God has chosen the foolish things . . . the weak things . . . base things . . . the despised things . . . that no flesh should boast in his presence." God has chosen to build up his spiritual kingdom without calling in the aid of the world's wise men.

Macaulay tells of a stained-glass window in a cathedral, made by an apprentice from pieces of glass which had been rejected and thrown away as unfit to be used, and yet when it was finished it was the finest window in all the splendid building. So God is building his spiritual kingdom from materials which the world's wisdom and skill reject and refuse to use; yet when it is completed it will far outshine the greatest kingdoms ever reared on this earth.

The reason why human power and skill are so ignored in God's work--is so that no flesh should boast before God. That is, the work of redemption is altogether a divine work; there is no place in it for any human part; there is nothing left for human hands to do. We are saved by grace, entirely by grace. All the glory of salvation must be given to God. The wisest man the world ever saw, if saved, must be saved altogether through the favor and mercy of God. So of the mightiest; so of the noblest in rank. There is only one way of salvation, and that is by the crucified Christ, and the salvation must be received by faith as a free gift, unmerited.

"Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God--that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption." We are nothing in ourselves, and all the blessings that become ours when we are saved--come from Christ.

His wisdom becomes ours, as we receive his Spirit and learn of him through his Word. His treasures of wisdom are put so freely at our hand that we are told if we lack wisdom--we have only to ask of him in faith. We ought never to act foolishly--when we have such a promise. His wisdom is not like the worlds; the maxims of the world are often very foolish in God's sight.

Then we have no righteousness of our own. Our best moralities are only filthy rags. Our holiest deeds are unclean. Wash as we may in the purest water, we shall still be vile before God. We need Christ's righteousness, and he becomes righteousness to us. This he does in two ways. By his atonement he made merit for us, and thus our standing in law before God is made right. This is justification. Then by his Spirit and Word he renews us and makes us righteous in heart and character. This is sanctification.

All our redemption is from Christ; that is, until the work of redemption is completed in glory it--is all Christ's work, and every blessing comes from him. At the end, when we shall stand before his throne, with white robes and palms and crowns--it will be found that it is all of Christ. Nothing will be our own! "Therefore, as it is written: "Let him who boasts--boast in the Lord." 1 Corinthians 1:31

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