

Text: I Corinthians 1:17-19
Title: “The Way of the Cross”

INTRODUCTION

Open your Bibles with me to I Corinthians 1:17-19. Growing up ... that’s the title I’ve given to the teachings of I Corinthians. We grow as we come to understand “the way of the Cross.” Read vv.17-19

There’s probably no more recognizable symbol of Christianity than the Cross. Most every church will have at least one cross. We have a cross on the top of our steeple. People wear it as jewelry around their necks. We might have it displayed in our homes. You see it hanging on the rear view mirror of cars. People even have it tattooed on their bodies.

The fact is, however, we look at the Cross differently in the 21st century than they did in the 1st century.

For people in NT days, the Cross was not a decoration. It was a horrible symbol. To have displayed it the way we display it today would have caused people to shudder. The Cross was an instrument of capital punishment like an electric chair, only more gruesome and humiliating. Suppose we had an electric chair mounted on our steeple. Wouldn't it be strange to walk up to somebody who had an a 14-carot gold electric chair hanging on a chain around their neck? Sure it would. But that would be much closer to the meaning the cross had in the minds of people in the 1st century.

What I want to happen over the next few weeks is for us to get closer to the real meaning of the Cross ... “The Way of the Cross.” You see the “way of the Cross” is God’s way to bring about deep spiritual change.

Our church’s vision statement says that we want to see God bring about deep spiritual change. Well, we better understand how God does that ... it’s by the way of the Cross.

Now the first thing we see is ...

1. THE ASSIGNMENT (v.17 – “preach the gospel”)

We talked about this last week.

1 Corinthians 1:17 - For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

Paul said, in essence, “My calling was to make sure you got the Gospel right.” You see, if we’re wrong on the Gospel, we will be wrong on just about everything else in the Christian faith. If we’re right on the Gospel, it leads the way to the right understanding of just about any other doctrine or teaching.

So the assignment for Paul, and for the church today, is to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Gospel. But we are not to fulfill this assignment in just any way we want. For we could share the Gospel in a way that would actually empty the cross and make it nothing.

v.17 – “preach the gospel - not with words of human wisdom...”

“Words of human wisdom” means anything we rely on to bring about change in a person or situation that does not include the Lord and “the way of the Cross.” People always try to figure out how to make life work without God or without the Word of God.

Obviously, not all wisdom is a detriment to the Gospel. The book of James talks about the difference between the wisdom from heaven, and the wisdom that is from this world ... God’s wisdom versus human wisdom.

But what is spoken of here is wisdom that comes through revelation from God, not wisdom that comes through the opinions of man. It is God’s answer the question, “What makes life work.”

ILLUSTRATION – Chad Allen is the star in the recent motion picture, “The End of the Spear.” This is a movie about a powerful story involving the martyrdom of some Christian missionaries, including Nate Saint and Jim Elliot back in the 1950’s. There’s been a controversy swirling around this film, which is produced by a Christian organization, because of the choice of Chad Allen for the leading role as Nate Saint. And I use this, because Chad Allen’s philosophy about what makes life work for him is an example of what the Bible calls “words of human wisdom.”

In a recent interview on *Larry King Live* this is what Chad Allen, who also happens to be a gay activist, said about his “religion”: “I have a deep relationship with God of my understanding. It's very powerful, and it's taken its own shape and form. And I am very much at peace in the knowledge that in my heart God created this beautiful expression of my love (homosexuality).” He continued: “These days I judge all of my actions by my relationship with God of my understanding. It is a deep-founded, faith-based belief in God based upon the work that I've done growing up as a Catholic boy and then reaching out to Buddhist philosophy, to Hindu philosophy, to Native American beliefs and finally as I got through my course with addiction and alcoholism and finding *a higher power that worked for me.*”

Those are “words of human wisdom.”

v.17b - not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

These “words of human wisdom” can easily get mixed in to people’s religion. That’s what Paul was saying: “When I preach I want to be careful not to give you my opinion about what makes life work, but rather I want you to see ‘the way of the Cross’ ... God’s revelation of what really makes life work.”

So what is the way of the Cross I’ve been talking about?

2. THE MESSAGE (v.18 – “the message of the cross”)

1 Corinthians 1:18 - 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.

And this message of the cross is literally the “word” of the Cross. It is the *logos*, the word used in other places to describe all of the revelation of God in Scripture. So there’s a sense in which when Paul is talking about the “message of the Cross,” he is really referring to the wisdom of God that is found in all of the Word of God. Even the OT contains the groundwork and the history of God’s great plan of redemption which culminated in the Cross.

“The message of the cross” is another way of saying “the Gospel.” Now obviously, the Gospel includes more than just the message of the Cross. The resurrection of Jesus is also an important part of the Gospel. And Paul will get to that later in I Corinthians. But the message of the cross was particularly needed in Corinth, as it is needed in our American churches, because the word of the cross is the way to deep spiritual change.

Now the “message of the cross” includes:

- **The historical fact of the Cross**

And we must be careful to accurately communicate the historical facts of the Gospel. The historical facts are: God became a human being in the Person of Jesus Christ. Christ was crucified and raised in order to provide for man’s forgiveness of sin and entrance into heaven for eternity.

But the “message of the Cross” is more than just the historical facts. It also includes...

- **The spiritual force of the Cross**

That God/Man, Jesus Christ, died on a Roman instrument of torture, like a common criminal, but in doing so determined the destiny of every person who has ever lived. This plan leaves no room for man’s goodness, because our righteousness is as filthy rags. It condemns our pride and our attainment.

This is a radical force. What a strange way for God to change the world. But “the way of the Cross” is the only way that man’s sins and God’s holiness could be reconciled. Only the Cross and the resurrection of Christ have the power, the force, to overcome that grave problem.

So we have to be clear when we communicate the message of the Cross. Because of its force, its power, it doesn’t have to be “packaged” with words of human wisdom.

3. THE RESPONSES (v.18 – “foolishness ... power”)

You see, you and I, as sinful humans, are on a collision course with God, just like the two members of the cross (the horizontal collides with the vertical). And the force of that collision shatters all of

our righteousness. The Cross is basically God saying, “You’re righteousness is not enough to save you. My righteous Son will die for your sins to pay the price.”

People respond in different ways when they get to that intersection.

1 Corinthians 1:18 - 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.

A straightforward preaching of the message of the Gospel will be met by two different responses:

- **Foolishness to those who are perishing**

“Foolishness” is the word from which we get our word “moron.” Some people hear the message of the Cross and say, “That stupid. That’s dumb.” And because of that they are “perishing.” They’re perishing because they will not listen to answers that don’t come from human sources.

“Perishing” is an interesting way to describe a person without Christ. They are already perishing. That is, they are already on the road to eternal destruction. One day that journey will reach its destiny in hell, but they’re already on the road. And only the power of God can interrupt that awful chain of events.

ILLUSTRATION – All over Europe and the Middle East there have been tremendous riots over the depicting of Mohammed in a series of Danish cartoons. The reason this was so controversial to many Muslims is a perfect example of the difference between the wisdom of humans found in religions like Islam, and the wisdom of God found in the message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

For Mohammed to make life work for his followers, he must be honored. For Jesus to make life work for His followers, He must be insulted and die. If Christ had not been mistreated as we see Him being mistreated in the Gospels, redemption would have never happened. For Jesus to accomplish the work of redemption required that He experience the shameful treatment of the crucifixion. The Bible says that He was despised and rejected by men. People would hide their faces from Him.

Jesus endured not just mockery in a cartoon. He endured unbelievable suffering at the hands of His enemies. And He never tried to defend Himself. Even when one of His disciples tried to come to His rescue with a sword, He held him back.

Now Mohammed would have never been treated like this. In fact, the Muslims do not believe that Jesus was treated like this. The message of the Cross is foolishness to them. They say the Bible is wrong at this point, and that Allah saved Jesus from crucifixion. Some Muslims even boast, “We honor Jesus more than you Christians do. We refuse to believe that God would permit him to suffer death on the cross.”

And there you see the difference between the wisdom of men and the wisdom of God displayed in the Cross. Jesus had to endure the suffering of the Cross because that was God's way of dealing with man's sin problem.

I hate to see the name and character of my Lord drug through the muck by the media or by the entertainment industry. But the answer is not for me to do what the Muslims have done with the caricatures of Mohammed, but rather to say, "You know what, people treated Jesus just like this when they crucified Him. And guess what? Jesus endured that suffering because He loves you."

That message is foolishness to people who are perishing, but it is ...

- **Power to those who are saved**

Those of us who are being saved know better. We know that "the way of the Cross" is the only power sufficient to save us, and to keep us saved.

Now all of this is built upon ...

4. THE PROMISE (v.19 – "It is written...")

v.19 - "It is written..." = lit. "it stands permanently written."

And Paul goes on to quote the word of the Lord through the prophet Isaiah. This reference connects us back to a time when the people of God were not relying on God's power, but upon their own wisdom.

1 Corinthians 1:19 - For it is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate."

This is the promise of God: man's wisdom will fail. God's wisdom will prevail. This prophecy and promise will be ultimately fulfilled in the last days when, at the return of Christ, God will sweep away all the objections and plans that humans in their wisdom have devised to make life work.

But there's a very real application in this promise for us today.

CONCLUSION

We are all inclined to try to solve our own problems and fight our own battles in our own strength. The message of the Cross is not just the promise that God has provided a way other than human solutions to solve our sin problem. It is the signal to us that the way of the Cross is the only way to make life work at all.

You can look at God's offer of eternal life, the full and meaningful life, and think: "This can't work. You mean, I just trust God? There's got to be more to it than that."

Only the way of the Cross can lead to real, lasting, deep spiritual change.