

# The Scandalon

## 1 Corinthians 1:18-25

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You might be doing today what a lot of people are doing in America, looking for answers. The uncertainty of an election year and the recent financial turmoil has a lot of people unnerved. What's going to happen? What does all this mean? Who can I trust? It is essentially a search for wisdom. Voting wisdom. Financial wisdom. Health wisdom. Life wisdom. And asking ultimate questions like, *Who am I? Why am I here? What happens to me when I die?* These are the big questions and people from every age have sought answers to them. Those who offer answers quickly become the gurus and the celebrities. In our day, the answer people are politicians, authors, talk show hosts, academics and Hollywood. When they talk, people listen.

In the culture of the New Testament, the answer people were the philosophers and religious leaders. When they talked, people listened. The philosophical epicenter of the ancient world was Greece. The three most famous ancient philosophers were all Greek – Plato, Socrates, and Aristotle. The Greeks were really smart. And all the Greeks here said, *Amen*.

The pursuit of wisdom was a national passion. You can hear it in the word philosophy. *Philos* is the Greek word for love. *Sophia* is the word for wisdom. Philosophy is the love of wisdom. The Greeks not only loved wisdom, their national identity was wrapped up in it. Today, Germans are known for their cars and beer. Swiss are known for their knives and watches. The Dutch are known for their good looks and humility. The Greeks were known the world over for their love for speeches and debates and philosophizing about everything. Two important words to the Greeks were ***Sophia*** and ***Logos***. Wisdom and Word. What they said and how they said it. Corinth worshipped both. They loved wisdom, but they deeply admired an eloquent speaker of wisdom.

One writer describes the scene in a Greek city like Corinth this way, *"You might hear many poor wretches of sophists, shouting and abusing each other, and their disciples, as they call them, squabbling; and many writers of books reading their stupid compositions, and many poets singing their poems, and many jugglers exhibiting their marvels, and many soothsayers giving the meaning of prodigies, and 10,000 rhetoricians twisting lawsuits. The Greeks were intoxicated with fine words.* (William Barclay). Walking down a Greek city street was like listening to all the stations on the radio dial at once. A cacophony of words. Words and more words.

First century writer Dio Chrysostom said of Greek wise men, *They croak like frogs in a marsh; they are the most wretched of men, because, though ignorant, they think themselves wise; they are like peacocks, showing off their reputation and the number of their pupils as peacocks do their tails.*

Do you get the picture? The Greeks became obsessed with style over substance. Whoever was the most eloquent drew the biggest following. Last week Pastor Jim taught on 1 Corinthians 1:10-17. Paul said that you Corinthian Christians are being Corinthian in the church. You're following men! Did they die for you? The key verse is 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.* Anything that exalts man diminishes the glory of the cross. Paul explains why now...

*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. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. (1 Corinthians 1:18-25)*

It's easy to hear the repeated theme – word and wisdom – the word and wisdom of man which lead to nothing and the word and wisdom of God through the cross that produces salvation.

### **The Apparent Nonsense of the Cross (Verse 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.*

This "word" (logos) of the cross seems like folly or nonsense to the world. It's not the word "cross" itself, but the cross as symbol of the gospel and all the doctrines that flow from it including the holiness of God, the sinfulness of man, man's need of salvation, Christ's atoning death, salvation by faith alone, judgment, and eternal life. The cross symbolizes the essentials of Christianity. It is folly to those who are perishing. Note that there are two categories of people – those who are "perishing" and those who "are being saved." To the one, the message of the cross is madness and nonsense. To the other, it is the power of God.

How true. We saw this in the video clip we played. The debate is a snapshot of what happens when Christian teaching collides with our secular culture. Some in the crowd passionately believed that Jesus is the Savior and the only way. Others passionately believed this simply cannot be the case. It sounds crazy and unfair and confusing. To some it is wisdom and the gospel. To some it is folly.

What makes the difference? Look ahead to verse 23, *but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, **but to those who are called**, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.* (Verses 23-24, emphasis added)

The difference between those who consider the cross silly and are perishing and those who see in it the wisdom of God and the way of salvation is the effectual call of God. The call of God is a spiritual summons whereby God speaks through the gospel to the soul and calls it to life and faith. Without God's call and initiative in our hearts, we would never believe. The call is personal, powerful, and always produces faith. The gospel used to seem like lunacy but then God calls us and there is an awakening within and it starts making sense. What has happened? God has summoned and now it all begins to not only make sense, but it becomes the most wonderful thing we have ever heard. He died for me! Wow!

Think of it in your own life. Now maybe you grew up in a Christian home and received Christ as Savior at a young age so your memories are fuzzy. But if you came to Christ later in life, do you remember hearing at Christmas and Easter about Jesus? Did you ever sing, *Hark the herald angels sing, glory to the newborn king*? And it just passed right over your head? Or maybe you had a family member who shared this with you and you just could not get why

they were so passionate about it? You could explain the gospel, but it made not a whit of difference whatsoever in your life. You might even be here today in that very condition wondering what all the fuss is about. Where does this transformation come from? Not from us. It comes from God who whispers to the human heart and draws us to Himself through faith in the cross. It's a God thing. *So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy.* (Romans 9:16)

This explains why verse 18 says the gospel produces two effects and two groups. To some it sounds like complete nonsense but to those who are called it is real and life changing wisdom. So there are two groups of people – those that are perishing and those that are being saved. Which one are you in? Paul gives three reasons why this is the case.

### **God is demolishing fallen human wisdom (Verse 19)**

Paul quotes Isaiah 29:14 where God promises to demolish the wisdom of man. Why quote that here? To show that God's plan all along has been to destroy man's attempts to reason his way to God. Man tries. Religion is man's attempt. Philosophy is man's method. Pride in man's accomplishment is the result. To this God says, *I will destroy the wisdom of the wise*. The wisest of men cannot reason or rationalize his way to God. When Adam and Eve led humanity into sin, our minds were negatively transformed as well. From that time on, our thinking is fundamentally flawed and doesn't take us where we want to go. We want to get to God but our minds don't work right anymore. We construct ideologies and search for meaning but they just don't work. The Greek philosophers had lots of theories – hedonism, stoicism, Platonism, Cynicism and others. One replaced the other and on and on it went.

It's still true today. We live in what is called a postmodern world, which has concluded that truth is subjective and defined any way you want. There is a deity if you believe there is a deity. We descended from worms and apes. Meaning comes from money, sex, and power. Guess what! Just like all the old philosophies, our present one doesn't work either! What do I mean? How well did it work when terrorists flew planes into buildings? How well has it worked while the stock market tanked? Mass hysteria. Paul's question in verse 20 fits great this week, Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater who can explain and solve the dilemma of the human condition? Teachers come and go and their apparent wisdom dies with them. It's like a blind man looking in a dark room for a black cat that isn't there. That's where human wisdom leads us. Despair. Fear. Emptiness.

Along comes God and He calls us through the gospel, let me tell you what real wisdom is, the Savior of the world died on a cross and all who believe in Him will be saved. What is the response in the world? What? We don't understand! That sounds like nonsense. That doesn't sound fair! That sounds too exclusive! A loving God wouldn't do it that way. That doesn't go along with our way of thinking! That is foolish!

I recently read a short story by H.G. Wells entitled *The Country of the Blind*. (H.G. Wells, *The Complete Stories of H.G. Wells*, ed. John Hammond (London: Phoenix, 1998), pp. 629-648). It tells the story of a man who happens upon a remote and cut off tribe of people who fourteen generations before had lost their sight. When it first happened, they knew they were blind and longed to see again. Over time and generations, the concept of sight and a visual world was also lost so that they were blind but didn't know it nor did they even conceive of a visual world. The traveler tried to explain to them what it was to "see." He would try to show them by seeing people before they arrived. He tried to explain reality to them. What was their response? They thought he was an idiot. They said he didn't know anything. They had not seen for so long that the idea of seeing was foolishness to them.

That's us. We're the villagers. We haven't seen and understood reality rightly since the Fall. God speaks His truth to us and in our spiritual blindness we think He's the crazy one and His words are folly. But in reality, who gets it and who doesn't?

Christian, doesn't this explain people that you care for in your life? You share the gospel with them and talk about new life in Christ and how this comes by believing. They look at you like you're from Mars and argue for some other way.

*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. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles... (Verses 21-23, emphasis added)*

### **Salvation by faith in a crucified Savior is counterintuitive to us**

The gospel is a stumbling block when you are blind. The Greek word for "stumbling block" is *scandalon* defined as *that which gives offense or causes revulsion, that which arouses opposition, an object of anger or disapproval.* (BAG)

We get the word scandalous from it. The cross is offensive to human way of thinking and it rubs the natural man the wrong way because it requires us to do the exact opposite of what man and his pride thinks he needs to do.

Let me illustrate this with a Chinese finger trap. You put one finger in each end and when you try to pull them out again, you're stuck. You can't get out. Do you know how to get out of a Chinese finger trap? You push your finger *in* so that you can pull your finger *out*. *The way out is the way in.* That's counterintuitive. Here are some reasons that believing in Jesus is counterintuitive...

### **Contrary to human religion (Verse 22)**

Every religion man comes up with has something to do with man making his way to God. Paul points out in verse 22 that the Jews demanded a *sign*. They wanted to see something that out of their wisdom they could judge as true. You may recall the Jews asking Jesus repeatedly for a sign or a miracle. They wanted to make their own judgment and all the religions of the world do the same. They magnify in some way man's ability to do or think or earn his way to God or Allah or Nirvana or Jehovah or whatever. Man's kind of religion always ends up worshipping man in some way. Christ crucified rubs man the wrong way.

### **Contrary to human thinking (Verse 22)**

Paul says in verse 22 that the Greeks seek *wisdom*. They want to rationalize their way to God. In the end, who gets the glory if man's wisdom leads him to God? Man does. Who gets the glory if human eloquence and human words lead man to God? Man does.

To the Greeks in the Roman Empire, if someone was crucified he was the worst of criminals. A crucified Savior? How could God save mankind by something so ugly and weak and despised as a Roman cross? That doesn't jive with our way of thinking. The Jews want power and in the cross they get weakness. The Greeks want wisdom, but in the cross they get apparent folly.

## Contrary to human pride and self-sufficiency

This is the big one. The human heart does not want to do what the gospel requires – humble itself. All the major objections to Christianity in some way stem from this fundamental flaw within us. List key doctrines and the objections will come; the atonement is too bloody and predestination seems unfair and God saving some and not everyone is too exclusive and eternal punishment in hell isn't right and a loving God wouldn't do it this way.

The gospel rubs the modern man or woman the wrong way and since we are the judge of the way it ought to be, we simply call it ridiculous. There is a movie out right now that says exactly that. *Religulous!* Religion is ridiculous to Bill Maher for all the same reasons Paul explains here. It strikes our sensibilities the wrong way because it elevates God and humbles us and we don't like that. The gospel is a scandal. It always has been. It always will be. We have to admit that....

### God is wiser than us (Verse 25)

*For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.*

The key to understanding this passage is adding the word "apparent." God's apparent foolishness in the cross is actually the eternal wisdom of God. Man's apparent wisdom is actually foolishness. So things are not as they appear. Take all the talking points of all the philosophers and talk show hosts and writers and columnists and politicians and statesmen and professors and teachers. Take all the things they've ever said and pile them up. The smallest thought that God has ever had eclipses all the wisdom man has ever accumulated. *For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.* (Isaiah 55:8-9)

God's Word is like the traveler to the *Country of the Blind* and the secret to the Chinese finger trap. It is telling us what is wise and what is folly. It is also calling us to wonder and worship. Do you realize that were it not for God's gracious calling in our lives, we would still be blind and solidly in the category of "those who are perishing" in verse 18? The right response of a recipient of grace is not pride but wonder and worship. There is nothing here for anyone to take pride in. The Corinthian Christians were finding their identity in eloquent speakers and teachers in the church. What? Who died for us? Who called us? God did. Let's praise Him!

Should you be here and the cross feels like its rubbing you the wrong way and you wonder what all the fuss is about, perhaps today you might realize why you feel the way you do. Maybe God will use that discovery to lead you to do what is counterintuitive for all of us, humble yourself and put your faith in Jesus as Savior and Lord. Our pride begs us not to but God's call is stronger than our pride. It's only when we realize we can't do it that we consider the possibility that He can. Not only can He, verse 21 says He "delights" to. In other words, He wants to and if you'll surrender in faith to Him and a crucified Christ, He will.

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