



# 1 Corinthians (2013) - Lesson 1B

## Chapter 1:17-24

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- Last week, we opened the letter to Corinth
  - Paul told the church he had heard troubling news
    - They were one Body, equally blessed and equally gifted
      - But they were dividing themselves in harmful ways
    - Paul tells them that by their faith in Jesus Christ, they would all be found blameless in the day of our Lord's coming
      - But they were acting as if a human affiliation was the key to God's favor
  - And in particular, they were trying to make something of who lead them to the Lord
    - Paul, Apollos, Peter...
    - Each evangelist had his respective following
    - Yet there were still some who said they were of Christ, not of a man
  - So Paul admonishes the church for such immaturity and pride
    - This is the earliest celebrity culture in the church
    - Taking our attention off Jesus and redirecting it to the men and women God calls to serve us
    - It's a type of idol – something of the creation turned into a focus of our worship
- Pastor Chuck Colson is no stranger to celebrity
  - He served time in prison as a result of the Watergate scandal
    - While in prison he became a Christian and a pastor who works in prison ministries
    - He is also a teacher and writer
    - And he wrote this about celebrity in the church

**The cult of celebrity has seeped into our sanctuaries. Like the culture around us, churches too often reward the sizzle and not the steak. Too many people in the pews would rather have a celebrity in the pulpit instead of a good shepherd of souls, a good servant leader.**

**Not surprisingly, some pastors, certainly not the majority, become addicted to all the adulation and then try to live up to the idol we have made of them. Or worse, all the celebrity worship can make pastors feel they are above criticism and accountability. Their work for the Lord turns toxic. Like many pop celebrities, they can focus ultimately on self-aggrandizement, not on serving others.**

**- [Chuck Colson](#)**

- Colson's words ring true in our ears and in our experience
  - Paul is worried about the very same thing as he writes to this young church
    - In Chapter 1 Paul reflected that he hadn't baptized many of the church

**1Cor. 1:14 I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius,  
1Cor. 1:15 so that no one would say you were baptized in my name.**

- ◦ Paul didn't want to do anything to feed the cult of celebrity in this church
- Paul was so determined to keep the church's gaze squarely on Jesus Christ that he was thankful that he didn't baptize them
- And he was grateful that this was the case
- Remember Paul's example anytime you happen to receive someone's thanks or praise for your service in the body of Christ
  - Receiving thanks and encouraging words from those we serve is fine
  - And we often need to hear how people have been blessed by our efforts, so we may have strength to continue on
  - But be like Paul, always vigilant to avoid drawing someone's attention and praise away from the Lord
- But Paul is just getting warmed up
  - He knows these bad behaviors are symptoms of a greater problem
    - One that's being fanned by false teachers who have selfish, ungodly motives
    - So we start again in v.17

**1Cor. 1:17 For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not in cleverness of speech, so that the cross of Christ would not be made void.**

- Paul explains his happiness at not baptizing many in the church
  - He declares that he wasn't sent by Jesus to baptize but to preach the gospel
    - Paul is speaking with a sense of sarcasm and exaggeration to make a point
      - Clearly baptizing new believers is an important and necessary function of any minister of the gospel
      - And no doubt Paul performed this sacrament many times throughout his ministry
    - So Paul wasn't denying the importance of baptizing
  - But in a comparison between baptism and preaching the gospel, there is no comparison
    - Baptizing believers is something that depends on the gospel
      - It's a step of obedience and recognition
    - But it means nothing in the absence of true faith
      - And faith depends on a presentation of the gospel
      - A wedding reception is a wonderful thing, but it means nothing without the wedding
  - God has designed the process of baptism so that we must work with another in the faith to obey Christ's command (you cannot baptize yourself)

- And this fact naturally leads us to feel a spiritual connection with the person who brings us under the water
  - But Paul says he wasn't commissioned by Christ to seek to develop these kinds of bonds...that wasn't the point
    - Paul was called to lay the foundation that makes baptism possible
    - Paul was called to preach the gospel of Christ
- But preaching the gospel can create another opportunity for a person like Paul to gain followers
  - Because in the same way that someone might follow a man because he baptized them, one might become attached to the man who brings the Gospel
    - Because beautiful are the feet that bring good news, as the Bible says
    - We often remember who preached the Gospel in the moment we first believed
    - And it's easy for us to develop a soft spot in our hearts for that person
      - Because they played an important role in our eternity, or so we assume
  - But while it is true that baptism is a moment when one person helps another spiritually, preaching the Gospel is properly understood as the moment when the Lord helped us spiritually
    - And Paul wanted the church to be utterly clear on the fact that no man deserved credit for their faith, not even Paul
    - In fact, Paul says the Lord has crafted the message of the Gospel in such a way that no human being will ever be able to claim that their salvation was due to the oratory power of another man
- In the second half of v.17 Paul says he did not arrive with clever words
  - In the original Greek Paul says didn't come in *sophia logos*
    - The Greek word *sophia* means human wisdom
      - We get sophistry from this word, which means clever speech intended to deceive
    - And of course the Greek word *logos* means the spoken word
  - So Paul says his preaching of the Gospel led to faith in the men and women of Corinth
    - But the message didn't succeed because Paul had convincing arguments
      - Paul wasn't crafty in his arguments
      - He didn't rely on perfect illustrations, poignant stories, cute jokes
      - He didn't rationalize away their objections
    - He simply presented the truth of Jesus Christ living, dying and resurrecting
  - So those who came to faith under Paul's preaching couldn't make the argument that they are "of Paul" because Paul was such a good orator
    - If they did, they were giving Paul credit for something that Paul simply didn't do
    - No one in Corinth stood in the grace of Christ because Paul convinced them into that understanding, though it may have appeared to some to be the case

- The reality was something else
- Paul says that were his success in preaching the Gospel dependent on his skill as a public speaker, then that would have made the cross of Christ void
  - This is a theologically important verse, and there are few more important verses in the New Testament
    - Paul teaches we are saved by the word of the cross of Christ
    - What is this word of the cross?
  - Simply put, it is the Gospel message
    - The message that one day in history, the Creator of all things put Himself on a cross to die in your place
    - His death was a payment for our sins
    - And nothing else but His payment can save you for the judgment that comes for all of us
      - Either we accept the cross of Christ or eternal judgment
  - If it were possible that something else could reconcile us to God, then the cross would be made void
    - To make something void is to declare it empty, without effect, untrue
    - As an evangelist, Paul would render the word of the cross void if he came seeking converts for Christ with a message other than the Gospel
      - If Paul substituted a more appealing presentation so as to be more persuasive
      - Perhaps employed court jesters to make the crowd laugh, or offered to make them rich or to heal them of every disease
      - Perhaps Paul relied on effective marketing methods to draw the most receptive crowds
      - If Paul did anything to create response rather than delivering the message that saves, he would have been rendering the cross empty, unnecessary, void
- And as the recipients of grace, we can also render the cross void
  - We can attribute our conversion to someone or something other than the saving power of the Gospel message
    - We can claim we heard the right preacher, saw the right drama presentation or movie
    - We received the right Bible tract, belonged to the right denomination, were born to the right family
    - That something in the Creation was the deciding factor in our salvation rather than the Creator alone
  - If it were possible for anything else to bring these people to repentance and to faith in God, then why would the Father have needed to put His Son on the cross?
    - If *any* other way were possible, then He would have made use of it
    - So to suggest that someone was “of Paul” – that is, they were in the church

- because of Paul – was to make the cross of Christ void
  - And Paul says that they were guilty of rewriting history
- More importantly, notice Paul says Christ didn't send him to preach in cleverness of speech
  - Paul was specifically told by the Lord NOT to dress up the presentation
  - Don't come to Corinth with a three-ring circus, a 70-piece orchestra and a laser light show
  - This the Lord's command to us as well
- The Lord has never asked anyone to find a better way to evangelize or share the Gospel
  - He doesn't need our help...we need His
  - And when we get that backwards, we make the cross of Christ void
- To stop prideful men from claiming they were saved by the power of persuasion of the latest evangelistic fad, Paul says the Lord *designed* His Gospel to be a foolish message

**1Cor. 1:18 For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.**

**1Cor. 1:19 For it is written,**

**“I WILL DESTROY THE WISDOM OF THE WISE,  
AND THE CLEVERNESS OF THE CLEVER I WILL SET ASIDE.”**

- In v.18 Paul says that word of the cross (i.e., the Gospel) is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are saved, it is the power of God
  - To understand what Paul is saying, we need to take this statement in parts
    - First, Paul says the word of the cross is foolishness
    - How can the message of Christ's death be considered foolishness?
    - As a believer you've probably never considered the Gospel to be foolish in any way
      - Like all believers, you have embraced it as the most beautiful awesome truth you've ever heard
  - But I want you to try to think of it again in an objective way...here's what the Gospel literally claims
    - A poor, wandering Jewish man who lived 2,000 years ago was God
    - He promises that when you die you can be welcomed into Heaven with Him
    - But after only a few years of walking around Judea, He was convicted as a criminal by Romans, and was executed
  - So our message to the world is that a man who seemed to be powerless to prevent his own death is our solution to death and hell
    - At its core, the message is foolishness
    - And God made it that way
- But then Paul qualifies his statement

- The message of the Gospel is foolishness to some people, but not to everyone
  - The message is foolishness to those who are perishing
  - The phrase “are perishing” is written in the Greek present tense and middle voice, which is a conjugation we don’t have in English
    - Present tense means a continuing action
    - While the middle voice means the subject and the object of the action are one and the same
  - So the one who sees the message of the Gospel as foolishness continues in a state of perishing for as long as they hold this view
    - They are both the subject and the object of the perishing
    - Their unbelief is the cause of their perishing
    - And they are in this state because the message that would save them is too foolish to accept
- So how does anyone break this cycle so as to be saved?
  - Why did God present the message of salvation in such a nonsensical way?
  - Why didn’t He design the message of salvation in a way that was compelling and convincing
  - Something that would appeal to the mind of every person?
- That brings us to the last part of v.18
  - Paul says for the one being saved, the foolish message becomes truth
    - The Greek verb for being saved is in the same voice as the verb for perishing
      - This group is also continuously saved because it has come to accept the truth of the word of the cross
    - When someone comes to accept a foolish message as spiritual truth, we are left with no choice but to credit God Himself with that outcome
    - Their acceptance is evidence of the power of God, Paul says
    - Because self-evidently it didn’t appeal to the wisdom of men
  - And this was always God’s plan from the start
    - Paul quotes from Isaiah 29:14
    - Isaiah declared that God’s marvelous plan to save Israel will come in a way designed to negate the wisdom of men
    - And certainly, wrapping the message of salvation in a foolish message is guaranteed to nullify the wisdom of men
- And in fact, this has happened, according to Paul

**1Cor. 1:20 Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?**

**1Cor. 1:21 For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe.**

**1Cor. 1:22** For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom;  
**1Cor. 1:23** but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness,  
**1Cor. 1:24** but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

- Paul asks the church rhetorically, where are the wise men or the scribe or the debater of Paul's age?
  - What he means is, where are they in their pursuit to discover the truth of God?
    - Did the world's wise men reason their way to the message of salvation?
      - Did they deconstruct the cause of men's sin and misery?
    - Did the scribes come to understand the need for a perfect Messiah to die in their place?
      - Did they search the scriptures and realize Jesus was that Messiah?
    - And did the great orators of Greece discuss among themselves and arrive at the confession of faith necessary for salvation?
      - Did all their words bring their countrymen to the same understanding so that all Corinth could be reconciled to God?
  - No, the people of Greece remained lost and perishing
    - But, oh, not for lacking of searching
    - Greece was famous for seeking truth through philosophy and literature and oration
    - And if it were possible for such pursuits to arrive at spiritual truth, then certainly Greece would have succeeded
- But Paul asks where did their efforts lead the people of Corinth? Nowhere
  - The wisdom in the world has not arrived at a knowledge of God
    - And as a result, the world has substituted other gods to fill the void left by their inability to find the true God
    - For Paul says in v.21 that God was well-pleased to remain outside the reach of men who searched by their own power
  - And in the meantime, the Lord chose to reveal Himself to men through a foolish message which they accepted by God's power
    - And this has always been God's plan: to craft a message of salvation that could not be believed apart from God's power to make it believable
    - So that when we believe, all the glory belongs to the Lord
  - No man may share the limelight with the Lord
    - For if we're honest with ourselves, we will admit that the Gospel sounded a bit silly and unimpressive to our flesh, at least at first
    - We hesitated to accept it; we might have even been a little embarrassed when we did accept it
      - We may have even wondered if we were just going along with what



everyone expected

- Our parents, our spouse, our friends
  - But still the message rung true, and over time the truth of it grew stronger
  - And when we were baptized, we knew we had made a statement with our life
    - But did we ever stop to ask how we arrived in that place?
    - Paul's answer is simple: the power of God
- Paul says the world can't find God in their own power, because they will always doubt, always second guess, always reject
  - Jews seek for signs
    - If any people could have been expected to come to an understanding of the Gospel apart from God's power, it would have been the Jewish people
    - The Jews were educated in the truth of the Gospel
    - They knew that a Messiah would come
    - They were given an incredible head start compared to the rest of the world
      - Paul says in Romans 3 that it was a tremendous advantage to be born a Jew in God's plan
    - Nonetheless, it wasn't enough, because even when the Messiah came, they still insisted on signs before believing Jesus' claims
  - And the Greeks (meaning the Gentiles) knew nothing of the coming Messiah
    - So they had no reason to be looking for anything
    - Instead, they confronted every new spiritual theory with skepticism seeking a convincing argument
    - And when Paul came with a foolish message those seeking for wisdom weren't impressed
- And so to a world seeking proof and words of wisdom, God determined to send men out with a message of a convict killed on a Roman cross
  - For the Jew, this became a stumbling block
    - Though they were looking for a Messiah
    - And they followed Jesus for a time in the hope He might be that Messiah
    - But when he landed on a Roman cross, they couldn't reconcile their hopes and expectations with that outcome
  - They couldn't look past Jesus' shameful death on a cross to see God's purpose in this outcome
    - And so they rejected His claims and continued in their perishing
    - The cross became something that stumbled them on the way into the Kingdom
  - And for the Gentile, including the Gentiles of today, the claims of Christianity sound ridiculous
    - They find nothing appealing in a message that demands repentance and submission to the Lord hung on a cross

- So the world mocks the faith of Christians
- But the Lord has designed the Gospel message to result in these responses
  - The message is foolish so that when it makes sense, we credit God
- In v.24 Paul says both Jews and Greek can find what they are seeking in this Gospel
  - To the one seeking miraculous signs of God's power, you will find it in the Gospel
    - You will see the life coming from death
    - You will experience a cold, godless heart coming to know and follow the Lord
    - You'll see sin removed from your life, spiritual and emotional wounds healed, spiritual gifts emerging, prayers answered and more
  - And to the one seeking wisdom and truth, you will find it in the Word made flesh
    - You will come to know the mysteries of God's plan for the creation
    - You'll come to understand the power of sin and the enemy and the greater power of grace, forgiveness and Christ's righteousness
    - You'll see the wisdom that is above all wisdom in the word of God and the marvels of His plan
  - So ironically, the world wants to find God by looking for power and wisdom
    - But God is offering them power and wisdom in the form of a foolish message that appears powerless
    - And only those who are called, Paul says, will receive it
- To the called, the message is power and wisdom, because the Lord brought them to an understanding in it
  - This is the only explanation
    - We cannot say that some were smarter, for it does not depend on wisdom
    - We cannot say that some were more receptive because the message repels all equally
    - And we cannot say that some were presented with the message in a more compelling way, because Paul says cleverness of speech would render the message void
  - Therefore the only explanation for why some believe a foolish message is that God calls them to that faith
    - It is the definition of grace – unmerited favor – that we came to faith in the foolish message of the Gospel