



Dr. Matthew McKellar
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Verses Covered

1 Corinthians 1:18 - 25

Well good morning, church! We're so glad you're here as we've gathered together in this place Good morning, Central. If you have a Bible with you, please take it and turn with me to the first chapter of 1 Corinthians. And while you're turning there, it's a great privilege to be back with you again today. And I want to share with you a slice of my own experience. I grew up in a small town in Northeast Texas and I think you can pretty much describe my upbringing and the environment. If you've ever seen the Andy Griffith show, it was a lot like that. Except my dad wasn't the sheriff in town, but he was a medical doctor; a family practice physician. And I remember when I was just a little guy how I would want to ride with him to church on Sunday night, because I knew that afterwards, he was going to make house calls. I told you this was Andy Griffith. Imagine the doctor coming to your house. But that's what he would do. And we'd make a couple stops after church on Sunday night and I remember carrying, lugging, his big leather doctor bag. I can still remember going into a home and I would watch him as he would assess the situation and ask questions and then he would make a diagnosis and then he would provide a prescription and often some treatment right there on the spot.

Well as we come to 1 Corinthians this morning, I want you to think of Paul as Dr. Paul, the spiritual physician. And while he's not making a face to face visit yet with the church at Corinth, he's writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. And Paul has received reports about contention's and divisions in the church at Corinth. And so as Paul steps into the emergency room of Corinth's crisis, he has both a diagnosis and a prescription for the people in the church at Corinth. The diagnosis; there is a cancer of contention and divisiveness in the church. We might call it a power play where different parties and groups are seeking to have the ascendancy to gain the prominence, to be the celebrities. And that's the problem and it threatens the very life of the church a Corinth. But Paul has a prescription and that prescription, as we see when we come to the latter part of chapter 1, is simply this: Corinthians come back. Come back to the cross. And I think that message echoes down through the corridors of time. I don't care how long you've been a believer. Don't care how long you've known Jesus as Lord and Savior. If you ever think you outgrow the cross, then you need to think again. Come back to the cross.

Would you follow along as I read through God's word? Chapter 1 beginning in verse 18 through 25. This is the word of the Lord.

¹⁸For 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. ¹⁹For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning, I will thwart." ²⁰Where 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? ²¹For 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. ²²For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom; ²³but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to the Jews and folly to the Gentiles, ²⁴but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

Father, thank You for Your word. By Your Spirit teach us, empower us, enable us, to come back again and again and again to the cross for the sake of Jesus. And in His name we pray, amen.

Now to really understand what's going on in 1Corinthians chapter 1 you have to have a little bit of context background. Paul is writing this very pastoral letter to what's been called a troubled and triumphant church. If you'll look in the first nine verses, Paul offers confirmation. These people really know Christ. They've trusted in Christ. And the testimony of their faith is known both near and far. So Paul commends them and he confirms them in their commitment to Christ. But when you come to verses 10 through 17, Paul deals with a contention in the church at Corinth. He writes of divisions. The Greek word there is *schismata* from which we get our word schism. And it seems that in the church at Corinth, there was a personality power play going on. Some people were saying, "Well, you know, I'd really like the style of old Peter, old Cephas, I'm a Cephas man all the way." Other people said, "Man, I just love the eloquence of Apollos. I just can't wait to hear him open up the word. I'm an Apollos man all the way. I've just got to have some Apollos." And still others would say, "You know, Paul, he's the great missionary. He's the great evangelist. I'm a Paul guy all the way." And yet still others, trying to be super-spiritual, would put down the others and say, "Oh, it's not about Peter and it's not about Apollos, it's not about Paul. Well we're the group, we belong to Christ."

Would you look at what Paul does here? He asked a series of rhetorical questions in verses 13 through 16. Here's the first one. "Hey, Corinthians. Is Christ divided? Do you think you can chop Him up and parcel Him out? Maybe give a little bit more of Him to someone who's got this spectacular spiritual gift? Maybe a little less to this person over there? Is that what kind of Christ we have? You are divided the undivided Christ." Second question. "Was Paul crucified for you?" Literally, was I, Paul, crucified in your place?" And of course the answer is, "No." And then the third question. "Were you baptized in Paul's name?" Baptism is a step of identification. We identify with Christ. Paul says, "You weren't, you weren't baptized in my name. You were baptized in the name of Jesus. What's going on here? You people have lost your focus." And that leads to verse 17. Would you look at it? Verse 17, chapter 1.

¹⁷For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, to share the good news, not with words of eloquent wisdom, I'm not trying to impress you with my oratorical skills,

I don't value that over gospel truth, Paul says, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

That's what Paul was concerned with. Whomever you are, wherever you are, wherever you go, what you need to take with you, what you need to have in your mind, what you need to have on your lips, what you need to have in your heart is this fundamental, foundational, rock-solid, clinging, and cherishing of the cross. Now what Paul was going to show us in verses 18 through 25 I can sum up with a statement like this: because the word of the cross demonstrates the supremacy of God's power and wisdom to a dying world, then you ought to depend on it and you ought to declare it with boldness and confidence. That's really Paul's message in the word of the cross. The word of the cross.

Now let's move on and look at verses 18 through 21 and notice what Paul zeroes in on here. The word of the cross, the word of the cross, God demonstrates His wisdom and God demonstrates His strength. First of all, the wisdom idea in verses 18 through 21. The word of the cross, we see here, exposes the futility of human wisdom. Now what kind of wisdom is Paul writing about here? I think he's dealing with the world view, the world view of fallen, sinful people not touched, not transformed by the grace of God. God exposes the futility of human wisdom. Now let's look at this phrase. For the word of the cross. The logos, the revealed truth, this unique communication about the cross. You might call this phrase, the word of the cross, a synonym for the gospel. The unique communication of revealed truth. And what is imbedded in this unique communication of revealed truth is the message of the atoning, sacrificial, vicarious, substitutionary debt of Jesus Christ. That is, Jesus died in somebody's place. He died in your place. He died in my place. The most powerful, the most meaningful, the most supernatural, the most important event in the history of time and eternity. That is the word of the cross.

Now look at what Paul does. He shows us a contrast, doesn't he? This word of the cross is folly. Literally, it is moronic. We might use the term absurd. The word of the cross is absurd, it's foolish, it's moronic to those who are perishing. Notice how Paul states it in his writing. To those presently in the process of perishing, the message of the cross is an absurdity. It is foolishness. Makes no sense. Crazy. Idiotic. Absurd. But in contrast to that, look at the text. But to those who are presently in the process of being saved, and if you put your hope in Jesus, there's a time in the past when you were saved, you're presently in the process of being saved. There's a day coming in the future when you will experience the full benefit of your salvation. Sometimes we use those words; justification, sanctification, glorification. Look at the contrast. The word of the cross, the message of a crucified Christ, dying as a substitute for the sins of human beings is foolish, is moronic, to those who are perishing. But to those who are being saved, it is the power of God. Now I want you to notice what Paul does next. Writing to his ancient office, his ancient audience, he's saying, "Look this idea of people rejecting the cross, treating the cross as if it were absurd, as if it were moronic, it's nothing new. Down through the generations fallen, sinful people have had, as it were, their hands over their eyes, their ears, their fingers in their ears. They don't want to listen. They don't want to hear a word from God and they think anything God says is utterly ridiculous and absurd. To reinforce that idea, Paul quotes from Isaiah, chapter 29, verse 14 to the obstinate, stiff-necked people of Israel. Listen to the full quotation, verses 13 and 14.

¹³Then the Lord said, “Because this people draw near with their words and honor Me with their lip service, but they remove their hearts from Me, and their reverence for Me consists of tradition learned by rote, ¹⁴Therefore behold, I will once again deal marvelously with these people, and the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the discernment of their discerning men shall be concealed.”

Paul marshal's scripture, it stands written, it stands written. God will destroy the so-called wisdom of the wise. He will frustrate the intelligence of the so-called intelligents. Did you see it this last week on Wednesday, one of the most world-renowned scientists, physicist, Stephen Hawking, died. He was 76 years old and he died after living 50+ years with ALS. He occupied important positions. He was a chair in, and endowed chair, an exalted, vaulted academic position at Cambridge. He was a noted Cosmologist and physicist and in that situation, he sought to find a unified theory for physics; how things work, how everything flows together. In an interview a few years ago, he was asked about his belief in God. This is what he said. “Belief in a God who intervenes in the universe to make sure the good guys win or get rewarded in the next life is wishful thinking. It's a fairy tale.” But in that same interview he goes on to ask, “But one cannot help asking the question, ‘Why does the universe exist?’” Isn't that interesting? The wisdom of the world. The wisdom of the world. Look at verse 20. Notice how Paul lumps everybody together. Where is the wise? He's thinking about the Greek. Where is the scribe, the Jew? Where is the debater of this age who delights in taking on the greatest thinkers of the day and debating and cancelling out competing conclusion after competing conclusion? And then notice in verse 21. Paul says it was God's pleasure. It is God's pleasure to use what appears foolish to totally expose the inability of fallen human beings to reach God on their own. I want you to think about it this morning. Why are you sitting here if you know the Lord? And why can you say, “I know the Lord” this morning? The first part of that answer is because God revealed himself to you. We sing it. It's good theology. Oh how I love Jesus because He first loved me. Yes, you had to respond, but God had to first make Himself available and knowable in the person of Jesus Christ. And what Paul is saying is where's the wise man of this age. Where's the scribe, the scholar, the guy who writes it all down and records it. Where's the debater of this age? What answers do they have? For all its brilliance, for all its talk, what does the world have the offer about eternal and ultimate issues? I think you know the answer to that. Oh, we think, you know, we just need more educated people. Why if we just educate people, we teach people to read and write and we get people educated, we will fix the problems in this world. Oh, we just need better government programs. We just need better people in office. Oh, we, we just need these better programs and the world will be a better place. You see, what God does, is take the apparent foolish and absurd thing to expose the utter and true absurdity of human life outside of God. That's what verse 21 is all about. God, God takes pleasure in what appears foolish. He exposes the moronic nature of worldly wisdom. For all of its brilliance, for all of its competing conclusions, for all the time that it spends volleying back and forth the voices of dead men, what does it have to offer? Nothing. Nothing.

Then notice what Paul says, “But God chooses to use the foolishness of what we preach, of what we proclaim to save people.” To save. Look at that word. To save people. To save from what? And here we get into an important element of the power and the message of the cross. You see, it won't work from a Biblical standpoint for me to say to you, “If you're here this morning and you don't know Jesus Christ, I want you to trust Christ because He wants to make your life easy.” Or

“Why don’t you give your life to Christ today because if you just add Him to the pantheon of idols in your life, maybe things will go a little bit better. Just get yourself a little Jesus and life will be better.” Just think of Jesus as that luck charm in your pocket and when you have a real need, pull Him out, and rub on Him a little bit and tell Him that He ought to give you what you want. No. To save, Romans 5:9 says we’re saved from the wrath of God. What is the wrath of God? It’s His settled hostility toward sin. It’s His refusal to compromise with it. It’s His resolve to condemn it. I was listening to a guy talk the other day. He was telling about an instance in which he had a wreck and it was his fault and he hit a guy and he said, “The guy got out of his car and the first words the guy said to him, as he pointed his finger in his direction, were these words, ‘Somebody is going to have to pay for this.’” Well when damage has been done, somebody’s going to have to pay. And the Bible indicates that you and I by our sinful, fallen natures have offended a holy God. Let me tell you something this morning. The biggest problem you have isn’t financial, it isn’t your relationship with co-workers at work, it isn’t your academic progress. The biggest problem you have is that you and I have offended a holy God and He has every right and every reason to banish us to the lowest pit of Hell. And the biggest issue in your life and my life today is how are we related to God. And the Bible says that God delivers us from the wrath of God by means of the Son of God. We sing the song sometimes, Stuart Townend and Keith Getty wrote it, In Christ Alone. You know that line? For on the cross where Jesus died, the wrath of God was satisfied. A couple years back a major denomination here in the United States contacted Keith Getty and Stuart Townend, who wrote that song, they had the copyright to it, and they said, “Look, we want to include your song in our new hymnal that we’re about to publish. But we have some concerns about some of the words in that song.” And through correspondence the committee from this particular denomination said, “We have a problem. We have a problem with that statement; for on the cross where Jesus dies, the wrath of God was satisfied. We’d like to change it; for on the cross where Jesus died, the love of God was magnified.” Townend and Getty said, “Thanks, but no thanks. We’ll not be changing the words to our song.” But you see, today, the wisdom of man says, “Hey all this stuff about Jesus on the cross, this unemployed carpenter from Nazareth bleeding on a cross and somehow that’s the pivotal moment in history and somehow that determines one’s eternal destiny. Man, you guys have to get off of that. That’s absurd. It’s irrelevant. You need to improve that message. You need to dress it up a little bit. You need to make it more palatable.” Stuart Townend and Keith Getty said, “Not going to do it.” But long before them the apostle Paul said, “Not about to do it.” The word of the cross is the power of God and the wisdom of God.

Now Paul’s really getting up his head of steam here as we go into verses 22 through 25, the word of the cross exposes the futility of human wisdom, but notice what else it does. The word of the cross exceeds the force of human strength. Paul’s going to expand and elaborate on those first verses, 18 through 21. Notice the repetition of wisdom and strength; wisdom and strength. Paul says the Jews demand signs. They want the spectacular. Always looking for signs. They’re enamored with the big event. They’re enamored with the celebrity process. I heard somebody a couple of years ago give this definition of a celebrity and I’ve not forgotten it. What is a celebrity? A celebrity is someone who’s known for being known. How about that? A celebrity is somebody who’s known for being known. It may not be an expert, usually isn’t. May not be educated. May not be informed. May not have a clue as to the real ultimate issues in life. But, man, everybody known him or her. The Jews wanted the spectacular. The Greeks, on the other hand, they’re seeking the intellectual. They’re seeking the intellectual. I mean, human nature hasn’t changed

much. That's what our culture wants today. Man we want elaborate discourses. We want dramatic signs. And Paul says, "The word of the cross is what saves." And there's still those voices today that say, "This Jesus thing, you've got to improve it. You've got to dress it up. You've got to make it more palatable to modern hearers." And what's happening today, what was happening in Paul's day, is that people want to substitute divine wisdom for worldly wisdom. They want form over content. We might say they want steak over sizzle. And always at the heart of world wisdom is the quest for self-preservation, self-serving, self-seeking, and self, ultimately, destruction. In Paul's day, as in our day, people are carried away with human eloquence, with mental gymnastics, with the appearance of things. There's so much superficiality that even in evangelical circles it seems that the dominant characteristic is self-promotion. I'm telling you that Paul was not promoting Paul. He was not promoting a particular method of oratory. He was promoting the cross of Jesus Christ. Look at it. Verse 23. But no amount amalgamation of human wisdom and gospel, but we preach Christ, literally having been crucified. Notice what Paul does there. He deals with the historical fact. Jesus Christ, Jesus of Nazareth, was crucified, a criminal's death, a cruel death reserved only for the lowest of the low. And then notice that Paul adds the interpretation, Jesus Christ was crucified for our sins. 1 Corinthians 15:1 through 4.

³For I delivered to you that which is of first importance.

What does the word of God say is of first importance? That Jesus Christ died for our sins. For, in the place of, our sins. He became our substitute according to the scriptures. That's it. Well this message, Paul says, is a stumbling block. Literally it's scandalous to the Jews. I mean, the Jews wanted a powerful Messiah who would cruise into town on a white steed and wield his sword and wipe out the opposition. But instead, they see in this man Jesus, this vulnerable, weak, and bleeding guy who's hung on a cross outside the city wall of Jerusalem. And according to them, Deuteronomy 21, cursed is him who is hanged on the tree. No, no to them, that's can't be Messiah. Stumbling block.

To the Greeks, to the Greeks, foolishness. Foolishness is moronic. Listen to what one writer so aptly expressed about the content of what Paul preached.

At the center of what Paul preached was this. The bloody criminal, shame-covering, torturing, scandalous death of Jesus Christ. The heart of that message, Christ was insulted, mocked, ridiculed, scorned, derided, satirized, parodied, caricatured, then hung up like a piece of meat and speared to see if it was done.

Foolishness to the world! But the power of God to those who believe. From a human perspective, it's absolutely absurd. What a silly notion people would think. I remember having a guy, years ago, say to me after I shared the gospel, "Matthew, are you telling me, are you telling me that I'm such a bad person and anything good I've done doesn't count. Are you telling me that I'm such a bad person that God had to take on flesh and had to suffer on a cross for my sins so that I can be made right with God. Is that what you're telling me?" I said, "You've pretty much got it." He said, "Well I can't accept that. I'm a good person. My wife knows I'm a good person. My children know I'm a good person. I'm honest. I'm moral. I'm upright. I give to United Way. I'm a part of so many humanitarian things and I will just not accept the fact that I'm so bad that someone had to bleed on a cross for me." Maybe you're in that same position today. Don't take it from me.

Take it from the testimony of God's word. The word of the cross is what saves people. But today we have relative eyes, we privatize, we marginalize this truth about the cross. So much so that you hear people say, "Well, I'm glad that works for you. I'm glad you believe that myth, that silly notion about Jesus dying in your place on the cross and somehow that determines your ultimate and eternal destiny. I'm glad you buy into that. But I think there are many, many ways to God and you shouldn't be so narrow-minded." Can I just say what an insult, what an attack, what an assault that is on the character and integrity of Almighty God? Matthew 26:39 – 42. Jesus is in the Garden of Gethsemane. And more than once will you notice what Jesus prays? Father, if it be possible, then let this cup pass from Me." There's Jesus, fully God and fully man struggling in the Garden. He's saying, "Lord if there's any way, any other way to accomplish Your plan, let this cup pass from Me. Nevertheless, not what I will, but what You will." Listen to me this morning. God was pleased to bruise His son, Isaiah 53, and in the fullness of time, Jesus came forth born of a woman, born under the law, and the Bible says He went to the cross willingly and He suffered and He bled and He died for your sins and God raised Him from the dead. There is no message you need to hear, or I need to hear, more than that. Look at it. That those called to believe through the preaching of the word, look at verse 24, it's the very power of God. It's salvation.

And then would you look at how, in verse 25, Paul wraps a neat bow on it. I don't want you to miss it. Look at that verse again. For the apparent, we might say, foolishness of God is wiser than man, and the apparent weakness of God in the cross is stronger than men. Foolish weakness. Weak strength. Well the rest of chapter 1 verses 26 through 31, if the message of the cross is true, then human pride and boasting is nullified. It's like Paul takes a wrecking ball and says, "All of you who will boast, boom, here you have it." And so I say to myself and I say to the church today, don't boast of personnel, don't boast of budgets and buildings and baptisms, boast of Christ and His cross. He is all. He is all. The death of Jesus is the highest expression of the wisdom of God and in that wisdom we have righteousness and sanctification and redemption, only Jesus Christ makes it possible for your sins and my sins to be forgiven. Billy Graham was interviewed in the later years of his life and the interviewer asked him, "If you could have some do-overs what would you do differently?" One of the things he said was this, "If I could go back, I would preach more about the cross and the blood. That's where the power is."

Alas! and did my Savior bleed, and did my Sovereign die! Would he devote that sacred head for such a worm as I?

Isaac Watts wrote those words in the 1700's. Down through the years, people have altered those words. Some years after it was written, Alas! and did my Savior bleed, and did my Sovereign die! Would he devote that sacred head for sinners such as I? Later. Alas! and did my Savior bleed, and did my Sovereign die! Would he devote that sacred head for such a one as I? Beware, beware, beware of minimizing, of minimizing your identity as a sinner. You've probably heard it said, the bad news, the good news is such good news because the bad news is such bad news. And the bad news is that you and I are sinners. Isaac Watts wrote those words for such a worm as I. People say, "Oh! That's so offensive. Don't call me a worm. God loves us. God doesn't think of us as worms." Well how about Isaiah 41, verse 14. God is addressing His covenant people. What does He say in Isaiah 41:14? Fear not, you worm, Jacob. Why does God use that terminology? I don't know all the reasons, but a worm is pretty helpless. It just slithers along. It's the lowest of the low. It's helpless. It can't do anything for itself. And God says, "Fear not, you worm! You are

helpless. You are, in the eyes of the world, worthless and meaningless. You're to be stomped on, to be trampled on, but fear not, you worm." Listen, if the message of the cross is true, and it is. I'm glad and you ought to be glad to be a worm in the care of God who didn't spare His one and only Son. Because the word of the cross demonstrates the superiority of God's power and wisdom. Declare it. Depend on it.

When I was here last time I think I shared with you the story of a church member that in her last days of dementia, Alzheimer's, was being cared for in the home of her family. She loved the great hymns of faith and would sit and sing the old hymns. Her daughter told me the story that as her memory and mind began to fail that she could remember fewer and fewer words. One of her favorite hymns was Jesus Paid It All. I hear the Savior say, thy strength indeed is small, child of weakness watch and pray, find in my they all in all, Jesus paid it all. All to Him I owe. Sin had left a crimson stain, He washed it white as snow. As time progressed, she remembered fewer and fewer words, but her daughter told me, "You know, the last time I heard her sing that song, she'd forgotten all the words, but she did keep repeating this phrase. All to Him I owe." All to Him I owe. That's the message of the word of the cross. Cling to it. Cherish it.

Let's pray. We're going to have a time of response in just a moment. It's your opportunity to come forward and take the hand of the staff member here and say, "I want to give my life to Jesus today. I want to follow Him. I want to turn away from my own wisdom and my own strength. I want to come just needy. I need Jesus." Oh, they'd love to share with you how you can have a personal relationship with Jesus. Others are here and you need a church home, I can't think of a better place for you to invest yourself in loving Jesus and promoting the word of the cross. Maybe as we reflect today you would take a moment to say, "Lord thank You for the cross. Thank You for the message of the cross. Help me to cling to it and cherish it." Father I pray now that by Your Spirit You would draw us to Yourself. I pray for any in this room who may have never come to grips with the truth of the cross. That today might be a day of deliverance and salvation. I pray, Father, that those who heard that message again and again. I pray that there would be a new cherishing and treasuring of all that You are for us in Jesus. Be glorified, be honored and thank You for the message of the cross. In Jesus name. Amen.