

1Corinthians 17-12-03a

Good morning, this is Sunday the 3rd of December 2017, and we're continuing our study in the book of 1 Corinthians chapter 1, and we'll be resuming at verse 18. Let's take a moment as we begin to go to the Lord in prayer, ask God's blessing on our time of fellowship and study, and then we'll begin. Father, how grateful we are for this time of study to nourish our souls in the truth of your Word.

We thank you for this letter and the truth that it contains, and we ask that your Holy Spirit will be our teacher and will bless us with insight and understanding. Help us to see the pertinence and the applicability of the things we look at this morning, and bless each heart. May the spiritual gifts that you've distributed be in evidence in and through each one of us so that we are all mutually edified and built up, and the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ will be reflected.

We pray these things in Jesus' name, amen. Looking again at 1 Corinthians, you remember the situation where there is a church founded by Paul. He has been away for a while.

Other people have come in and spoken, and honestly, the culture has begun to reassert itself. Corinth, being at the crossroads there of the Peloponnesus, being a center of culture and learning and erudite debate, people have begun to question Paul's message, and that message is labeled in verse 18, the message of the cross. Let's begin at verse 18 and read a few verses.

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. For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent. Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe.

For Jews request a sign, Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified. To the Jews stumbling block. To the Greeks, foolishness.

To those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ, the power of God and the wisdom of God, because the foolishness of God is wiser than men and the weakness of God is stronger than men. Well, this matches our situation in the modern day to a great extent, doesn't it? If you think about the intellectual assault on Christian faith, particularly wrapped in the flag of science and the arguments put forward in the media over the internet, books written by the likes of Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens and Sam Harris, there are blogs, the skeptics' websites are proliferating everywhere, and the notion that we are sinful and that a sacrificial offering was made on our behalf is not just disbelieved, but it is repugnant. It is rejected as nonsensical and so on.

I thought about maybe reviewing or rehearsing a few of these notions for you. It's sort of like, here, taste the poison, but let me just quickly summarize by means of one of these website

summaries, lists, if you will, the typical arguments talking about the foolishness of the message of the cross. I surveyed many, many of these, but here's a very typical offering and it reflects most of what you hear.

Ten reasons the crucifixion makes no sense. Number one, why is the death of Jesus Christ special? There were lots of people crucified by the Romans in the first century. You Christians claim that, well, this was special because Jesus was God's Son and He was doing something in the eyes of God, but it's not like this death was dramatically worse than death today.

Crucifixion may no longer be a worry, but cancer is. Six hours of agony on the cross is pretty bad, but so is six months of agony from cancer. So, you know, diminishing the suffering of the Lord Jesus as though the price was being paid by the level of His physical suffering.

And a lot of people have died worse deaths that took longer and were more painful and more brutal and so on. That's one of these rational arguments. Number two, what is the whole thing about hell? An eternity of torment for even a single person makes Jesus' agony insignificant by comparison.

We've talked about this. How can you equate eternal conscious torment, eternal conscious torment, with whatever it was that Jesus endured on the cross? It did not last unendingly. And to multiply something by infinity makes it infinitely painful, infinitely cruel.

So Jesus' work counts for nothing when you consider the billions that are apparently going to hell. Number three, and I've seen this in a bunch of places, Jesus didn't really die. The absurdity of the story, of course, is the resurrection.

If Jesus died, there's no miraculous resurrection. If there's a resurrection, there's no sacrifice through death. It's either a miracle of resurrection or it's a sacrifice, but it can't be both.

The Gospels don't say that He died for our sins, but that He had a rough couple of days for our sins. You know, I saw another one that said, you know, Jesus had a rough weekend for our sins. So not understanding what the death of Christ was.

Somebody was arguing that, well, you know, He didn't go through the fear of death and of annihilation, and He knew He was coming back, so His death was just sort of falling asleep, going into a coma, you know, I'll be right back, that kind of thing. Number four, taking on the sin versus removal of sin are not symmetrical. We didn't do anything to get original sin, we inherited it from Adam, so why do we have to do anything to get the redemption? If God demands a sacrifice, He got it, that's enough.

Why the requirement to believe in order to access the solution? Number five, the reason behind the sacrifice, mankind's original sin, makes no sense. All of this, of course, we're talking about in context with 1 Corinthians 1, the belief, which is shared by many, that the message of the cross, the work of Christ on the cross is foolishness. And so this is man's attempt to show how it is foolish.

So man's original sin makes no sense. Why blame Adam for a moral lapse he couldn't even understand? He hadn't eaten of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, so who could blame him for making a moral mistake? How can we inherit original sin? That blames us for something we didn't do. Even the Bible says children should not be put to death for the sins of the parents, and so on.

Parents shouldn't be put to death for the sins of the children. Some of these are kind of painful to even read. Number six, Jesus made a sacrifice, big deal.

Jesus is perfect, so His doing something noble is like water flowing downhill. It's unremarkable. He's just acting in accordance with His nature.

Why should He be honored, or worshipped, or respected for doing something that He basically can't help because He's perfect, He's God? A selfish, imperfect man acting against His nature to make the ultimate, unselfish sacrifice is far more remarkable than a perfect being acting according to His nature. Aren't everyday noble actions by ordinary people more remarkable and more laudable? Number seven, what is left to forgive? The Jesus story says we've sinned against God, it's a debt. God could just forgive the debt, and I've heard this argument countless times.

Why does it take a bloody sacrifice, and why can't God just forgive? We absorb wrongs by people and say, I forgive you. We let it go. Why can't God do the same thing? Why does it require all of this? Some Christians say that to forgive would violate God's sense of justice, but when one person forgives another's debt, there's no violation of justice.

But God doesn't seem to like this route. That leaves number two, where Jesus pays for our sins. If Jesus pays the debt, then there's no need for God's forgiveness because the debt is paid.

If He died for the sins of the whole world, then the whole world should be saved. Here's an everyday example. When I pay off my mortgage, the bank doesn't, in addition, forgive my debt.

There's no longer a debt to forgive. Why imagine that God must forgive us after He's already gotten His payment? Number eight, the Jesus story isn't even remarkable within mythology. His sacrifice was small compared to the Greek god Prometheus, who stole fire from Olympus and gave it to humanity.

Zeus discovers the crime, punished Prometheus by chaining him to a rock. You remember this story, and a vulture comes and eats his liver, and every night the liver grows back, and every day the vulture comes back and eats it again. The gospel story where Jesus is crucified once and then pops back into existence a few days later is unimpressive by comparison.

Number nine, the Bible itself rejects God's savage justice, quote-unquote. Must Iron Age customs persist so that we need human sacrifice? If God loves us deeply and He wants to forgive us, couldn't He just dot-dot-dot forgive us? That's how we do it. That's the lesson we get from the parable of the prodigal son, where the father forgives the son even after being

wronged by him.

If the standard is mercy, why can't God follow it? Since God is greater than a human, wouldn't He be that much more understanding and willing to forgive? And I like this one especially. If we were to twist the prodigal son parable to match the crucifixion story, the father would demand that the innocent son be flogged to pay for the crime of the prodigal son. Number ten, the entire story is incoherent.

Let's try to stumble through the drunken logic behind the Jesus story. God made mankind imperfect and inherently vulnerable to sin. Living a sinless life is impossible, so hell becomes unavoidable.

God creates people knowing for certain they are going to deserve eternity in hell when they die. Why create people that He knew would be destined for eternal torment? But don't worry, God sacrificed Jesus, one of the persons of God, whatever that means, so mankind could go to heaven instead. So God sacrificed Himself to Himself so we could bypass a rule that God made Himself and that God deliberately designed us to never be able to meet.

I can't even understand that. I certainly feel no need to praise God for something so nonsensical. It's like an abused wife thanking her abuser.

We can just as logically curse God for consigning us to hell from birth. Perhaps I can be forgiven for being unimpressed by the crucifixion story. Seen on a bumper sticker, Jesus died for my sins? Tell Him I said thanks.

This is the level of scorn and the human wisdom that says the message of the cross is foolish. And there's nothing wrong with asking these questions. Why is there an awful sacrifice depicted, portrayed, accomplished in the payment for sin? Why was it foreshadowed by animal sacrifice in the Old Testament? All of these wonderful, healthy, best of the flock animals, quote-unquote senselessly slaughtered to appease a deity in heaven.

It sounds pagan. Many of the pagans did a similar thing. So why is the message of the cross not foolish would be another way to put it.

Well, enough of the uninformed ramblings of human wisdom. Let's take a look at how Paul answers this, because these would be the kind of things that would be brought up by the erudite, the educated, the intellectuals, the Greek sophists and philosophers, even if they were to acknowledge the problem of sin, would be questioning this Semitic God and His alleged sending of a son who would be perfect and would die, and then the necessity to place faith in Him to receive this deliverance from a putative, eternal condemnation. Well, how does this work? Paul says, back in verse 17, And you get the idea that in the mind of many atheists, the cross of Christ is of no effect.

Not only of no effect, but that it is actually a foolish notion. It's a silly story with no basis in reality and certainly doesn't make sense to any thinking mind. Paul goes on to say, again, as we

read in 18, But to us who are being saved it is the power of God, for it is written.

And just notice here the number of times that you see the words for wisdom and understanding and knowledge. I will destroy the wisdom of the wise. I will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent.

This is a quote from Isaiah chapter 29, verse 14. And you ask yourself, well, if God gave us our intellect and made us above the animals in the sense that we are capable of abstract thinking and conceptual understanding, then why is He going to destroy the wisdom of the wise? Why is He going to bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent? I thought being prudent and having understanding was a good thing. You think about Proverbs chapter 2, So it seems that God likes knowledge and wisdom.

Sometimes and other times He doesn't. Where is the wise, verse 20? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this age? Well, I just read you one of many of the disputers of this age. Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? Well, and that is the question.

Has God made this sort of logic futile? Has He demonstrated its shortcoming, its weakness, its flaw? Verse 21, It's God's wisdom that man is not going to come to God by wisdom. Interesting idea, something we need to investigate. It pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe.

For Jews request a sign, Greeks seek after wisdom. But we preach Christ crucified. To the Jews, this is a stumbling block.

To the Greeks, it's foolishness. And every time you see foolishness, this is some form of the word moria, M-O-R-I-A, from which we get moron, moronic. But to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ, the power of God, and the wisdom of God.

Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. Well, how do we deal with this? How do we account for this? There are three things at work here. The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing.

But to us who are being saved, it is not foolishness, it is the power of God. Now, when we get saved, do we suddenly lose our reason? Are we incapable of logical thought? Are we somehow blinded? Are we debilitated? Is there something wrong with our logic circuits? Or was there something wrong with them before we believed, so that we would believe a foolish message? And this is the classic boiled-down atheist argument. Believing your Christian gospel is foolish.

It doesn't make sense. I can't believe it because it defies logic. It fails on so many levels.

I find it repugnant, I find it nonsensical, so I will not believe. And yet Paul goes on to say in verse 20, Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish that wisdom that says this message should be rejected? Now, those of us who are saved, who feel like we still have our wits about us, many of us have got a good college

education, we're certainly possessed of common sense, we observe, we interpret, we apply what we know, we don't consider ourselves to be wild-eyed fanatics, we're not mystics, we're not operating on emotions, we don't feel that we're casting about looking for some crutch to get us through the day. And yet others say, your defining belief, that which makes you who you say you are, is nonsense.

Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? Well, for us who believe, we recognize instinctively, before we go through and see the refutation of these observations and these arguments, we instinctively know that these wisdom-of-the-world observations are deeply flawed, that they reflect false premises, false logic, and being started on bad grounds, they can only end up with bad conclusions. We may not be able to specify how that is, we just know. It's sort of like someone claiming that your mother is a notorious bank robber and has been for 30 years in escape justice, and you grew up with your mother, she didn't have time, she was too busy doing the laundry and cooking meals and cleaning house, and you may not be able to prove to someone that she's not a notorious bank robber, but you know in your heart that she isn't.

Now there are people that have been fooled, and married somebody who led a double life and all that, but my illustration here is designed to point out that there are some things that we just have a sense of and we subsequently find the proof, we find the evidence, we can collect the logic and the arguments that support what we basically know to be true. I can't necessarily explain why my refrigerator is not working, but I have the belief that it is not permanently broken. I had this experience this past week.

The refrigerator repairman came out and put in a part and hooked everything up and it just sputtered and died, sputtered and died. No amount of coaxing could get the thing to come alive again, and he said, well, it's just shot. You can't expect a 67-year-old refrigerator to last forever, it has died to death, you need to haul it off, make it into a planter, take it to the dump.

I could not explain how I knew this, but I just believed that that was not so. It was a part of my observation and experience with this refrigerator over my entire life that told me it can still work. But I couldn't say why to the refrigerator repairman, who knows more and explained to me all the reasons why they typically go, and his wisdom and his logic would be unassailable by me at that point.

But happily for me, he turned out to be wrong, and the refrigerator is chugging merrily away back there now. I subsequently was able to document why my instinct was correct. I was able to go in and apply a knowledge that the repairman did not have, and it's fixed.

So that's a loose analogy to what we're talking about here. But let's first of all, as we begin to approach the time where we're going to pause and take our break, distinguish what Paul says here. He draws a contrast between the foolishness of the message of the cross and the wisdom of those who disparage it.

And so we come up against this idea that God is, and at the center of this between verse 18 and verse 21, you have this quote from Isaiah 29, 14, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent. We know from the context, especially looking back at Isaiah, that there is a contrast being drawn, not that there's anything wrong with knowledge or that there's anything wrong with being prudent or being wise. But when that knowledge, that wisdom, that prudence is put for God, when it is a substitute for God, when it is the go-to solution, I will get this done my way.

I think I know how this works. I'm going to fix it. And it is a form of idolatry.

This logic and reason works well. It solves problems for me. I can operate cell phones and build dog houses with it, so it will help me when it comes to all other problems.

And God says the wisdom that man depends on to solve material problems is inadequate and insufficient when it comes to the immaterial, when it comes to the invisible, when it comes to the spiritual. And it is necessary to demonstrate its inadequacy and its insufficiency. It is as though if the unbeliever, if the skeptic and the atheist could fully understand the cross, if it didn't horrify them, if it didn't create scorn and ridicule and a complete sense of horrified confusion, that this makes no sense to me.

Remember, that's how the... I can be forgiven if this seems nonsensical to me. You really can't be forgiven because that's the point. It's not supposed to be accessible by simple logic.

You have to think about that for a moment. God is not accessible by human steps of reason. You're not going to get to Him and connect with Him and access His grace, His forgiveness, His power, His life by logic.

Overthinking is what got us in trouble in the first place. That's why the tree in the garden was called the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Thinking that knowledge is the path to attainment is what got Eve and later Adam kicked out of the garden.

What is the contrast? There is an innate consciousness of God in all of us. So to access, to seek that God, a couple of paths are open to us. If we trust God in whatever nebulous sense we can tell that He's there and realize whoever He is, He's much greater than me.

He is going to have to create the path. He is going to have to show me the way. That is an expression of humility.

It is an expression of teachability. It is an expression of dependence. Once we become aware that there is a creator God and we need contact with Him, we need help from Him, we need life and guidance and grace from Him, we respond to that realization in one of two ways.

Either we think, well, I can build a bridge, I can build a tower like that in the plain of Shinar, and I can reach this God by my efforts, by my logic. This God will meet my expectations and I can get to Him by my chosen path. And that self-sufficient approach will never work.

I will destroy the wisdom of the wise. I will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent. To find a path to morality, to achievement, to self-realization, to satisfaction, to peace, to happiness in this life, there are people who say, well, I can do that myself.

I will decide my standard of what's right and what's wrong, what's moral and what's immoral, what I should do and what I shouldn't do. I'm sufficient in and of myself. I've got reasoning skills.

I've got logic. I've got observation. I've got evidence.

I have the arguments of others. I've got the companionship of others who share my view that, you know, cruelty is always wrong and the fundamental moral principle is do no harm. And so I've got what I need.

I've got this. I do not need help. This, of course, is the fatal persuasion of addicts, whether alcoholics or crack, cocaine, or whatever else.

You can never become unaddicted so long as you think you can fix the problem yourself. If you've read the Alcoholics Anonymous big book, the first principle is to acknowledge I need help from outside myself. Well, that echoes, that reflects the truth that Paul is getting to here, that the first and fundamental response at the point of God consciousness, if you want to call it that, is either a dependent response or an independent response.

Accepting that we are needy, that we are imperfect, that we are inadequate, that we need help from the one who made us is the first and foremost acknowledgement. And there are two kinds of people in the world. You will notice Paul makes this distinction clear.

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. That's the only two kinds of people in the world. There are those who are perishing and there are those who are being saved.

And these are present tense. They are perishing, we are being saved. That's the only two kinds of people in the world.

What distinguishes them? Those who are perishing are relying on their sense and saying my perceptive abilities, my deductive logic tells me what's best and what I should do. We who are being saved say, I can't tell you that everything makes sense to me right now, but what I do know is God is going to have to save me. I cannot save myself.

The message of the cross is first and foremost that which divides households, that divides humanity into two groups. Those who recognize that we are insufficient and inadequate. We cannot give ourselves life.

We cannot overcome the corruption of our nature in and of ourselves. We cannot be good or good enough. And we recognize this.

We know that there is something beyond and outside us. And that is the message of the cross. First and foremost, it is something God does for us.

All of the answers to these other questions, why sacrifice? Why is this death of Jesus significant if he came right back? Answers to those things that are wise and do reflect knowledge and understanding of a transcendent nature. It is greater than, it is wiser than. What seems to be the foolishness of God in sacrificing his son and demanding a payment and not just saying, okay, I forgive you.

The answers to those objections and those questions are available. And it turns out that what is labeled the foolishness of God is wiser than the wisdom of men. But you don't get that with a haughty attitude.

You don't get that with a proud and self-sufficient question. You've got to match my logic or I will not believe. I think this is all a bunch of nonsense.

That is not the path to better knowledge, to that which makes more sense than anything a human mind can devise. So the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, not only is it not foolishness, it is the power of God. And I'll leave you before the break here with a quick thought.

If everything God is and everything God does and the history, the present, and the future of God's plan and purpose, if it all made sense to us, God would not be God because he wouldn't be any higher or any wiser than we are. If everything that went on in a household made sense to toddlers growing up in that household, it would be a horrific place. You'd immediately run out of groceries and clean laundry because toddlers have no concept of how those things are handled.

Unless we are the wisest thing in the universe and God isn't any smarter than us, then it is going to take a special path to begin to understand what God is doing. We will have to grow into a transcendent understanding. Lots of people claim to have a mystical transcendent understanding, but to those of us who are being saved, it is going to reveal the power of God.

It's not a secret handshake. It's not a formula or a mystical incantation. It isn't an esoteric or ephemeral, ethereal sort of gnosis.

We come to appreciate the power of God, the greatness of God, the wisdom of God, the character of God through this. And it is an ever-growing appreciation of grace. Well, the world does not understand this, and that wisdom is going to be destroyed and brought to nothing.

The wise, the scribe, the disputer of this age, the wisdom of this world is made foolish. And Paul says to the Corinthian believers, has God not made this foolish? In other words, he appeals to what he taught them when he was there for those two years. You know that we have already answered these objections.

God has already begun to reveal to us why the message of the cross is not foolish. But Paul says, I started with that. I didn't start with logical argument.

I didn't start with debate and answers to hard questions. I began with God's sacrificial love. I began with the message of the cross.

Well, let's pause here and take our break. When we come back, we're going to see exactly what this message of the cross is and how it is addressed, how it is referenced here by the Apostle Paul.