

"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." —1 Corinthians 1:18 (NASB)

"For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified." —1 Corinthians 2:2

"For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek." —Romans 1:16

The desire for validation is one of the strongest motivations known to man. Those obsessed with it will do anything to gain the approval of those they so strongly revere. Examples fill crime documentaries galore.

The Christian is not immune to such obsession. In fact, the smile of God *is* something every believer should desire (e.g., 1 Thess 4:1; Col 1:10; Heb 13:21; 1 John 3:22). However, the believer's obsession for validation is not always directed toward the right object. The habits of life prior to conversion and the ongoing influence of the sinful flesh lead many to seek the approval of the culture. This is especially the case with the use of the *mind*. Christians often fall into the trap of accommodating their thinking in such a way as to garner the favor of men. Observing this tendency Francis Schaeffer wrote,

Here is the great evangelical disaster—the failure of the evangelical world to stand for truth as truth. There is only one word for this—namely *accommodation*. The evangelical church has accommodated to the world spirit of the age. First, there has been accommodation on Scripture, so that many who call themselves evangelicals hold a weakened view of the Bible and no longer affirm the truth of all the Bible teaches—truth not only in religious matters but in the areas of science and history and morality . . . This accommodation has been costly, first in destroying the power of the Scriptures to confront the spirit of our age; second, in allowing the further slide of our culture. Thus we must say with tears that it is the *evangelical accommodation* to the world spirit around us, to the wisdom of this age, which removes the evangelical church from standing against the breakdown of our culture. (*The Great Evangelical Disaster*, 37–38)

Such *intellectual accommodation* manifests itself in the fear expressed by many of being labelled by the culture with pejorative terms. This fear is particularly acute in the world of the academy. Many educated Christians fear being labeled a "fundamentalist" or "fanatic." To avoid being cancelled, Christian academics remain silent about their convictions. Others justify their implicit support for anti-Scriptural stances as the necessary cost of keeping "a witness" present in the dark echelons of elite society. Or—as Schaeffer states—some simply abandon belief in many of Scripture's truths in order to deaden their consciences and receive the head-pat of those whom they respect.

But such a temptation is not limited to the academy. Intellectual sell-out to the culture has been particularly intense among Christians at a broad level during the last two years of the Covid pandemic. Large numbers of professing Christians filled the platforms of social media to warn others not to be a "public disgrace" in their usual practice of gathering with other Christians to worship Christ. Some who failed to dissuade others from gathering then proceeded to join with unbelievers in heaping scorn on those who sought to abide by Scripture and conscience. But even beyond Covid, there is for many Christians a kind of law—an unwritten "eleventh commandment"—that the believe should regulate Christian belief and practice in the eyes of the public: "Thou shall not offend." In other words, "You are free to be as Christian as you want in private, but just don't embarrass us when the world is watching. We need its charity."

How should Christian men relate to this desire for validation by the world? What role should the world's opinion of us play in our thinking? Paul provides important instruction on these issues in 1 Corinthians 1:18–31.

I. The Bankruptcy of Human Opinion (1 Corinthians 1:18–25)

Paul begins with a foundational premise based off the words he just stated in the previous section (cf. 1:17): **“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” (1:18).** On the one hand, the “word of the cross” is a broad designation that includes the totality of apostolic teaching—“the whole counsel of God” Paul and the other apostles were entrusted to proclaim. But on the other hand, the “word of the cross” explicitly emphasizes the keystone of that sum of teaching: *the vicarious atonement of Christ*. What the apostles taught—and what saving faith embraces—all leads up to and centers on Christ and His sacrifice for sin on the cross. So important is this keystone that Paul divides all men into two categories based on their response to this “word.”

Response to the “Word”	“foolishness”	“power of God”
Description of the Responder	“those who are perishing”	“those who are being saved”
Understanding of the “Cross”	Scandalous! Crucifixion was the means for ridiculing and exterminating despised criminals.	Salvific! Crucifixion was the means of bringing forgiveness and life to the sinner.

To the vast majority who heard Paul’s message, the cross was scandalous. Greg Gilbert explains why:

Crucifixion was never a private event. It was always raw, and searingly public, because its purpose was to terrify the masses into submission to the authorities. Crosses often lined the main roads into cities, holding the broken writhing bodies of the condemned, or displaying the rotting corpses of the dead. The Romans even scheduled public crucifixions to coincide with religious festivals, insuring the maximum number of people present to witness the horror. Murderers, robbers, traitors, and slaves were crucified, brutally, by the thousands all over the empire and always deliberately.

Shredded flesh against unforgiving wood, iron stakes pounded through bone and wracked nerves, joints wrenched out of socket by the sheer dead weight of the body, public humiliation before the eyes of family, friends, and the world—that was death on the cross, ‘the infamous stake’ as the Romans called it, ‘the barren wood,’ *the maxima mala crux*. Or as the Greeks spat it out, the *stauros*. No wonder no one talked about it. No wonder parents hid their children’s eyes from it. The *stauros* was a loathsome thing, and the one who died on it was loathsome too, a vile criminal whose only use was to hang there as a putrid, decaying warning to anyone else who might follow his example. That is how Jesus died.” (“God’s Self-Substitution for Sinners,” in *Don’t Call It a Comeback*, 71–72)

Several decades before the crucifixion of Christ, the Roman statesman Cicero (106–43 BC) described crucifixion as unworthy even to be thought about by good Roman citizens:

Wretched is the loss of one’s good name in the public courts, wretched, too, a monetary fine exacted from one’s property, and wretched is exile, but, still, in each calamity there is retained some trace of liberty. Even if death is set before us, we may die in freedom. But the executioner, the veiling of heads, and the very word “cross,” let them all be far removed from not only the bodies of Roman citizens but even from their thoughts, their eyes, and their ears. The results and suffering from these doings as well as the situation, even anticipation, of their enablement, and, in the end, the mere mention of them are unworthy of a Roman citizen and a free man. (*Speech before Roman Citizens on Behalf of Gaius Rabirius*, 16)

Indeed, according to natural human logic, the idea of an innocent, sin-bearing Savior who died an ugly criminal’s death to atone for the sins of other guilty men was utterly ridiculous. It was offensive, not just to some, but to all—to *Gentile* and to *Jew*, to the pagan and the religious monotheist. And this offense created by the “word of the cross” continues even to this day. The British philosopher A. J. Ayer summarized humanity’s current assessment of the cross when he stated, “Of all religions, a strong case can be made against Christianity as the worst, because it rests on the allied doctrines of original sin and vicarious atonement, which are intellectually contemptible and morally outrageous.” (*The Guardian*, August 30, 1979). Such words demonstrate precisely why the Christian worldview is so incompatible with and unacceptable to other worldviews. The world cannot integrate true Christianity into its system. It can only reject it or attempt to subjugate and vanquish it.

Consequently, God has rendered His verdict on the opinions of mankind. Paul writes, **“For it is written, ‘I WILL DESTROY THE WISDOM OF THE WISE, AND THE CLEVERNESS OF THE CLEVER I WILL SET ASIDE.’ 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?” (1:19–20).** God’s verdict is not arrived at through a competition or battle. Paul simply quotes Scripture (Isaiah 29:14) to show that God’s verdict is *declared*. Paul then includes a series of rhetorical questions to prove his point:

- 1) “Where is *the wise man*?” (σοφός, *sophos*) – “the one having intelligence and education above the average.”
- 2) “Where is *the scribe*?” (γραμματεὺς, *grammateus*) – “the specialist in the law of Moses.”
- 3) “Where is *the debater of this age*?” (συζητητής, *syzētētēs*) – “the contemporary philosopher.”

To each of these questions Paul assumes a simple answer: “Nowhere!” There are none who can stand before God. None who can give an answer. None who can justify their rejection of the word of the cross. Paul then adds one more rhetorical question:

- 4) “Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?”

The answer? *Indeed, God has!* What Paul now describes here is another accomplishment of the death of Christ. Not only was it efficacious for the salvation of those chosen (v. 18), but it was also efficacious for the humiliation of the natural human intellect (v. 20). The cross utterly crushes human pride.

Paul continues, **“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. For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1:21–24).**

Here Paul distinguishes the Christian worldview (controlled by the cross of Christ) from all other worldviews. The Jews rejected the word of the cross by advocating *evidentialism*; they wanted *proof* or *evidences* that would meet their subjective standards of believability. In particular, they wanted litanies of miracles (cf. Matt 12:38–39; Mark 8:11–12; Luke 11:16; John 2:18; etc.). The Gentiles, on the other hand, rejected the word of the cross by advocating *rationalism*; they wanted the message about Jesus to harmonize with their subjective dictates of philosophical reasoning. By contrast, Paul was unwavering in his position as a *revelationist*. He simply “preached Christ crucified” (v. 23; cf. also 2:2). He recognized his role was not to stoop to the level of fools by operating according to the demands of a worldview that was diametrically opposed to God and His way of salvation.

Why was Paul so confident in his proclamation of God’s word? He answers in the next verse: **“Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men” (1:25).**

II. The Triumph of Divine Wisdom (1 Corinthians 1:26–31)

If the message of the cross is unbelievable to the natural human mind, then what difference will it make? If no one can be expected to ever believe this message, what is its point? Paul answers this question in the next section as he shifts from describing the bankruptcy of human opinion to extolling the majesty of God’s redemptive plan. He states to the Corinthian believers, **“For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble” (1:26).** The term “calling” (κλήσις, *klēsis*) refers to the believer’s *selection by God* (cf. 1:2, 24; Rom 11:24; Eph 4:1). In light of humanity’s intellectual and moral bankruptcy, unless God *chooses* some to believe, no one will. The message is too scandalous and offensive to the sinner’s corrupt rationality. But this is exactly what God does. And to magnify the extraordinary nature of this grace even more, Paul states that the majority of those whom God has chosen will not be from the upper echelons of society. The majority will be from the low classes, from the unscholarly, from the uninfluential, from the insignificant, from the non-elite. It is these nobodies who will manifest the wisdom and the power of God.

Further emphasizing the sovereignty of God in salvation, Paul states, **“but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not” (1:27–28a).**

Here he uses another verb, ἐκλέγομαι (*eklegomai*, “I pick out for myself, I choose,” v. 27), to give the credit for salvation to God. In the end, no one who comes to believe the word of the cross will ever be able to attribute his faith to his own intelligence. God’s approach is to *choose* in such a way that *belief* can never be attributed to education, authority, status, or privilege.

Paul then draws his instruction to a close with two important purpose statements, the first serving as the basis for the second: **“so that He may nullify the things that are, so that no man may boast before God. But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, so that, just as it is written, ‘LET HIM WHO BOASTS, BOAST IN THE LORD’” (1:28b–29).**

How must we respond?

1. **Marvel at the grace of God manifest in your salvation.** Recognize that you would *not* have believed the message of the cross if it was left up to you. You did believe it only because God chose to manifest His grace in your unworthiness. This recognition leads naturally to a life of humility and profound praise to God.
2. **Reclaim the cross of Christ as the center of your worldview.** This world and our own lives only make sense and have meaning in light of the atonement of Jesus Christ. Keeping the cross of Christ central within your thinking will help you understand why there is such a great divide between you and all those of non-Christian worldviews. It will keep you from falling into their intellectual expectations and traps. When the cross is not central, something else will take its place. D. A. Carson’s warning here is important: “I fear that the cross, without ever being disowned, is constantly in danger of being dismissed from the central place it must enjoy, by relatively peripheral insights that take on far too much weight. Whenever the periphery is in danger of displacing the center, we are not far removed from idolatry” (*The Cross and Christian Ministry*, 38).
3. **Stop striving for the validation of the world.** The desire for *validation* is indeed a powerful motivating force. But look for that validation for your beliefs and for your witness *in God alone*. Moreover, what God looks on with disdain, we cannot look on with respect. We must think like David Brainerd, the 18th century missionary to the Native Americans: **“God was so precious to my soul that the world with all its enjoyments appeared vile. I had no more value for the favor of men than for pebbles.”**
4. **Don’t be ashamed to associate with the church.** Courage in the gospel manifests itself in courage to associate with those the gospel saves—as unseemly and unimportant as they seem to be. God’s power is manifested in saving those whom our world scorns. Moreover, as Christianity becomes increasingly despised in our secular society, it will become increasingly costly to associate with the church. Take encouragement from 1 Corinthians 1:18–31, and love the assembling with those despised and rejected by this world.

For Further Study

1. Memorize 1 Corinthians 1:18 and Romans 1:16.
2. What are the areas in your life that are particularly sensitive to the opinions and approval of the culture?
3. How does the “word of the cross” influence your outlook on life? How does it relate to personal life, family life, business life, etc.? How does your belief in Christ’s vicarious atonement manifest itself in your lifestyle?
4. Consider David Brainerd’s quote above. Do you see this attitude growing in your own life? Why or why not?
5. When explaining the gospel to unbelievers, there is a temptation to think that one must accommodate the presentation of the gospel to the demands of the listener. In other words, if he asks for “proofs” or “reasons,” you must provide them to him or you cannot continue. How does 1 Corinthians 1:18–31 confront this temptation?

Audio, video, and handouts for this session: gracechurch.org/motw

Next meeting: March 23, 7pm, “Making a Defense”