

1 Corinthians 1:17-25

"What Does the Cross Mean to You?"

Let's open our Bibles this afternoon to 1 Corinthians 1:17.

I want to read you a couple of verses that Paul writes to the Corinthians (chapter 1:17 of 1 Corinthians). This is what he wrote, "For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of no effect. 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, and Greeks seek after wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, 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."

Verse 18 says, "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." Paul abruptly and my interest this afternoon is to just stay to the basics. But Good Friday is all about your opinion of the cross. It really boils down to that, even as us believers. What you think about the cross, what it means to you is really the difference between eternal life or judgment. There really is no middle ground. Even in verse 18, there're really only two sides to the story. And so I thought it would be wise for us on this Good Friday, and the cross makes it good, I don't suspect on the first Good Friday anyone thought it was good except God. Certainly the followers of Jesus were disappointed, the expectation of the would-be believers all let down. Only God could see that this was going to be the best thing for man to be saved. So I think there are some basic elemental truths that we should understand because Good Friday and there are services going on throughout the country today that will draw millions of churchgoers, and yet it is the personal response to the cross, its significance, its value, that makes all the difference.

What does the cross mean to you, if you had to tell someone? We have to know, personally, what made the cross necessary, what prompted God to be willing to send His only begotten Son to die upon this day. And until you know that personally, this day has no effect upon you whatsoever. It's of little value. Oh, maybe you get out of work early. But beyond that, there isn't really any significant benefit to you. There's no joy that comes with it. There's no help to you until you get to the sacrifice. In fact, if there is no compelling reason for you to be able to speak about the sacrifice of the cross, then the death of Jesus - which is factual and historical - might very well be the best argument that you could make against the cruelty of God. If there is a God, if He would allow something like that to happen to His Son, and it wasn't necessary - absolutely necessary, then He is a cruel God. The brutality of capital punishment carried out in the days of the Roman Empire would ultimately bring the goodness of God or the love of God into question. How could He? Why did He? It would cast tremendous doubt upon God's heart.

So, the question always is the same - what does the cross mean? What does it mean to us? Why did it have to happen? There are some things that I think we should consider immediately. For one thing, even as we read here, the cross itself immediately throws a wrench into the commonly-held belief that God expects man to measure up to some standard. Now that's a worldwide-held axiom. Right? That we should perform to the best of our ability and beyond, that we should rise to a high level of accomplishments, that our deeds should stand out amongst the rest if we would ever hope to warrant an invitation or a welcome in heaven as a reward.

Paul uses a very ironic kind of twist of words here to say to those who view the message of the importance of the cross as foolish or worthless, if you want to define the word, or needless. And Paul says of them, "They that hold that position are perishing." Writing off the need for the cross, the death of Christ, the sacrifice that God made through His Son - if you write it off as unimportant to you, not applicable to you, it defines your perishing heart because it separates you from the only thing that can save you. To those of us who are being saved, the message of the cross is a demonstration of God's smartness, His wisdom, His insight. It puts to shame the wisdom of man - man, what he can come up with on his own. The man who believes all roads lead to salvation and the only thing that matters is the sincerity of the individual. He means well. He's so devout. He's holier than a lot of people. But yet he sets the cross aside. The wisdom of God would say otherwise. Man cannot save himself. Sin has a death penalty attached

to it. No amount of good works can pay that debt unless you'd like to die forever in your sins, and then God would be just in allowing that to happen.

It becomes very clear just reading these few verses that God's solution for man's sin runs contrary to man's idea of individual performance, that we ought to have a measuring stick for our access to heaven into the presence of God. And we set the bar at various levels, and God just says, "It can't be done. Put the ruler down. You don't measure up." If indeed God was looking for performance from us, then the cross doesn't need to enter into the equation at all. You can just set it aside. If it's a matter of accomplishment on your behalf, then we don't need Jesus or the cross. We just need a bigger book of rules and maybe some advice on how to do better. Why would it be necessary for Jesus to die if it still falls upon me to clean up my act? For me to toe the line? For me to turn over a new leaf? For me to try a little harder next time? Because when all is said and done, it's going to be my willingness to try a little harder that's going to make all the difference. But you see, that's where the rub comes in when it comes to preaching the gospel to most folks. It is that head-on collision between man's performance and the fact that it isn't good enough. And it humbles people, and it angers them and frustrates them to no end. The very thought that I might need some help - and that the cross is vital to get to heaven - flies right in the face of my plans of my determination to get there on my own; those feelings that are created in my life when I have good ambition, when I have tried hard, and I can pat myself on the back and say, "Man, I really gave it my all that time." The personal struggles, the sacrifices, the good intentions, the ambitions that I put forth. And let's face it - we would rather compare ourselves with people that did poorly and say of ourselves, "Well, I'm a lot better off than that jerk or that sinful person. I do much better than most folks around me." Yet according to Paul, the whole attitude leaves me perishing. That understanding doesn't get me any closer to God or to heaven at all. It leaves me headed for disaster, and it is rooted in the wisdom of man which stands in direct contradiction to the Word of God regarding the cross. It is good only because it is God's only way of life.

Paul used the same line of reasoning when he wrote to the Galatians in chapter 5:11, and he said to them, "And I, brethren, if I still preach circumcision," (which was an appeal to become a Jew) "why do I still suffer persecution? Then the offense of the cross has ceased." His point was he was preaching the cross, and because he was preaching the cross, he continued to suffer. He wasn't trying to sell a religious system. He was calling people to faith. But he said, "If I turn back to works, then

the only thing that is offensive about the cross - which is you can't work your way there - has been set aside because that's the battleground. You can't. He can. You can't." The word "offense" is the Greek word "*skandalon*." It's where we get our word "scandal" from. It is used in the Bible defined as a stumbling block or something that gets in the way that hinders our progress. For most self-satisfied unrepentant sinners, they believe without a doubt that they can make it on their own; that God is going to be merciful to them, that somehow God is going to factor in all of the efforts, and He's going to grade on a curve, and you're going to get in on it with a C+ or something. But Paul continued to preach the message of the cross, which effectively says your works won't do it, man's conventional wisdom about his relationship with God is completely wrong, and sinners are headed - because of their sin - to judgment, that God has a better plan than your own. That's where the battle is fought. Most folks, if they can get by their own failures, can get saved fairly quickly. But it is the pride of self and accomplishment and the wisdom of man that makes it so difficult. Most folks, when they hear about the preaching of Jesus and the cross, or the good news of the gospel, raise their ire. They'd rather do it themselves. They feel better when they have made their own efforts. And they get extremely angry and resentful and oftentimes will refuse the news that they can't do it themselves. And Paul says, "If that's your attitude, you're perishing." You can find a lot of people to agree with you. You might stand in the majority. But God has never been moved by the majority. He decides, and we bow.

The cross says you can't work your way into a relationship with God. You cannot. It says that you cannot overcome sin. It says that you cannot get to heaven on your own. Very clearly. Your best behavior, your good intentions won't do it. It's where the battle lines are drawn, and people take opposing sides, and they leave themselves worlds apart. We are either being saved by the power of God, or we are left to our own devices, and eternity hangs in the balance. There's nowhere else to turn. It's one or the other. One or the other.

It is no wonder, then, that the cross stands at the central place of the message of Christianity, which defines us from every other religion, if you will, in the world. God's provision for our salvation is found at a cross. Everything revolves around it. It stumbles many who must face the fact that their best isn't good enough, that they need a Savior who died in their place on their behalf, and they fight with this blinding pride of sin that refuses to admit failure, doesn't want to ask for help, doesn't believe it needs to be forgiven. And so man goes on. He throws God tokens

of devotion. We go to church on Christmas, and Easter we never miss. There's a religiousness to their life and no hope in their heart. Every false religion of man promises glorious rewards in some eternal future based solely upon man's accomplishments, man's obedience to a predetermined set of rules - some manmade, some ascribed to God. Every religion, however, begins with the presumption that man is able, that with enough determination, that with a willingness of heart you can clean up your sinful life sufficiently to warrant excusing the sins of your past and of your present and even of your future. I can do well enough to take care of that, and it is the lie to the world that continues to drive the religious man. And Paul doesn't apologize to say, "If that's the way you're thinking about this - it is foolishness to you - you're perishing."

The Bible (in its written form) and the cross (in living color) declare that salvation for man requires more than man can achieve on his own. It requires a change of nature. It requires a change of heart. It is something that only God can accomplish. We read in Ecclesiastes 1:15, "What is crooked cannot be made straight, and what is lacking cannot be numbered." Jeremiah wrote in chapter 13:23, "Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard its spots? Then may you also do good who are accustomed to do evil." Translation - you need a new heart, you need a different nature. The nature of sin with which you're born sends you running in the wrong direction. I can always change the outward appearance of my life. I can sit quietly in church and raise my hands at the appropriate time and participate to look like everybody else. But only God knows what's at the core of my heart. I can't change my nature no matter how sincerely I try. It's like putting a pig in a tuxedo. He looks pretty good. But don't turn your back on him because he's running right back to the dirt. At the core of his being is who he is no matter how he presents himself outwardly.

And the cross comes along, and it says to the proud, "You can't do it. You can't do it." And you are reduced to, if you are going to agree with God, a childlike faith in the goodness of God who sent His Son to die for the failures of man. And as we turn to His sacrifice, as we trust in His goodness, He gives to us the things that are absolutely vital for our lives. He gives to us a new heart, and He puts His Spirit into our heart so that we can live for Him. He does the work. We're just a product of His work at that point. It is exactly that which we are here to celebrate on Good Friday - the necessity of the cross for your and my future hope and the foolishness of taking the position we don't need the cross at all nor the message that it brings.

Notice here in verses 17 and 18 that the message of the cross regarding salvation and the love of God puts the Good in Good Friday. It's a truth that brings life. It offends the flesh. And Paul goes on to say (in verse 17), "I came to preach the gospel, but I can't depend on words to convince you, or the wisdom of words. I have to depend upon the power of God's Spirit." Nobody gets into the church by applying. You can't join. You have to be placed there by God's work. Seeing my sin and then seeing His love places the cross of Jesus as the cornerstone of my faith because I have to understand that the cross means that I can be delivered from my sin in only one way; that I can be assured of eternal life by only one Person. Because of that, the offense of the cross never changes. To the saved believer, it is his joy. It is a proof of God's love. It is an assurance of the future. He rose, you rise. He lives, you live. His promise is made sure by the resurrection. But if you set that aside, and you allow self-confidence and individual performance to play a part, then you don't need Him.

It goes on (in verse 19), as Paul writes, to say that it was God's intention, as evidenced by the quote here in verse 19 (it comes out of Isaiah 29:14), to bring man to his knees, having to lay down his pride and his human wisdom to be saved. And God, in His wisdom, decided that by the substitutionary death of His Son, He could set the wisdom of the world - the majority view that is based on works to maintain hope - aside. In fact, he declares (in verse 20), "So where are the wise guys that came up with this in the world? Where are those who understood, through natural wisdom, God's plan of salvation?" No. It has to be supernaturally revealed, and it is found at Calvary.

Verse 21, "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." It was the wisdom of God to preach Jesus. It was the wisdom of God to set aside man's prideful ways, to reduce him and us in faith. It'll kill your self-confidence. To get saved, your self-confidence has to be checked at the door.

God's method of salvation for man - by the way of the cross - poses problems, notice, in verses 22, 23 and 24. It poses problems for the Jew and for the Greek. From a Jewish perspective (in at least Jesus' day) the cross was associated with capital punishment. It was disgraceful, it was humiliating. We wear crosses around our necks, but in the 1st century you might as well wear an electric chair around your neck. "What do you got that on for?" "Well, we rejoice in the death of Christ." To them, they didn't relate because it was a disgrace. It was the method

whereby the Romans in the 1st century punished evildoers. The cross was vile to the Jews. It spoke about breaking the law. Paul said (quoting in Galatians 3:13), " 'Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree.' Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us." Yes, there is a curse involved. Yes, there is humiliation involved. But it's our sins that put Him there. But to the Jews, that was a big problem. The Jews stumbled at the method. They stumbled at the message. The word is the same one - "*skandalon*." They disassociated themselves in their religion from a need for a Savior. They didn't like the idea of a substitute when, in reality, for thousands of Old Testament years of experience, they came to the Temple every time to offer sacrifice carrying a substitute. It was fine until it became personal. It was fine when it stepped out of the religious realm to, "Here's the Person that is represented by those lambs that you've slaughtered over the years. He's the One that can bring you in." And what used to be pride for them - in having a religion that was different from the world - now becomes a stumbling block. For the Greeks, who were not mired in religion, their response to salvation by grace and faith offended their intellect. They were mired not in religious practices though they had plenty of gods. But they prided themselves on intellect. The Greek influence in our world over the years has always been the intellectuals who hypothesize about life. So to say to them, "You've got to believe in Jesus" made no sense. It offended their understanding. Right? It was religious ignorance to them. It was foolishness. "That can't help anyone!" And confident in their reasoning and in their rationale, the idea that God would die to help man doesn't register. "I don't need Him. That's far beneath me. This is the 21st century. Wake up, man. Smell the coffee."

It was this (according to verse 25) humiliating, disgraceful, foolish method, however, in man's eyes that God chose to save everyone through. This is the world's opinion - the wisdom of man. This is God's plan - through His Son's death, my sins would be forgiven, I would be given a new nature, He would place in me a new heart, I would become a saved life, I'd have a future and a hope. And even at his best, man cannot reach God. And I love the twist of the old figures of speech. Paul says here (at the end of verse 25) God at His worst is greater and wiser than man at his best. Now he's not pressing that home as some theological truth, but he's saying man, even at his most intellectual insightfulness, misses the truth.

Isaiah wrote of the ministry of John the Baptist (back in chapter 40) and said that he would come upon the scene to prepare the way of the LORD. When you get to the gospels, guys like Luke and John, especially, recognize that those words were

applied to the ministry of John the Baptist. Luke wrote in chapter 3:3 that he went everywhere "preaching repentance for the remission of sins and saying, 'Prepare the way of the LORD; make His paths straight. Every valley shall be filled and every mountain and hill brought low; the crooked places shall be made straight' " - ah, the very thing Ecclesiastes says can't happen - " 'and the rough ways smooth;' " - and then he said this - " 'all flesh shall see the salvation of God.' " Everyone will see. Seven hundred years earlier, Isaiah had proclaimed it. Luke grabs hold of it, and he said, "There He is, the Savior of the world." When the angel Gabriel appeared to Joseph regarding Mary's pregnancy (which bothered him greatly, not having been with her), the Lord said to him about the faithfulness of his wife and the work of God and the Son that she was going to bear who was going to save the people. In fact, he said (Matthew 1:21), "She's going to bring forth a Son. You're going to call His name Jesus. He's going to save the people from their sin." It's a foolish thought to the world. It's the wisdom of God set on display. It's the only way life comes. When Paul was in prison years later, he wrote to Timothy in his first letter, and he said, "This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief" (1 Timothy 1:15). Paul understood the mission, if you will.

So the cross and its purpose for each of us has to be seen on Good Friday if it's going to have any impact on you at all. And seeing it, understanding it should drive you to tell everyone you know that there's a way of life, and it is narrow in its scope. But it is the ultimate act of love - that unless you embrace Him, it will leave you unchanged and still perishing.

There were some folks in the gospel of John who followed Jesus only for what He gave them. The immediate benefit of being with Him drove them. Jesus turned to them at some point, and He said to them (John 6:26), "Look, you seek Me not because you saw the signs but because you've eaten the loaves and the fish. You missed the fact that I can multiply food in My hands. That makes Me different than everyone else you know. That should have spurred you on to ask more questions. But you were lost in, 'What can You give me now? What will You do for me now?' " And Jesus went on, and He said to these guys, "You shouldn't labor for the meat that perishes so much, but you should labor for the meat that will endure to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you because God the Father has set His seal on His Son." It was thirty or forty verses later that, when they realized what Jesus was asking of them, they turned around and left. They didn't want to trust Him. They weren't looking to Him for life. They didn't feel they

needed Him in their lives. But they loved Him as long as He was coughing up what they needed. In John 8, Jesus has another group of men around Him who actually proclaim that they believe in Him, and yet when He begins to talk to them about faith and life, they bail out. They start to accuse Him of things that He hadn't done. They stumble over His love and over His grace. It is only at the end of John 6 when Jesus turns to the disciples, who are one of the few groups left, and Jesus said, "Are you also going to go away?" and Peter spoke for the group, and he said, "Lord, You have the words of eternal life. Where are we supposed to go?" And they stuck with Him, and they followed Him, and they admitted their need for a Savior.

If you read through the gospels, you will find that the driving force behind the hatred of Jesus - more than anything else - was His willingness and His ability to expose men's hearts. He knows all about you. They come smugly, they're wrapped in their religious cloth, they use religious words, they have a reputation for being holy. And Jesus just goes, "Yeah, that's not you at all." And over a matter of time, because the Lord knew them inside out - He read their thoughts, He knew what they were thinking, He knew what they were going to say, He pointed out their dishonesty, He showed their true colors - they ran off. Rather than doing where that headlong crash is, admitting their failure and saying, "Help me, Lord," they thought putting Him out of His misery and getting rid of Him, putting Him to death would work. "I'll just push Him away. I don't want any part." His messages were too close to home. It struck a nerve. It exposed a need.

But it is always that's the issue - when man finds himself unwilling to admit he is bound to sin, he reaches for the wisdom of man, comforts himself with his own abilities, and misses the cross all together. But what the Bible would tell him is you're perishing. There is no alternative to that lifestyle. You have to turn to the cross. You have to turn to Jesus' sacrifice. If you go to any bookstore, you will find that the fullest shelf even today (we were at Barnes & Noble the other day), the largest counter of books is self-help books, self-improvement guides, techniques where you can feel more satisfied with yourself. I grew up in the 60's and 70's, but there was a comedian (or we call him a great theologian), George Carlin, (Laughing) who said this, "If it is a self-help book, why do you need a book written by someone else? Wouldn't that simply just be called 'Help'? And if you're doing it yourself, why do you need any help?" He said, "The language is all wrong." And he's right. It is all wrong. And so is the philosophy of thinking you can save yourself.

Look, the fact that man hungers to be changed, I think, can't be denied. People want to improve. They want to do better. But you can never make changes of any consequence that are observable, and the reason is we have a heart bound to sin, we are powerless to overcome it, and unless God helps us, there'll be no help. If you believe His promises - that you can't do it, but He can; that He died for you; that He has grace for you - then you can live. And really the only thing that the Bible tells us is that we have to call upon His name. It's not good enough to just conclude, "I can't." He now wants you to come and say, "Will You help me?" Jesus said, in Matthew 9:12, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. For I did not come to call the righteous," (self-righteous, really) "but sinners, to repentance." So, once you realize where you stand, then you can ask. And the assurance from the Bible is if you ask, God comes. He doesn't look at you and go, "Yeah, I don't know. I didn't like you much before. I don't think I like you any better now." No. You come, He comes. You call, He answers. "I desire mercy and not sacrifice" is what Jesus said there to the group (Matthew 9:13). "I don't need your works. I want to bless you." The word "mercy" in the Bible means not getting what you deserve, and yet that is at the base of the wisdom of man for salvation. "God owes me." You don't want what God owes you, and you don't want what you deserve. "I desire mercy," the Lord says. "I don't want to give you what you deserve. Nor do I want your sacrifice." You see, to everyone who admits their sin and cries out to God without excuse - at the cross - will find life.

So, the biggest hurdle is usually admitting failure, inadequacy, inability. If you can get by that, the second step is far easier. You cry out for help. "I can't do it. God, would You help me?" And you're going to be pleased to hear Him say, "I will." The hurdle is agreeing with Him about your condition. After that, things are always downhill. But you see, it depends on our response. We crown Him Lord, we get saved. We seek to crucify Him as a deceiver or a liar or a charlatan, we stand in the wisdom of man, and we perish. There's no middle ground here. You can't take it or leave it. You're either in or you're out. The statements are too significant. The consequence is too great. You want to be sure you've got this right. If He is right, you go to Him, and you believe in Him, and you get saved. If He is wrong, and you reject His words, you can mock His ability, you can turn against the goodness of His heart towards man, and you can just hang on to your best efforts and hope for the best. But you should know God says this to you, "You're perishing."

So we loop around, and we end up where we started. We sit in a service celebrating the love that God has shown us by sending us His Son, and we ask ourselves the question - what does that mean to us? John was about 90 years old when he wrote John, and in chapter 3:36, he wrote, "He who believes in the Son has everlasting life." Present tense. "He who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him." Just what Paul writes here. In speaking to that ancient ruler, Nicodemus, one night, Jesus made His intentions to come quite clear (John 3:16), "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish." Same word as here. Instead he'll be given "everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world," (that happened already because of sin) "but that the world through Him might be saved. He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For everyone practicing evil hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But he who does the truth comes to the light, that his deeds may be clearly seen, that they have been done in God." Your life can change.

On this first Good Friday back in Jesus' time, everyone was unsure of what this death of Christ meant. His family didn't believe until after the resurrection. The centurion, until He died, didn't get it. One of the two thieves came to his senses right before it was too late. But everyone around Him struggled. Nicodemus, though, came out after the death of Jesus. So did Joseph of Arimathea. They went public because of the cross. The cross is salvation to those who believe. The cross should have you coming out, standing up, proclaiming who He is. It saved you. It can save others. "The wages of sin is death," Paul said six chapters into Romans, "but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 6:23). Again, making the same comparison, we usually go to work hoping to get a reward, right? If you get a new job, the first question is usually, "How much are you going to pay me? How much time am I going to have off? What benefits do I have?" Because everything's about reward for performance. And that works everywhere in the world - you get good grades, you can get a better school; you get a better school, you can make more money. It's all about performance until you get to God. And then you fail, and the whole thing turns sideways. God will give you a free gift, but you'll have to put your trust in Him. And the very fact that we're going to gather together on Sunday again to celebrate Easter tells us that Jesus is able to

fulfill His promise that there's life after the grave for us - because He delivered it.

So what does the cross mean to you? Is it some distant event on someone else's religious calendar? Is it a scandal to you to think that it would have any bearing at all on your eternal well-being? Is it foolish? Is it an offense to reasonable people to think here're Christians sitting in a room with their eyes closed and their hands raised, and God cares? Or there's a God that even takes notice? Or is it, indeed, what God said - the way of man brings forgiveness when man turns himself to the promises of God? Here's the real scandal - you'd walk in here today and walk out of here today unchanged. I would say to you - don't stumble at the cross. It's your only hope. Instead, let Jesus have your life. And today will be Good Friday for the first time, and it'll be Good Friday every day from now on. But you're either in or you're out. You either believe or you don't. If you believe, then you've got to ask, and you've got to call, and you've got to follow Him because now He's the Lord of your life.

Submitted by Maureen Dickson
April 15, 2018