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1 Corinthians 1:18-31  
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### **“Such Foolishness”**

Have you ever noticed that there is no limit to the foolish things people do and say? Particularly our legislators!

A few years back a man named Robert W. Pelton did some research on laws that have been passed with regard to behavior in churches. Some of them are quite interesting.

For example, young girls are never allowed to walk a tightrope in Wheeler, Mississippi, unless it's in a church.

I'm sure there's a good reason why this law was put on the books. I simply can't imagine what it could be.

In Blackwater, Kentucky, tickling a woman under her chin with a feather duster while she's in church carries a penalty of \$10.00 and one day in jail.

No citizen in Leecreek, Arkansas, is allowed to attend church in a red-colored garment.

And, finally, turtle races are not permitted within 100 yards of a local church at any time in Slaughter, Louisiana.

You think that's foolishness ... Just check out what we, as Christians, believe about God!

If we were explaining our God to someone who knew absolutely nothing of our God or our faith, they would assume we believe in a god that acts like a fool.

Unreasonable. Irresponsible. Not sensible. Impractical, and downright foolish.

Let me illustrate. Take the Incarnation. Do you know any other God who actually comes down to earth as a human being?

In almost all other religions, God stays in heaven, where he belongs.

But, our God comes to earth as a lowly human being who suffers, just like us – well, actually a lot more than us.

How foolish of God to suffer like we human beings.

And how about the parents of this Jesus of Nazareth. Do you know any other god whose father was a wood-working carpenter and his mother a thirteen- year- old peasant girl?

How unbecoming of God.

But that's the kind of God we believe in.

And if God were a respectable God, wouldn't he have been born in someplace like the Taj Mahal or the White House or some other grand palace of Europe or China?

But our God gets himself born in a cow barn. A dirty old common cow barn. How foolish. How ridiculous.

Then he begins talking and teaching like an idiotic fool. Who would ever take his teachings seriously?

He says things like: "Someone hits you on one cheek, offer the other cheek for them to hit." Really?

Or, "Someone takes your coat, give them the rest of your clothing as well." Not smart.

Or, "Someone asks you to do a favor and go a mile for them, go the second mile for that person." Ridiculous.

Or, "Your enemy spits in your eye, love them back." Impossible.

You have to be a fool to take that stuff seriously. Our God's teachings are not practical, not reasonable, not sensible.

Not only the teachings, but the stories about Jesus reveal this same divine foolishness.

A woman gets caught in the very act of adultery and Jesus says to her, without her even confessing her sins, "I do not condemn you." What?

Jesus is getting killed on the cross and he calls out, "Father forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing." What?

Forgiveness for someone who is killing him and not even saying that they are sorry? Mad. Divine madness, I say.

And then Jesus goes and chooses his disciples. What a joke. Jesus wanted to change the world.

Now, to change the world, I would have chosen an Alexander the Great, a George Washington, a Bill Gates, type.

But Simon Peter? A fisherman? Andrew, James, John? They probably couldn't read and write. I thought God wanted to change the world.

And soon they were thrown to the lions, so to speak, when they wouldn't bow to Caesar, and they died as martyrs. What fools. And what a foolish God.

And then there is this theology of God's love and grace which is so perplexing.

You can't earn it. You can't buy it. You can't create it. You can't even steal it.

This foolish love from God is all a gift to us. God's love is all a gift, a pure gift.

What I am suggesting to you is that *at the very heart* of the Gospel is a foolishness, a divine madness.

This divine madness was inside of God from the beginning, was totally inside of Jesus, and came into his followers by means of the Holy Spirit.

And I haven't even gotten to the cross yet. We believe in a God that sets himself up to be killed? A god who dies? Just like the rest of us?

Can you see how the cross might be foolishness to those to whom he was preaching? In the first century A.D. a cross was a symbol of shame.

Crucifixion was reserved particularly for slaves. It was informally known as the "slave's punishment." Consequently, a Roman citizen could never be crucified.

Jews despised crucifixion. The Old Testament says, "Anyone hung on a tree is under God's curse."

So the Jews thought that someone who was crucified was cursed by God. Criminals died on crosses not decent folk. And certainly not God!

The Jews were expecting a very special kind of Messiah—a Messiah who would ride on a great horse and lead the people of Israel to victory over their enemies.

And what does Jesus do? He rides into Jerusalem on a humble donkey and dies on a cross between two thieves. No wonder the Gospel sounded like foolishness to the Jews.

And it sounded like nonsense to the Greeks. The Greeks prized philosophy above all things.

For the Greeks, the path to salvation lay along the path of wisdom. The Greeks gave us Plato and Socrates and Aristotle.

If we could but know everything there is in this world to know, according to the Greeks, then we could find heaven.

But Paul comes along and says, "No, you need know only one thing and that is that Jesus was crucified for your sins."

And the Greeks said, "It's got to be more difficult than that." And they dismissed it as nonsense.

And what religion has it put the instrument of death that its god experienced in front of their congregation for all to see?

We are used to the cross. But suppose, instead of a cross, Jesus dies by electrocution?

And so, we hoist an electric chair and put it on our wall as a focus of our worship? Or if he died by hanging?

Or by lethal injection! Can you imagine an enormous replica of an IV bag depicted in our stained glass windows?

It sure seems pretty foolish to me. It seems almost like we'd be mocking Christ's memory, more than honoring it.

And yet that is exactly what the early Christians did. They made one of their most important symbols the very instrument that brought our Lord's suffering and death.

In our text for this morning, Paul is writing to a divided church in Corinth about foolishness and wisdom.

Some of the divisions appear to be caused by differing views on which teacher of the faith is the more eloquent.

In response to these divisions, Paul quotes Isaiah, our Old Testament text, to remind the Corinthians that God has often been in the business of confounding the wise and stopping up the tongues of the eloquent in order to teach what God's wisdom looks like.

To subvert wisdom and power in order to offer another kind of wisdom and power.

AND it's here, if we are not careful, and many before have not been careful, that it is tempting to turn this passage into a diatribe against learning...

... to suggest that Paul is offering us a doctrine of "know-nothingism," celebrating a mind that is closed and empty and narrow.

But God did not create your head and your heart in order for them to wage a lifelong battle against each other.

God's wisdom has never asked that a book be burned or an image be destroyed.

God is not battling wisdom. God, through Christ Jesus, offers us another kind of wisdom, the wisdom that is deep and true, the wisdom that is not concerned with appearance or association.

The wisdom that is not wise, is the kind of wisdom that points to self, that seeks to humiliate the other, that treats knowledge as a weapon.

But God, through Christ Jesus, is offering us true wisdom. Such wisdom can be handled by the weak and the poor and the unconnected and the invisible ones

Unfortunately, for many Christians, not being seen as wise or powerful in the world's eyes is a struggle.

Not being an insider is a real challenge and can even be a cause of real sadness and loss.

Why? Because there is a part of us that struggles with accepting that God's approval and God's perspective on us is enough.

But why is that the case? It seems to me that it's because, if we're honest, we would admit that sometimes God seems so distant - so abstract.

And the reality is, there is something to that. Jesus, who remains both divine and human, is not here, at least not in body, in the same way that other people all around us are physically here.

We can reach out and touch them. We can look them in the eyes and receive handshakes and hugs and hear audible words of affirmation in a way that we cannot with Jesus - not yet at least, and certainly not directly.

And there's a real longing and expectation that results from that.

To be sure, we can and do experience something of the nearness of God and the proximity of Jesus now ... tangibly and practically ... through his people, his body, the Church.

And we have the Holy Spirit dwelling within us, which is another sermon altogether.

Nevertheless, if we are honest, then we have to admit that sometimes we struggle to be content with where we are at the moment, and to see these things with the eyes of faith.

And we have a hard time being patient and willing to wait for that day when we will know fully and experientially, what we now know in only a partial sense, at best.

And sometimes that just extenuates the foolishness of God

It is interesting how God has so often used those who were foolish in the world's eyes.



One of the greatest examples of this is the story of David and Goliath.

When the Philistines selected a man to fight in a one on one battle against any man from Israel, they chose a giant, Goliath. He was over 9 feet tall.

Israel kept looking for a man mighty enough to face the giant, but couldn't find one.

But God sent out a young teenage shepherd boy, who believed that God was bigger than the giant. And with a complete confidence in God, he slew the giant.

Weakness and insufficiency are the climate in which God's strength is made manifest.

In 2 Cor. 12:9 the Lord said to Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness...."

How is that? It is that when we recognize our own weakness, we are in a better position to trust in God to supply the strength we need.

And so, because of all this foolishness, because the story sounds so unbelievable sometimes, we have a hard time sharing our faith, don't we?

And while we might want to see the successful, the talented, the good looking, and the intelligent come to Christ and join our church, but the fact is, they are often difficult to reach.

One main reason most of the world's great and prominent people do not become true Christians is because of their own self-sufficiency.

You see, the first step to becoming a Christian is a sense of need. You will never have a close relationship with Jesus Christ as long as you are self-sufficient.

Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Mt. 5:3). Until you see your own spiritual poverty, you cannot be blessed of God.

But so often, the intelligent man (or woman) believes that he (or she) is too smart to believe the simple gospel.

You see, the moral man (or woman) believes that his (or her) morality is enough. The wealthy tend to trust in their wealth, not God.

All too often, great influence and great strength keep people from admitting their need of God.

Perfect example. I had dinner with my brother and two sisters last Tuesday evening.

My older sister is an atheist and my younger sister and brother are more like agnostics.

We started talking about what happens at the end of life. All three think religion is no more than a crutch to explain what happens when we die.

They see it as all foolishness. And when I try and explain it, I don't get very far. I think they think I am pretty foolish, too.

The truth is, they are all doing well and see no need for God. How sad, right? And how much they are missing.

A converted Hindu once said to his countrymen, "I am by birth of an insignificant and contemptible caste, so low that if a Brahman should touch me, he must go and bathe in the Ganges River for purification.

"And yet, God was pleased to save me, and even call me to the high office of teaching the gospel to others.

"Do you know the reason for God's conduct? It is this:

"If God had selected one of you learned Brahmans and made you the preacher, when you were successful in making converts, by-standers would have said it was the amazing learning of the Brahman and his great weight of character that were the cause.

"But now, when anyone is convinced by my instrumentality, no one thinks of ascribing any praise to me; and God, as is His due, has all the glory." (That is the last part of our text today – it is not us, it never is...)

Christ started with only 12 men and an unknown number of women. By the time he died, his band of followers was still very small. Then, after Pentecost, that number exploded.

By the time Paul was preaching to the Corinthians, there were tiny churches planted in towns all along the Mediterranean.

Still, it seemed like a mighty stretch when Paul said that God was going to use this motley group of generally powerless people to turn the world upside down.

But it was not foolishness.

Over the next few hundred years it began to take off and people all over the world felt the love and grace of God blessing their lives.

Folks, it is not foolishness. It is only foolishness when we ignore God and fail to trust God.

Thank God that is not the case, here. Right?

*Amen!*