

# Unity in the Word of the Cross

## 1 Corinthians 1:17-2:5

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Paul's purpose is to call the Corinthians to restore unity through their common faith in the gospel, a message which is totally contrary to the human pride, reason, and wisdom that had been dividing them.

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Main point: The nature of the word of the cross is so totally contrary to human wisdom and pride that only the opposites of those things—humility and dependence—can and should exist in the community that this gospel brings together.

### Introduction/Context

If you would open up to 1 Corinthians chapter 1, we'll be picking up at verse 17 tonight. Last week Pastor Tim started to walk us through one of the major appeals that the apostle Paul is making in his letter to the people of the church at Corinth, and that was an appeal for their unity. Some of the members of that church had been in contact with Paul while he was away, and they had reported to him that there were some serious problems. They saw that members of the church were quarrelling. They were arguing. They couldn't agree with each other. And believe it or not, it wasn't over a presidential election. But why? What was causing these people to turn against each other? Well, a big part of it was that their *distinctives* were becoming their *essentials*. Now let me explain what I mean by that. We could think of distinctives as those

things that set us apart from each other—it’s what makes us distinct. And usually, there’s a good reason why we hold those distinctives, at least in our own minds. Otherwise we wouldn’t hold them. But what sometimes happens is that we look around within our context—let’s say, in our Reformed baptistic view of biblical Christianity, or within Clearcreek Chapel, or even in our own family, or just our own individual personal views, however far we want to zoom in and reduce it—we see that, even though we have a lot in common on one level, if we *really* start to dig in and get to know each other and build into each other’s lives and go deeper...well, now those distinctives start to emerge. And we begin to realize that we actually have some serious differences. Because, that person voted for so-and-so (or didn’t). Or, she believes in \_\_\_\_\_ (or doesn’t). Or, they listen to Preacher X. And *that* is where the Corinthians were. See, Paul had founded this church after coming to the city some years before, and a lot of the people there still identified strongly with him. Some other folks preferred Apollos, this dynamic speaker who had come and helped to build the church up later on. Others were partial to Peter, who’d spent three years actually walking around Judea as Christ’s personal disciple. Paul and Apollos couldn’t say that. And finally there were those who insisted that they just didn’t need anything but the teachings of Jesus himself—the just-Jesus-and-me crowd, as Pastor Tim described last week. These identifications—where they were saying “I’m with Paul, I’m with Apollos,” etc.—those were their distinctives. Their opinions and preferences. And maybe they had very good reasons for holding to them. But what had happened was that those distinctives had become the essentials. They had taken center stage to the exclusion of the *one* thing that had originally brought these people together in the first place. And *that one thing* is what Paul sees that he needs to remind them of by writing this letter.

So what *was* it that had brought them together in the first place? And how could they put it back in its rightful place so that the arguing and the quarrelling would stop? Paul’s answer, of course, is that it’s the *word of the cross* that can re-unite this church. And he’s going to give that answer in three parts in the section that we’re going to look at tonight. First, in chapter 1, verses 17-25 he’ll give an *explanation*. What *is* the word of the cross? Second, in verses 26-31 he’ll give an *example*. What does the word of the cross actually *look* like in action? And third, in chapter 2, verses 1-5 he’ll give an *exhortation*. How can they *think* of the word of the cross moving forward?

So, big idea is: *the word of the cross brings people together because it totally destroys the things that pull them apart, like human pride and wisdom, and replaces them with humility and dependence.* And we’ll see this idea of the word of the cross laid out in terms of an explanation, an example, and an exhortation.

## **Exposition**

So—with that in mind let’s take a look at the first section, the *explanation* of the word of the cross in chapter 1, verses 17-25. Listen for what Paul says that the word of the cross *is*.

[Read 1.17-25.]

So, as we said, here in this first section Paul wants to *explain* the word of the cross. What is it? Well, he begins by telling us what it’s *not*. It’s not **eloquent**, verses 17-20. The word “eloquent” is actually supplied here by our translators because it literally just says in verse 17 “not with wise words.” But the idea is right, because in this heavily Greek and Roman culture, people valued the

ability to communicate a message in a convincing or eloquent way. And in fact they tended to assume that if a message *couldn't* be expressed that way, it must not be true. Now, before we dismiss that idea right away as ridiculous, let's just remember that there's a reason that even today, big companies invest thousands if not *millions* of dollars in marketers to write catchy advertisements, and talented, appealing celebrities to deliver them, and they do it *because it works*. Biblically speaking, we know that the human heart actively looks for reasons to believe whatever "truths" that it has already chosen to love. And a beautiful person making a clever or artistic or emotionally compelling argument often does the trick.

Now, the problem for the Corinthians was that the apostle Paul was decidedly *not* a beautiful person making a clever or artistic or emotionally compelling argument. He fully admits that and says that actually that's exactly as it should be—"lest the cross of Christ be emptied", verse 17. It's easy for us to say, "Of course nothing could empty the cross of Christ." But what did Paul actually mean by that? He tells us in verse 18 when he gives his most concise and precise definition of why the word of the cross is so "ineloquent": it's because it's "folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."

I don't think this is something that you all need me to explain to you. If you've been a Christian for any length of time, and if you've given any effort to sharing this word of the cross with other people, you've got plenty of personal experience with the majority opinion that Paul mentions here: it's "folly". Foolishness. And that's a spectrum that ranges from the warm, respectful, friendly response like "I really admire you for finding something that *you* can believe in"...to the bold-faced, hostile ridicule of the scientist, the doctor, the university philosophy professor who scoffs at the idea that a God *exists*, much less that he inspired a book and sent his Son to die on a cross. And there are countless responses in between—which all reduce, at their core, to this one-word response: "folly."

And it *is* folly. An eternal God who created everything that is, out of nothing, through the power of his own word? Whose greatest and deepest concern is for the glory of his own name? That in pursuing that glory he saw fit to allow our world to fall into darkness and evil and sin and death, with a punishment of eternal judgment and wrath? ... That in his compassion, and kindness, and mercy, he took on the flesh of his fallen creation, and dwelled among them like a servant? And that his love for them drove him to a wooden cross, where he suffered verbal insults and physical tortures that were *nothing* compared to the endless and infinite wrath of a righteous God against the rebellion of humanity, *relentlessly* poured out upon the perfect, spotless son he loved so much. And, furthermore, that three days later that fallen son arose to resurrection life, conquering the curse of sin, destroying the power of death, ascending to glory at the right hand of his Father and pouring out his Spirit on all those who would believe in his name so that they too might have hope in eternal resurrection life. *Friends, that is folly.*

"But to us who are being saved, it is the power of God." It's a message about a plan that was fulfilled in a person and designed from eternity past to confound the wisdom of the world at every step of the way. Paul shows that this has *always* been God's purpose by quoting from a prophecy of Isaiah written some seven hundred years before: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." Paul pulls this line from a text that emphasizes the spiritual blindness and deafness of the Israelite people even as it looks forward to a day when God will once again act to reveal himself to his people in totally surprising ways.

Of course, Paul sees the fulfillment of that prophecy in the coming of Jesus, which, as we already noted, accomplished God's plan in ways that were completely contrary to human reason or expectation. That's why in verse 20 here Paul can ask, "Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age?" The mystery of the word of the cross that had now been revealed—God in the flesh, killed and risen again—these were truths that *no one* could have anticipated according to the conventional wisdom of the world.

And that is *exactly* the point, as Paul shows in verse 21: "For 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."

Just think about that for a moment. God actually designed the world and the human being in such a way that, now that sin and corruption have come into the world, it would not be possible for people to come to a genuine, relational knowledge of him through the use of our natural abilities. It can't be done. Now, there are some things that can be known *about* God in that way, as Paul teaches in other places. But in terms of the personal, experiential knowledge of the "higher power" that is the goal of almost all religious and spiritual activity in every time period and every culture—Paul says that it's all in vain. And it was in God's *own* wisdom that he set it up that way.

Why? Because, as we see throughout the Old Testament and, especially, in the story of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, God likes to make things nice and clear. He likes to operate in ways that leave absolutely no room for doubt about who was responsible for the saving event. Think about the genealogical line of Jesus, going back to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. All the women in that line were barren! No exceptions. In every case, God intentionally chose to continue the line of the Messiah's descent through women who were previously unable to bear children so that there would be no question that he had miraculously intervened. And when that's the case, the glory does not—cannot—go to human beings.

We could find so many more examples of this sort of thing in the Old Testament. But they were all foreshadowing the great capital-M Miracle that Paul is explaining here: the word of the cross. The system that God has been pleased to use to save lost people is the preaching of this ridiculous gospel. Because then when someone actually believes it, the glory does not—cannot—go to human beings.

So the word of the cross is not eloquent, and in verses 22-23 it is **not provable**. The church at Corinth included both Jews and gentiles, and that meant groups of people with very different ways of being convinced of things. Paul says that "Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom," which probably means that the Jews were looking for miraculous signs that Jesus was the Messiah according to their understanding of the Old Testament, and the Greeks wanted complex, well-delivered philosophical arguments for why they should believe in him at all.

But Paul didn't cater to those demands. He says in verse 24 that he preached "Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to gentiles." The word of the cross did *not* fit with Jewish conceptions of the messiah, and it did *not* satisfy all the philosophical questioning of the Greeks. In that way it actually seemed to *prevent* them from believing. This would be considered bad apologetics in many of our modern circles. But Paul's focus, as we see in verse 25, was not on those who found reasons to reject the word of the cross but on "those who are called"—and for

*these* people, *God's* people, Jesus Christ is the embodiment of both God's miraculous power *and* the divine wisdom.

All of these reflections can only lead Paul to finish his explanation of the word of the cross by noting that if it's not eloquent and not provable, it's also **not conceivable** in verse 25: "For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men." He's baffled and amazed when he considers what a crazy, counterintuitive plan has emerged from the mind of God for the salvation of his people in Christ—he wants the Corinthians to see that apart from the wisdom of God himself imparted by his Spirit, it simply cannot be understood.

This last point gets at the heart of the argument that Paul is making in our passage. The purpose of his explanation of the word of the cross is to show that both its power and its wisdom rest totally and completely in God himself and the work of Christ. There is not an inch of room for human pride, either in those who declare the message or in those who listen and believe in it.

2. So after setting forth the explanation in verses 17-25, Paul wants to give the Corinthians a good example of the word of the cross in action, which is what we have in verses 26-31. And he gives them a pretty familiar one—it's the story of their own experience. And just like the explanation, the example of the word of the cross completely wrecks the potential for human pride. Picking up in verse 26:

[Read v. 26-31]

So it starts with their **humble beginning** in verse 26. Paul wants them to look back and remember their own first experience with the word of the cross. What factors caused them to buy into it? Well, not many of them were wise according to worldly standards, he says. Not many of them were powerful. They weren't privileged by being born into wealthy or influential families. They were pretty run-of-the-mill, in a way that I think most of us in this room can probably relate to.

And their humble beginnings set the stage for their humble calling, in verses 27-29. Despite their pretty unremarkable origins...notice the repetition here. "God *chose* what is foolish in the world to shame the wise. God *chose* what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God *chose* what is low and despised, *even things that are not*, to bring to nothing things that are, so that *no human being* might boast in the presence of God." It wasn't their knowledge of the Old Testament that caused them to believe the gospel of Jesus when Paul first exposed them to it. It wasn't their education. It wasn't their common sense or their moral decency or their personal intelligence or their sophistication or even their "open-mindedness"—it was because of one, single factor: "*God chose*." And what did he choose? The foolish. The weak. The low and despised. The things that are not. What's that do for your self-esteem? But again, the reason is the same, in verse 29: "so that no human being might boast in the presence of God." The glory does not—and cannot—go to human beings.

So their experience includes humble beginnings, a humble calling, and in verses 30-31, a humble coming. Because God *chose* them, they were united with Jesus, who is himself the embodiment of gospel humility. Think about the selfless condescension of the Son, the second person of the Trinity, to take on a human nature. In his life he revealed all that God is—his wisdom and his righteousness—and in his death he provided all that God has—his sanctification and his

redemption. And so the theme returns in verse 31: “Let the one who boasts, boast *only* in the Lord.” The glory does not—and cannot—go to human beings.

Well, I hope you’re sensing a pattern here, and starting to see exactly how the word of the cross applies to the problem of human pride that causes division. But just to hammer it home, after giving us an explanation and an example, Paul now gives us an **exhortation** in chapter 2, verses 1-5. It’s an exhortation drawn, once again from, the Corinthians’ own experience—their memory of the way Paul himself presented the word of the cross to them. And he offers it as a model for them going forward. Picking up in verse 1:

[Read 2.1-5]

If we’ve been following Paul’s train of thought to this point, we can’t possibly come to the conclusion that he’s being arrogant or boastful by asking the Corinthians to remember and reflect the way *he* spoke to them about the word of the cross. And Paul admits his own flaws and shortcomings in plenty of other places in his writings. But here his concern is to use himself as an imperfect but familiar illustration of the mentality that he’s calling them to share. First, it was a **simple declaration** (verses 1-2). He says in verse 1 that he didn’t use lofty speech or wisdom to make it easier for them to swallow the hard pill of cross of Christ. In fact, he didn’t give them anything *but* that hard pill, as verse 2 says. Paul made a conscious decision to “know nothing” among them except Christ and him crucified. He’s already given us a full explanation of what that message was.

That simple declaration was accompanied by a **powerful demonstration**, verses 3-4. But it wasn’t a demonstration of his own power. In fact, Paul says that when he first got to Corinth he was full of weakness and fear and much trembling. Can you imagine him like that? You can if you remember that when he came to Corinth it was after he had already been driven out of Pisidia, attacked in Iconium, stoned and possibly murdered at Lystra, beaten and jailed in Philippi, mobbed in Thessalonica, and mocked and ridiculed in Athens. So there was not a whole lot of optimism for a welcome reception going into Corinth, and *that’s* what he means by weakness and fear and much trembling.

And those things did affect Paul’s presentation. In verse 4 he admits that his speech and his message were *not* “in plausible words of wisdom.” His delivery was not impressive and he was not a charismatic speaker who could attract massive crowds with his booming voice and rhetorical flourish. Yet those were the very features that made his preaching *all the more* a “demonstration of the Spirit and of power”—that is, the power of God himself. It was literally a miracle that anyone listened to Paul, much less believed in the Jesus that he described. And once again, the glory did not—and could not—go to human beings.

So finally, Paul’s simple declaration, expressed through a powerful demonstration, revealed, at its heart, a total dependence, as we see in verse 5. God led him to preach the word of the cross in such a way “so that your faith might *not* rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.” *This faith* is what Paul is urging the members of the Corinthian church to remember. A faith that rested not in the distinctive ability or character or personality of any individual, and not in the sense or reason or logic or persuasive argumentation of any group, but rather a faith that rested in the person and work of Jesus on the cross—both described and believed *only* because of the effective power of God the Spirit. The glory did not—and could not—go to human beings.

## Application

I hope that my constant repeating of that last phrase has made it easier to see how this whole discussion of the word of the cross relates to the question of moving from division to unity. Along the way, we've seen that Paul gave an explanation, an example, and an exhortation of the word of the cross.

In the **explanation**, he showed that the word of the cross is not eloquent, it's not provable, and it's not conceivable—according to human and worldly standards. We should not expect that word to be received as anything other than the folly that it appears to be—unless God intervenes. Sometimes in our efforts to make the gospel appealing, we compromise it. We water it down and sweep the hard parts under the rug in hopes that we can “hook” people with whichever parts will be more attractive to them. Paul didn't do that. He went into those conversations assuming that his message would seem foolish, weak, and wrong. In fact he counted on it. Do we think about the word of the cross that way? Does our understanding of what God has done take account of the way it totally defies human pride and human wisdom every step of the way? If not, we may be contributing to the sort of self-centered division that Paul had heard about in the church at Corinth. We might be fascinated with human genius. Great speakers who make sound arguments and present them in artistic and entertaining ways. Innovation and freshness. We are just as susceptible to those traps as the Corinthian people were two thousand years ago. Maybe more so, with the way technology has made it possible to manipulate appearances, edit out deficiencies, and control our perceptions. We *have* to be on guard that, however much we make use of these resources and techniques (or listen to people who do), it is *always* in the service of the uncompromised word of the cross. If that is our deepest concern and greatest passion, we *will* experience the unity as we submit ourselves to that word and partake of it together, over and over, until Jesus returns.

Secondly, Paul gave an **example** of the word of the cross in action by urging the Corinthians to remember the humility of their own beginnings and their own callings. We can do the same. Think back to where you came from. Your upbringing. What did you bring to the table, exactly, that enabled you to join the people of God? If you have an answer for that in your mind right now, you aren't believing what Paul is saying in this letter. The reality is that regardless of our backgrounds, none of us could possibly have understood and believed the mystery of the word of the cross unless God had opened the eyes of our hearts to its truth. It's too contrary to our pride. It doesn't allow us to take any of the credit. It doesn't reward our ability or our character or our effort. In fact it insists that none of that is worth a shred in light of the fact that in his sheer grace, “*God chose.*” And he chose what is foolish, weak, low and despised. If that's true of us, how can we argue and quarrel and dispute with each other? How can we let our distinctives become our essentials? It's only through sheer *pride* that the things which make us unique or different or *right*, as we would rather say, suddenly set us apart from everyone else—in the church, in the broader tradition, or in the world. We *have* to counter that constant tendency by remembering who we were, who we are, and the fact that in Christ, *God chose*—and that alone is what brings us together.

Third, and finally, Paul gave an **exhortation**. He reminded the Corinthians of the way he himself had spoken the word of the cross to them—and in their mind's eye, it wasn't too impressive. He was just a man. A man with a simple declaration. But in that simple declaration was a powerful demonstration of the power of the Holy Spirit, who opened blind eyes and softened hard hearts

and gave spiritual life to those who were dead. Paul's total dependence on that power gives us a model for our own declaration of the word of the cross—at home, in the workplace, and in the church. As we strive to make the gospel of Jesus known, we *have* to recognize that the effective power comes from him, and does not rest in the creative strategies of human beings. If we rely on the power of the same Spirit, we *will* be united in that Spirit, in Christ, as a body.

Let's pray now for that type of unity in the word of the cross, as we remember that the glory does not—and cannot—go to us.