

SERIES: Easter 2007

SERMON: **The Scandal of the Cross**

SCRIPTURE: 1 Cor. 1:18-31

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Lewis Sperry Chafer once wrote, "The Bible is not a Book that man would write if he could or could write if he would." I think the same could be said of the entire Christian faith. It is not a religion that any person would have devised had he been able, or would have been able if he had wanted to. As God Himself said through the prophet Isaiah, "'My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways,' declares the Lord. 'For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts.'" (Isaiah 55:8-9)

Nowhere is the difference between divine and human perspective more evident than in regard to the death and resurrection of Jesus. We're taking a short break in our series on the Sermon on the Mount, as today on Palm Sunday we examine the *Scandal of the Cross* and then on Easter Sunday, Lord willing, we will look at the *Scandal of the Resurrection*.

What do you think of when you hear the word "cross"? We see it in stained glass windows and on top of churches of widely varying beliefs. It is found around the necks of the deeply religious, the thoroughly superstitious, and all shades in between. The sign of the cross is made by baseball players before they bat, by pilots before they take off, and by boxers before they fight. In fact, you may have heard of the gambler at the race track who happened to see a priest making the sign of a cross over a horse, and promptly bet his paycheck, rent money and car payment on that horse. When the horse came in last he sought out the priest and demanded to know why the horse had done so poorly when he had just blessed it. With surprise the priest responded, "I wasn't blessing that horse. I was giving it the last rites."

The story aptly illustrates how the cross has largely been emptied of its content in our society today. As a symbol it has been so sanitized that it has lost its original meaning. It's used as a piece of jewelry today, but in the first century it was a symbol of death by torture and execution. The modern parallel would be more like having a hangman's noose or a replica of an electric chair hanging around one's neck.

We seem to hear less and less about the Cross even in the Church. I am troubled at the number of TV evangelists, radio preachers, pastors, and Christian seminar speakers who rarely, if ever, mention the Cross. I am also bothered by the number of Christian people who share their testimony and never mention the Cross or the death of Christ. They will talk about their conversion, about the great change that has taken place in their lives, about the prayers they have seen answered, etc. But they leave out the most important part of any true Christian's testimony, namely that our entire salvation is due to Jesus' death on the cross. He died in our place. Friends, if it were not for the Cross we would have no message at all.

The reason the Cross is downplayed, according to our passage, is that its message is contrary to

human wisdom, and its disciples rarely measure up to society's standards. I want us to read 1 Cor. 1:18-31 from Eugene Peterson's paraphrase, *The Message*, though I will preach from the NIV. Since it's unlikely many of you carry that version, we'll put it on the screen so you can follow as I read. I am aware that some of you have a hard time appreciating modern versions and paraphrases, but I believe Peterson communicates the essential truth of this passage in a powerful way to our culture, and after all, that's who we're trying to communicate with:

The Message that points to Christ on the Cross seems like sheer silliness to those hellbent on destruction, but for those on the way of salvation it makes perfect sense. This is the way God works, and most powerfully as it turns out. It's written, "I'll turn conventional wisdom on its head, I'll expose so-called experts as crackpots."

So where can you find someone truly wise, truly educated, truly intelligent in this day and age? Hasn't God exposed it all as pretentious nonsense? Since the world in all its fancy wisdom never had a clue when it came to knowing God, God in his wisdom took delight in using what the world considered dumb—preaching, of all things!—to bring those who trust him into the way of salvation.

While Jews clamor for miraculous demonstrations and Greeks go in for philosophical wisdom, we go right on proclaiming Christ, the Crucified. Jews treat this like an anti-miracle—and Greeks pass it off as absurd. But to us who are personally called by God himself—both Jews and Greeks—Christ is God's ultimate miracle and wisdom all wrapped up in one. Human wisdom is so tinny, so impotent, next to the seeming absurdity of God. Human strength can't begin to compete with God's "weakness."

Take a good look, friends, at who you were when you got called into this life. I don't see many of "the brightest and the best" among you, not many influential, not many from high-society families. Isn't it obvious that God deliberately chose men and women that the culture overlooks and exploits and abuses, chose these "nobodies" to expose the hollow pretensions of the "somebodies"? That makes it quite clear that none of you can get by with blowing your own horn before God. Everything that we have—right thinking and right living, a clean slate and a fresh start—comes from God by way of Jesus Christ. That's why we have the saying, "If you're going to blow a horn, blow a trumpet for God."

The message of the Cross is contrary to human wisdom. (18-25)

"For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing." The Bible's warning of lostness and the need for a crucified Savior generally falls on deaf ears today. You can preach the love of God and you will always get a hearing. Preach health and wealth and people will come out in droves. Preach self-esteem and encouragement and there will be no shortage of followers. But the message of the Cross rarely draws crowds. Why? I suggest it's because people fail to see themselves as lost sinners; therefore the notion that a cross is needed to save them sounds like foolishness.

The story of the Titanic comes to mind as an illustration of the truth that Paul is seeking to convey. When the first warnings were broadcast about the collision with the iceberg, many of

those on board refused to believe danger was imminent. "Aren't we on the Titanic, the greatest ship ever built? Didn't its builders declare it unsinkable? Doesn't it have the latest navigational equipment available?" The word of warning sounded like foolishness to those about to die.

And how many there are today who feel the same way about the message of the Cross! "Aren't we Americans, the strongest, richest country in the world? Isn't science solving more and more of the problems of human existence? What can a cross add to all of that?" The problem is this.

Human wisdom is morally and spiritually bankrupt, and thus is incapable of coming to know God. (18-21a) Science has given us a greater life expectancy, but it has not given us more to expect from life. The government has given us social security, to a point, but it cannot give us moral or spiritual security. Paul asks four rhetorical questions designed to show just how bankrupt human wisdom really is: "Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?"

The Apostle asks us to look back over human history and pick out the great thinkers: Pythagoras, Plato, Aristotle, Parmenides, Hume, Kant, Russell, Sartre. All of them made noble attempts to explain the origin of the universe, or to establish a fool-proof system of thought and logic, or to provide a basis for ethics and morality. But they did so with hardly a glance at the Revelation provided by an infinite personal God. Where are they all now? Dead. And where are their philosophies? Passe. Most are historical curiosities. No wonder Paul says in verse 21, "The world through its wisdom did not come to know God." Human wisdom is bankrupt when it comes to finding ultimate truth.

Is there no hope? If the best that man can do and the wisest that man can devise still comes up short, is there any solution? Yes, but unfortunately, God's remedy for the bankruptcy of human wisdom is considered "foolishness" by most intellectuals.

God offers a "foolish" remedy for the bankruptcy of human wisdom. (21b) Verse 21 goes on to say, "God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe." "Foolishness" here, of course, is not what the Gospel actually is but rather what sinful man deems it to be. The fact is, God's remedy is actually very wise. If God had made it possible for the best and brightest of the human race to figure out a way to Him, then Heaven would be the reward of the brilliant and would be populated by those with high IQ's and Type-A personalities. That would leave many of us out.

But the Cross cuts a swath across IQ's, across education, and across human achievement. It is understandable to the Ph.D. or the child, the cultured or the crude, the old or the young. Not everyone can read Aristotle and understand him. Hardly anyone can read Jean Paul Sartre or Paul Tillich and understand them. But God has seen fit to make His message of redemption a simple thing that anyone can understand by faith, if they will: "God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son . . ." No one would have thought that up on his own as an appropriate way to save a lost world, and sadly, that's exactly why many refuse to accept it. It's too easy, too simple, too naive.

People must individually respond to God's remedy. (22-25) Our text mentions three responses people are known to give to God, but only one of them results in salvation.

1. The response of Formalism or Ritualism. The example given is the Jewish people. Throughout their history they allowed their faith to become a form or ritual with no commitment of the heart. Whenever that happens, faith deteriorates and one's sensitivity to God's work is dulled. And that is why the Jews of Christ's day were always demanding signs. They were unwittingly acknowledging their hard crust of unbelief when they demanded that God break through with some miraculous sign.

Jesus responded to the Jewish demands by saying in Matthew 16:4, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah." And when the sign of Jonah was given and Jesus spent three days in the tomb, what was the result? The sign was rejected and the Cross became a stumbling block. The Greek word for "stumbling block" here in verse 23 is *skandalon*, from which we get our word, "scandal."

Why did the Cross become a scandal to the Jews? Because they were looking for the return of a Messiah who would deliver them from their Roman enemies. How could a crucified Messiah accomplish that? Besides, did not their own Scriptures say, "Cursed is everyone who hangs upon a tree?" If the Cross involves a curse, how could it have anything to do with Messiah?

But we needn't feel pious and pretend that the Cross is a scandal only to the Jews. Many sitting in church pews today are similarly scandalized by the preaching of the Cross. They love subjective religion; they like to hear of the love of God; they feel all warm when they sit in the mystic beauty of the sanctuary and hear soft music. But when the preacher breaks upon them with the message of the Cross and of the need for lost souls to be cleansed in the blood of Christ, they react with indifference or recoil in anger.

2. The response of Intellectualism. Here he uses the Gentiles as examples. Greek children didn't collect baseball cards; they collected philosopher cards. In the Greek market place the great philosophers would attract crowds of loyal followers, hoping to see their favorite cut down his opponent with some brilliant syllogism or *reductio ad absurdum* argument. They believed that through debates and philosophical interchange the truth could be attained.

But what is the result of a purely intellectual approach to God? The Gospel appears to be foolishness, for it insults human pride and intelligence. If we were going to devise a plan of salvation we would never do it the way God did it. We would do it with a show of strength, not of weakness. We would require people to do something to earn their salvation rather than receive it as a free gift. God's way seems so foolish to the intellectual.

Sam Harris is perhaps the leading atheist in our country today. He has written several best-selling books attacking religion, particularly Christianity. In his *Letter to a Christian Nation*, after listing a number of beliefs evangelical Christians hold, he summarizes:

Among developed nations, America stands alone in these convictions. Our country now appears, as at no other time in her history, like a lumbering, bellicose, dim-witted giant. Anyone who cares about the fate of civilization would do well to recognize that the combination of great power and great stupidity is simply terrifying. . .¹

Frankly, I was unaware that biblical Christianity had that much power in our country today, but Harris' evaluation that we are guilty of great stupidity is actually quite a common view among intellectuals.

3. The response of faith. The example Paul uses here is not the Jews or the Greeks or any other ethnic group—rather it is “the called,” i.e. those who have responded to God’s initiative by putting their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. They do not ask for a sign or seek wisdom as an end in itself; they just take God at His Word. And the result is that Christ becomes for them the power of God and the wisdom of God.

Unbelieving skeptics have frequently ridiculed the Christian faith on the grounds that it turns a person into a gullible fanatic and emasculates his mind. And it is true that Jesus said, "Unless you are converted and become like children, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven." But being childlike in faith is not the same as being gullible and foolish. Sometimes it is being able to see the facts without the deadening cynicism and suspicion that so many adults have learned.

A preacher in England found himself constantly interrupted by the scornful challenges of a philosophical skeptic. "If your God is so great, why couldn't He save all men without putting an innocent man to death? If Jesus really rose from the dead, why didn't he appear to the authorities instead of just His disciples?" On and on he went. Finally the preacher invited the skeptic to the front of the church and challenged him to present the case for skepticism, to show positively what his philosophy could do for the audience.

When the skeptic was through, the pastor did not attempt to refute him; he simply asked if there was anyone in the audience who would like to testify as to what the Gospel had done for them. A man got up and said, "I was an alcoholic, but Jesus saved me and set me free." A woman got up and with tears in her eyes confessed to having had several affairs, but because of the shed blood of Jesus Christ she was now a devoted wife and mother. Another got up and claimed to have been a proud, haughty, obnoxious person, who by God's grace, could now love his fellow-man.

And there are scores here this morning who can give similar witness to how the power of God has changed your life. Yes, "to those who are the called, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God." I'm not suggesting that our faith is true just because it works. I believe there are solid reasons for believing in Christ, but those reasons are never going to be seen as sufficient on an intellectual level alone.

So far we have seen that the message of the Cross is contrary to human wisdom. The second major point our passage makes is that,

The disciples of the Cross rarely measure up to society's standards. (26-31)

God doesn't choose people as we would choose them. (26-28) Now I recognize that some people react strongly to the very idea that God chooses people at all. We like to think of ourselves as perfectly free beings who examine the evidence and freely choose to be followers of Jesus Christ, but Paul tells us it's not quite that way. Look at the following statements:

verse 26: you were called

27: God chose

27: God chose

28: He chose

30: It is because of Him that you are in Christ Jesus.

Now none of these statements is designed to lessen the responsibility that is ours to respond to the Gospel message, but the Bible makes it very clear that no one would respond to the Gospel if God did not initiate the contact and actively draw that person to Himself.

1. God doesn't choose on the basis of knowledge, influence, or rank. Verse 26: "Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth." How contrary to the human way of doing things! When we have an opportunity to choose people, we want the best and the brightest. Whether it's a church looking for a pastor or a company looking for a new executive, or a team looking for a new player—we go for proven quality, bright minds, and good looks. But not God.

Years ago I heard a preacher tell the story of an incident he had witnessed as a young teenager. A kid in his class named Jim was the proverbial klutz—always chosen last when baseball teams were being formed. But this one day Jim's brother was one of the captains, and when it was his turn to choose a player he said, "I choose Jim." The teacher said, "Hey, you don't have to take Jim. You can have anyone you want." "I know," was his response, "and I want Jim." The teacher couldn't quite believe it and said, "Of all the players available, why would you pick Jim?" to which he replied, "Because he's my brother, and I love him."

That, friends, is also why God chooses those He chooses—not because they are intelligent or powerful or wealthy or noble, but because He loves them. In fact, there's a sense in which God actually goes to the opposite extreme.

2. God *does* choose the foolish, the weak, the lowly, the despised, and the "nobodies."

Notice that in verse 27 Paul says God chooses "foolish things" rather than "foolish people," which we would have expected. The Greek word is "moron," but it refers to moronic things as well as moronic people. You see, this principle applies to all of creation, not just the world of mankind. When God wanted to speak to the prophet Balaam in the OT, He chose a donkey. What could seem more foolish than that? When He decided to bring His Son into the world, He chose a foolish place—a manger in a stable. When He decided to pick twelve men to turn the world upside down, He chose a motley crew of mostly uneducated ne'er-do-wells. When He provided salvation He chose a foolish instrument like a Cross. God has always used men and things that

were foolish by human standards to accomplish His great purposes.

But not only did God choose moronic things and people to do His work, He also chose the weak. What a moral weakling Jacob was. What a physical weakling Paul himself was. And Fanny Crosby, the great blind hymn writer, and Joni Eareckson. But God chose them anyway. And God chose the lowly. The word means literally, “not well-born,” the opposite of nobility. Examples like Rahab and Ruth and Mary Magdalen come to mind—women who were outcasts, yet God chose them to serve important purposes in His plan.

And God chose the despised. He took a hated Samaritan woman, and tax collectors like Zaccheus and Matthew, a slave trader named John Newton, and a despised President’s most despised hatchet man, Charles Colson. And He set His affections upon them and turned their lives into something useful.

And finally, God chose the things that are not, the nobodies, the nothings, and used them. John the Baptizer was certainly a nobody; so was Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Dwight L. Moody, a shoe cobbler. God can do that because He is a Creator God. If He can create the universe out of nothing, He can make a choice servant out of a nobody.

I was in a small group of five other men. We were sharing our faith stories with one another, and I was shocked to hear one of them say that his parents had 12 marriages between them—11 after he was born. He was raised by a grandmother, and the story went south from there. But God saved him, gave him a dear wife, and is using him powerfully in many people’s lives. His story reminds me so much of this very Scripture passage.

The enumeration of God's choices that Paul gives here is a fairly accurate summary of the membership of the early Church. A bitter critic of the Church in the 2nd century wrote of the early Christians: "We see them in their own houses, wool dressers, cobblers, and fullers, the most uneducated and vulgar (meaning common) persons." He went on to say that the Christians were "like a swarm of bats—or ants creeping out of their nests—or frogs holding a symposium round a swamp—or worms in convention in a corner of mud."

Now you might not think that's very flattering, but it depends upon who is doing the evaluating. The Psalmist wrote, “I would rather be a doorman in the house of my God than dwell in the Palaces of the wicked.” No, God doesn't choose people as we would choose them, but . . .

There is method in God's "madness," if I can say that reverently. (27-31) We are given in verses 27-29 both the immediate and the ultimate purposes of God in the kinds of choices He makes. His immediate purposes are listed in verse 27 & 28: “To shame the wise, to shame the strong, to nullify the things that are.” In other words, God is actively involved in making fools out of those who place their faith in human wisdom, human strength and human rank. I think of people like Carl Sagan, the late great worshiper of the Cosmos, Peter Singer, the notorious Yale professor who actively promotes infanticide, Stephen Gould, the brilliant Harvard professor who preaches evolution and scorns God, and Richard Dawkins, famous British atheist,

humanist, and skeptic. They will not long be idolized. They will join the Voltaires, the Freuds, the Sartres, and the other brilliant but now discredited heroes of the past whose ideas lie on the ash heap of intellectual history. God loves them as individuals, but their wisdom is destined to be brought to shame.

But God's immediate purposes are only steps toward His ultimate purpose: "that no one may boast before Him." God hates pride and He hates boasting. When a person states (or even thinks) that he has saved himself or someone else, that he has arrived spiritually on his own, or even that he has achieved great things for God solely because of his intellect or his position or his background or his efforts, God hates it. And He hates pride so much that His own choices are designed to prevent it.

But Paul also addresses the positive side of God's purpose in choosing. Notice it in verse 30: "It is *because of Him* that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is our righteousness, holiness and redemption." I am a child of God today, not because I was spiritually minded and sought Him out, or because I was smart enough to see I had a need, but rather because God loved me enough to do something about my sin problem.

He sent His Son to pay my penalty.

He chose me.

He pursued me.

He allowed me to hear the Gospel.

He gave me the faith to believe.

He forgave me.

And He saved me.

It is *because of Him* that I am in Christ Jesus.

And what are the results? Christ has become to me wisdom from God, and my righteousness and holiness and redemption. All that the world tries to offer but can't, Jesus provides. He gives wisdom and meaning for life, He gives me the righteousness I need in order to get right with God, He makes possible my growth in holy living, and He delivers me from the power and guilt of sin. It all comes down to this: when we realize that we as members of the Church are not chosen according to human standards, we are freed up to give God the glory. "Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord." (Verse 31).

I wonder if there might be someone here asking the question, "Well, if God chooses down-and-outers, is there no place for the famous, the wealthy, or the brilliant in the family of God?" The answer is definitely, "Yes!" Notice carefully that verse 26 does not say, "Not *any* of you were wise, not *any* were influential, not *any* were of noble birth," but rather not *many*. Thank God for the letter "M." Thank God for the J. C. Penneys, the R. G. LeTourneaus, the C. S. Lewises, the Francis Schaeffers, the R. C. Sprouls, who have become Christians, but God's word tells us we should never expect the Church to be filled with such people.

One of the "wise" whom God called was a man who has always fascinated me. He was Robert Dick Wilson, brilliant professor at Princeton during the early decades of the 20th century when

Princeton was known for its biblical studies. Late in his life (he died in 1930) Dr. Wilson was asked to lecture on the subject of how he arrived at his conviction that the Bible is the Word of God. I want to read a few excerpts from that lecture, entitled, "What Is an Expert?"

If a man is called an expert, the first thing to be done is to establish the fact that he is such. One expert may be worth more than a million other witnesses that are not experts. . . .

You will have observed that the critics of the Bible who go to it in order to find fault have a most singular way of claiming to themselves all knowledge and all virtue and all love of truth. One of their favourite phrases is, "All scholars agree." When a man writes a book and seeks to gain a point by saying "All scholars agree," I wish to know who the scholars are and why they agree. Where do they get their evidence from to start with? . . .

I have claimed to be an expert. Have I the right to do so? Well, when I was in the Seminary I used to read my New Testament in nine different languages (some of us were doing well to read it in nine different English versions). I learned my Hebrew by heart, so that I could recite it without the intermission of a syllable. . . . When I got to Heidelberg I made a decision. I decided—and I did it with prayer—to consecrate my life to the study of the Old Testament. I was twenty-five then; and I judged from the life of my ancestors that I should live to be seventy; so that I should have forty-five years to work. I divided the period into three parts. The first fifteen years I would devote to the study of the languages necessary. For the second fifteen I was going to devote myself to the study of the text of the Old Testament; and I reserved the last fifteen years for the work of writing the results of my previous studies and investigations, so as to give them to the world. And the Lord has enabled me to carry out that plan almost to a year.

Most of our students used to go to Germany, and they heard professors give lectures which were the results of their own labours. The students took everything because the professor said it. I went there to study so that there would be no professor on earth that could lay down the law for me, or say anything without my being able to investigate the evidence on which he said it. . . .

I defy any man to make an attack upon the Old Testament on the grounds of evidence that I cannot investigate. I can get at the facts if they are linguistic. If you know any language that I do not know, I will learn it. Now I am going to show you some of the results.

After I had learned the necessary languages I set about the investigation of every consonant in the Hebrew Old Testament. There are about a million and a quarter of these; and it took me many years to achieve my task. I had to read the Old Testament through and look at every consonant in it . . . (There is much fascinating material I must omit, but here's one final paragraph);

The result of those thirty years' study which I have given to the text has been this: I can affirm that there is not a page of the Old Testament concerning which we need have any doubt. We can be absolutely certain that substantially we have the text of the Old Testament that Christ and the Apostles had, and which was in existence from the beginning.ⁱⁱ

Now is God anti-intellectual? Was Dr. Wilson a second-class citizen with God because he was brilliant? Of course not. He's just rare, and *even he* had to realize that all his unusual mental powers were a gift from God, and God deserved all the glory. One of the most stirring moments in the experience of his students occurred when, after a dissertation on the complete trustworthiness of Scripture, the renowned scholar said, with tears: "Young men, there are many mysteries in this life I do not pretend to understand, many things hard to explain. But I can tell you this morning with the fullest assurance that 'Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.'"

Conclusion: A great theologian once said of the Gospel, the plan of God to bring salvation by way of the Cross, "I am glad I did not invent it, and hence it is not my responsibility to defend it. My only task and privilege is to tell you that God Himself said so and says so until this day." Friend, how do you view the Cross today? Is it a sentimental symbol, an embarrassment, a scandal? Or is it your glory—that which gives your whole life meaning and purpose? Only in the Cross do we see the incomparable love of God—that He would send His one and only Son to suffer the cruelest death known to man that we might have eternal life.

*When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of Glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss
And pour contempt on all my pride.*

*Forbid it, Lord, that I should boast
Save in the death of Christ, my God;
All the vain things that charm me most,
I sacrifice them to His blood.*

i. Sam Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, X.

ii. Robert Dick Wilson, *Bible League Quarterly*, 1955, quoted in David Otis Fuller, *Which Bible?*, 41-45.