

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
www.lutheranlccf.org
Septuagesima, January 31, 2021

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 158, 294: 1, 460, 381, 355.

Lessons: Isaiah 29:1-16, Romans 1:14-32, Matthew 15:1-9.

Sermon Text: 1 Corinthians 1: 17-25.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

What do you expect to hear about when you come here? Jokes? Cute little stories? Just personal experiences? Inspiring poetry? A dynamic speaker? I surely hope you come to hear about Jesus Christ. Before he ends the first chapter of his first letter to the Corinthians, Saint Paul emphasizes what God called him to do. He says

WE PREACH CHRIST CRUCIFIED

1. **Christ is “a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.”**
2. **“But to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ [is] the power of God and the wisdom of God.”**

The verses before our sermon text included Paul’s trying to remember whom he had baptized in Corinth. He wasn’t sure of everyone whom he had baptized. But he goes on and tells us something he is sure of. What was much more important to Paul than how many baptisms he did was his preaching of the Gospel. When he writes **“Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel”** he does not want to give anyone the idea that baptism is not important, but that for him, preaching the gospel was more important.

Paul writes: **“For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel--not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.”** The subject is “wisdom”. This Greek word for “wisdom” is found 51 times in the entire New Testament and 16 of those times are in the first chapters of 1 Corinthians.

To the Greek people of Corinth, life’s highest goal was to gain wisdom. Even the Christians in Corinth were tempted and touched by this idea which surrounded them. Saint Paul writes **“Greeks look for wisdom.”** Wisdom to them meant power and prestige. We could say that the Greeks worshiped wisdom, but they valued the wrong kind of wisdom. They wanted the wisdom of the worldly wise.

Paul challenges this worldly wisdom. The Christian must challenge the wisdom of the world. Paul writes that his preaching is **“not with words of human wisdom.”** He doesn’t present the kind of wisdom that the people in Corinth had been brought up to know and value. He doesn’t offer their kind of philosophy. He doesn’t even speak in the clever words they admire. The gospel that Paul tells them about is a new subject to the people in Corinth, and the words he uses are new to them. There is good reason for avoiding both their wise philosophy and their clever words. The cross of Christ is emptied of its power when too much is made of human wisdom and eloquence. When glorified human wisdom enters the pulpit, the simple message of the cross of Christ is diluted and loses its power. **“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; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.’”**

The wisdom of the world is not really the glorious treasure the Greeks believed it to be. Their wisdom would lead them to hell. They were truly **“perishing”** in their wisdom. They were sure they knew what God was like and how to deal with him. They were so confident that they had the answers to the problems of mankind, including any problems of sin and guilt, that they automatically rejected what the true God had to say about their salvation through the cross of Christ. This isn’t so different from people today. How often have you heard people talk about a god as if “he is a loving god so he would never send anyone to eternal damnation”? Or how often have you heard people reject part of the Bible because they “can’t believe that a loving god would say or do that”?

Paul preached the whole truth of God, Law and especially Gospel. That is especially obvious from the verbally inspired letters – epistles – he wrote to Christians in Rome, Corinth, Galatia, Ephesus, Philippi, Colossi, Thessalonica. His calling was to preach Christ – to tell people about Christ and what he has done for mankind.

And what is your calling? (Pause.) You are invited by Christ, you are told by Christ, you are even commanded by Christ to preach the Gospel. He said **“go and make disciples of all nations.”** Matthew 28:19 (NIV) and **“Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation.”** Mark 16:15 (NIV) Every Christian has that responsibility – starting right where you are in the world.

God tells his followers to preach, to proclaim, using words. To tell. To teach. God uses words to communicate. Pictures, graphics, and social media can help make the message more appealing in a worldly way, but words are used for the primary message. Words are used to reach out to others and tell them that there is something much greater than this world that God wants to give to them and to all men.

And so we tell, teach, proclaim, preach Christ. But to human wisdom isn't the cross of Christ foolishness? Let's make up a situation to help explain the foolish logic of the cross of Jesus Christ. First you do something really terrible against the law, to deserve a big prison sentence or even the death penalty. To save you from being punished, someone else volunteers to be punished in your place. But in order for you to get off the hook and not suffer that punishment you deserve, isn't there something you can or must do? Don't you have to do something? So what do you do? Could you pay something to the person who volunteers to take your punishment? But the person who volunteers to be punished for you doesn't want anything. He's willing to suffer your punishment freely. Ridiculous, isn't it? If you want to go free, you just have to believe, to trust that benefactor. If you trust that volunteer, you get off the hook and go free and are not punished. If you don't trust that volunteer, you get punished in addition to the volunteer being punished!

So what would you do? To trust and believe doesn't cost you a thing. That's sort of like the 'foolish Gospel' that Paul preaches and every Christian believes.

We preach Christ and what he says. We don't make up a god who is more acceptable to people's idea of what a god should be. People who claim to be Christians criticize pagans who make up or imagine gods of sunshine, or of harvest, or of rain, or of any other thing they are hoping will go right for them. But many people who claim to be Christians think or pretend the true God to be just such a god – one who will approve anything that they do or say or think and even reward them anyway!

To the Greeks, in their earthly wisdom, salvation through the cross of Jesus Christ was “foolishness”. It was the silliest thing they had ever heard. And they were perishing because they thought the cross of Christ was “foolishness”. But **“to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”** By knowing and believing that the cross of Christ is true wisdom, we are saved.

Paul makes reference to the words of Isaiah: **“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.”** Isaiah wrote: **“the wisdom of the wise will perish, the intelligence of the intelligent will vanish.”** Isaiah 29:14 (NIV)

God still brings human wisdom to nothing. The greatest of scholars, regardless of how much they know, how much they have learned, will never find God or understand him if they depend on their own intellect or learning.

Listen again to an example of this from our Epistle lesson: **“The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities--his eternal power and divine nature--have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.”** Romans 1:18-23 (NIV) From nature, that is, from what God created, men can learn there is a god, though they may refer to him only as “a supreme being”. But from nature they can only learn about sin and its consequences. If you live a wicked life, you will pay the price in one way or another. No human is exempt. That is also what conscience, that voice within us that witnesses to right and wrong, should teach us. If you do evil, you will ultimately be punished in one way or another. Put in another way, men can learn about “The Law” even from nature. And we humbly confess that we are sinners, condemned to

eternal damnation because of our disobedience of “The Law of God”. But we have come to know through the work of the Holy Spirit that God saved us through Jesus Christ.

But it is only through the written Word of God, and as that written Word of God is preached, as Paul does to the Corinthians, that anyone can learn about the way God has chosen to extend life into eternity. It is only through the written Word of God that is preached by God’s grace to you even this very day that you can learn of salvation from sin. Jesus died for all your sins. Believe that and be saved eternally. And how is that salvation from sin accomplished? Jesus Christ did it for you. You can learn that only from the Word of God.

Think for a moment of all the lies and falsehoods that man’s wisdom teaches you. Didn’t man’s wisdom teach us once upon a time that the earth was flat? Didn’t man’s learning claim once upon a time that the earth was the center of the universe? Didn’t man’s wisdom teach us that medicines will someday cure humans of every disease? In the early 1960’s human wisdom told us that what are called “sexually transmitted diseases” were almost completely wiped out. But humans bring upon themselves even greater plagues as time passes, such as HIV leading to AIDS, and other sexually transmitted diseases. But man’s wisdom keeps looking for a magic pill that will let anyone do anything they want to do without consequences, physical, emotional, or mental. God has some very good reasons for giving mankind the Ten Commandments!

God asks *“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? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man’s wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man’s strength.”*

If the unbelieving people in Corinth were to look around them, they would see that for themselves. The Holy Spirit has led the Corinthian Christians to understand and believe that they have been saved through the cross of Christ. The Greek debaters and philosophers have been proved to be fools because they, with their wisdom, reject the only way of salvation there is: Jesus of Nazareth dying on the cross for our sins. God in his wisdom saw to it that the world would never find God through human wisdom. God’s way had nothing to do with human wisdom. He *“was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe.”* How much clearer could it be? Man does not know enough to save himself. He is incapable of saving himself.

People by nature expect something else from God than what he offers them. Paul writes: *“Jews demand miraculous signs.”* The Jews demanded signs and miracles of Jesus and said “then we will believe you are the promised Messiah”. He gave them many signs and miracles. He healed the sick, he opened the eyes of the blind, he raised the dead. But they wanted a different kind of sign. They wanted a liberator from the Romans, not a liberator from sin. Today men look for Christ to end wars on earth, to eliminate poverty, to get rid of suffering on earth, to assure civil rights. They forget that Jesus never made any such promises. Many churches have lost sight of the true mission of Christ and they make those things the work of churches. But Jesus foretold that such problems would plague the world until the end of time.

The history of the Jews contains many miracles – yet they wanted more. The history of the Greeks contains much philosophy and wisdom – the wrong kind of wisdom. Greeks ridiculed the thought that believing in the work of Jesus Christ on the cross could make things better for people.

But what is foolishness to one human is wisdom to another. In the congregation at Corinth there were both Jews and Greeks who had discovered that the gospel they once rejected or dismissed was in reality the power of God and the wisdom of God. What an amazing turnaround! Only the Holy Spirit, who calls men, women, and children to faith, can accomplish that miracle.

In God’s kingdom things are topsy-turvy, upside down from what man expects. What man considers foolish, God proves is wisdom. What man considers weak, God proves is strength. The Jews saw the cross as proof of Jesus’ weakness. God made that cross the world’s most powerful instrument for good! The Greeks saw the gospel as the most ridiculous thing ever, as proof of absurdity. God made that gospel the greatest truth the mind and heart of man can receive.

And so we, today, by the grace of God, can still confess that *“We preach Christ crucified.”* He is *“a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles. But to those whom God has called,”* – to you, here, today – *“Christ [is] the power of God and the wisdom of God.”* Amen.