

Third Sunday in Lent – Epistle

GOD'S FOOLISHNESS TRUMPS HUMAN WISDOM

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

Third Sunday in Lent

Analysis by James Squire

18For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. 19For it is written, 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.' 20Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? 21For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. 22For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, 23but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, 24but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

DIAGNOSIS: Human Wisdom Leads to Foolishness and Destruction

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *Demanding Signs and Desiring Wisdom*

At first glance, these wary approaches to understanding seem appropriate. We demand signs (v. 22) because we have learned to be cautious about who we trust. We desire wisdom (v. 22) because

it promises to protect us against deceit. We engage in debates (v. 20) because that is how we test the causes that seek our devotion. To do otherwise is foolishness to us (v. 21). If only those who proclaim the message about the cross would do it wisely (v. 21), we would be happy to meet them halfway. We do not demand perfection from these signs and wisdom. We simply ask for what is reasonable: a logical reason why we should believe in God. But those who proclaim foolishly, like Paul (v. 21), do not give us logic or evidence. In fact, they dismiss those who would try to give us these things (1:10-13). From Paul and others like him we turn in disdain.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – Stumbling Block and Foolishness

The problem is that when we turn away from Paul, and toward these other wise proclaimers, the latter always disappoint us. They try to give us salvation according to human wisdom (v. 21), and sooner or later we stumble over it because, for all its attractiveness, what we are receiving into our hearts is a divided Christ. When we seek wisdom, we disdain signs because we view them as beneath us. When we demand signs, we disdain wisdom because it is too hard. In either case, we certainly disdain sacrifice because it doesn't make any sense. We want some of Christ, but not the whole Christ. What we get is a divided Christ, which Paul disdains (1:13). In fact, his sarcastic question says it all: "Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?" What we get is not even a divided Christ, but a cheap Christ-substitute. We stumble (v. 23) over the real Christ. In our desire to avoid foolishness, we foolishly waste the benefits that are available from Christ.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – Thwarted Discernment and Destroyed Wisdom

Our disdain serves us badly. The "message about the cross" appears foolish to us because we are perishing (v. 18). We try

to take only what we want of Christ him and so we get nothing. Our wisdom cannot protect us from the signs and portents we ignore. Our watchfulness detracts from wise living. Our lack of sacrifice isolates us from others. Ultimately without the whole Christ on our side, we can only count on ourselves, which means we are doomed. Our strength is weaker than God's "weakness" (v. 25).

PROGNOSIS: Christ's Foolishness Leads to Wisdom and Life

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – *Christ-New Discernment and New Wisdom*

It is precisely this kind of sinner that Christ "foolishly" came to save (v. 21)! We seal our own fate with our shortsightedness and we deserve to perish. But, irrationally, Christ focuses on such good-for-nothing lost causes like us-recalcitrant, hopeless cases who had plenty of chances to get with the program but were never willing to make the commitment. In Christ, God embarrasses himself for the whole world to see by seeking to rescue us from ourselves. Just as we have been left nothing of Christ because of our pick-and-choose attitude toward him, Christ himself was left with no God-connection when he hung on the cross. To die for criminals like us is offensive to the world and a breach from the intent of God's law. Yet, this kind of foolishness wins the day, as Christ emerges from the tomb on Easter morning, risen in body, and bringing our new fate with him through new life in a new kingdom. This is the new wisdom, wiser than human wisdom because it can do what human wisdom cannot achieve. Christ does what no one else can do: he transforms our lives outside and in, from the tips of our toes to the core of our very being. Now that's true rehabilitation, and that is something that only can be discerned by those who experience it.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – *Called by*

Christ to New Belief

The crucial difference with Christ's rehabilitation program for us fools is that he can turn us into believers. Paul can't (just ask him!), Apollos can't, Cephas can't, none of the messiah-wannabes in our world today can. They can only exhaust themselves trying desperately to package the message so we'll buy it, and then scold us for not doing so. They can't transform us from the inside, deep down in our hearts, like Christ can and does. Christ calls us into a new being (v. 24), no matter who we are according to the world's categories. The new wisdom and new power are all tied up in "Christ crucified" (v. 23), and when this Christ calls us, he presents himself as our salvation to sustain us and renew us forever. We are touched in a way we have never been touched before, and are given a new kind of believing we never thought possible.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – *Living with Christ-New Power and Strength*

Living with Christ, we begin to exhibit God's foolishness and weakness in the world, not for the entertainment and ridicule of that world, but for continuing God's "foolish" salvage mission to all those who are "the called" (v. 24). Whoever "the called" are, they cannot be discerned according to the world's standards (demanding signs or seeking wisdom), but only by being in Christ and seeking out those who are "perishing" (v. 18). We are called to be Christ to them, to sacrifice ourselves for the sake of their salvation in Jesus Christ. In a time when signs and wisdom seem especially important, we are called to give them a new sign (the sign of the cross by which their own sins perished), and a new wisdom (one that protects them from the wrath of God). Some will stumble and some will mock, but some will see the "wisdom" in such a message and allow the author of that message, Jesus Christ, to transform their lives as he has ours.