

Sermon outline and notes prepared by:
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I Corinthians 1:17b-25 “Good News for Modern Man”

Intro. On December 26, 2004 many tourist were on the beach or by the pool in southeast Asia, enjoying their Christmas vacation. It was a beautiful, sunny morning. Then suddenly and without warning, a series of tidal waves pounded the shore. Floods of raging current swept many away. Fortunately, many were able to flee to higher ground, some were rescued, but over 170,000 perished in just a few minutes. They were powerless to resist the force of the waves that swept them away.

Do you realize that many are perishing in another way, even as I speak? Notice in v.18 the contrast between “those who are perishing” and “us who are being saved.” “Perishing” is a present tense, not future tense. Some are in the process of perishing even as I speak, and others are being saved. You are in the state of perishing right now if you have not been saved by Jesus Christ. You don’t have to wait until you die before you begin to perish. There is no middle ground. You are either on the road to heaven, or you are on the road to hell. Likewise, Jn. 3:16 says, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” People are indeed perishing in their sin. You may be like someone who has been condemned, and waiting on death row for the sentence of death to be carried out. John 3:18 says, “... He that believeth not is condemned already.” You may be one who is addicted to sin, and slowly, but surely, you are perishing in your sin. The lion of sin has you in its jaws, dragging you away, and it’s just a matter of time before you reach a state of death that is irreversible. You are on the road to utter ruin right now until you respond to the good news of Jesus Christ.

Most people are very slow to admit that they are powerless to save themselves. And when people do realize that they have problems they can’t handle, they usually look in the wrong places and to the wrong people for answers. In this text of Scripture Paul points out that this was certainly true in Corinthian culture. And it is just as true in our day.

This morning I want to share with you how you and others can be saved from perishing in sin. I will tell you how you can be forgiven, and how you can experience transformation of life, and how you can know you are going to heaven. If you are already saved, I want to strengthen your understanding of the gospel, and encourage you to stay committed to the gospel, and share the gospel.

So let’s look into our text of Scripture for answers. The first truth I want to share is this:

I. YOU CANNOT SAVE YOURSELF

Paul uses the analogy of being saved twice in this text. In v.18 Paul describes Christians as those “who are being saved.” In v.21 Paul talks about God saving people. So one of the first lessons we all need to learn is that you need a Savior. You cannot save yourself from the serious problems you face. You may be able save yourself from some problems, but you cannot save yourself from the consequences of sinning against a holy God. Doing good works will not save you.

One of the basic principles of the 12 steps of alcoholics anonymous is that you can’t overcome the alcohol addiction on your own. You must trust in a higher power. Well, it’s not just

alcoholics that can't save themselves. You can no more save yourself from sin than you could swim across the Atlantic Ocean.

Have you reached the point in your life that you realize that you cannot save yourself? Do you have to wait until you hit bottom, before you acknowledge that you need a Savior? Are you willing to stop being so prideful, and acknowledge that you need help outside of yourself to overcome the problems of life?

Well let's take the next step addressed in our text. You cannot save yourself. Furthermore:

II. WORLDLY EXPERTS WILL NOT SAVE YOU

The bad news is that people have problems; many problems, serious problems. When the problems become big enough, people tend to look for solutions. But too often they are looking for solutions in the wrong places. People have a tendency to reject the biblical solution to the problems of life. Paul says in v.18, "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing...." He says the same thing in v.23. "What could the death of a Jew on a Roman cross have to do with us today?" they say. In v.23 Paul acknowledged that Jews stumbled over the message of the cross. A crucified Messiah just didn't fit into their hope and dreams of liberation from the Roman Empire.

While many reject the message of Christ, there are many so-called experts in philosophy, science, politics, and religion who are clamoring to give you solutions to life's problems.

But before you put your faith in these experts, listen to what Paul says. First, he quotes the Old Testament in v.19: "For it is written: 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, And bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent.'" Then he says in v.20, "Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?" As we shall see, God has shown how foolish worldly wisdom really is. Then he says in v.21, "For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God...." That is a strong indictment against the experts of this world. With all their supposed wisdom and intellect, men have never been able to know God. And without a knowledge of God, you will go down one dead-end street after another in your search for solutions to the big problems of life. The great philosophers of Paul's day never could bring solutions to man's problems. Our experts are no different. They come up with theories and opinions and more questions, but few real answers.

I want to point out to you the different kinds of worldly experts that tend to be spiritually bankrupt, and will not save you from perishing in sin, or help you overcome to sin problem. First of all:

A. Philosophy Will Not Save You – In v.20 Paul asks, "Where is the wise?" In the ancient world of that time, there were over 50 identifiable philosophical parties or movements. The Greeks loved their schools of wisdom. Their scholars and philosophers were heroes in that society. They hoped that through philosophy they could find solutions to human problems. But each school of philosophy had this in common; they all were based on human reason and speculation. They were not based on God's revealed truth. And in regard to the most important truths - those about God, sin, human nature, morality and ethics, the spirit world, the transformation and future of human life – human philosophy is bankrupt (See Jer. 2:13).

Someone has defined philosophy as a blind man in a dark room looking for a black cat that isn't there! Some intellectuals have come to realize the failure of philosophy, and have become skeptical like Pilate who exclaimed, "What is truth?"

So don't put your faith in philosophy. Furthermore:

B. Secular Science Will Not Save You – Science has brought about amazing progress in medicine, industry, transportation, agriculture, and so forth. But don't put your faith in science when it comes to the big issues and problems facing humanity. Scientists often claim to be wise and intellectual. And so many think that they will get the answers to some of the major questions of life through science. While science has offered many improvements for the outer, material life of man, the inner life seems to have correspondingly less meaning. We are more educated than our forefathers but we are not more moral. We have more means of helping each other but we are not less selfish. And in spite of all of our scientific advances, people seem to have more personal problems and hang ups than ever before.

One branch of science is psychiatry. Psychologists have studied human behavior and human nature for years, but psychology has been an utter failure. If you want to get messed up, just study secular psychology and believe what you read. Someone has said, "Modern psychiatry just simply arranges our hang ups so that we can be unhappy more efficiently." Now psychiatry is trying to mess around with the complexities of human nature and personality with drugs, and I believe that experiment is proving to be a failure long term. Too often the approach of medicine is to treat symptoms, not cure the problem once and for all.

I am reminded of the story about a man who was going to jump off a tall bridge. Everyone came and begged him not to jump. Finally, in desperation, someone said, "Let's call his psychiatrist. Maybe he can keep the man from jumping." So they brought the psychiatrist to the bridge; he and the man talked for a little while, and then they both jumped! Did you know that psychiatrists have one of the highest suicide rates of any group? Why put your faith in them?

By the way, I'm not saying you shouldn't ever use the services of a psychiatrist. Mental illness is a real problem, and they can relieve the symptoms of mental illness. But don't look to psychiatry for the real, lasting answers to the problems of life. And I believe if you follow God's plan, you will minimize the development of mental illness. You can't do much about the genetic side of mental illness, but you can promote mental health by believing and following the Word of God.

There is also something called "political science." Paul says in v.20, "Where is the disputer of this age?" The Greeks loved to debate philosophical questions. And listen to talk radio and TV today, and you will see many so-called experts debating what the problems are, and offering political solutions to the problems we face. And yet, think about the failure of man's wisdom in solving human problems and providing personal and world peace. Wars continue all over the world. Crime is still a serious problem. Poverty is still with us in spite of spending billions of dollars on social programs. The experts and politicians see the problem of teen pregnancy and the rise of venereal diseases. So what is their solution? They think sex education is the answer. But in just about every school district where sex education is implemented, there is been a rise in the teen pregnancy rate. That has happened right here in Colonial Heights.

Folks, there is no salvation in worldly wisdom! Even when we combine all the wisdom of men and all of their marvelous scientific achievements through 4000 years of recorded history, they can't save one soul or change one human life. And after over 100 years of teaching the "wisdom" of evolutionary pseudo science, and the worldly wisdom of social sciences, and the philosophy of moral "freedom", look where we are today! No wonder Paul said in the last of v.20, "Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?" And yet, although human ideas are constantly changing, appearing and disappearing, being tried and found wanting, conflicting with and contradicting each other, men continue to put faith in them.

The reason philosophy and science cannot solve our most basic problems is because they are addressing the symptoms of our problems, not our fundamental problem, which is man's sinful human nature. Why do we have wars, crime, poverty, drug abuse, hatred, and so forth? These are

symptoms of our sin nature. We are never going to come up with the right solutions until we recognize that our problem lies in the sinful nature of man, and our alienation from God. And secular science does not even acknowledge the reality of sin. They deny that homosexual acts are a sin. They are just an alternate lifestyle!

Here is another reason why you shouldn't put your faith in science: God and sinful rebellion against God are totally outside the realm of science. The honest observations and findings of science are consistent with the reality of God and sin, but neither can be proven by science. This is a matter of faith. And because the experts are biased against a divine solution to our problems, they are looking for solutions in the wrong source.

So don't put your faith in worldly scientific wisdom.

C. Religion Will Not Save You – Paul also asks in v.20, “Where is the scribe?” The scribe was the expert in Jewish religion. He broadly represents all experts in the various religions that have sprung up over the last 3,000 years of human history. But religion has not saved man. In fact, human religion is part of the problem, as we see today.

So who are you going to believe in for the answers of our human problems? Are you going to trust in the politicians? Are you going to trust in the so-called experts of our day? I want to suggest to you that there is a far better answer. What we need most is not more government programs or more education, but what we need most is a great awakening to the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. So let's see next of all:

III. CONSIDER WHAT GOD HAS DONE TO SAVE YOU

God is the One who created us, and knows all about us. Doesn't it make sense to trust in Him? And what has God done to save you from perishing in sin? In v.23 Paul says, “we preach Christ crucified...” The cross of Christ is the central focus of the Gospel message. Why did Paul preach Christ crucified? Notice what v.18 says, “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.”

Some time back I told you of my childhood experience of being carried out to sea by rip tides. I needed a Savior. I needed someone much bigger and stronger than I. A large, strong man swam out and saved me.

Even so, we need someone much stronger and wiser than we. And so I want to assure you that there is power in the Cross of Christ. Someone said, “No one's so good that he can save himself; no one's so bad that God can't save him.”¹ No sinner is beyond the reach of God. No addiction is too great for the saving power of God. The hope for your forgiveness is found in the death of Christ on the cross.

Why is there power in the cross of Christ? Jesus perished on the cross so that you might not perish. He suffered for your sins that you might not have to suffer because of sin. You say, “What could a death 2,000 years ago do for us today?” Well, I want to point out that in v.23 “crucified” is a perfect tense. That is the tense used to indicate abiding results. Yes, there is still power in the blood of Christ! Though this way of salvation may seem foolish to the Jews and to modern man, it is nevertheless consistent with God's righteousness and love. His righteousness demands punishment for sin, and His love provides forgiveness of sin.

Let me tell you why you should look to God, not men. In v.25 Paul says, “Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.”² He's not

¹ Croft M. Pentz.

² The Greek of v.25 uses neuter forms to refer to the foolishness and the weakness of God. He thus avoids ascribing

saying that God has foolishness or weakness. He is just emphasizing how much wiser and stronger God is by comparison. Modern man is overly impressed by his own achievements. Though men who ride a few miles above the earth are called ASTRONauts, what is that in comparison to our God who placed the stars hundreds of light years apart?

So behold Christ suffering and dying for you. There is power in the cross to forgive any sin. There is power in the cross to overcome any addiction. There is power in the cross to give life to one dead in sin, and eternal life as well. Behold the Cross! Then:

IV. SIMPLY BELIEVE AND TRUST IN THE MESSAGE OF CHRIST

We have seen that the power of salvation is through the Cross of Christ. But how do we receive this saving power? Are we saved by good works? No! Are we saved by education and intellectual advancement? No! Paul tells us how in the last of v.21, "...it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe." The gospel is the only hope of mankind. But God saves only "those who believe" this gospel. Men cannot "figure out" salvation; they can only accept it in faith. Faith in the cross of Christ releases the power of God to save.

There was a rich Christian who had a large company of employees, many of whom owed him money. He was constantly trying to teach them something about Christianity, and one day he hit upon a plan. He posted a notice on his property that said, "All those who will come to my office between 11 and 12 o'clock on Thursday morning to present an honest statement of their debts will have them canceled at one." The debtors read the notice with a great deal of skepticism, and on Thursday morning, although they gathered in the street in front of his office, not one of them went to the door. Instead, they murmured and gossiped and complained about their employer, and ridiculed the notice he had posted. They said it did not make sense. But finally, at a quarter to 12, one man jumped forward, dashed up the steps into the office, and presented his statement. "Why are you here?" the rich man asked him. "Because you promised to cancel the debts of all those who would come as you instructed," the other replied. "And do you believe the promise?" "Yes, I do." "Why do you believe it?" persisted his employer. "Because, although it was too much for me to understand, I know that you are a good man who would not deceive anyone." The rich man took the bill and marked it "Paid in full." At which the poor man, overcome, cried out, "I knew it! I told them so! They said it could not be true and now I'm going out to show them!" "Wait," said his benefactor, "it's not quite 12 o'clock. The others are not entitled to any special proof of my sincerity." When the clock struck 12, the forgiven debtor ran out waving his receipt in the face of his fellows. With a mad rush they made for the door, but it was too late. The door was locked!³

I believe that in the wisdom of God, salvation is by faith, for anyone can believe. You don't have to be highly intelligent to be saved. In fact, Paul said in v.17, "For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of no effect." Paul refused to change the gospel to appeal to the Greek desire for a so-called intellectual approach to the problems of man. He knew the Greeks regarded the Gospel of a crucified Savior as foolish, but he preached it anyway. Instead of appealing to Greek intellectualism, he spoke the simple Gospel with simple, plain words. The message of the Cross is a simple message. It is so simple that a little child is able to understand it.

the abstract qualities of foolishness and of weakness to God as though they were two of His actual attributes, for as attributes both of them are contradictory to God's very being. Rather, he is making a reference to the perceived foolishness and weakness of Jesus' death on the cross. But God has proven the superior strength and wisdom of this method of salvation.

³ Peter Eldersveld in *Pulpit Helps*, January 2005, page 1.

I grew up going to a Presbyterian church. When I was about 9 years old, we got a new “minister.” I know now that he was schooled in liberalism. I never knew what he was talking about. I couldn’t understand him. He was talking about existentialism, and other big –isms. That’s not the gospel.

Let me tell you why you should trust in Christ: You will undergo a powerful transformation. Again, v.18 says, “For the message of the cross ... is the power of God.” This verse shows that through the gospel God works powerfully to bring about salvation from the consequences of sin. The only message I know that can truly change human behavior is the message of the Cross. Rom. 1:16 says, “I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes....” By believing this message, and by receiving Christ as your Savior, you can have the power to overcome Satan, sin, and selfishness. In the cross of Christ God offers transformation, regeneration, new birth, and new life. 2 Cor. 5:17 says, “If any man be in Christ he is a new creation, old things are passed away; behold, all things become new.” I’m sure we have many here today who have been transformed by the power of Jesus Christ.

Conclusion: Will you acknowledge your need for a Savior this morning? Don’t be like many, and consider this salvation “foolishness.”

Let me give you another reason to trust in Christ: You will find in Christ what you are longing for. The Greeks longed for wisdom, and the Jews longed for a powerful Messiah. And as Paul said in v.24, to those who accept Christ, they find that Christ is the wisdom they were looking for, and the power they were looking for. If your soul is thirsty you will find that Christ is the living water that will satisfy for all eternity. If you long for love you will find the greatest love in Christ. If you search for significance, and meaning and purpose, you will find it all in Christ.

In v.24 Paul makes reference to those who are “called.” God is calling some of you this morning, calling upon you to believe in His son. Will you answer the call and be saved today?

Sources used in preparing the message: R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1937); John F. MacArthur, Jr., *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: 1 Corinthians* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 5 (Pasadena: Thru The Bible Radio, 1983); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [CD-ROM] (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); Jerry Vines, *God Speaks Today: A Study of I Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979). Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).