

## **The Message of the Cross (1 Corinthians 1:14-25)**

Expository Lessons from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians

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### **I. Review from Prior Lesson**

- a. Paul was writing to the Corinthian church, addressing a number of problems there that he was aware of, and also answering questions they had raised to him.
- b. Corinth was a wealthy and decadent pagan city in Achaia (southern part of Greece).
- c. Many of the things Paul states in this letter, while consistent with the teachings of other apostles and Jesus, were profoundly counter-cultural in Corinth and in the ancient Roman world.
- d. The very first problem Paul addressed was that of division in the church, based on factions forming with strong veneration of and loyalty to prominent teachers and apostles (with Paul, Peter and Apollos being mentioned by name).
  - i. “Now I say this, that each of you says, ‘I am of Paul,’ or ‘I am of Apollos,’ or ‘I am of Cephas,’ or ‘I am of Christ.’” (**1 Corinthians 1:12**, NKJV)
  - ii. The subject of this kind of division within the church, which we introduced in the prior message in this series (which was **on 1 Corinthians 1:1-13**), continues through the first 3-4 chapters of the letter.

### **II. Paul had Baptized Only a Few in Corinth**

- a. Read **1 Corinthians 1:13-17**.
  - i. Paul recalled baptizing relatively few in Corinth: Crispus, Gaius and the household of Stephanas.
  - ii. “For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel....” (**1 Corinthians 1:17**, NKJV)
- b. Some use this statement by Paul to attempt to make a case that Paul considered baptism to be unimportant.
  - i. However, Paul is not saying that the crucifixion was unimportant; he is simply saying that he was not the one crucified for them.

- ii. Likewise, he is saying here that he was not the one who personally baptized most of them.
  - 1. Consider what Paul is saying here. He assumed that *everyone* he was addressing *had already been baptized in the name of Jesus*.
    - a. “Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? *Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?*” (**1 Corinthians 1:13**, NKJV)
    - b. Here Paul presents three rhetorical questions, where in each case, the answer would be obvious to all he was addressing.
      - i. **Question No. 1:** “Is Christ *divided?*”
        - 1. **Their Answer:** No; Christ is *not* divided.
      - ii. **Question No. 2:** “Was *Paul* crucified for you?”
        - 1. **Their Answer:** No, *Jesus* was crucified for us.
      - iii. **Question No. 3:** “Were you baptized *in the name of Paul?*”
        - 1. **Their Answer:** No; we were baptized *in the name of Jesus Christ*.
  - c. We can see Paul’s convictions regarding the importance of baptism, by looking at other passages in the New Testament.
    - i. After being rejected at the synagogue in Corinth:
      - 1. “And he departed from there and entered the house of a certain man named Justus, one who worshiped God, whose house was next door to the synagogue. Then Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed on the Lord with all his household. And many of the Corinthians, hearing, *believed and were baptized.*” (**Acts 18:7–8**, NKJV)
    - ii. Paul describes the basis for unity among all Christians as follows:
      - 1. “...endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; *one Lord, one faith, one baptism*; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.” (**Ephesians 4:3–6**, NKJV)

- a. Paul considered the unity of all Christians was based on all of us sharing in common: “one Lord, one faith, *one baptism*”.
- iii. “Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection,” (**Romans 6:4–5**, NKJV)
    1. Paul makes participating in the likeness of Christ’s death (through baptism) the basis for our confidence that we also will participate in the likeness of His resurrection (in our being resurrected from the dead on the Last Day).
  - iv. Also, consider Paul’s own conversion (also described in **Acts 9** and **Acts 26**), as he recounted in **Acts 22** to the Jews in Jerusalem:
    1. “Then a certain Ananias, a devout man according to the law, having a good testimony with all the Jews who dwelt there, came to me; and he stood and said to me, ‘Brother Saul, receive your sight.’ And at that same hour I looked up at him. Then he said, ‘The God of our fathers has chosen you that you should know His will, and see the Just One, and hear the voice of His mouth. For you will be His witness to all men of what you have seen and heard. And now why are you waiting? *Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins*, calling on the name of the Lord.” (**Acts 22:12–16**, NKJV)
      - a. Recall that Paul’s baptism, when Ananias said his sins needed to be “washed away”, occurred *after*:
        - i. Paul had a personal encounter with Jesus;
        - ii. Paul called Jesus ‘Lord’; and
        - iii. Paul had been praying and fasting for three days.
    - v. **Conclusion:** Paul is in no way downplaying the importance of baptism in his statement here in **1 Corinthians 1**. He is pointing to the fact that Jesus was the one crucified for them (not Paul); and they all were baptized in the name of Jesus (not Paul). Furthermore, Paul personally had baptized only a few of them.
      1. Paul’s role was to preach (primarily).
      2. Others generally did the baptizing.

### III. Christ Crucified: a Stumbling Block to Jews, Foolishness to Greeks

- a. Read **1 Corinthians 1:18-25**.
  - i. Paul preached “the message of the cross”.
  - ii. This message was a stumbling block to the Jews (who were looking for miraculous signs), and foolishness to the Greeks (who were looking for wisdom).
- b. **Question:** Is this the worst ‘marketing plan’ in world history?
  - i. A good marketing strategy generally includes:
    1. First, find out what your prospective customers desire: what they are looking for.
    2. Next, convince them that what you have is exactly what will meet their felt need.
    3. Emphasize the benefits and advantages of what you are offering.
    4. Finally, downplay, minimize or completely ignore any focus on the costs, negative consequences or unwanted side effects of what you are offering.
  - ii. Most churches today, in a desire to spread the Christian faith, generally follow this approach in their evangelistic outreach.
    1. Find out what ‘the unchurched’ or unbelievers are looking for. Things like:
      - a. I need to fix my family problems. My children are undisciplined, being corrupted by worldly friends and influences. Or perhaps a marriage is falling apart.
      - b. Can you fix my problems of isolation, the lack of community and good friends?
      - c. Can you fix the deep unhappiness I feel (which may be the result of various sins such as drunkenness, laziness, selfishness or immorality)?
    2. The church is advertised to those outside it as a perfectly loving, accepting community.
    3. The gospel is presented as Jesus having fully paid the price for all our problems via His suffering on the cross. As a result of

what He did, by simply accepting that we can enjoy ‘the good life’ here and now.

iii. Contrast this with the message Paul preached: *Christ crucified*.

1. The Jews, who seek miraculous signs, are highly offended by this approach. This message is “a stumbling block” to them.
2. The Greeks (the Gentiles), who seek wisdom, are highly offended by this. They consider this the height of foolishness.
3. **Question:** What are we supposed to learn from this? Should we try to be as offensive to everyone as possible?

c. **Question:** Why was Paul’s message such a “stumbling block” to the Jews?

i. Justin Martyr, a Christian from a Samaritan background, records his dialogue with Trypho, a Jew, who gives a classic explanation of why the crucifixion was such a stumbling block for the Jews. Writing c. 160 AD:

1. “Then Trypho remarked, ‘Be assured that all our nation waits for Christ; and we admit that all the Scriptures which you have quoted refer to Him.
2. “...But whether Christ should be so shamefully crucified, this we are in doubt about. For whosoever is crucified is said in the law to be accursed, so that I am exceedingly incredulous on this point. It is quite clear, indeed, that the Scriptures announce that Christ had to suffer; but we wish to learn if you can prove it to us whether it was by the suffering cursed in the law.’
3. “...‘Bring us on, then,’ said [Trypho], ‘by the Scriptures, that we may also be persuaded by you; for we know that He should suffer and be led as a sheep. But prove to us whether He must be crucified and die so disgracefully and so dishonorably by the death cursed in the law. For we cannot bring ourselves even to think of this.’”
  - a. (Source: Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho, a Jew*, chapters 89-90; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 1, p. 244)
  - b. Here Trypho was apparently referring to **Deuteronomy 21:23**, “Cursed is everyone that hangs on a tree”.

c. This reaction of the Jews was, as Paul discussed in **1 Corinthians 1**, a “stumbling stone” for the Jews, in fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah.

i. “He will be as a sanctuary, But a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense To both the houses of Israel, As a trap and a snare to the inhabitants of Jerusalem.” (**Isaiah 8:14**, NKJV)

1. This prophecy also is referred to in **Matthew 21**, **Romans 9** and **1 Peter 2**.

4. Further on, Justin continues:

5. “For tell me, was it not God who commanded by Moses that no image or likeness of anything which was in heaven above or which was on the earth should be made, and yet who caused the brazen [bronze] serpent to be made by Moses in the wilderness, and set it up for a sign by which those bitten by serpents were saved? Yet is He free from unrighteousness.

6. “For by this, as I previously remarked, He proclaimed the mystery, by which He declared that He would break the power of the serpent which occasioned the transgression of Adam, and [would bring] to them that believe on Him [who was foreshadowed] by this sign, i.e., Him who was to be crucified, salvation from the fangs of the serpent, which are wicked deeds, idolatries, and other unrighteous acts. Unless the matter be so understood, give me a reason why Moses set up the brazen serpent for a sign, and told those that were bitten to gaze at it, and the wounded were healed; and this, too, when he had himself commanded that no likeness of anything whatsoever should be made.’

7. “On this, another of those who came on the second day said, ‘You have spoken truly: we cannot give a reason. For I have frequently interrogated the teachers about this matter, and none of them gave me a reason: therefore continue what you are speaking; for we are paying attention while you unfold the mystery, on account of which the doctrines of the prophets are falsely slandered.’

8. “Then I [Justin] replied, ‘Just as God commanded the sign to be made by the brazen serpent, and yet He is blameless; even so, though a curse lies in the law against persons who are crucified, yet no curse lies on the Christ of God, by whom all that have committed things worthy of a curse are saved.

9. "For the whole human race will be found to be under a curse. For it is written in the law of Moses, 'Cursed is every one who does not continue in all things that are written in the book of the law to do them.' (**Deuteronomy 27:26**) And no one has accurately done all, nor will you venture to deny this; but some more and some less than others have observed the ordinances enjoined.
10. "But if those who are under this law appear to be under a curse for not having observed all the requirements, how much more shall all the nations appear to be under a curse who practise idolatry, who seduce youths, and commit other crimes? If, then, the Father of all wished His Christ for the whole human family to take upon Him the curses of all, knowing that, after He had been crucified and was dead, He would raise Him up, why do you argue about Him, who submitted to suffer these things according to the Father's will, as if He were accursed, and do not rather bewail yourselves? For although His Father caused Him to suffer these things in behalf of the human family, yet you did not commit the deed as in obedience to the will of God. For you did not practise piety when you slew the prophets.
11. "And let none of you say: If His Father wished Him to suffer this, in order that by His stripes the human race might be healed, we have done no wrong. If, indeed, you repent of your sins, and recognise Him to be Christ, and observe His commandments, then you may assert this; for, as I have said before, remission of sins shall be yours. But if you curse Him and them that believe on Him, and, when you have the power, put them to death, how is it possible that requisition shall not be made of you, as of unrighteous and sinful men, altogether hard-hearted and without understanding, because you laid your hands on Him?
12. "For the statement in the law, "Cursed is every one who hangs on a tree," (**Deuteronomy 21:23**) confirms our hope which depends on the crucified Christ, not because He who has been crucified is cursed by God, but because God foretold that which would be done by you all, and by those like to you, who do not know that this is He who existed before all, who is the eternal Priest of God, and King, and Christ."
  - a. (Source: Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho, a Jew*, chapters 94-96; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 1, pp. 246-247)

## ii. Conclusions from Justin include:

1. The crucifixion of Christ was a stumbling block to the Jews (in fulfillment of prophecy) because it says that anyone hung on a tree was cursed.
  - a. As Paul wrote: “For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them. (**Deuteronomy 27:26**)’ But that no one is justified by the law in the sight of God is evident, for ‘the just shall live by faith (**Habakkuk 2:4**).’ Yet the law is not of faith, but ‘the man who does them shall live by them.’ Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us, for it is written: ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree (**Deuteronomy 21:23**)’ ...” (**Galatians 3:10–13**, NKJV)
2. The story of Moses lifting up the bronze serpent in the Wilderness (**Numbers 20**), as Jesus pointed out (**John 3:14**) foreshadowed the cross.
  - a. The story of the bronze serpent seemed to be at odds with the command that they must not make an image of anything on the earth. (**Exodus 20:4**, **Deuteronomy 5:8**, etc.)
  - b. However, that story provided a sign to the Jews.
3. Therefore, Jesus Christ dying on a wooden cross was in fulfillment of prophecy.
  - a. Justin Martyr, Tertullian and other early Christian writers addressed this objection of the Jews to the idea of Christ being crucified on a cross. They did so by pointing to multiple Old Testament prophecies that foreshadowed the cross. While many Christians today are familiar with the prophecies of the crucifixion, such as **Isaiah 53** and **Psalms 22**, early Christians saw many more examples, such as:
    - i. In the story of Noah’s ark, “some of all kinds” are saved from the destruction to come, by *water + wood + faith*. (**Genesis 6**)
    - ii. In the story of Abraham sacrificing his son Isaac, the “beloved son” of the father carries the wood



to the place where he is to be sacrificed upon it.  
(**Genesis 22:1-19**).

- iii. In the story of the battle against the Amalekites, Moses is told to assume an unusual posture: sitting on a rock, extending his arms to hold up his wooden staff, with one man on each side of him. The Lord insisted that this posture be maintained all day long in order for Joshua (= Jesus, in the Greek of the LXX) to win the battle. (**Exodus 17:8-13**)
  - 1. This posture of Moses foreshadowed how Jesus would have to extend His own arms out on the wood of the cross all day long, with another man (robbers, being crucified) on each side of Him. Likewise, Jesus would have to maintain this posture all day long in order to win the great battle against His enemy, Satan.
- iv. In the story of the bronze serpent, Moses is instructed to “lift up” the bronze serpent on a pole, to which all those bitten by deadly serpents must look if they are to be saved from certain death. (**Numbers 21:4-9**)
- v. For early Christian references to the cross of Christ being foreshadowed in the Old Testament, see:
  - 1. *Epistle of Barnabas*, chapters 11-12; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 1. pp. 144-145.
  - 2. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho, a Jew*, chapters 86-99 and 138; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 1, pp. 242-248 and 268.
  - 3. Tertullian, *An Answer to the Jews*, chapters 10 and 13; found in Ante-Nicene Fathers vol. 3, pp. 165-167 and 169-171.
- 4. “Jews look for miraculous signs....” However, if they look hard enough, they will find another one here in all the fulfilled prophecies about the cross of Christ!

## d. Signs and wisdom?

i. Read **Matthew 12:38-42**.

1. Jesus actually does provide a miraculous sign: the resurrection on the third day!

a. Let us not be rebuked by the men of Nineveh, who repented at the preaching of Jonah.

b. Let us repent when we hear the warning message of Jesus!

2. Jesus actually does provide wisdom: even greater wisdom than Solomon!

a. As a young man, Solomon prayed for wisdom, In response, God gave him more wisdom than any man before or after him, until Jesus. (**2 Kings 3**).

b. Let us not be rebuked for laziness and complacency by the Queen of Sheba, who came from far away to find Solomon's wisdom. Now, we have an opportunity to hear the much greater wisdom of Jesus!

c. Jesus has much greater wisdom than Solomon. He is even referred to as "the Wisdom of God" here, in **1 Corinthians 1:24**.

i. At the beginning of *Dialogue with Trypho*, Justin explains how he had been an unbelieving philosopher when one day he met a Christian who challenged him, pointed him to Christ and challenging Justin to pursue the wisdom of the prophets.

ii. Justin then studied the writings of the Jewish prophets and became a Christian. Ultimately, he became a great Christian apologist.

1. Justin's desire for truth and wisdom drove him to believing in Jesus Christ.

ii. To those looking for miraculous signs: we have them in fulfilled prophecies.

1. "Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word

which I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures....” (**1 Corinthians 15:1-4**, NKJV)

2. Consider Apollos, mighty in the Scriptures, who proved to the Jews from fulfilled prophecy that Jesus was the Christ.
- iii. To those unbelievers who are looking for wisdom: Christians have that through the Scriptures, more than anyone else on the face of the earth.
    1. Read **Proverbs 8:23-35**.
      - a. Involved in all creation.
      - b. Begotten before all hills.
      - c. This was a passage that early Christian writers pointed back to Christ. They saw the references to “Wisdom” in this passage as pertaining to the Son of God: *begotten* before all ages and involved in the creation of all created things.
  - e. The message of the cross.
    - i. This (the idea that the Christ would be crucified on a cross) was a stumbling block to the Jews, unless they looked *deeper into the Scriptures*.
    - ii. This message also seemed like foolishness to the Greek philosophical types, unless they sought truth more seriously (as Justin Martyr did).
    - iii. The “message of the cross”: it is not only that *Jesus died for us* on the cross. Also, it includes that *we must follow in his footsteps*.
      1. Jesus said: “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it.” (**Luke 9:23-24**, NKJV)
      2. From Paul: “Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He

humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.” (**Philippians 2:5-8**, NKJV)

3. From Peter: “For to this you were called, because Christ also suffered for us, *leaving us an example, that you should follow His steps*: “Who committed no sin, Nor was deceit found in His mouth”; who, when He was reviled, did not revile in return; when He suffered, He did not threaten, but committed Himself to Him who judges righteously; who Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree, that we, having died to sins, might live for righteousness—by whose stripes you were healed. For you were like sheep going astray, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.” (**1 Peter 2:21-25**, NKJV)
  - a. The Christian life is to follow the example of Jesus, in taking up our cross and being willing to suffer every day for righteousness’ sake.
  - b. This is very challenging! We have to deny our flesh every day and be willing to face persecution.
- iv. We must preach the *same gospel* that the apostles did.
  1. Don’t give into the temptation to soft-pedal or water down the message of the cross.
    - a. Jesus died on the cross for us, and we must follow His example in our own lives if we want to be His disciples.
    - b. A student, when he is fully trained, will be just like his teacher. If we are disciples of Jesus, we must become like Him.
      - i. As Jesus said: “A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone who is perfectly trained will be *like his teacher*.” (**Luke 6:40**, NKJV)
      - ii. We need to “count the cost” of being a disciple and call those to whom we are introducing the faith to do likewise.
        1. Recall that in ‘modern marketing’ the temptation is to minimize or obscure the cost of whatever you are selling to your prospective customer.

- a. For example, recently I heard an ad for someone selling re-roofing services. They said the cost of a new roof could be “*as low as*” \$150/month. However, what does that statement mean?
  - b. Does the “as low as” mean that it is only if you have a tiny house (otherwise, the cost will be much greater)?
  - c. Or will you be paying \$150/month for the next 60 years?
  - d. (To me, this ad was a classic example of the seller trying to obscure the cost, in an effort to entice unaware, prospective buyers.)
2. In sharp contrast to many churches today, Jesus *did not* follow the principles of modern marketing. He clearly told His disciples that there would be a great cost to following Him, and challenged them to “count the cost” before proceeding.
  3. “Now great multitudes went with Him. And He turned and said to them, “If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple. And *whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple*. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has enough to finish it—lest, after he has laid the foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, ‘This man began to build and was not able to finish.’ Or what king, going to make war against another king, does not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to

meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? Or else, while the other is still a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks conditions of peace. So likewise, *whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple.*" **(Luke 14:25-33, NKJV)**

2. The message of the cross may be foolishness to the world, but to those of us who are being saved, it is the power and wisdom of God.