

From The Pulpit Of



IMMANUEL  
BAPTIST  
CHURCH

## The Folly of the Cross

No. 4  
Series: 1 Corinthians

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

April 13, 2025  
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### Text

<sup>18</sup> For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. <sup>19</sup> For it is written,

*"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,  
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart."*

<sup>20</sup> Where 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? <sup>21</sup> For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. <sup>22</sup> For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, <sup>23</sup> but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, <sup>24</sup> but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. <sup>25</sup> For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

### Introduction

One of the many reasons I find Christianity compelling is that nobody would make up a religion like this.

Today is known as Palm Sunday, in commemoration of the Sunday when Jesus rode into Jerusalem for the last week of his mortal life while crowds were waving palm branches in celebration. He came into Jerusalem that first Palm Sunday for the culmination of his public ministry.

It was odd. Jesus was from a backwater town, born to poor parents. He lived most of his life in obscurity. He didn't jump through the expected hoops of higher education. He never wrote a book. He didn't have friends in high places. He was nothing to look at.

But Jesus had been teaching provocative lessons with an intriguing style and haunting note of authority. And so people noticed. The audiences that gathered to hear him were sometimes large – 5,000 on one occasion, 4,000 on another, a crowded house crammed full of people so that the only way to get in was cutting a hole in the roof, a big turn-out at the beach so that he had to get in a boat and set out from shore a bit so that he could address everyone. Wherever he went, there was a buzz. He had been performing many miracles – healings, transcending the laws of nature, casting out demons...

And so when Jesus arrived in Jerusalem during this particular Passover festival the atmosphere was tense with anticipation. People wanted a change; they wanted a dynamic leader. And they thought Jesus just might fit the bill. The ruling Romans (and Jews who benefited from their relationship with them) felt threatened by Jesus because

they feared he might challenge their power. The rest of the Jewish population was excited about Jesus because they hoped that he would rival and repel Roman rule. And so there were shouts of Hosanna (which means, ‘Save us!’) and there were cloaks and palm fronds lining the parade route that first Palm Sunday.

But by the end of the week the Romans were relieved because Jesus turned out to be an utter loser in their estimation. And the Jews were totally disillusioned and disgusted. Jesus had entered into town to fanfare, but in everything he did it was like he was trying to get himself killed. And he succeeded. The Romans strung him up on a Cross, their preferred method of execution for those they deemed worthless scum. This outcome was not what anyone – Roman or Jewish – was expecting from a Messiah, a Savior. It was befuddling. Utterly baffling. Even contemptible, irritating and offensive. Jesus by all estimations was a total failure.

But what Christians today memorialize on Good Friday is that this gruesome death: naked, beaten, spat on, humiliated... that *was* precisely what Jesus wanted to have happen. It was God’s plan to save the world from before the beginning of time. It was weakness, not a show of strength. It was embarrassing, not impressive. It was grotesque, not pretty. It was the exact opposite of what the world expects from a leader. And yet it was the only way that humans could be saved. You see: this is not the kind of religion anyone would make up. And that’s why it’s the only one that’s true: it’s not man-made.

In short, what we’re going to see today from the next section of 1 Corinthians which we’ve been going through the past month is just this: **Christianity is completely counterintuitive. Christianity is completely counterintuitive.** It just doesn’t compute. It’s totally not what you would expect. It doesn’t fit into our natural way of thinking. It runs counter to every normal expectation of the way things should work. It’s ridiculous. It feels foolish. And yet it is the wisdom of God and the only way for anyone to be saved.

*Let’s pray...*

### **Review** (vv. 1-16)

This letter was written by the Apostle Paul – a hand-picked, eye-witness, authorized representative of Jesus. It was written to a particular local church – every Christian is expected to be a member of a local church. But Christians are also part of a larger network of believers all around the world – the universal church. We saw all this in vv. 1-3.

Paul then quickly moved to state his sincere gratitude for the Corinthian church, a church that he had helped start and that he cared for deeply and that he knew was full of people who had the Spirit of God and would be sustained in their faith until the end. He was confident of their future.

But he was not content about their present. They had problems. He was writing this letter because he’d heard reports from some of Chloe’s people that there were divisions in the church, factions were forming. The church was experiencing some disunity. That’s what we looked at last week. And it stemmed from people falling into a worldly way of thinking that prized certain preaching styles and became aligned with certain personalities. Some people preferred Paul’s speaking, some Apollos’, some Peter’s. We saw last week that Paul said that way of thinking was not right.

It feels right. It's normal. It's natural to center your Self and sort out into cliques. It's totally intuitive to gravitate towards personalities that project themselves in ways that are appealing to you and that you click with. But **Christianity is completely counterintuitive**.

Here's how we're going to move through this text today... We're going to think about intuitive, expected ways that things should work. And then we're going to show how Christianity runs counter to that.

### **Dynamism (v. 17)**

For the first one, we're going to go back into v. 17, the verse just before where we started reading for today. Verse 17 introduces the concept that Paul runs with next. And it reveals to us a common expectation that people intuitively have, and that is dynamism. We want to follow dynamic people, especially as seen in smooth speaking. We prize communication gifts. I've gone to several campus visits lately with Lucy. Who is a college going to put up to try to convince you to go to their school? Someone who is shy and stutters? No. Someone who is articulate and confident and funny and isn't afraid of public speaking. It's just obvious and intuitive. We're drawn to dynamic speakers. A politician has to hold people's attention at a rally. A podcaster has to be interesting. A lawyer has to be convincing. A salesperson has to be slick.

And so if you're starting a religion or planting a church, the conventional wisdom would be to get a gregarious personality that can draw a crowd. They usually need to look good and be well dressed too – it gives a sense that this is someone important, intelligent, successful... and we're drawn to that. We want to be part of that.

But Paul says in v. 17 that Christ sent him not to win adherents to his fan club, but to preach the gospel, what he calls “the word of the cross” in v. 18. And even that he did not do “with words of eloquent wisdom.” He was very careful not to play that game that was so popular in Corinth, and today. He didn't try to be super polished and well-produced. He was a simple messenger trying to relay what Christ did and get out of the way.

Yesterday at GFC – our Pastoral Apprenticeship Cohort – we were talking about preaching. I mentioned one preaching book that is good. And I said, “But the author is one of the ugliest guys I've ever seen.” And they Googled him and agreed. He would probably have a hard time getting hired in many churches today. We intuitively think that in order to grow a church and expand the reach of our religious organization we need to present a put together picture.

I've been looking at church websites lately trying to help someone find a church in a different city. And I have to confess: I judge a church by its website. I look at the staff pages and am turned off by overweight pastors, low audio/video quality of sermons is a knock against a church, and pictures of people that look a little dorky. I want to see high resolution, crisp depictions of young, beautiful people. But that is worldliness. That is the intuitive way you grow an organization. And Paul eschewed that. He rejected that. He did not prize polished people with smooth speaking. That's not how Christianity markets itself. That's the first way that **Christianity is completely counterintuitive** that we see here.

### **Pluralism (v. 18)**

But it wasn't just the way Paul spoke that was counterintuitive for winning friends and influencing people. It was also the restrictive way he thought that framed his speaking. We intuitively think that there are multiple paths to God or enlightenment or the afterlife or however you define your goal. Religious pluralism is popular. Inclusivity is easy and intuitive. But exclusivity is hard and turns people away. We want a religion that is low stakes. But **Christianity is counterintuitive** because it claims there is only one way and following it matters more than anything else.

Look at v. 18. Paul says – “For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.” What a binary thing to say! And exclusive. And it could sound arrogant – “us who are being saved” (it's not, as we'll explain more in a bit). But Paul doesn't sugar coat things. He doesn't equivocate. He is clear and blood earnest. “[T]here are only two kinds of people in the world – those in the process of perishing and those in the process of being saved.”<sup>1</sup>

We want there to be other ways. We don't want to accept the idea that there are just two options. And we certainly don't want to say that those who don't agree with us are on the path to hell. That doesn't seem nice. And being nice and not making sharp distinctions is the intuitive way many people would think religion should be. It's what most made up religions say – Bahai, revisionist Protestant Christianity, post-Vatican II Catholicism...

But Paul is saying something here that really rubs us the wrong way – there are just two paths: the broad path that leads to destruction and the narrow path that leads to salvation. That's what Jesus himself taught (Mt. 7:13-14). We want to believe that there are many paths to God and almost everyone gets there eventually. But Christianity says that there are people who are perishing, and they find the word of the cross silly. And there are people who are being saved and they are the one who find the message of the cross powerful. The response to the gospel is the dividing line. That's **counterintuitive**. And that's at the core of Christianity.

### **Subjectivism** (v. 19)

What else describes what comes intuitively to us that Christianity contradicts? How about subjectivism – the idea that our feelings and intuitions are determinative? Subjectivism is a mindset that resists authority. It avoids objective facts. It is definitely not comfortable with written texts with fixed meaning. But Christianity is a revealed religion. It's not based on what you want or wish to be true, but what God has told us. And as a revealed religion it is a religion of the book – recorded revelation for all to read – not a religion based on private impressions.

Notice how we're engaging with a written text right now and trying to let it contradict and correct us. And notice how Paul himself, in v. 19, quotes a written text – “For it is written, ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.’” That's a quote from the OT book of Isaiah, ch. 29, v. 14. Isn't that interesting? Paul is quoting texts, Scripture, assuming that they are inspired and authoritative. That's **counterintuitive**.

We much prefer to go by our feelings. *That feels right. That feels wrong. I sense this. I sense that.* But Christianity is **counterintuitive** in that it is based on texts. It doesn't really matter what you feel, the text says this. That's the very definition of **counterintuitive** because you have an authoritative text that can counter your intuitions.

### **Elitism (v. 20)**

Alright, we've mentioned dynamism, pluralism, subjectivism. These are all isms that are intuitive to us, natural mindsets. We want dynamic people, we want there to be multiple paths, and we want to think what seems right to us. But Christianity doesn't comply with those impulses. It's about truth over personality, exclusive truth, revealed truth.

What else comes intuitively for us? How about elitism? The fascination with experts. The elevation of certain people to a status based on credentials and titles. I'm not going to spend too much time on this because we'll talk about the idea some more next week, but you can see it in v. 20.

Here Paul asks, "Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age?" These were respected positions perceived to be intelligent and accomplished. It would be like the PhD, the guru, and the influencer with a million followers. Jordan B. Peterson has 8.66 million subscribers on YouTube. Joe Rogan has 19.6. By way of contrast, Timothy Keller has 13.8 thousand. I have 311 followers on X. But it doesn't matter, Paul is saying! God – who is the Maker, Sustainer, and Judge of all 8.1 billion people on the planet right now – has confounded the wise, the scribe, the debater. "Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?" He does not need celebrities or people with credentials to give him credibility. Being in a position of respect or popularity does not mean anything in God's economy. Christianity is not a movement dependent on having adherents among the elite in the world's eyes. That is **counterintuitive**.

### **Self-Helpism (v. 21)**

This next one is huge. It's really at the essence of this whole section and behind everything I've been mentioning. What is intuitive to us all at the most elemental level, that Christianity completely contradicts? Self-helpism. This is so innate. This is what every other religion does – it offers you advice on things you can do to improve yourself in this life and increase your chances for good in the next life. And for those who aren't religious, there are less formalized self-help philosophies. But everyone is working on something, with a therapist or on their own. Buying the books, going to the seminars, watching the YouTubers. And they're getting the wisdom of the world, which is self-help, self-improvement.

What is Jordan Peterson telling people, especially young men? Rules for life. Make your bed. Take responsibility. There is a lot of overlap here with biblical wisdom, found for example in the book of Proverbs. But it's Christless. It's all law and no gospel. It's assuming that you can do it and by doing it you can save yourself. It's similar with Andrew Huberman (6.73 million subscribers) and his prescriptions for self-optimization. These are our modern representatives of wisdom. They give tips for how to make yourself better. And people eat this up!

It's so intuitive. I intuitively know I have some problems. I need to change. And then my intuitive solution is to find a wise guru who will give me some encouragement, give me some advice, give me a plan that I can follow to clean my life up, pick myself up. That is the way of every religion and every philosophy and every talking head and it

resonates deep down with every person. I want to be told I can save myself and how to do it.

But Christianity comes in and turns that completely on its head. It doesn't give you a prescription for self-improvement. Jesus doesn't come with help on how to actualize yourself, be more successful, be a better you. **Christianity is completely counterintuitive** in this way.

Look at v. 21 – “For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.” In the wisdom of God. It's not God is un-wise. He is all-wise, infinitely wise. And in his wise plan he designed it so that the world does not know him through wisdom, that is through human ingenuity and effort. We don't rise up to get to God through our search for meaning and self-exertion. He comes down to get us through grace. This is **completely counterintuitive**. We want to do something, contribute something, play a part, have something to show. But God says, “No. Just receive. Just believe.”

“It pleased God.” That's a phrase worthy of a whole sermon's reflection and more. “Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases” (Ps. 115:3). It pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.” Belief. Faith. Being saved by faith is the opposite of being saved by works. Faith is trusting, not trying. As one person has put it, this verse is saying that “when it comes to knowing God, the nub of the issue is trust, not wisdom.”<sup>2</sup> You do not know God through wisdom, through the message of the self-help teachers. You know God through faith, through the message of gospel preachers.

This is the hardest thing for people to get about Christianity. They so desperately want to turn it into another kind of regimen for cleaning your life up. They're looking for something they can do to improve and will try to read the Bible that way and view church that way. *Yeah, I need to read the Bible more, I need to go to church more, I need to do better.* That's not what this is about. Listen to how Paul puts this in the book of Romans 4:5, perhaps the most succinctly stated representation of the **completely counterintuitive** nature of Christianity anywhere in the Bible – “To the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness.” That just seems so wrong, doesn't it? We intuitively think: To the one who works hard and becomes godly, he is considered righteous. That makes sense. But that is mere human wisdom.

The gospel tells us that God in his wisdom has determined that no one will come to know him savingly through their own wisdom, but through the **counterintuitive** message of justification by faith alone. We intuitively operate by works righteousness. Christianity is about faith righteousness. All you have to do is believe the gospel that says you don't have to do anything, Christ did it all. *No, that can't be right. I've got to do something. I don't want that message, which says I'm incapable of contributing anything. That's absurd. I want a message that makes me feel smart and gives me a sense that I am capable of contributing.* **Christianity is completely counterintuitive** in it's message that we are sinners who can only be saved by faith in what Christ has done, not by works in any way. That's **completely counterintuitive**, isn't it?

**Humanism** (v. 22)

So what's intuitive to us? Verse 17 – dynamism; v. 18 – pluralism; v. 19 – subjectivism; v. 20 – elitism; v. 21 – self-helpism. And Christianity is **counterintuitive** in all those ways. What's the assumption of the world's way of thinking that is found in v. 22? I'm going to call it humanism. And that term can have a wide range of meanings, but here I'm referring to the inherent tendency to privilege our human perspective and try to center ourselves.

In the Corinthian church there were both Jews and non-Jews, otherwise known as Gentiles or Greeks. These two cultures were different in some ways, but the same in the fundamental human tendency to think highly of themselves. We've been talking about the Greek obsession with human wisdom. Here Paul mentions the Jewish demand for signs. They insisted that anyone purporting to represent God should perform for them, prove themselves with attention-grabbing displays of power. This is what C.S. Lewis referred to as 'putting God in the dock,' the dock being the British version of the witness stand, making God a defendant in a court case. We are interrogating him as prosecutor or even judge. But God is not in the dock. We are. We are not the judge. He is.

The demand for proof indicates that they "set themselves up as an authority that can pass judgment on God," as one person has put it.<sup>3</sup> Another writes, "[A]ll people everywhere have suffered under the same delusion that they can reach God by *their* preferred means."<sup>4</sup> We center the I not just against other people, but against God himself. *I think you should do things this way*. But he doesn't oblige. This is yet another way that **Christianity is completely counterintuitive**.

### **Triumphalism** (v. 23)

Verse 23 – "...but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles." What is intuitive? Triumphalism – power; glory; victory; a Christ who crucifies, not one who is crucified. A Savior who gets killed?! That is **completely counterintuitive**. As others have pointed out – "It is strange, to say the least, that the all-powerful creator would choose a shameful execution to redeem the world."<sup>5</sup> "To those hoping for something impressive and irrefutable, Paul preaches the altogether odd and unexpected: *Christ crucified*."<sup>6</sup>

This was a stumbling block to Jews, something that they just couldn't get over. It kept tripping them up and preventing them from accepting Jesus as the Messiah. In the mid-second century a Christian named Justin wrote a dialogue with a Jewish rabbi named Trypho. In it he was trying to convince Trypho from OT texts that Jesus was the Christ, to which Trypho responded – "Sir, these and such-like passages of scripture compel us to await One who is great and glorious.... But this your so-called Christ is without honour and glory, so that He has even fallen into the uttermost curse that is in the law of God, for he was crucified."<sup>7</sup>

Greeks similarly found a crucified king laughable, unimaginable. To quote a commentator – "The cross is nonsense to some because it represents such a repugnant worldview. It is an assault on the values of power, glory, honor, and success, so dear to Corinthian and many other societies."<sup>8</sup> Triumphalism is intuitive. Someone who appeared to suffer such a humiliating defeat is **counterintuitive**.

But let's remind ourselves or make clear if it's not, why Jesus went to the Cross. It's because we all actually deserve to be condemned and executed for our sins. We're not good people who just need better influences and instruction. We're rebels against

God's throne who should be punished. But in order to redeem us, Jesus bore the judgment on our behalf, took the penalty in our place. There was no other way for us to be saved, than for Christ to be crucified. We don't want a message about Christ and him crucified. We want a message about humanity and it improved.<sup>9</sup> **Christianity** centered on the Cross **is completely counterintuitive**.

### **Pelagianism** (v. 24)

One more in v. 24. What is intuitive to us? Pelagianism. What is Pelagianism? It's a heresy named after a guy who lived around the year 400 A.D. named Pelagius who taught that humans are not inherently sinful and therefore their salvation is completely left up to their own choice. In other words, our salvation is owing to ourselves, not God's grace alone. Pelagianism comes intuitively for us.

But notice what it says in v. 24 – "...but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." To those who are called. To those who are called/elected/predestined/chosen by God, they find the Cross of Christ to be amazing because it displays God's power to save and his inimitable wisdom. Being saved is not dependent on anything in us – being Jew or Greek or smart or good or rich or whatever. It's completely and totally dependent on God and his gracious will. That bothers us, doesn't it? Why? Because we want to be able to take some responsibility for our salvation. We want to have a hand in it. We want to find some reason in ourselves, instead of in God alone. But **Christianity is completely counterintuitive** because it's all of grace, sovereign grace. And God gets all the glory. Have you seen the beauty of that? Do you love that? Or do you resent and rage against it?

One time Jesus prayed, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will" (Mt. 11:25-26). It's not the great, the learned, the disciplined, the hard working, the accomplished or those who are making progress who are saved, but those who acknowledge their utter need, like a little child. Do you delight in that?

### **Conclusion** (v. 25)

To conclude with v. 25 – this way things work, God's way, the way of the Cross is way better than anything we could come up with. "For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men." **Christianity is completely counterintuitive**, but God has done something no one expected, something bigger and better than what we could have come up with on our own. It humbles us and gives us hope. It's what we are focusing on this week. God took what looked like a disaster and changed the course of eternity through it. It's not what the crowd on the road to Jerusalem waving Palm branches were expecting, but it's way better. It's wiser and more powerful than anything we could have come up with on our own.

### **The Lord's Table**

Sunday Jesus entered Jerusalem. Thursday night he sat down to eat the Passover meal with his disciples and he transformed that commemoration of and participation in the event of the Exodus into a new ritual commemoration of and participation in the event that would happen the next day, Friday; that is, the death of Jesus for the salvation

of his people from the judgment they deserved for their sins. This made the Cross the centerpiece of Christianity for all time to come, something to be regularly rehearsed and remembered.

He “took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, ‘This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.’ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1Cor. 11:23-26).

Just like in the Passover meal you had to be officially part of the people of Israel to eat, so in this Lord’s Table you have to be a baptized member of a local church to eat. And as you eat, may the Lord use it to drive home to you the **counterintuitive** yet captivating message of the gospel...

This sermon was addressed originally to the people at Immanuel Baptist Church, Chicago, Illinois, by Pastor Nathan Carter on Sunday morning, April 13 2025. It is not meant to be a polished essay, but was written to be delivered orally. The mission of Immanuel is to be a multiplying community that enjoys and proclaims the Good News of Christ in the great city of Chicago.

End Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> Craig Blomberg, *1 Corinthians*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 52.

<sup>2</sup> Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 97.

<sup>3</sup> Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians: A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 47.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Gardner, *1 Corinthians*, Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2018), 99-100.

<sup>5</sup> Ciampa and Rosner, 96.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>7</sup> Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 31-32.

<sup>8</sup> Ciampa and Rosner, 91.

<sup>9</sup> Adapted from a phrase in William H. Willimon, *Peculiar Speech: Preaching to the Baptized* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 9.