

“THE MESSAGE OF THE CROSS”
Psalm 15, I Corinthians 1:18-31, Matthew 5:1-12
February 1 & 2, 2020

“If you travel up I-395 through Washington, D.C., and cross over the Potomac River, you will likely cross the Arland D. Williams Jr. Memorial Bridge. Who was Arland D. Williams Jr.?”

“On January 13, 1982, he gave hope to five individuals at the cost of his own life. On that cold January day, Air Florida Flight 90 crashed into the icy Potomac. Ice on the wings prevented the plane from a successful takeoff. Almost all of the passengers perished.

“Five different times, a helicopter dropped a rope to save Williams. Five times, Williams passed the rope to other passengers in worse shape than he was. When the rope was extended to Williams the sixth time, he could not take hold and succumbed to the frigid waters.

“His heroism was not rash. Aware that his own strength was fading, he deliberately handed hope to someone else over the space of several minutes.

“Jesus did not make a rash decision to give His life for ours either. His destiny from eternity past was to be an atoning sacrifice for us. We need only take the lifeline handed to us by His sacrificial death on the cross”¹ in order to find the life that only He can give to us.

But in both cases, there are many who would say, “WHAT A FOOLISH MAN!” Why would anyone purposefully give up their own live in order to save another? What about your loved ones? What about the future? What about your career? What about...? What about...? The list could get real long on why a person would be so foolish in giving their life away in order to save another one’s life.

Today I want us to look at what the MESSAGE OF THE CROSS means for all of us. I want us to look at three Scripture references to see what God is doing, and has already done, so that we might be with Him; Psalm 15, I Corinthians 1 and Matthew 5.

To start, I want us to look at the question, WHAT IS REQUIRED TO BE IN GOD’S PRESENCE? The first Scripture reference, Psalm 15, one of the earlier psalms of King David in the

¹ (PreachingToday.com, *More Perfect Illustrations*, [Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 2003] pg. 256-7)

Old Testament, defines the age old question, “How do we come into God’s good GRACES?” What is it that is required for us as humans to find ourselves with God? Listen how David puts it. This is Psalm 15. (READ Psalm 15)

Wow, that’s a pretty impressive list of things that grant us access to the Lord? Blameless, righteous, truth, no slander, good neighbor relationships, a positive expression of others, detesting wrong and evil, honoring those who fear the Lord, keeping our oath - even if it hurts us, lending without interest, and not accepting bribes. Anyone here claiming all of these? Yeah, it’s a rigid and tough list to follow, especially in our world today that seems bent on breaking most, if not all, of these guidelines. So I can easily ask, “Are these things POSSIBLE for us today? Are we even capable of following them? It’s a pretty tough ticket to punch! We’re all in danger of missing out on finding ourselves in the presence of the Lord God, if this was what it takes for us to be with Him, because we can’t do it.

But you know, even if we were to strive for attaining all of these qualifications, I wonder how many of us would become like the Pharisees, legalistic in our approach to getting into God’s presence. Would we be so intent on following the letter of the Law that we would miss the intent of the Law? Would we become so interested in our own meeting the standard that we would neglect those around us? And then, if we were able to finally achieve the fulfillment of the list, becoming one of those who follow the Law, would we then turn to those who aren’t meeting it and point fingers at them telling them how bad they are because they are missing the mark?

When we become legalistic in our approach to striving to be with the Lord God, we lose our relationship with one another, and we lose the ability to help each other along. Works-righteousness doesn’t work for SALVATION! Even if we do the very best we can in obtaining and following the guidelines and regulations for becoming righteous in God’s eyes, we will still always fall short. By ourselves, we can’t do enough, or pay enough, or say enough to make us righteous before God.

So HOW IS IT POSSIBLE FOR US TO ACHIEVE GOD’S APPROVAL? What can we do to be saved from the wages of sin and once more become pure and holy before the Lord God? Well, that

comes as we accept God's way of Salvation for us – through Jesus Christ taking our sins upon Himself and paying the price for those sins in order to free us from the bondage to our sin.

Yet, many in our world just cannot understand the importance of a crucified savior. In a March 27, 2000 article, *Newsweek* religion editor Kenneth L. Woodward wrote:

“Clearly, the cross is what separates the Christ of Christianity from every other Jesus. In Judaism there is no precedent for a Messiah who dies, much less as a criminal as Jesus did. In Islam, the story of Jesus' death is rejected as an affront to Allah himself. Hindus can accept only a Jesus who passes into peaceful *Samadhi*, a yogi who escapes the degradation of death. The figure of the crucified Christ, says Buddhist Thich Nhat Hanh, "is a very painful image to me. It does not contain joy or peace, and this does not do justice to Jesus." There is, in short, no room in any other religion for a Christ who experiences the full burden of mortal existence—and hence there is no reason to believe in Him as the divine Son whom the Father resurrects from the dead. . . .

“The image of a benign Jesus having universal appeal should come as no surprise to us then. It should not surprise us either, that most of the world cannot accept the Jesus of the cross. The idea that Jesus can serve as a bridge uniting the world's religions is inviting, but is ultimately impossible.”²

Paul puts it very well in our second Scripture passage today of I Corinthians 1:18-31. He 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*” (1:18). In other words, God's MESSAGE is foolishness to the world because they can't accept a Savior who would give Himself up to die for those who can't save themselves. The thought of Jesus dying on a cross to take the punishment of all of our sins in order to free us from the penalty of death, just does not make sense.

And no matter how hard we try to make sense out of it, Human wisdom does not BENEFIT us at all. Paul continues, “*For it is written: 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise: the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.' Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of*

² (PreachingToday.com, *Perfect Illustrations*, [Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 2002] pg. 231)

this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?" (1:19-20). In all of our own wisdom, the salvation of God through Jesus makes absolutely no sense. Why would God do that for us? Why would He send His own Son to die? Couldn't there be another way for us to achieve salvation? Did Jesus die for everyone, or just the ones that were alive at that time? What about those who died before Jesus came to earth? Did He save them, too? All kinds of questions come up in an attempt to figure out the Salvation of God in Jesus, but they make no sense to many because they just can't figure it out. For others it's too easy – just believe in Jesus and you are saved? Don't I have to do something to gain it or purchase it, or earn it? No, it's just doesn't make sense to so many people of the world, and so they reject it as foolishness.

But we have to remember that God often works in "foolishness" to bring about His **PURPOSE**. Paul states it well in verse 21: *"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."* Those who see themselves as wise ones, often have so many arguments against God's working that they just refuse to accept that it is possible for one Man to die for the sins of the world. But to those who are simple, those who see that there is no other way for us to be saved, faith in what God has already done makes perfect sense. How can a person in prison find release unless another person steps up and takes the burden upon himself to free him? So many of God's ways are just beyond us because our wisdom is so limited and our understanding is so small. How can we possibly understand all of God's ways?

So Christ's **CRUCIFIXION** is seen as *'a stumbling block...and foolishness'*. Paul goes on to explain it a little more (1:22-24), *"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."*

Much of our science today exists in order to try to figure out how things work. How do grains of wheat grow up to produce more grains of wheat? How do the cells know how to divide and how do they become different parts of the plant? How does an acorn produce a gigantic oak tree, with leaves and

bark and branches and other acorns? How do caterpillars transform into butterflies? What takes place in the chrysalis that enables a worm to become a creature that flies? And how do frogs turn from tadpoles into the mature frogs? So much that we just don't know because our understanding and knowledge and wisdom is so limited! There is so much for us yet to learn how God created everything to work in an orderly and perfect fashion. Yet we don't call science foolishness? It is an effort to learn how everything works.

So why do we refuse to accept God's gift of Salvation? Why is it so hard for us to comprehend that in order for us to come back into a relationship with our perfect and holy God, we need God's help to do it? Yet many still ask, why can't God just change His ways so that all of us can just be with Him, regardless of what we do? Why can't we just all get along with each other? Why can't we just do what we want? Why is there so much hatred? Why do we have to have laws limiting us from doing what we want? Questions of the ages, yet we still don't have the answers. And we spend time and energy and money trying to get the answers. Is it all foolishness? No, it's trying to figure things out.

Paul has an answer for that, too. "For the **FOOLISHNESS** of God is wiser than man's wisdom..." he says in verse 25. God is so much higher and greater than we are that there is just no way our human minds will ever be able to comprehend Him. So when God does something that is foolish to Him, it is way beyond our understanding because it is so much greater than what we can figure out. But it works for God, and all we need to do is to believe it, accept it, and receive it as a gift to us. Because we can't figure it out doesn't make it worthless, so instead of discounting it because it doesn't make sense to us, why can't we trust it and follow it and let it transform our lives so that we CAN become like Him?

And the second part of that verse challenges us even more, "...the **WEAKNESS** of God is stronger than man's strength." Now we happen to think we are very strong people. While it is true that we can do a great many things, we are totally at the mercy of the winds, the waves, and the earth. There are things in this world that are beyond our control, and they literally blow us away; hurricanes,

tornados, fire-storms, earthquakes, landslides, floods, tidal waves. And then there are famines, plagues, infestations, diseases – all out of our control. God has placed all of these things here on the earth and it demonstrates the magnitude of His power. God’s weakness is more than we could ever comprehend.

So what does God **CHOOSE** to reach out to us? How does He work to get our attention and help us come back to Him? Let me finish the rest of the chapter and let Paul explain. *“Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standard; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things – and the things that are not – to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before Him. It is because of Him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God – that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. Therefore, as it is written: ‘Let him who boasts boast in the Lord’” (1:26-31).*

God deliberately chooses those things that seem to us to be completely foolishness to accomplish His purpose. A shepherd overthrowing a mighty warrior (David/Goliath). A blind man overthrowing a corrupt government (Samson/ the Philistines). 300 men with clay pots, torches and trumpets defeating an enemy of 135,000 (Gideon/ Midianite army). A woman, armed with a tent peg and a hammer, subdues a great army commander (Jael/Sisera). A virgin bringing forth a Son who would become our Savior (Mary). It’s not very often that God used the strong to defend Israel. It was the few, the weak, and the ones with no power for themselves. And it is the Lord, AGAIN THE LORD, who breaks the power of sin through His own Son, Jesus. It is Jesus who releases us from the wages of sin, which is death.

Though the message of the cross seems so foolish to so many people, how can we help them to see the value of having Christ Jesus as Lord of their lives? What can we do to help those around us to understand the great message of God’s Salvation in Jesus? HOW THEN SHALL WE LIVE in order to help them to see the value of receiving the foolishness of God in Jesus Christ?

The last Scripture lesson today helps answer that question. Listen to Matthew 5:1-12. (READ Matthew 5:1-12)

Realizing that God works in mysterious ways, often considered foolish in our world today, we see that Jesus' teaching here in Matthew invites us to live and be different. God's ways are completely **COUNTER-CULTURAL** to what our world says is good and right, and that is very clear in these categories that Jesus lifts up as being blessed. It's not the self-assured that receive the kingdom of heaven, but those who are poor in spirit, who realize that they don't have all the answers. It's not the ones who are safe and comfortable who need to be comforted, but those whose hearts are breaking and longing for the presence of God. It's not the strong and mighty that will inherit the earth, but rather the ones who are meek and humble. Now these are not *weak people* by any means, but they realize that pride does not bring reconciliation; gentleness and kindness does. And it's not the satisfied who will be filled, but those who hunger and thirst for what is right and good. It's not the arrogant and proud who will receive mercy, but rather those who show mercy to others themselves. It's not the rebellious and the disobedient who will come into God's presence, but those who strive for a pure heart, doing what is right and good and just. It's not the warrior or the selfish or the angry who become the sons of God, but rather those who seek peace and reconciliation. And it's not the ones adamantly punishing others for their faithfulness that find their place in the kingdom of God, but those who suffer for what is right and give their all to follow God's ways. It's not those who belittle and insult and try to make themselves bigger in the eyes of everyone else by knocking everyone else down that find God's peace and presence. It is those who continue to follow God's ways even through the oppression and persecution. Everything here is up-side-down, according to the ways of the world. But these are the things that draw us closer to the Lord God in our life.

So this begs the question, "Are we letting God be in the **DRIVER'S** seat of our lives, or are we relegating Him to be in the back seat? Are we allowing God to be Lord of our life, or are we demanding to have it our way, doing our own thing, and expecting God to be pleased with us all along?"

Then how are we going to live our lives? Will we live for me or will we live for **OTHERS**? Will we focus our whole life on satisfying what we want, what we desire to have, and what we think we should be? Or will we begin to look out at the needs of others and begin to help them find what God wants for them to be? Will we selfishly live to only satisfy ourselves, or will we use the resources available to us to touch the lives of those around us and help them find the love of God for them, too? The world tells us to live it up, look out for your own #1 and forget, or even trample on the rest. It doesn't take too long for us to see the end result of that – it's happening right in front of us. So why not begin to live in a different way to help others along, too.

But one might ask, “But Pastor Warren, How can I live without the **WORLD**? Am I just to give up all that I have and expect God to supply me with my needs on a daily basis?” Why not? Isn't God big enough, and powerful enough, and wise enough and abundant enough to supply us with all our needs? It's what we pray for, “...give us this day our daily bread...” We don't need to pursue all the riches of the world. Live simply and watch how God can use you for His glory. Become what the world calls “foolish” and see how many people you might encourage.

God does not **FORSAKE** us when we live for Him. No, rather when we strive to serve Him with our whole lives, using what He has provided for us to encourage and build up the lives of those around us, God is pleased to call us His own and to supply us with all our needs. God watches out for His family, those who do their best to follow His Ways and do His Will.

The Message of the Cross is foolishness to the world, because they have not yet seen an example of the difference Jesus makes in the lives of those who sincerely follow Him. If we can live life at its **FULLEST** the way that God intends us to do so, what a difference we can make with those around us. God will watch out for you and provide for you if you live His way and follow the One who makes it all possible in the first place, Jesus Christ

Therefore, go to serve God and your neighbor in all you do, to the glory of God in Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN.