

Isaiah 29:13–15 (NIV)

¹³The Lord says:

“These people come near to me with their mouth
and honor me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me.

Their worship of me

is based on merely human rules they have been taught.

¹⁴Therefore once more I will astound these people

with wonder upon wonder;

the wisdom of the wise will perish,

the intelligence of the intelligent will vanish.”

¹⁵Woe to those who go to great depths

to hide their plans from the LORD,

who do their work in darkness and think,

“Who sees us? Who will know?”

1 Corinthians 1:17–31 (NIV)

¹⁷For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with wisdom and eloquence, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

¹⁸For 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. ¹⁹For it is written:

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise;

the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.”

²⁰Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹For 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. ²²Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, ²³but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

²⁶Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. ²⁷But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. ²⁸God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, ²⁹so that no one may boast before him.

³⁰It 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. ³¹Therefore, as it is written: “Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.”

Fools. Losers. . . . Christians have been called many things.

What do we want to be called?

It seems irrational. It seems impossible. It seems, in a word, crazy. Who in their right minds could really and truly believe that the death of a single man on a Roman cross 2,000 years ago reconciled humanity with God? It just seems absurd on its face.

And then to claim that this man was resurrected; not resuscitated, but resurrected to newly embodied and immortal life only makes things more absurd. Come on . . . it is like something from a 1950's sci-fi movie.

And then comes the icing on the crazy cake – the claim that this man was God, the creator of the cosmos. Really? What kind of God goes and gets himself killed? How could you kill God? Come on . . .

As an itinerant preacher named Paul put it nearly 2,000 years ago, this whole package seems like utter “foolishness” to countless people. It did then. It does now. And increasingly in the U.S., fewer and fewer young adults are ready to believe anything of the sort.

And even older Americans, most of whom have been Christians all their lives, have allowed themselves to drift into a Christless Christianity. Sure, Jesus is nice and all, but too few believe that we truly *need* Jesus to get right with God. This was the topic of last fall’s opening sermon series calling the “Christianish” to become passionate servants of Christ.

You’ll recall the startling conclusions Christian Smith and his colleagues came to after analyzing their extensive survey and interview work with young adults. Recognizing that the faith of teenagers and young adults tends to reflect that of their parents, Smith and his colleagues wrote this:

We have come with some confidence to believe that a significant part of Christianity in the United States is actually only tenuously Christian in any sense that it is seriously connected to the actual historical Christian tradition. . . . It is not so much that U. S. Christianity is being secularized. Rather, more subtly, Christianity is either degenerating into a pathetic version of itself, or more significantly, Christianity is being colonized and displaced by quite a different religious tradition.¹

Based on their research, Smith found the key tenets of this new religion (which he calls “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism” or simply “MTD”) to be:

- A god exists who created and ordered the world and watches over human life on earth.
- God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
- The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
- God does not need to be particularly involved in one’s life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
- Good people go to heaven when they die.

One of the drivers in this transformation of Christianity into “MTD” has been the growth of an intellectual elite and popular culture that are ever more hostile to Christianity. Those who hold to the tenets of orthodox Christianity are seen as backward, uneducated, less-than-bright, gullible, and so on. All this has made it ever harder to stand up in public and state one’s adherence to the most basic Christian claims about Jesus. Again, who wants to appear “foolish” to their neighbors? As Hugh Hewitt put it in his 1998 book, *The Embarrassed Believer*, “Now, it’s one thing to believe. It’s another thing to be hooted at for belief.”

Granted, you and I live in DFW, a place still pretty amenable to all things Christian. Nonetheless, we live within the larger intellectual and popular cultures that are delivered by the various media into our homes, schools, and workplaces. Too much of this media wants us to believe that holding to the Apostles Creed without crossing our fingers is foolish and undignified, unbecoming an educated 21st century man or woman.

Undignified? Yes. True? . . . Emphatically, yes!

Incredible as the Christian claims seem, we hold that they are true. As true now as they were true when Paul wrote his letter to the Christians in Corinth. It may be that the “wisdom of the wise” and the “intelligence of the intelligent,” as Isaiah wrote, is a

¹Smith and his colleagues have produced two books, detailing their findings: *Soul Searching: The religious and spiritual lives of American teenagers* and, later, *Souls in Transition: The religious and spiritual lives of emerging adults*. As you can tell by the titles, the books reflect the on-going tracking of these people as they got older.

stumbling block but the truth is the truth – and this truth needs to be spoken boldly, not timidly. It needs to be shouted from rooftops.

If it is undignified in the eyes of the world to proclaim the truth, then we must redouble our efforts to proclaim the Good News boldly and clearly.

Why? Because everyone does *need* Jesus. Not just as a time-to-time helper when things get rough, but as a savior, the one who makes us right with our creator, the one without whom we are lost.

Some years ago Ted Turner, the founder of CNN, famously remarked, in a voice dripping with derision, that Christianity is a “religion for losers.” The irony of his put-down was, of course, that it was true. In the eyes of the world, Jesus was a “loser,” nailed to a cross as a public spectacle and his followers were fools. The world’s strength is not God’s strength; the world’s win is not God’s win. The world divides people into “somebodies,” like Ted Turner with all his billions, and “nobodies,” like most of the rest of us. Beginning in 1:26, Paul takes this head-on, knowing that most of the Christians in Corinth were “nobodies.”

In his commentary on today’s passage from 1 Corinthians, Tom Wright reflects on seeing the world not at Ted Turner sees it, but as God sees it.

The world is full of ‘somebodies’ and ‘nobodies’, and it does neither of them any good. That’s not the way God intended it to be. Every human being, man, woman, child, and even unborn child, bears the image and likeness of God, and has neither more nor less dignity because some other people have heard of them, look up to them, or think they’re special. But in most parts of the world, at most periods of history—and, as the story shows, often enough in the church itself—people feel that it’s better to be ‘somebody’. The cult of fame has reached monstrous proportions in recent days, to the absurd point where many people are now famous for being famous. We know their names, we recognize their faces, but can’t remember whether they are footballers, film stars or fashion models.

Corinth, as a proud Roman city, was exactly the sort of place where people would look up to the ‘somebodies’, and do their best to join them. Then, as now, there were the obvious routes to fame: political power, and royal or noble birth. And, as we’ve seen (though this doesn’t hold for all cultures), Corinth paid special attention to people who could speak well, public rhetoricians, lawyers and the like. The wise, the powerful, the noble: these were the ‘somebodies’ in Corinth.

And Paul reminds his readers that most of them were, on the same scale, ‘nobodies’. When he first came to town and announced the gospel of King Jesus as Lord, and they believed it, most of them weren’t among the ‘wise’ whom society looked up to. Most of them didn’t have any social power (though Erastus, the city treasurer, is mentioned as a Corinthian Christian in Romans 16:23). Most of them didn’t come from well-known, ‘noble’ families.

‘But God ...’ Those are some of Paul’s favourite words. He often describes a human situation or problem and then takes delight in showing that God has stepped in and done something to change it drastically. They were ‘nobodies’, but God has made them ‘somebodies’. Not the sort of ‘somebodies’ the world would recognize as such, but the only sort that mattered. And what is important in this paragraph is the fact that God has taken the initiative in it all. The Christian gospel is a matter of grace from start to finish. God chose these Corinthian ‘nobodies’ (verses 27, 28); God ‘called’ them through Paul’s announcement of the crucified Jesus as Lord (verse 26; the word ‘call’ is Paul’s regular word for what we sometimes call ‘conversion’); God gave them the status in his eyes that the Messiah himself has (verse 30). They are who they are, as he says in a rather shorthand way, ‘from God in the Messiah’ (verse 30). This is the same sequence (chosen, called, justified) as Paul sketches in the famous summary in Romans 8:29–30, though there he extends the sequence backwards to God’s original plan and forwards to ultimate glorification as well.

The result of it all, of course, is that they have nothing to boast of. As he says later in the letter (4:7), they have nothing that they haven't received as a gift; and if someone gives you a present you didn't deserve, you haven't got anything to boast about. This is essentially the same point that Paul makes in several other places, where he speaks of 'boasting' as being ruled out by the gospel, both the actual message (the foolish announcement of a crucified Lord) and the way it works (by the power of sheer grace to change the heart and produce faith and Christian life).²

The Scandal of the Cross

In his commentary on 1 Corinthians, Richard Hays, of Duke seminary, reflects on today's passage and the "scandal of the cross."

Paul's language throughout this section revels in the paradoxical twists of God's grace. This is not, however, just a Pauline rhetorical tour de force. The fundamental theological point is that if the cross itself is God's saving event, all human standards of evaluation are overturned. This outlandish message confounds Jews and Greeks alike, who quite understandably seek evidence of a more credible sort, either empirical demonstrations of power ("signs") or rationally persuasive argumentation ("wisdom"). But the apostle offers neither. Instead, "we proclaim Christ crucified" (v. 23).

The scandal of this message is difficult for Christians of a later era to imagine. To proclaim a *crucified* Messiah is to talk nonsense. Crucifixion was a gruesome punishment administered by the Romans to "make an example" out of rebels and disturbers of the *Pax Romana*. As a particularly horrible form of public torture and execution, it was designed to demonstrate that no one should defy the powers that be. Yet Paul's gospel declares that the crucifixion of Jesus is somehow the event through which God has triumphed over those powers. Rather than proving the sovereignty of Roman political order, it shatters the world's systems of authority. Rather than confirming what the wisest heads already know, it shatters the world's systems of knowledge.

All of this is understandably baffling to Paul's hearers in the ancient Mediterranean world. Jews, who have suffered long under the burden of foreign oppression, quite reasonably look for manifestations of God's *power: signs* like those done by Moses at the time of the exodus, perhaps portending at last God's powerful deliverance of his people again from bondage. The Messiah should be a man of power, manifesting supernatural proofs of God's favor. Greeks, with their proverbial love of learning, quite reasonably look for *wisdom: reasonable accounts of the order of things presented in a logically compelling and aesthetically pleasing manner*. The Christ should be a wise teacher of philosophical truths. But no! God has blown away all apparently reasonable criteria: the Christ is a crucified criminal.¹

¹ Hays, R. B. (1997). *First Corinthians*. Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (30–31). Louisville, KY: John Knox Press.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Let's begin at the end, with Ted Turner's statement from some years ago: "Christianity is for losers." In what ways might he have been right, even though he said it scornfully? What is a "loser" in the eyes of the American culture? Are there any "losers" in the eyes of God? To what degree do we divide the world into "somebodies" and "nobodies"? How might we help one another to truly embrace the reality that we are all made in the image of God and that we all *need* to get right with God – even Ted Turner?
2. What do you find to be craziest in the Christian claims? Try to put yourself in the place of someone who has never heard a word of this before. What do you think you would find to be the most difficult to consider as being really true?
3. At least part of what makes us cling to our dignity is our desire to have our worthiness and status affirmed by those around us and by the society in which we live. No one really wants to be hooted at for their beliefs; ridicule is often the deepest cut of all. How can we go about strengthening ourselves to withstand societal pressures to reshape Christianity into Moralistic Therapeutic Deism? How can we become happy "fools" for God?

² Wright, T. (2004). *Paul for Everyone: 1 Corinthians* (15–16). London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Romans 1:8-17 Paul is not ashamed of the gospel.</p>	<p>Tuesday, Romans 3:21-31 We have been put right with God by Jesus's faithfulness. (Use the footnoted translation of v. 22).</p>
<p>Wednesday, Ephesians 2:1-10 God has made us alive in Christ and not one of us has anything to boast about (see v. 9)</p>	<p>Thursday, 1 Corinthians 15:1-28 Paul presents the Christian that Jesus was resurrected and that, like him, we too shall be resurrected. It is on this claim that we stand.</p>
<p>Friday, Jeremiah 9:23-24 A powerful and succinct statement about what we can boast in.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Weekly Joys and Concerns</p>

