

**THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR MAKING CHRISTIANS LIES SQUARELY ON THE SHOULDERS OF THE
HOLY SPIRIT**

Sermon for the 4th Sunday after Epiphany, 2020
1 Corinthians 1:18-31

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is our Second Lesson from before, 1 Corinthians 1:18-31: ¹⁸ **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.** ¹⁹ **For Scripture says: “I shall destroy the wisdom of wise people and frustrate the intelligence of intelligent people.”** ²⁰ **Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has God not made foolish the wisdom of the world?** ²¹ **For, since the world by its wisdom has not come to know God, God has graciously resolved, in His wisdom, to use the foolishness of the preached message to save those who believe.** ²² **For Jews ask for miraculous signs, and Greeks look for wisdom.** ²³ **However, we preach a crucified Christ, to the Jews a stumbling-block and to the Greeks foolishness;** ²⁴ **but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, we preach Christ, the power of God and the wisdom of God.** ²⁵ **For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.**

²⁶ **For see what you were, fellow-Christians, when God called you! Not many of you were wise from a human point of view, not many were influential and not many were born of noble parents.** ²⁷ **However, God has chosen the foolish things in the world to put those who are wise to shame. God has chosen the weak things in the world to put those who are strong to shame.** ²⁸ **God has chosen the lowly things in the world, the things that are despised and the things that are not, to bring to nothing the things that are,** ²⁹ **that no one may boast before God.** ³⁰ **However, you are from Him in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God and righteousness, holiness and redemption,** ³¹ **that it may be as Scripture has said, “Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord!”**

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth, Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

As part of our calling as Christians, we have the privilege of telling others whom we meet in our lives about our Saviour Jesus, and what He has accomplished for all mankind, namely, salvation. It is always our goal when telling others of Jesus *to lead them to the cross*, so that they too, may repent of their sins and believe the Good News.¹

This all sounds well and good, but the problem is that often when we are courageous enough to tell others of Jesus, nothing happens. While some simply won’t allow us to say anything and become quite hostile at times even at the slight mention of the name of Jesus, yet even when there are those who are receptive of what we tell them, they don’t want to act on anything and so are no closer to confessing Christ as their Lord and Saviour than when we first began to speak to them. The conversation may be polite, but often it seems as though we have achieved nothing. So it is then that we get to the stage of thinking “what is the point?” We know we ought to tell others about Jesus, but when we see that our evangelising is not achieving anything, the easiest option is to simply just keep our mouths closed. However, then we begin to feel guilty because we know we should tell people about Jesus, but things just don’t turn out the way they are supposed to.

For any who may feel that way, the Apostle Paul has some good news when he says, **“Jews ask for miraculous signs, and Greeks look for wisdom.”** ²³ **However, we preach a crucified Christ, to the Jews a stumbling-block and to the Greeks foolishness.** With these words, Paul teaches us that some people will hear about Jesus and not care: some people will even be offended when we tell them about Jesus.

How can this be good news? It is good news because the Scriptures place the responsibility for making Christians *squarely on the shoulders of the Holy Spirit*. A little later in this same Letter to the Corinthians, the Holy Spirit inspired Paul to write, *“However, an unspiritual person does not receive the things of the Spirit of God. For they are foolishness to him; and he cannot know them because they are discerned spiritually”* (1 Corinthians 2:14). And to the Church at Rome, he was inspired to write, *“...the way of thinking that belongs to the sinful nature is hostile to God.*

¹ Mark 1:15

For it is not subordinate to God's Law. For it is not even able to be" (Romans 8:7). Unregenerate minds, hearts, and wills are entirely evil, perverse, and hostile to God.²

Note some of the other words Paul says. **"God has graciously resolved, in His wisdom, to use the foolishness of the preached message to save those who believe."** These words teach us that it is God who saves. Because of the folly of human thinking about how to attain the knowledge of God, it was God's gracious and sovereign decision to lead people to the right knowledge of Himself by that most unimpressive means, **"the foolishness of the preached message."** By "preaching," Paul does not mean merely the *act* of preaching; he constantly bears in mind its *content*, the cross of Christ. Working through what we preach, it is God who does the saving.

The wisdom in today's world often tells us that in order to bring more people into the church, we have to use such things as fancy marketing gimmicks, or we need to change the church and what it teaches, to make it more in step with what the world teaches. By the power of the Holy Spirit, the Apostle Paul ridicules this wisdom of the world when he says, ²⁰ **"Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has God not made foolish the wisdom of the world?"** ²¹ **For, since the world by its wisdom has not come to know God, God has graciously resolved, in His wisdom, to use the foolishness of the preached message to save those who believe."** Martin Luther explains this very well in the Small Catechism. At the beginning of the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed, he says: *"I believe that I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to Him, but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the one true faith."* If we cannot bring ourselves to faith, how can we possibly bring someone else to faith? We are not responsible for making Christians. That is the job of the Holy Spirit.

To make it even more clear that the Holy Spirit does the work of making Christians, God works in ways that appear foolish, weak, and lowly. Paul writes, **"God has chosen the foolish things in the world to put those who are wise to shame. God has chosen the weak things in the world to put those who are strong to shame."** ²⁸ **God has chosen the lowly things in the world, the things that are despised and the things that are not, to bring to nothing the things that are."**

There are a lot of religions that ask people to die for their god or gods. Look at the number of Muslims who have died for Allah. When you confess Jesus to a Muslim, it seems utterly foolish, weak, and lowly. It doesn't make sense for God to take up humanity and then humble Himself unto death, even death on a cross.

Nevertheless, this is the way God has obtained His victory over sin, death, and the power of the devil. The Son of God took on full humanity in the womb of the Virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit. He actively humbled Himself under the Law and fulfilled the Law for us.³ Then He passively endured the punishment we deserved as He allowed mere men to nail Him to a cross. After He had suffered the full punishment for our sin, He died, and His friends laid Him in a tomb.

This is the Christ crucified that Paul preached to the Corinthians. This is the Christ crucified that faithful pastors still preach today. All the religious power and wisdom of God are delivered via the preaching of Christ crucified, a stumbling block and foolishness to unbelief. Through this Word of Christ comes victory and life!

Jesus Christ did not remain in the grave after He had paid for all our sins. Instead, He rose. He taught His disciples for forty days after His resurrection. Sometime during those forty days, Jesus appeared to His disciples and said to them, *"This is what Scripture has said: 'The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day; and on the basis of His name, repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem'"* (Luke 25:46-47). This proclamation of repentance and the forgiveness of sins is the foolishness of God that is wiser than men, and the weakness of God that is stronger than men.

When we confess this message with others, we do not have to worry about being eloquent. We do not have to worry about being persuasive. No human being is eloquent or persuasive enough to bring a single person into the family of God. The Holy Spirit does that.

Our sin is taken away through the foolishness of a particular man dying on a particular cross outside the city of Jerusalem. Tell the people that you meet about this Man who is Christ crucified. Let the Holy Spirit worry about making them into Christians.

² Formula of Concord, SD II 17

³ Matthew 5:17-20

Jesus said that the world would hear the proclamation of repentance and the forgiveness of sins in the name of Christ.⁴ We are part of this when we confess our faith to the people we meet in our lives.

Therefore, search the Scriptures high and low. In them, we shall not find one place where our Lord Jesus Christ judges congregations by their size. On the other hand, we shall find plenty of places that speak of the judgment of God on congregations who do not faithfully proclaim the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We are asked to be faithful in proclaiming repentance and the forgiveness of sins in the name of the crucified Christ. Like we said earlier, God does not ask us to make Christians: that is the job of the Holy Spirit.

So, we do not need gimmicks. We have the Word of God. We have the Holy Sacraments. Through these, as through means, we have the Holy Spirit. We have the promise of God that the means of grace will bear fruit, sometimes in a greater harvest, sometimes less, as God wills. Let these things suffice - the things of God - to fulfil the mission of making disciples. For above all else we have a risen, glorified, ascended, ruling, and soon-to-return Lord Jesus Christ, whose words of promise ring down the ages in good times and in bad: *"I shall build My church, and the gates of Hades will not overpower it"* (Matthew 16:18). We can tell the people that we meet about Jesus, but the mission is fulfilled because of God's promise, not our own efforts. His promise is sure, *"For, as the rain and the snow come down from the sky and do not go back there without watering the earth and causing it to bring forth and to sprout, so that it gives seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so My Word will be, which goes out of My mouth. It will not return to Me without results, but it will accomplish what I desire and be successful in what I have sent it to do"* (Isaiah 55:10-11).

May God continue **to use the foolishness of the preached message to save those who believe** that through it, the Holy Spirit may move more and more to turn to the truth and be saved. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

PRAYER FOR THE FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

Almighty God, Your ears are always open to the prayers of Your people, and You promise Your saving help in every time of need. Therefore we lift up our hearts to You.

We thank and praise You that You have enabled us to understand Your Word, and for the blessings of faith, love, and trust in You. Most of all, we thank and praise You for the coming of Your Son, and for His deliverance from our sin, from the condemnation of the Law, from our death, from the devil, and from hell. We give You humble thanks for all Your other gifts.

Graciously You have bestowed Your Spirit on us through Jesus, Your holy Anointed One. Through Your Spirit give us a deeper knowledge of Your will, and a deeper faith in Your salvation. Continue to renew us by the Spirit also. Give us deeper love for all people. Keep us conscious of Your desire that we should spread the Good News about Jesus. Give us opportunities to tell the good news of the Gospel, and the courage to tell it; and strengthen us by the presence of Jesus, who has promised to be with us always in this task. Make us more aware of people's needs, that, in meeting them, they may see that we are credible witnesses of Him; and bless what we say.

We pray also for all our families. Bless each home with Your presence and the Spirit of Christ, that children may grow in favour with God and man, and that parents, by love and proper example, may maintain their homes in godliness. Grant that both children and parents may be eager to worship You, and may delight in serving Your Son in their daily lives.

Provide and maintain good government for us and for all people; give all in our nation high moral values and responsible citizenship. Grant weather that is appropriate to our needs.

Comfort and bless all among us who are afflicted in any way, that they may find release from their burdens and trials, and learn to know Your gracious will, and how to submit to it.

May we all, in the unity of the faith, and in the knowledge of Your Son, continually praise Your name and fulfil Your saving purposes in the world. We ask all these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

⁴ Matthew 24:14

FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

Micah 6:1-8

¹ Please listen to what the LORD is saying: “Stand up! Plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear what you have to say!”

² Listen, you mountains, to the lawsuit of the LORD! Listen, you long-lasting foundations of the earth! For the LORD has a lawsuit against His people and will argue against Israel: ³ “My people, what have I done to you? How, then, have I made you weary? Give evidence against Me!” ⁴ For I brought you up out of Egypt and redeemed you out of slave-quarters. I sent before you Moses, Aaron and Miriam. ⁵ My people, please remember what Balak, the king of Moab, had planned to do to you and how Balaam, the son of Beor, answered him! Remember your journey from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may acknowledge the righteous acts of the LORD!”

⁶ What should I bring when I come to meet the LORD and bow down before God on high? Shall I come to meet Him with burnt offerings, with one-year-old calves? ⁷ Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, or with ten thousand rivers of olive-oil? Shall I give my first-born because of my crime, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? ⁸ He has told you, O man, what is good and what the LORD requires from you: only that you should act justly, love mercy and walk carefully with your God.

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ For Scripture says: “I shall destroy the wisdom of wise people and frustrate the intelligence of intelligent people.” ²⁰ Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has God not made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹ For, since the world by its wisdom has not come to know God, God has graciously resolved, in His wisdom, to use the foolishness of the preached message to save those who believe. ²² For Jews ask for miraculous signs, and Greeks look for wisdom. ²³ However, we preach a crucified Christ, to the Jews a stumbling-block and to the Greeks foolishness; ²⁴ but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, we preach Christ, the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.

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Matthew 5:1-12

¹ When Jesus saw the crowds, He went up on the mountainside. When He sat down, His disciples came to Him. ² Then He began to speak and continued to teach them:

³ “Blessed are those who are poor in spirit! For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

⁴ “Blessed are those who mourn! For they will be comforted.

⁵ “Blessed are those who are meek! For they will inherit the earth.

⁶ “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness! For they will be filled.

⁷ “Blessed are those who are merciful! For they will be treated mercifully.

⁸ “Blessed are those who are pure in heart! For they will see God.

⁹ “Blessed are those who make peace! For they will be called ‘the children of God.’

¹⁰ “Blessed are those who have been persecuted because of righteousness! For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you, because of Me! ¹² Rejoice and be very glad! For your reward in heaven is great. For in this way people persecuted the prophets who were before you.