

FIRST LESSON: Micah 6:1-8

SECOND LESSON: 1 Corinthians 1:18-31

February 2, 2020

“An Antidote for Arrogance”

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We tend to put a lot of emphasis on education and degrees in our culture, and to expect that the “experts” among us can provide all the answers. On a flight to Florida an educational psychologist was preparing his notes for a parent-education seminar he regularly conducted. The elderly woman sitting next to him explained that she was returning to Miami after having spent two weeks visiting her six children, 18 grandchildren and ten great-grandchildren. She then inquired what he did for a living. He told her, fully expecting her to question him for free professional advice. Instead she sat back, picked up a magazine and said, “If there's anything you want to know, just ask me.”

Pride, arrogance, judging others . . . What defines success? Is it a degree? Is it wealth? In many ways the Church as a whole has not provided the world with a living example of the kingdom of God, and instead has simply imported the world's standards into the church. A successful church is not a poor church ministering among the poor. A successful church is a rich church with a growing budget, a new building, and multiple staff members to run events for church members. A successful pastor is not the one who spends anxious hours with a family in a hospital room. A successful pastor is a head of staff with a large salary who does speaking engagements and writes books. The career path is clear. Begin as the pastor of a small church and then move to a larger one, or be an associate pastor and then become a head of staff. We haven't given the world an alternative! We've given them a mirror. **This is not what God wants from us.**

Paul begins by pointing out how contrary to human wisdom the cross is: “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.” He goes on to quote Isaiah and comment on his words. “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.” Where 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?”

The “wise person” is the philosopher, and Greek culture prized philosophy. Today's best equivalent might be the academic. These are the PhDs of Corinth. The “teacher of the law” is the Jewish version of the philosopher. They are the scholarly rabbis. And what we have translated in the NIV as “the philosopher of this age” is really the public debater. This is the politician skilled

in rhetoric and persuasive speech. These are the people who hold a crowd spellbound. But all three of them completely fail to see and understand what God is doing and how God is working. God can only truly be known by revelation. It doesn't matter how smart we are. God must reveal Godself to us.

Members of the Corinthian church had been arguing among themselves, each faction claiming its own leader and its own wisdom and insight. Essentially, they were copying the way the larger society thought and conducted business. Paul pointed out the futility of this. God does not work this way. By the world's standards the cross is utter foolishness. We should not try to do anything by the world's standards because God operates in an entirely different fashion. In the kingdom of God the last will be first, and the highest is the servant of all.

It is hard for us to remember this, but Jesus was a condemned prisoner, put to death in one of the most humiliating and painful ways. Crosses were not pretty things. A cross meant total subjugation. A cross meant a slow and terrible death. The crucified were to be an example to others. In Judea, a cross always represented Roman oppression. The Jews did not crucify. The Romans did. But we're not in Judea here. We are in Gentile Corinth, a city that owed its life to Rome. Rome was not the enemy in Corinth. Rome meant peace, stability, trade and prosperity. Rome meant good roads and some semblance of law and order. And so those who were crucified in Corinth were not viewed the same way that they were in Judea. It's not that being crucified in Judea was a positive image, but since rebels against Rome were crucified, the crucified could in some circumstances be viewed as martyrs. In the Roman world, however, if the authorities crucified someone, people reasoned that there must have been a very good reason. The crucified one in no way became a hero. The crucified were despised. All of the leaders of the day in Corinth would have asserted that this was so. Jesus would have been blamed for his own crucifixion. It would be assumed that he had been guilty of sedition and causing unrest. Understanding all this makes the case even stronger for not doing things the way the world does.

Try for a moment to imagine how Jesus would be received today in our world. I am quite confident he would be arrested. He would cause havoc at the border rescuing children. He would physically throw all the lobbyists out of Congress, expose all of the lies told by corporations and their corrupt deals with politicians. He would demand that at least half of the prisoners in this country be set free. And he would come into open conflict with a large percentage of our religious leaders. And that's just to start. We have forgotten how "not with the program" our God is. And all of our leaders, the top tier preachers from the most prominent congregations, the congresspeople and senators, the academics from the universities—**they would all condemn him.** This Jesus, they would say, is dangerous. He doesn't understand the real world and how things work. He must be stopped. And if somehow in the process of his arrest he was shot and killed, what would people think? They would think that he was a criminal and that his teachings were utter foolishness. They would think he got what he deserved. And then, if some of his followers claimed

he came back from the dead before going to heaven?! Christianity would quickly be identified as a dangerous cult that must be stopped. And that, historically, is exactly what happened, because human nature doesn't change.

The apostle Paul said, "Jews demand 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. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength."

To believe the gospel takes more than logic. It takes divine revelation, because the cross is total folly in the world's eyes, and to the sophisticated the teachings of Jesus are ridiculously naïve.

Paul finishes his argument by making it personal. He turned his focus on the Corinthian congregation itself reminding them that, "Not many of you were wise by human standards; 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. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are." Ouch! So much for our pride. God did not save us because we rank number one in our given field, have exceptional talent or wealth, or are incredibly attractive. We've been saved because we are a bunch of nothings! The temptation to boast of having great human achievements is an obstacle to grace. All success in the kingdom of God depends upon our humble willingness to let God work through us. No matter what we accomplish in life through our own strength we can **only be saved** by grace, but that same grace working in us and through us can accomplish amazing things for God.

As the prophet Micah proclaimed: He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God. The kingdom of God should never be a mirror of the way the world does business out there. We should not judge one another by worldly standards, but love one another with humility and grace. Amen.

Micah 6:1-8

6 Listen to what the Lord says:

"Stand up, plead my case before the mountains;
let the hills hear what you have to say.

2 "Hear, you mountains, the Lord's accusation;
listen, you everlasting foundations of the earth.

For the Lord has a case against his people;
he is lodging a charge against Israel.

3 "My people, what have I done to you?
How have I burdened you? Answer me.

4 I brought you up out of Egypt
and redeemed you from the land of slavery.

I sent Moses to lead you,
also Aaron and Miriam.

⁵ My people, remember
what Balak king of Moab plotted
and what Balaam son of Beor answered.
Remember your journey from Shittim to Gilgal,
that you may know the righteous acts of the Lord.”

⁶ With what shall I come before the Lord
and bow down before the exalted God?
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,
with calves a year old?

⁷ Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousand rivers of olive oil?
Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?

⁸ He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.
And what does the Lord require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly 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 it is written:

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise;
the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.”

²⁰ Where 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?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. ²² Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

²⁶ Brothers 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. ²⁷ 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. ²⁸ God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, ²⁹ so that no one may boast before him. ³⁰ 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. ³¹ Therefore, as it is written: “Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.”