

**Pastor Jim Lloyd**

**Date: July 2, 2023**

**Title: THE SCANDAL OF THE CROSS**

**Text: 1 Corinthians 1:17-2:5**

*17“For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.”*

### **Christ the Wisdom and Power of God**

*18“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. 19For it is written, ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.’ 20Where 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? 21For 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. 22For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, 23but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, 24but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. 26For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. 27But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; 28God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, 29so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. 30And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, 31so that, as it is written, ‘Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.’”*

### **Proclaiming Christ Crucified**

*1“And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. 2For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. 3And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, 4and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, 5so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.”*

At our recent car show, I met a man whose pastor recently fell through the church ceiling. I believe there was a catwalk that he stepped off. Instead of stepping on the joists that held the ceiling in place, he stepped between the joists. Thus, his feet went through the ceiling and he landed on his feet. He actually broke his feet. He just recently went back to preaching. Fortunately, I’ve never experienced the sensation of falling through a ceiling. Neither do I want to, nor do I recommend it. In addition to the pain of his injuries, the hole in the church ceiling likely mocked him until it could be repaired. He placed his weight on something that could not bear it. The results were embarrassing and were almost disastrous.

The question I’d like you to consider this morning is this: **On what are you putting the weight of your life?** We live in an age of unprecedented wisdom and knowledge. We have eloquent beautiful pieces of literature, the accumulated wisdom of centuries, the latest discoveries from fields like psychology, neuroscience, and medicine. We have technology surrounding us which was unimagined not so very long ago. Doctors are doing the incredible in operating rooms. In minutes we can be made aware of happenings on the other side of the world. It is quite tempting to put our faith in these sorts of things. Yet, according to the passage we just read, none of these can bear the weight of our lives. Furthermore, they weren’t designed to.

We just read a passage from a letter that the Apostle Paul wrote to a church in Corinth. Corinth was a city in what we would today call Greece. It was known for its prosperity, diversity, and liberal attitudes within a culture that LOVED WISDOM. Gordon Fee, a scholar, called it the “New York, Los Angeles, and Las Vegas of the ancient world.” Corinthians would have seen themselves as rather sophisticated. Yet for all its wealth, all its

freedom, and all its wisdom, Paul explains that HUMAN WISDOM is NOT enough. The best literature, the most profound insights, the most helpful advice are not enough. There's only ONE message that is enough: the scandalous message of a crucified Savior hanging on a cross. There is only one message that can bear the weight of our lives: the message of the cross. I'm not here to say that human wisdom is evil or unnecessary. In fact, part of the reason I am even standing here is due to human wisdom – educated and skillful surgeons. This morning as we worship, we are enjoying the fruit of human wisdom. How many traveled to church in a vehicle of some type? Wise and skilled people designed and manufactured those vehicles. Our sound system and electronic instruments are the fruit of knowledgeable craftsmen. In fact, all the instruments used today are the fruit of knowledgeable craftsmen. This preacher, as has every preacher who has ever stood behind this pulpit, has gone to some sort of school for the purpose of gaining wisdom. If human wisdom is folly or wasteful, we'd have no good reason for sending our children to school; thus, we'd not have occasion to celebrate graduates. Note that Paul is not putting a premium on ignorance. Paul himself was an incredibly learned and wise man. I hold that he is strongly making the Corinthians, who LOVED WISDOM, aware that if they ONLY put all their trust in the wisdom of the day that they were missing or neglecting the greater message – the MESSAGE of THE CROSS – the SCANDALOUS message of the cross.

The passage before us explains why we need this message. Here's the first reason why we need the message of the cross:

**1. It's Better Than Any Other Message (1:18-25).** We live in a world of competing messages, and so did Paul. We have the messages of diverse political voices. We even have the messages of diverse religious messages. There are growing numbers of churches changing the words of Holy Scriptures to pacify their whims and wants. (The hearts of men are waxing cold!) Just about EVERY message that comes our way has at least 2 sides. There's a word (depending on the translation) that appears at least 12 or more times in this passage: WISDOM. Because the culture of Corinth valued wisdom TO A FAULT, Paul is scathing in his critique of human wisdom. That's where they were putting ALL their trust. Thus, their trust was in the temporal, the natural, the limited. Paul is clearly saying YOU CAN'T TRUST IN HUMAN WISDOM ALONE. Even though Paul was trained in Greek and Jewish wisdom, he argues that IT IS NOT ENOUGH. In fact, he argues that in sharp contrast to the message of the cross of Jesus, human wisdom is foolish because human wisdom will only take one so far. Look again at verses 19 and 20. <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?"* Paul is helping us understand an important principle: human wisdom will NEVER give us the insight that we need because IT DOESN'T TELL US WHAT WE NEED TO KNOW ABOUT GOD. It will NEVER give us the answers we're looking for in the HOSPITAL ROOM or the FUNERAL HOME. Human wisdom at its best will eventually disappoint because it can never bear the weight of our lives and the brokenness we experience in this life. What's the alternative then? Paul tells us in verse 18, and then verses 22 – 24. <sup>18</sup>*"For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing [the natural man, the lost, the unsaved], but to us who are being saved it is the power of God..."* <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."* According to Paul, the message of the cross is scandalous. That's where we get the phrase "the scandal of the cross." The word "stumbling block" in verse 23 can be translated "scandal." The message of the cross is shocking and offensive. It trips us up. Nobody likes it. The story of the cross is bloody and gory. Try to imagine the emotions after the cross and before the resurrection. In Roman times, CRUCIFIXION was the ULTIMATE PENALTY. It was reserved for the WORST criminals. Jesus' death was a scandal for BOTH religious and irreligious people alike. Religious people would have expected a miracle that would show Jesus was legitimate. They would NOT have expected a death. Messiahs don't die. Like today, irreligious people would have preferred an interesting new idea. The crucifixion would have been an affront to the educated, sophisticated thinker. NOBODY would look at a battered, bloody body of a naked man being executed in the most shameful way imaginable for the wisdom they need, AND... Yet Paul says that this is exactly where we should look if we want ultimate wisdom,

because as he says in verse 25, *“the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.”* There is really no such thing as the foolishness of God. Ever hear the saying – “A bad day of fishing is still better than a great day at work?” This is a lesson in contrast. In essence, there is no foolishness of God. What exactly does Paul mean by the wisdom of God? It’s that the Son of God came in the most radical act of generosity ever displayed. He gave up ALL His privileges as God. He lived the PERFECT life that we never could. And... Although He is the ONLY person who’s ever lived who did NOT SIN, He willingly died in the place of sinful men and women. He died in the place of His enemies – in our place – as our substitute, so that we could be forgiven and restored. ONLY THE CROSS reveals the sacrificial love of God who was willing to go from the HIGHEST place to the LOWEST place FOR YOU! Only the cross shows us that “He was bound that we might be free. He suffered terrible disgrace so that we would never be put to shame. Though He was innocent, He was sentenced to death so that we might be acquitted before the judgment of God. On the cross He humbled Himself to the deepest humiliation, hellish anguish of body and soul. He cried out with a loud voice, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ so that we might be brought to God and NEVER BE FORSAKEN BY HIM.” (Mark Dever) Human wisdom will NEVER reveal that. The most important message in the world is one we’d never figure out because it runs opposite to the way we think. To understand GOD’S wisdom, WE NEED THE CROSS. It’s better than any other message! Here’s the second reason we need this message:

**2. It’s Good News for Those Who Are Low (1:26-31).** You look like a fine bunch this morning. I recently read a statement by a pastor who was with a group of professionals. Through a web app, these professionals anonymously submitted their greatest fears, which were then displayed on the screen before everyone. Hundreds of them were unmasked. They were accomplished people. They were well-liked. Their lives looked good on Instagram and Facebook. BUT... Underneath they all struggled with much the same fears. They were a lot messier than they let on. So are we. The Corinthians looked like they had it all together. They valued success. Perhaps they considered themselves too sophisticated for a crude message like the cross. But in verses 26 to 31 of chapter 1, Paul reminds them of who they were and are: <sup>26</sup>*For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth.* <sup>27</sup>*But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong;*” The Corinthians felt strong. But Paul reminds them of the truth. We’re not as together as we think. Strip away the façade and we realize – we don’t need good news for the strong. We NEED good news for us when we are WEAK, when we STRUGGLE, when we’re LOW. In every area of life, doesn’t it seem like the strong get ahead. The most talented thrive. The bullies push to get ahead. And... IF you’re WEAK, then step out of the way before you’re crushed. But... Paul says that with God, it’s the very opposite. God used the same design as He did with the cross. He uses the foolish to shame the wise, which is good news for those of us who have grown tired of trying to be impressive and wise. Are you wise according to human wisdom? That wisdom will only get you so far. No matter how successful we are, no matter how great our lives look, our wisdom and accomplishments won’t ultimately bear the weight of life. Besides, it’s exhausting. Those who chase wisdom, success, and meaning, always pushing themselves ahead, know how exhausting and unsatisfying this can be. The best among us know that our best isn’t enough to fill our deepest needs. I couldn’t help but think about the rich man and Lazarus. The rich man lived an extravagant life. He may have been born into a wealthy family, OR... His WISDOM may have played a part in his wealth. Neither his riches nor his WISDOM kept him from eternal punishment. Lazarus had no riches; he struggled to eat. Lazarus didn’t even have the opportunity to build his life on riches. His life was built on his walk with God. The question for us this morning is NOT whether you can become better and wiser. The question is whether you can stoop low enough to receive the foolish message of the cross. It’s not just good news for the low, but ONLY THE LOW CAN RECEIVE IT. When we realize that we’re low – that we are sinners, we’re in a perfect position for God to raise us up through the power of the cross. As Martin Luther said: “God saves no-one but sinners. He instructs no-one but the foolish and stupid. He enriches none but paupers. And... He makes alive only the dead.” How low are you today? Do you want what only God can give? Do you want what Paul describes in verse 30: *“righteousness and sanctification and redemption?”* In other words, do you want to be

completely changed from the inside out? There's only one way. Lower yourself to receive the message of the cross. There's ONE MORE reason we need this message:

**3. In the End, It's the Only Message We've Got (1:17; 2:1-5).** Paul COULD have come to the Corinthians and impressed them with his wisdom. He was trained by the leading philosophers of the day. He COULD HAVE wowed them with his rhetorical skill. BUT... He didn't. In fact, he refused to. Why? He explains: <sup>17</sup>*"For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power..."* <sup>1</sup>*"And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom."* <sup>2</sup>*For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.* <sup>3</sup>*And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling,* <sup>4</sup>*and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power,* <sup>5</sup>*so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God"* (1 Corinthians 1:17; 2:1-5). What's Paul saying here? He's saying, "I could wow you with wisdom. I could blow you away with rhetoric and argument. I could entertain and impress you." He could have done these things, but he refused to. The most powerful thing he had to offer is the simple message of Jesus and Him crucified. IF you want power, that's where to look. How can you know you've found a good church? By its singular FOCUS ON THE CROSS. Friends, the power of Christianity isn't found in passionate music, dynamic speakers, or charismatic leaders but in the simple message of A SAVIOR WHO GAVE HIS LIFE FOR SINNERS. A famous preacher once said, "Other men may preach the gospel better than I, but NO MAN can preach a BETTER GOSPEL." Why is the message of the cross so powerful? Because the cross tells us that God lowered Himself into the abyss of our sin and suffering. The cross is not another religion telling us how to be good in our own power. It tells us the story of God's costly, sacrificial rescue effort on our behalf. It's a message that's changed history and millions of lives, and it can change your life too. Hear this again. We're all looking for a powerful message. We read books and listen to podcasts and TED Talks looking for insights that will transform our lives. Don't get me wrong. We can benefit from great books and talks, but in the end there's one message that TOWERS ABOVE THEM ALL. Friends, the ONLY place to safely stand is on the scandalous, counterintuitive message of the cross. You can discover the message that will most change your life. The only hope for you is to turn from trying to bear the weight of your life on your own, or putting that expectation on your joy, money, career, reputation, spouse, or accomplishments. Those will never bear your weight. They weren't meant to. I invite you to look to Jesus, this crucified Jesus, and put all your hope in HIM. Put all your weight on HIM. LOOK TO JESUS AND LIVE! In the early part of the sermon, I mentioned – Paul is helping us understand an important principle: human wisdom will never give us the insight that we need because it doesn't tell us what we need to know about God. It doesn't go far enough. It only deals with the natural, not the supernatural or spiritual. It will NEVER give us the answers we're looking for in the hospital room or the funeral home. When Diane's leg broke from a chondrosarcoma on December 20, 2001, Diane was taken to the emergency room where a doctor was called in. He told me what he could do; he even drew me a picture. He turned away from me, then stopped and turned back toward me. He said, "Do you know what you REALLY should do; you should take her to Sinai Hospital to Doctor Levine – this is his area of specialty." Those words likely saved Diane's life. I love Doctor Edwards for saying that. You see, he understood that HIS wisdom and expertise was limited, and this might be a surgery beyond his wisdom or skills. Basically, he was confessing that he didn't know it all and he pointed us to a doctor with greater wisdom and experience. Dr. Levine, a professor and one of the top such surgeons, told us that by the time he finished running tests on Diane, he would know in great detail Diane's condition. After almost a week of testing, Diane was scheduled for surgery on December 27. It was a lengthy surgery – one of the longest days of our lives. During surgery, Dr. Levine did additional biopsies. The results came back. He told Diane that she would die. Basically Dr. Levine was saying, "I don't know what else I can do; I've used all the wisdom I have. I'm done. I used all the wisdom I had to see that Diane had the best of care." Dr. Levine did everything he KNEW to do, but by his own acknowledgement, he said it wasn't enough. He didn't know what he could do beyond what he did. We had already been leaning on Jesus, now Jesus was ALL we could lean on. Sometimes the natural doctor just isn't enough. We only had our spiritual doctor – Doctor Jesus – to call on. It

was His work done on a scandalous cross that counted. It went beyond any human wisdom. BY HIS STRIPES WE ARE HEALED! Sometimes our healing is here – and that is ALWAYS a TEMPORARY healing. But... If not here, there! There's no sickness in heaven. It's a FOREVER healing! Both kinds of healing are wrought by the work done on a scandalous cross. One day while making calls at Berkeley Medical Center, I was called to come to the emergency room for a baby that had passed from crib death. In that I was at the hospital when my phone rang, I got there before the parents arrived. The nurse ushered me to the room with the deceased baby. That beautiful little baby lay there like a doll, motionless, lifeless. You see, the wisdom of the EMT's wasn't enough. The nurse excused me and said she'd call me when the parents arrived. I went to the cafeteria to wait. In short order, the nurse called me asking that I return to the emergency room. As I made the walk to the ER, I heard some horrific sobbing. A young mother, without notice, had lost her precious little baby. The nurse ushered me to the room where the mother was. Some 20 medical personnel – doctors and nurses – circled the room. They were speechless. They offered no wise words – NOT ONE. Their limited wisdom left them without words. That broken-hearted mother wasn't in any position to hear anyone's words, including mine. The medical personnel just stared at the mother as I put my arm around her and prayed to the ONE who died on that scandalous cross. That was our ONLY HOPE! I knew that Jesus had died for that little one. March 21, 2022 – anyone know the significance of that day? That was the day our dear Mahlon went home to be with Jesus. (BTW – I asked Lisa if I could share this.) Mahlon collapsed at the camp of a massive heart attack. CPR was administered. The ambulance raced him to the hospital. Lisa and some of you also raced to the hospital. A team of the hospital's available doctors worked on him – likely they were among the WISEST people in the building. Every available specialist was tapped. Yet there came a point when the doctors' wisdom no longer helped. Mahlon had taken his last earthly breath. ALL the wise doctors and nurses disappeared. They didn't know anything else to do; their wisdom only took them so far. Lisa and I were escorted to a room with walls of fabric to view the body. His body was bruised from the efforts of the WISE doctors. I believe the doctors exhausted everything they knew to do. It was just Lisa and I and a gentleman who was planning and gathering details for an autopsy. The wise doctors were no longer in sight. When human wisdom failed us, we could still stand on the scandalous work that Jesus did on the cross. Jesus shed His blood on the cross for the redemption of Mahlon. Again, we see that the scandalous cross is God's greatest message to man. On another day at the same hospital, I was asked to visit Chrissie, a 21-year-old young lady who had been diagnosed with terminal cancer. She didn't have any hair on her head, yet there was a certain beauty about her. We talked for nearly an hour. She shared her fears. I shared Jesus. She prayed to take Jesus as her Savior. A few weeks later, I got a call from the hospital asking that I visit Chrissie again as she had returned to the hospital. The switchboard operator apologized for calling me, as the scheduled chaplain had already visited her. She thought my visit was unnecessary. She said the two grandmothers insisted that she call me. I made my way to the hospital. Stepping off the elevator to the oncology floor, I heard deliberate, loud, and pitiful moaning. It was coming from Chrissie's room. Her parents had stepped out, both grandmothers and her nurse were there. The nurse informed me that Chrissie had been moaning like that nonstop for days. No reprise. They had tried multiple types of drugs. She assured me that they had done everything they knew to do, and nothing helped. I went to Chrissie's side. Her eyes were closed tightly. I took her hand. As she continued to moan, I reminded her who I was. I reminded her of our conversation a few weeks earlier. I shared scripture and reminded her of the commitment she made to Jesus. I reminded her of Jesus' love and provision FOR her and His promises TO her. I reminded her that because she had confessed her sin and because Jesus had paid her sin debt on a scandalous cross that she had NOTHING to fear. I told her that her best day ever was just ahead of her. At that, the moaning stopped. Now the grandmothers were crying. The nurse was crying. The nurse came and threw her arms around me. She said, "I've never seen anything like that." You see, human wisdom provided no answers that day. The answer rested in the work of Jesus on a scandalous cross. Chrissie's eternity was fixed because of a scandalous cross. Years later during Covid, while making a pastoral call in a yellow gown and mask, that nurse recognized me. I don't know how. She asked if I was Pastor Lloyd. She told me the day and hour that Chrissie took her last breath. She was marked by that experience because the spiritual superseded the natural. The presence of the Almighty visited a hospital room when human wisdom provided NO answers.

David Platt said, “Your only hope in this life is found in the brutal, bloody, humiliating, horrifying death of a naked man on a wooden post.” That’s ALL we’ve got, BUT... IT’S ALL WE NEED! There are millions of people whose lives have been changed. We need the message of the cross – because it’s better than any other message; because it’s good news for the low, it’s good news when we come to the end of ourselves and depend on the work of the cross and because it’s the ONLY message that brings eternal results and lasting hope.

**CONCLUSION.** Won’t you trust the message of the scandalous cross today? You CAN put the weight of your life there! Your eternity depends on it. To unbelievers, the message of the cross sounds absolutely foolish – BOTH – The idea that the Son of God would voluntarily die for sinners, AND... The notion that saved sinners should voluntarily die to themselves for the sake of discipleship. The word Paul uses for “foolishness” (1 Corinthians 1:18) “Moria,” is related to Moros, from which we get our English word “moron.” From the world’s perspective, only a moron would believe the message of the cross and live a life of self-sacrifice in light of the cross, BUT... For believers who are being delivered from a life of hopeless bondage to sin by taking up their crosses and following Christ, the cross is “the power of God.” Believing in the FOOLISHNESS of a SCANDALOUS CROSS is the WISEST thing you could do. Let’s pray. Father, our hope is not in human wisdom. All human wisdom pales beside the message of Jesus Christ, which is folly to those who are perishing, but to those who are being saved is the very power of God. Thank You for humbling Yourself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Thank You for saving us through the scandalous message of the cross. Spirit, help us receive the message of the cross in new and deeper ways. May our greatest treasure become nothing but Jesus Christ and Him crucified. Help us to rest NOT in human wisdom, but in the powerful and scandalous message of Jesus crucified. We pray this in Jesus’ name. Amen.