

THE MESSAGE OF THE CROSS

1 CORINTHIANS 1:18-25

Certain products sell themselves. They require no marketing or advertising. Some items and ideas appeal to a ready-made clientele. Here are some examples...

Snow chains in a blizzard

Plywood before a hurricane

Firewood in a power outage

Toilet paper on a camping trip

Earplugs at a Men's Retreat

Evergreen trees at Christmas time

Tie-die T-shirts at a Grateful Dead reunion

Metamucil at a chili cook-off

Foam tomahawks at an Atlanta Braves game

Championship pennants at an Atlanta Hawks game

Hey, certain products are *sure sells*, the demand is so great Walmart doesn't even have to run a special...

On my first trip to the island of Haiti, I ate the local food - and after several days of *mystery meat*, I was so hungry, I would've given my right arm for a Big Mac.

If the Domino's Pizza delivery man had showed up on my doorstep he could've named his price. There are situations where a product becomes an easy sale.

You'd think when God strategize salvation He would've offered a plan so appealing it would sell itself.

No reason to preach and plead... The need would be so apparent - the solution so attractive - as soon as you sat it on the shelf folks would scoop it up.

Salvation would be hard to keep in stock!

You'd think God would dream up a salvation that made for an easy sale... *yet God did just the opposite.*

The means God devised to forgive us of our sin, and make us His child, and clean up our lives, and guarantee us a home in heaven - *rather than sell itself*, actually provokes an initial *repulsion* and *resistance*.

You'd think God would've prescribe salvation as a tasty, cherry-flavored elixir - that goes down smoothly.

But to the contrary, salvation comes in a pill, the size of a golf ball. God deliberately made salvation tough to swallow. You've got to gulp hard to get it down! The message of the cross is not palatable to human tastes.

Unlike an accessory to a wardrobe the cross doesn't go with a thing you're wearing. For most people it clashes with *where they're at*, and *what they're into*.

In a society that idolizes style, and values vogue - the cross is like an ugly shirt stain you hope is far enough down, so you can tuck it in and no one notices.

The message of the cross is an offense to human sensibilities - *and that is exactly as God planned!*

God never intended for salvation to sell itself! God designed the cross to be an affront to all we hold dear.

It *defies our pride, and shakes our status quo, and flies in the face of our values. You'd think God would've concocted it differently... but you'd think wrong!*

The trend in churches today is to be trendy. We tend to value “relevance” above all other traits. It's all about being cool, and hip, and polished, and non-offensive.

Today's churches are most often measured by how well they relate to the secular culture around them - and the size of the crowd that attracts.

And understand, I'm not against being relevant. I believe our job is to bring the changeless Gospel to a changing world. God's truth is timeless yet timely!

In fact, when God became man He connected with His audience. He was relating firsthand to the human plight. He was empathizing with folks - *feeling for them, relating to them*. This a big part of Christian ministry.

But realize, the Incarnation was not an end in itself. *Jesus was born to die*. His coming to Earth led to His crucifixion. God knew that *relevance doesn't produce righteousness* - salvation demanded a sacrifice.

Though the ministry of Jesus began with His relating to mankind... it ended with Him doing what no one else could do. *Relevance gave way to holiness*. It was a means to an ends - but it was never an end in itself.

Yet when a church values relevance above all else, it inevitably shies away from the message of the cross.

For the cross is not relevant to today's culture - or to any culture. It's an offense to all that humans hold dear.

A church that's all about slick presentations, and engaging entertainment, and how-to suggestions, and self-massaging sermons - *to the neglect of the cross...* has missed the whole point of why it even exists.

Without the message of the cross pastors are just babysitters and churches become country clubs.

Years ago Richard Niebuhr warned of a Christianity that preaches “a God without wrath... trying to bring men without sin... into a kingdom without judgment... through the ministry of a Christ without a cross.”

Tragically, this is happening in many churches today.

It reminds me of a British Chapel. Its stone walls were covered with ivy. Over an arch were engraved the words, “We preach Christ crucified.” The men who founded the church did - they preached the cross.

But over time the ivy grew along the arch, and covered the word “crucified” - so that the arch read, “We preach Christ...” This reflected what had happened to the

church's message. They spoke of Christ - but as *an example, a servant, a humanitarian*.

Over the years the ivy continued to grow until finally it covered up the word "Christ" - so that it read, "We preach..." And that's what this church does today... It's abandoned the message of the cross, and preaches current events, and pop psychology, and social issues.

Let's never forget, the message that God uses to *forgive sin, and save souls, and renew minds, and transform lives, and heal hurts* is the cross of Jesus!

In this morning's text, the Apostle Paul tells us why God offers salvation through the message of the cross.

Paul gives the Corinthians four reasons...

First, the cross shocks our senses.

Second, the cross blocks our pride.

Third, the cross mocks our values.

Fourth, the cross locks our hearts.

Let's work line by line through our text this morning, and pick out each of these reasons in detail...

First, the cross is **a shock to our senses.**

Today in many ways the cross has been sanitized, and popularized, and even secularized - but in the beginning of Christianity the *cross of Jesus* was a shock to our sense of decorum. It was ugly, grotesque, disgusting, revolting, repulsive, and disturbing...

Remember in the famous hymn "**The Old, Rugged Cross,**" author George Bennard describes the cross of Jesus as "**the emblem of suffering and shame.**"

Verse 18 tells us, "**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.**"

Paul says that to those who are perishing the message of the cross is *utter foolishness*. And to those who're being saved the message is *utter power*.

But no one who sees the cross, for what it is - can ignore it, or toss it aside as a mere relic. The cross is in your face. It has to be reckoned with... God intends for the cross to **shock our senses** and grab our attention.

Today celebrities wear crosses tattooed on their chest - baseball players cross themselves before they step into the batter's box - jewelers beat down their gold

into earrings and necklaces in the shape of a cross - even candy-makers market chocolate candy crosses for Christians to eat on Good Friday...

But God chose the message of the cross to shock us and stir us - *that's why Satan has seen to it that the cross has been stripped of much of its shock-effect.*

Many years ago a cross was erected in a city park in Eugene, Oregon. It became a town landmark.

In recent years this upset some opponents of religion who filed a lawsuit to have the cross removed. The court let the cross stay, but this was their reason, "(The cross is) simply a symbol, universally accepted. It no longer carries religious significance, thus it's allowable on public property." *The cross no longer has spiritual connotations? Welcome to our modern world!*

It reminds me of the woman who walked into a Denver jewelry store. She asked the man at the counter if she could see a gold cross. The man answered, "A plain one, or one with a little man on it?"

We're desensitized to the shock of the cross!

There was though one cross that provoked the proper reaction. One Easter, on a church lawn in Dallas a 10 foot tall cross became the talk of Texas.

It stirred controversy and bitter reaction. It upset both church members and atheists. Editorials were written. Its photo was in the newspapers and on TV. Outraged people called the local talk shows to vent their anger.

What made the cross so controversial was it consisted of weapons confiscated by the Dallas PD.

Guns, pistols, knives, bayonets, bullets, bomb fragments, even broken bottles. The base of the cross consisted of a totaled-out car - ripped apart in a DUI accident. The display was surrounded by barbed-wire entanglements – the kind you'd see outside a prison.

The good people of Dallas started a petition to have the ugly cross removed. People called it a desecration.

Someone said, "How can you turn the cross of Christ into a symbol of violence, and pain, and suffering?"

Excuse me? If you were around in the first century AD that's exactly how you would've seen the cross...

The cross was the most hideous, torturous form of execution ever devised. Josephus, the Jewish historian, who saw firsthand his share of crosses, called the cross, "the most wretched of deaths."

Cicero wanted Roman citizens sheltered from even the sight of a cross. He wrote, "The idea of a cross should never come near the bodies of Romans... never pass through their thoughts, eyes, or ears."

Even members of the early church were repulsed by the cross. The cross was banned from depiction in the arts for the first four centuries of church history.

Not until the Emperor Constantine abolished the crucifixion as a form of execution was the cross turned into an emblem of the church. CS Lewis once pointed out, "The crucifixion did not become common in art until all who had seen a real one had died off."

If you were standing before a live crucifixion you'd shiver in horror - you'd *turn your head* - it would *turn your stomach* - for weeks you'd have nightmares.

Imagine, me walking into church one Sunday wearing a little gold electric chair around my neck... or a silver hypodermic needle pinned to my lapel...

Would you be offended? Jewelry in the form of an instrument of death - people today would be appalled.

When Paul wrote to the Corinthians about **"the message of the cross,"** it was the equivalent of me writing to you about *"the message of the electric chair."*

Have you ever happened on a traffic accident... *after the fact?* You drive past the tangled metal, broken glass is everywhere, tire marks are tattooed to the street - you sum up the situation, and shutter, ***"Wow, something serious happened here - lives were forever altered - eternity might've been further populated."***

This is the conclusion God intends for you to draw when you hear the message of the cross.

When you see the Roman cross, standing against the dark Jerusalem sky, on the lonely hill called Calvary - God wants you to think, ***"This was not just business as usual... something heavy happened here!"***

It reminds me of the mom and little girl on their way to the zoo. It was during Easter week, and as they drove past church after church the little girl counted up the crosses, ***"Mommy, how many times did Jesus die?"***

Her mom answered, *"Only once, dear."* The daughter replied, *"Well, then why are there so many crosses?"*

She answered, *"To help us remember how much Jesus loved us. He died on the cross in our place."* The little girl was up in arms. She shouted, *"How could we ever forget something like that!"* *Indeed, how can we?*

That's what God thought when He packaged salvation in the message of the cross. The cross was intended to **shock our senses** and grab our attention.

But that's not all. In verse 19, Paul quotes Isaiah 29, **"For it is written: 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent.'"**

The cross **shocks our senses** - but second, it **blocks our pride**. Paul is quite bold. He claims that through the cross God intended to *"destroy the wisdom of the wise, and bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent."* The cross of Jesus was designed by God to wipe out all vestiges of human ego and arrogance.

At the foot of the cross, Paul taunts the smartest humans. Verse 20, **"Where is the wise?"** He calls out the *"experts"* to try and refute God's work on the cross.

“Where is the scribe?” He challenges the university professors - the academics - put the cross under your microscope and see if you can dissect its power.

“Where is the disputer of this age?” Paul says, bring on the debaters and the quick witted talkers, and let them try to dismiss the cross with their sarcasm...

Paul pits *the wisdom of the boastful* up against *the power of the cross*, and he concludes, “Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?” Not even humanity’s brightest can get their minds around the wisdom of God. The brilliance of the cross humbles us.

Paul continues in verse 21, “For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God...”

Notice, God is not against wisdom, and education, and human learning, He just didn't choose these things as vehicles for communicating divine knowledge.

The Greek master, Socrates, said, “Oh, that someone would arise, to show us God.” Paul lived 500 years after Socrates, and Greece was still in the dark.

Paul is saying, “If God can be known through man’s wisdom then the world’s wisest wouldn’t be standing around *talking about God* - they’d be *talking to God*.” For it’s the cross - not wisdom - that lets us know God.

Understand, the cross is an anomaly in the history of God - an aberration. It's not what we would anticipate from God. It's a twist in the plot we didn't expect!

God is all-powerful. He's all-wise. God destroys the wicked, and He vindicates the righteous - so *why does He let His Son die at the hands of evil men?*

The cross was like a smoke detector going off... like an engine light illuminating on your dashboard. It was God screaming out that something has gone wrong.

The cross is God saying, "Man has a problem, and it won't get better on its own!" In essence, the cross is an affront to our ability to fix things. Man can't fix himself.

Several years ago, we had a problem with the sliding door on our minivan. I'm not a very mechanically oriented guy, so my wife took it to two mechanically oriented friends of ours - and neither could repair it.

My dad, who is the world's ultimate handyman, worked two days trying to fix that door, but failed...

That's when I told Kathy that I'd take care of the van! I didn't tell her my plan was to take it to a nearby body shop. The guys there got it functional in five minutes.

When I returned home Kathy was gone... so I stuck some tools in my back pocket, and waited.... When she drove up there I was standing next to the van...

She was happy to see the door fixed, but she didn't buy my story... I tried to convince her I had repaired the van myself... *Hey, if I could've gotten away with it, I might've taken credit for fixing that van door...*

What's the crime in being a hero in your wife's eyes every once in a while? All men want the wife and kids to think there's nothing in the world we can't fix...

But that's exactly why God devised the cross! One look at Jesus on the cross... *Behold, the bleeding wounds in His hands and feet... His eyes rolled back in His head... Blood oozing out of the punctures in His forehead... Watch Jesus in excruciating pain as He hikes Himself up on the spikes to grab another breath.*

At the cross you realize... **I can't fix this...**

If I could fix my sin-wrecked soul - if I could repair my broken heart - if I could clean up my record - and whitewash my dirty mind - then Jesus would've never had to go there! The cross would've been unnecessary.

The cross was intended to humble us. If salvation came through power - we'd all start lifting weights. If it came through knowledge - we'd all go back to school.

But since salvation comes through the cross - there's nothing we can do - but sit there, behold His blood soaked body, and believe in the crucified Christ!

The cross puts us in our place. Paul finishes verse 21, "It pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe."

The cross destroys all pride.

The cross sees to it, once and for all, that God is known not through *human achievement* or through *human knowledge* - but through *simple faith*.

In Rembrandt's painting of the crucifixion he has the dying Savior lifted on the cross - you also see the expressions of various bystanders. But in the center of the painting - *in blue* - you'll see Rembrandt himself.

The painter realized we all belong in the crucifixion scene. It's my sin and your sin that nailed Jesus to the tree. The cross happened because *you and I* needed it to happen. We couldn't fix ourselves - *so Jesus did*.

But not only did the cross **shock our senses**, and **block our pride**, but God also intended for the cross to **mock our values**. On the cross, it was as if God was destroying all of man's family heirlooms, *our treasures*.

He took all our worldly values, and trashed them.

Verse 22 tells us, "**For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom...**" The Jews and Greeks represented the two poles of human values. And its fitting they expected from God what they valued most.

Thus the Jews wanted a *sign - they were into power*.

Greeks sought *wisdom - they were into knowledge*.

But the cross appealed to neither **power** or **knowledge**. In fact, to Jews the cross was *a indication of weakness* - and to the Greek *an act of foolishness*.

God gave them both the exact opposite of what they wanted. On the cross, it was as if God were scoffing at what both Jews and Greeks valued most!

Again, the Jews were into power...

Their greatest heroes were known for their powerful exploits – Moses parted a Sea, Joshua won military victories, Samson was a one-man Philistine wrecking crew, David a giant-killer, Elijah called fire from heaven.

The Jews wanted a Messiah who was just as powerful as the heroes of their past. That's why it's no surprise masses of Jews followed Jesus as long as He multiplied the loaves and fishes, and worked miracles.

But once they realized political power was not His concern they started jumping off the bandwagon. Jews wanted a Savior with punch, not a "*suffering servant.*"

And again, the Greeks were into knowledge...

These were the descendants of Socrates and Plato. The Greeks were antiquity's great philosophers.

In Athens, the favorite past-time was carefully crafting philosophies; then debating them on Mars Hill with the resident scholars. Yet *where was the brilliance, the sophistication, the intellectual triumph in the cross?*

Rather than a stroke of genius - the cross seemed like a gigantic mistake. To the Greeks, if God had authored the cross, then God is prone to accidents.

In the minds of the Greeks the cross was at best a bungle of efficiency, a waste of human resources, a noble idea spoiled in midstream - at worst, a cruel joke.

Sometimes I wonder myself...

God, why the cross? Why didn't Jesus just toss Pilate out on his ear? Slay the Roman legions with a single swipe, and take the throne for Himself?

Jesus, why not impress us with Your power?

Like giddy, little school girls let us squeeze Your muscle and marveled at Your strength!"

Or Jesus, why not show off your wisdom?

Why didn't You journey to Athens to match wits with the smartest Greeks? Put your brilliance on display...

You could've explained the mysteries of life, thrilled them, and boggle their brains, with your omniscience!

But *oh, the cross...* according to human tastes the cross is an embarrassment. In verse 22 Paul writes, **"For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness..."**

To the Jews the cross was **"a stumbling block."** The phrase is a translation of the Greek word **"scandalon"** - from which we get our English word, **"scandal."**

The Jewish Scriptures declared, "cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree." There was no room in Jewish theology - or its value system - for a *martyred Messiah*.

For Paul to preach "Christ crucified" was sheer scandalous to the Jews... *The cross was blasphemous to Jews, and "foolishness" - or silliness - to the Greeks.*

And understand, the last 2000 years has done little to alter human values... We're still drawn to those with clout and power - the famous, the sexy, the strong, the privileged, the political - are always at center stage.

We're still impressed with *education* and *reputation* and *sophistication*. In fact, the two anathemas in our scientific age are to appear either *foolish* or *weak*.

It's amazing, how even Christians have tried to remake Paul's message. They've tried to spruce up "Christ crucified" to appeal to modern values...

Years ago, Norm Evans, a former Miami Dolphins lineman, wrote a book entitled "*On God's Squad*."

In his book he writes, "I guarantee you Christ would be the toughest guy who ever played the game of football... If He were alive today, He'd be a six-foot, six-

inch, 260 pound defensive tackle who would always make the big plays. He would be hard to keep out of the backfield for offensive linemen like myself."

How about that for an object of power... Imagine, Jesus, a 6'6", 260 pound, defensive lineman.

Fritz Peterson, a former New York Yankee, imagines Jesus in a baseball uniform. He wrote, "I firmly believe that if Jesus Christ was sliding into second base, He would knock the second baseman into left field to break up the double play. Christ might not throw a spitball, but he would play hard within the rules."

Wait a minute - let's take Jesus off the cross and put Him on the defensive line - make Him a sack specialist.

Let's wipe the blood off His beaten body, put Him in a uniform adorned with a Nike swoosh, and send Him into second base with His spikes high. Let's clean up His image... *people are into power, not weakness.*

Broadway composer Andrew Lloyd Webber goes even further. As he planned a revival of the musical "*Jesus Christ Superstar*" he commented on how he would cast the lead role, "Jesus has got to have sex appeal and real star quality..." Trust me, there's nothing sexy, or glamorous about "Christ crucified..."

And that is exactly what God intended. The cross of Christ is an affront to our values of physical power, and human wisdom, and pleasing appearance.

The cross is a satire on what we treasure most.

On the cross, God was mocking *beauty, brawn, and brains*. The cross makes fun of our puny muscles - our shallow logic - our preoccupation with appearance.

The message of the cross taps us on the shoulder and asks us the question, "Why are we wasting so much time at the health club when the most powerful act in history was accomplished through weakness?"

The cross challenges us, "Why put so much stock in degrees and intellectual achievement when the wisdom of man calls God's wisdom foolishness?"

The cross confronts the image-conscious, "Why worry about the hair that won't lay down, when the Son of God hung naked and bleeding from an ugly cross?"

This is why Paul says of those who heard and received the message... "but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." The message of the cross is more than the mere facts about Jesus' crucifixion, it's God's attempt to rearrange our priorities and challenge our values. The message of the cross impacts us deeply.

Instead of physical power, human wisdom, outward beauty; it focuses us on the obedience Jesus modeled.

His cross schools us on commitment and courage.

Behold Jesus on the tree, and it teaches us what *love* is really all about. The cross is God's way of saying we've gotten what's important all twisted up.

Paul closes this thought in verse 25, “**Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.**” The message of the cross **shocks our senses**, it **blocks all pride**, it **mocks our values...** but finally, it **locks our hearts**.

For once you've seen the cross for what it truly is, its wisdom and power, it secures your allegiance forever.

God knew **the cross would be initially repulsive**. We'd have to get over our cultural refinement to accept it...

God knew to embrace the cross **we'd have to humble our hearts**, and step over our sinful pride.

And God knew **it would challenge our values** - it would force us to reassess and rearrange our priorities... God knows, handymen and handy-women have a hard

time admitting they can't always fix stuff... But once you trust in the cross, its wonder and power captures your imagination and your loyalties forever.

It reminds me of a WW2 soldier who had grown weary of battle, and decided to go AWOL. It was a dark, rainy night when he slipped away from camp.

After wandering for hours in the woods of Southern France he came to a pole by the roadside. He decided to climb the pole - get above the tree tops - and see if he could spot a landmark, and get his bearings.

When he reached the top of what he thought was a telephone pole a lightning bolt illuminated the night sky.

The soldier turned toward the pole and right into the face of the crucified Christ. What he thought had been a telephone pole was a giant, roadside crucifix.

The soldier said one look at Jesus on the cross restored his bravery and courage. The thought of what Jesus did, re-energized him for battle. If Jesus endured the cross for him, he could hold his post a little longer.

This is what the cross does for us - it locks our hearts, and holds us in tight allegiance to our Master.

How can you refuse a love that bore the cross?

The message of the cross is not a product that sells itself. There are formidable barriers to overcome for us to grasp its power - and its beauty - and its wisdom...

The cross sees to it that we come to God *on His terms, rather than our own*. The cross is a hard pill to swallow, but it's the medicine we desperately need.

And God knows, if a man or woman, boy or girl, is really willing to come and embrace the cross - *to bypass their sensibilities, and set aside their pride, and rethink their priorities...* then they'll never leave!

They'll stay locked to the cross forever!

Again, as John Bennard puts it, "On a hill far away stood an old, rugged cross, the emblem of suffering and shame - **and I love that old cross** - where the dearest and best, for a world of lost sinners was slain.

And the chorus, **So I'll cherish** the old, rugged cross, til my trophies at last I lay down. **I will cling** to the old, rugged cross, and exchange it some day for a crown."

God chooses for us to enter His Kingdom through the door of paradox. Accept the weakness of the cross, and He unleashes His awesome power. Embrace its foolishness, and you're privy to His boundless wisdom.

The cross is more powerful than nuclear fission - it's more intellectually challenging than quantum physics, but you'll never know it until you *shed your sensibilities*, and *renounce your pride*, and *rethink your values* - and put all your faith in the crucified Christ.

The message of the cross is not an easy sell.

It requires some serious rearranging - but it's still the greatest bargain in history... God keeps His treasures hidden behind an ugly, uncouth, uncultured cross.

Embrace the cross, and you'll find the power and wisdom of Almighty God. It's true, *"X" marks the spot*. At a *cursed cross* is where we find all *God's blessings*.

Dave Hutto use to run a youth camp in Alabama. On a mountain is a huge cross that's illuminated at night.

One day a man appeared on Hutto's doorstep. He asked Dave if he could see the cross. As they headed up the mountain he explained the reason for his visit...

He was the pilot of a small plane that had taken off in terrible weather from Atlanta to Birmingham.

In fact, the man had left Atlanta in a deep depression. He had contemplated suicide. That's why he didn't mind leaving in such dangerous conditions.

When the man flew over the state line he got into trouble. The fog was so thick his visibility was zero.

He was lost and scared - and for the first time in years he prayed. Suddenly through the fog he saw a lighted cross. He radioed the tower. The controllers knew of the cross, and used it to guide the pilot to safety. The experience had changed the pilot's life...

As Dave Hutto, and his new friend stood in front of the cross, the man dropped to his knees, and prayed, "[Lord, I've found my way back, and I'll never be the same.](#)" The cross has led many a person back to God.

Here is where *God gets our attention, and abolishes our pride, and reorders our priorities. At the cross our love for Jesus forms a cord so strong it'll never break.*

The cross captures our heart and never lets it go.

Did you know, the word “**crux**” is from “*crucifixion*” - it speaks of the cross? The Gospel Paul preached makes the cross of Jesus the crux of all we do.

The Jews stumbled over the cross. The Greeks laughed it off as foolishness - and both sadly, tragically, perished in their sin. But those who trust in the cross discover the *power of God* and the *wisdom of God!*

Let's not only embrace the message of the cross - let's relish it, and rejoice in it, and marvel at it...

And let's go a step further... let's proclaim it boldly, and share it with everyone we can... As the little girl said, “**How could we ever forget something *like that!*”**”