

The Way of the Cross

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[0 : 00] So, welcome to Corinth. In many ways, it's a city like any other. A city where the rich look down on the poor and the gap between them is cavernous. A city where culture surrounds its people wherever they go. A city of temples and celebrity and sport.

Actually, their games were second only to the Olympics in grandeur. A city obsessed with sex, money, and influence. Corinth, a city perhaps not as far removed from our own as we might expect. And it's a city where Christ's church was growing. Paul had traveled to Corinth as he worked his way around Turkey and the Mediterranean, telling people about Jesus and planting churches. And one of these was in Corinth. In our Bibles, we have two of the letters that Paul wrote to this group of early Christians. And over the next four weeks, we're going to be spending time in the first four chapters of the first of these.

So, since Paul had left them to plant churches elsewhere, things had begun to go downhill a bit. First Corinthians at first glance, it kind of looks like a list of difficult but separate problems that Paul was having to troubleshoot from afar.

[1 : 13] He's had one letter from the church asking him a bunch of questions, which illustrates some of the misunderstandings that they had. He's also had reports from other folks in the church, which have given him cause for concern.

The way the Corinthians are living and behaving is alarming to Paul, to say the least. At the heart of all their problems is this one problem.

The Corinthians have believed the Jesus message, but they've not understood the Jesus way. And that's why that's the title for our series, The Jesus Way.

And what I hope that we're going to see over the next few weeks is that the two, the Jesus message and the Jesus way, separable. Just as the Corinthians had to learn about the Jesus way, i.e. what it practically looks like to be a Christian.

I hope that's what we're going to be able to learn too. Because the challenges that the church in Scotland faces today is not that dissimilar from the challenges that the church in Corinth was facing.

[2 : 13] So as we begin thinking about the Jesus way, I'm really going to lean into that way metaphor this afternoon with our three points. I'll probably not be as obvious with the way imagery in later talks, but we've got the Corinthian way, the foolish way, and the Christ crucified way.

These are our three points. So let's start with the Corinthian way. The manner in which Paul opens up the letter gives us quite a neat little snapshot of what the church in Corinth looked like.

What I want us to notice is that the Corinthians had two major influences on their lives. The first was God, who had saved them and had redeemed them and had made them his holy people.

The second was the world, which was calling them to live in ways which were basically incompatible with the Jesus that they believed in. And so the Corinthian way is a mongrel way that reflects both the influence of God's transforming grace, but also the destructive influence of the world.

And it's not a way that belongs to the Corinthians alone, but for the sake of argument, we're going to refer to it as the Corinthian. Now, the beginning of Paul's letter is actually pretty encouraging, and Paul intends it to be so.

[3 : 27] Paul greets them with grace and peace, and notice how he describes them in verse 2. The Corinthians are those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be his holy people, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours.

Paul's reminding them as he begins this letter that they belong to God and have been called by him to be holy and set apart. And he reminds them, too, that they are part of the global church, all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And Paul rarely makes reference like this to the global church at the start of his letters. But as we'll see, the Corinthians have become rather introspective and self-centered in their outlook, rather consumed by their own issues.

Paul speaks about how they've not just been called, but have had confirmation that Jesus has called them. If you look down at verse 4, Paul's reminding them that he is thankful that God has shown him his grace, and the proof of that grace is that the believers in Corinth have been enriched with spiritual gifts of speech and knowledge.

Now, later parts of the letter will show that the Corinthians have basically abused those gifts. But at this point of the letter, Paul is pleased with what they signify. They signify God's grace at work in these believers.

[5 : 08] And not only this, but Paul is convinced that God is going to keep the Corinthians until the day that Christ returns to judge the world. Verse 8 says, Paul has confidence that God has been working and will continue to work within the lives of these Christians in Corinth.

I don't know about you, but I find it's all too easy to forget often that God is at work. But look around you. You're actually, audience participation, just look around you at all the people around you. God is at work amongst us, just as he was at work in Corinth. Before we go any further, because Paul's letter does get much heavier and quite challenging, I want us to remember, just as Paul wanted them to remember, God's grace is at work amongst us.

It's been a strange year so far, but God is working in our lives if we're trusting in him. And so before we press ahead, we need to know that the foundation of our lives is God's grace to us in Christ. And we need the conviction that he is working in his church, working here in Israel, because he is. Now returning to the Corinthians, and this is where it starts to get heavier.

[6 : 31] It's interesting that Paul doesn't commend them for anything. Often Paul will commend churches when he writes to them for their faith, or their hope, or their love, their work, or their endurance.

Paul doesn't commend the Corinthians. He's so glad and he's so thankful that God has been working in them. But it doesn't seem to have prompted them to show those distinctive characteristics that usually accompany faith in Christ.

And the reason for that is that the world has been at work among them. The culture of Corinth casted a very large shadow over the church.

And one of the shadow's effects was division. Paul says in verse 10, And I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought. Because this is a divided church. Paul's heard a report from Chloe's people, presumably a group in the Corinthian church, that folks are dividing basically over different church celebrities.

[7 : 41] Then, as now, Christians love to turn particular people, usually church leaders, into Christian celebrities, which, as we'll see, is a contradiction in terms. Now, Paul, he's the one who planted the church, so it may be natural that some of them are saying, oh, we follow Paul.

But you've also got Apollos. He was a younger guy who came to Corinth not long after Paul had left. And he really knew his stuff, and he presented it well. He was a skilled speaker, a very talented apologist.

And so some in the church are saying, oh, why follow Apollos? And Peter, he's sometimes known as Cephas. He was one of Jesus' original 12 disciples. Well, he's also apparently paid Corinth a visit.

And some of the Corinthians, well, they're saying, oh, why follow Cephas? And then there's this group who kind of try and distance themselves above the fray, and they say, oh, well, we follow Christ. Is Christ divided?

Says Paul. You can always hear the exasperation as he wrote it, can't you? Christ shouldn't be divided, but the Corinthians have tried their level best to do so. Was Paul crucified for you?

[8 : 47] Obviously not, is the answer that Paul's expecting. Were you baptized in the name of Paul? No, baptism is only in the name of God, Father, Son, and Spirit. Paul's relieved that he only baptized a few folks in Corinth.

Otherwise, they might have had even more ammunition for building up this personality cult around him. And that's the last thing that Paul wants. Because it's not that Paul's annoyed that Apollos and Peter maybe have more fans than him.

He really couldn't care less about that. It's that the Corinthians are viewing these church leaders in completely the wrong way. Corinthian culture was celebrity culture.

It was a culture that, like our own, was incredibly superficial and founded celebrities and the speakers who managed to move and manipulate their audiences the most effectively. These speakers were the Corinthian influencers, if you like.

What they said tickled the ears and sounded really wise. They looked like they had it all together. And like influencers today, people wanted to be like them. People adored them.

[9 : 49] I don't know what the Corinthian equivalent of likes was, but they had them in bucket loads. And so, can you see how the Corinthian influencer culture has been applied by the Corinthian Christians to the church?

They were pitting Paul, Peter, and Apollos against one another and dividing over them, despite the fact that they all preached the same message. The Corinthians were so rooted in a worldly perspective that naturally wants to put people up on a pedestal, just as Christians today can be in danger of doing.

What's the problem with this? Well, it's quite stark, according to Paul. Look at what he says in verse 17. Paul's primary goal was not baptizing people, but telling people about Jesus.

And Jesus did not send them to preach with wisdom and eloquence, i.e., in the style of the Corinthian influencers that puts all the focus on the speaker. Because when that happens, the cross is emptied of its power.

If we're pulled to proclaim Christ in a way that drew more attention to his own powers of rhetoric and intelligence, well, he'd end up just proclaiming himself, not Jesus. His words would point to Jesus, but his manner would point to himself.

[11 : 18] And so the work of the world is a danger because it threatens to empty the cross. An empty cross is, of course, no good. The power of the cross is that Jesus died on it.

To empty the cross of Christ by taking on the world's behaviors and its values is to try walking on fire. And that's what the Corinthians were doing.

To illustrate the danger, consider those who call for the defunding of the police. And consider their reasons. When it looks like the police are targeting particular ethnic groups over others.

When it looks like the police are abusing their power. And when people fear the police more than criminals. Well, something's probably gone a bit wrong. When the behavior of certain officers goes against the creed that the police ought to follow, it drags the name of the whole institution through the mud.

Now consider the danger of the Corinthian way and the similarities. The danger is a church that is doctrinally sound, preaches the truth, believes the truth, but actually mirrors the world in its behavior and ethics.

[12 : 21] And therefore drags the name of Christ through the mud. Churches that say and believe one thing, but don't live that out in the way they live. And churches whose behavior doesn't match up with Jesus or the Bible are really flirting with peril.

It's very easy to know the right things and yet live in a way that suggests the church of Christ is functionally no different from the world. And even more so than the Corinthians, we are surrounded, bombarded actually, with culture.

With technology, we carry the world and its preaching around wherever we go. And it never lets up, does it? In contrast, the time we spend with God's people and listening to God's word is probably comparatively low.

So this is the ever-present danger of living in the world. Do we mirror the world or do we mirror Jesus? Are we tempted towards the Corinthian way? And so here's why we might instinctively and unconsciously want to mirror the world rather than Jesus.

Because the Jesus way is, in the world's eyes, the foolish way. And that's our second point. Paul introduces this idea in verse 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.

[13 : 43] For it is written in Isaiah, this is what we started our service with, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate. In the world's eyes, and we probably know this well from experience, the message of the cross is foolishness.

But those who see it as foolishness and stupidity are the ones perishing in sin. To those who believe, they recognize the cross as it really is the power of God.

Now, Roman culture, of which Corinth was a part, a crucified God, was the height of ridiculousness, really. Cicero, one of Rome's greatest orators, once said that the very word cross should be far removed, not only from the person of a Roman citizen, but from his thoughts, his eyes, his ears. The cross was scandalous. One writer has actually suggested that the scandal of the cross is matched only in our cultural imagination by the horrors of Hiroshima or the gas chamber. That's the scandal and the bizarreness that accompanies the idea of a crucified Messiah. What sort of God dies on a cross?

[14:58] But here's Paul asking, where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? We might ask, where is the academic? Where is the podcaster?

Where is the YouTuber, the Instagram influencer, the TikToker? Because these are the people that our culture listens to. And Paul silences them all in verse 20.

Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since the wisdom of the world, through its wisdom, did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe.

Wisdom and intelligence of the academic and the podcaster, the YouTuber, the influencer, the TikToker, all amounts to nothing in the end. All they have, as Hamlet once said, is words, words, words.

But the foolishness of the gospel and the message of the crucified Messiah, that is the way that leads to salvation. The philosopher Luke Ferry, in his book, *A Brief History of Thought*, suggests that all philosophies, worldviews, and religions are, at their core, different ways of finding salvation from that very human problem of death.

[16:19] Now, the crucified Messiah looks foolish to most people in the world as a means of salvation, or as a means of making sense of life. And yet, it is the only message that has the power to save.

But the world struggles to make sense of that or believe it, and usually falls into one of two camps. And Paul outlines them here. The Jews demand science 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. So, you've got some people who are like the Jews, who demand and need a miraculous sign from God, on their terms, obviously.

But, of course, the Jews rejected the biggest sign, which was the resurrection. And so, this group of people are never going to be satisfied. But then, on the other hand, you've got those who are like the Greeks, who are only going to believe in a way that mirrors culture and its wisdom.

But, of course, culture changes in what people see as foolish in one generation. Another generation will see as wise. Our generation, for example, has seen so many changes in understanding and position on things like sexuality and gender, for example.

[17:36] By contrast, the message and wisdom of the cross hasn't changed for 2,000 years. So, the cross is a stumbling block. The Greek word is *skandalon*, from which we get our word *scandal*.

It's true. The message of the cross in Christianity is scandalous in our day and age. It's not wise. It's not culturally relevant. It's fundamentalist. It's close-minded.

It's nice for you to believe, but I'd be a fool if I believed it. That's the message of the cross. And yet, the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

And it's for that reason that God chooses the foolish and the weak. The Roman culture was obsessed with status and money. The Roman writers Horace and Juvenile both mockingly suggested that money and status were basically worshipped as goddesses, which, in a culture that actually did worship real, well, they thought were real goddesses like Juno and Venus and the like, that's quite a surprising statement.

And just proves how important money and status were for the Romans and the Corinthians, because Corinth was a Roman colony. A lot of its population were made up of freedmen, so slaves who had been granted their freedom.

[18:54] And so, in Corinth, there were myriad opportunities for these freedmen to achieve wealth and status. And so, these Roman cultural preoccupations were enlarged to an even greater degree.

And so, we can see why Paul actually has to remind the Corinthians where they came from in verse 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. But, the Corinthians really didn't look like much in the eyes of culture. But, continues Paul, 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.

That's pretty humbling for Paul to call the Corinthians things that are not. But, in the eyes of the world, most of them really had nothing much gotten for them. But, that's the sort of people that God chooses.

[19 : 56] To shame and humiliate the proud and arrogant wisdom of the world, which thinks it knows the way. Verse 29. The reason, so that no one may boast before him.

Every other road to salvation that culture offers is focused on basically what you can do to save yourself. Whatever that might look like, whether it's becoming your best self, or finding yourself, or discovering, or finding your personal truth.

Whatever that might mean. The focus is all on yourself, and your process of self-actualization.

Using Paul's language, we can sum up all these roads as reasons to boast in yourself.

The Jesus way, it humiliates all these shallow ways. And there's no call for boasting, because Jesus is the focus, not ourselves.

Which is why Paul says in verse 30, it's because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God. That is our righteousness, holiness, and redemption.

[21 : 03] Therefore, as it is written, let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord. Jesus is the wisdom of God. The Christian who's united to Jesus, what that means is he is our righteousness, our holiness, and our redemption.

That is, he makes us spotless in the eyes of God. He sets us apart to be his people, and he redeems us from the slavery of sin. In other words, salvation comes not from any of our efforts, but from Jesus alone.

And so it says, Paul, if you're going to boast, well, boast in Jesus, because he's the one who's done all the work. So the divisions over leaders, and as later parts of the letter are going to make very clear, their high view of their own spirituality and their own wisdom, is because the way of the world has got into their system.

The Corinthians really thought that they had reason to boast, but they'd forgotten that Christ and the cross was what had saved them. And they'd applied the ways of the world to their understanding of the gospel and their life in the church.

And the results were messy. The rest of the letter shows that this problem emerged in incest, divisions between rich and poor, meetings that were absolutely chaotic, and an obsession in their freedoms to live as they wanted.

[22 : 21] And so Paul's laying a choice before them, and the choice is laid before us as well. There are two ways of wisdom. Two ways of living. Two ways of world. Corinthians, well, they wanted the blessings of the gospel, but they didn't want to change the way they lived.

They didn't want to sacrifice the ways of culture in order to follow Christ. And it's such an easy temptation to fall before today. But following Jesus means not just believing the Jesus message, but living the Jesus way.

Follow the Jesus way, and you may put your career progression at risk. Follow the Jesus way, and you may lose the respect of those around you.

Follow the Jesus way, and folks that you know may take you for a fool. Follow the Jesus way, and you open yourself up to various accusations, the worst of which probably being the accusation of hatefulness and intolerance.

Jesus way is the scandalon. It's scandalous. But don't we want to be believers whose lives, perspectives, and priorities mirror Christ crucified, no matter the cost?

[23 : 38] It's because the Corinthians were so surrounded by the influence of their culture and so pressured by it that Paul came and told them the gospel in the manner in which he did. Chapter 2, verse 1 says, And so it was with me, brothers and sisters, when I came to you, I didn't come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God, for I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Christ and him.

Paul's way was the Jesus way, the Christ crucified way. And that's our final point, which is shorter than the first two. You'll probably be glad to know. When Paul says he knew nothing except Christ crucified, what he means is that the way he told them the gospel was all about Jesus, not just in his words but in his manner.

Everything was pointing towards Jesus and he tried the best he could to point away from himself because the gospel was all about Christ. Jesus, who came in weakness and humility and became the man of sorrows on the cross despite being God himself to save the world from sin, Jesus, who is the only one who has the power to bring eternal life and make life right.

Jesus, who is the very son of God. And Paul, when he came to Corinth, he also came in weakness. Look at verse 3. I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling.

This was not the Corinthian way to win people over. Why did Paul come in fear and trembling? We read in Acts that God spoke to him in a vision whilst he was in Corinth. God said, Paul, don't be afraid.

[25 : 20] Keep on speaking. Don't be silent. For I am with you and no one is going to attack and harm you because I have many people in this city. So we can infer that the work in Corinth was hard.

There was the threat and fear of attack hanging over Paul as he preached. Paul here, he makes no attempt to cover up that fear that he had when he first came to Corinth. Because he wants the Corinthians to know that he is not like the Corinthian influence who takes so much.

None of us like looking weak, do we? We've probably all got moments in our past where we appeared so foolish that just remembering those moments causes us to shrivel up in cringe and embarrassment.

And you're probably all thinking of those moments right now. And we all know the value of making a good impression. We all have a desire to win adulation and praise from our peers and our seniors.

And when we live and talk about Jesus, those feelings can so easily predominate, can't they?

But the church is not built on the backs of what the world thinks is impressive or attractive or wise. It's built on the back of a crucified Messiah and his weak-looking people who bring his message of life.

[26 : 36] As Paul says, my message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom but on God's power.

Where does real power lie? Because it's not in the wisdom of culture. If it was, surely, surely the world would have overcome so many of its problems by now. But instead, as we know very well, humanity never really moves forward.

fads and fashions and new ideas, they all seem to solve very, very little. There's no other way of understanding life that has the heavenly power of the cross.

Jesus hung there bleeding and dying because he took our sins and he bore our sorrows. It was weakness and powerlessness in the eyes of the world.

His accusers looked up at him and they mocked him. How could such a pathetic figure have claimed to save the world? And yet, this Messiah on the cross dealt with sin and he dealt with death.

[27 : 46] The weakness of the cross is the power of God. And when Paul preached that message of the cross, the Spirit of God was at work.

Paul might have come looking unimpressive and uninspiring, but his message of Christ crucified brought these Corinthians to God. Isn't that how Paul began his letter?

I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. Power of God was displayed in Corinth because they believed and received God's gift of grace in Christ.

his forgiveness, his wisdom, his holiness, redemption, and righteousness. This is the power of God. This is the power to change lives. And so as we close, Christ died for you.

Jesus hung on that cross and took your sin and mine in love and mercy. Did it look powerful? No. Was it powerful?

[28 : 56] Oh yes, it was. That cross in Palestine 2,000 years ago was the turning point in the story of the world. And the moment you believed or perhaps that moment still in the future for you, well that moment is the turning point in your story.

It might not look like the most important moment to the world around us. It often happens without much pomp or ceremony. But the work of the Spirit in the message of the cross is the power of God himself.

Which is why our resolve as followers of Jesus needs to be Paul's resolve. Resolving to know nothing except Christ and him crucified.

Because the Jesus way is the way of the cross. It's foolishness and it's weakness and it's powerlessness in the eyes of the world. but the way of the cross is the power of God.

God is the power