

Since so many of our people are enjoying a nice service up at the church camp, we are taking a break from our verse-by-verse study through the Book of Acts. Today you will get from me the very rare and elusive topical sermon.

I was reminded this week about the popularity of Christian apologetics. Apologetics is from the Greek word ἀπολογία (ä-pŏ-lŏ-gē-ä) meaning to give a verbal defense. To the ancients it was a technical legal term for defending yourself in court. If charges were leveled against you, you had the opportunity to make a speech explaining why the charges were false or otherwise misrepresented you and your actions.

In talking about Christianity, it is to defend your belief in Christ from being misunderstood or misrepresented. It is to explain the faith defending it from false claims and other distortions. It doesn't mean to apologize, although the concepts are related, it specifically means to make a defense and, in this case, it is to defend Christianity. We, in the 21st century, have turned it from defending Christianity into proving Christianity.

Like I said, it's popular. There's a lot of viral videos on the internet of various apologists making skeptics,

agnostics, and atheists look like fools. They're fun to watch because our side wins and the people who demean and hate us lose.

Is that evangelism? I once was enrolled in a master's degree program in apologetics. I ended up dropping out for a few reasons, but the main one was a profound realization that apologetics is a tool to aid in evangelism, not a method of evangelism.

What I mean is that all the reason, logic, science, math, archeological, and historical evidence conceivable will never prove beyond any doubt the Truth of the Gospel. Just like you cannot prove the non-existence of God, you cannot prove from the available evidence the existence of Him either.

Beyond that, I believed what Oswald Chambers wrote more than 100 years ago now, "You can never argue anyone into the Kingdom of Heaven... The only result of arguing is to prove to your own mind that you are right and the other fellow wrong." In such a case, we don't serve the Lord in the advancement of His Kingdom, we serve our own human pride.

Don't get me wrong, I think that apologetics is a very important area of study, and I applaud the people who devote their lives to it, as long as we never forget that it is the Holy Spirit alone Who can move a human heart. As long as we never forget that Salvation comes by believing, which by definition requires faith and that such faith is a gift from the Holy Spirit.

Initial Salvation cannot be an academic exercise exclusively, any more than Sanctification, which is growing in Christian maturity, can be an academic exercise exclusively. We do what we do at Alêtheia not to think our way into maturity, but to think our way into doing what leads to growing our Christian maturity. You cannot be a Christian sitting in a pew. Christianity is an activity.

From start to finish Salvation is about being, not simply knowing. The Devil knows Jesus... Far better than any of us. He doesn't truly know Jesus though and that kind of knowing is experiential, not just academic.

Remember also that in conveying the content of the faith to others we are to do it humbly and gently. We are to share the Truth with others not to prove that we have the Truth, but with the goal of them accepting the

Truth. How can I explain the Gospel in a way that this particular person can best receive it? That's the question you must constantly ask God during every ministry encounter.

Think about it this way, Jesus commanded us to "make disciples" as we saw last week. He didn't tell us to simply declare Truth claims and win arguments. He didn't tell us to intentionally alienate everyone who doesn't agree with us. He didn't tell us to do battle with the unsaved, physically, verbally, or politically.

He commanded the church to disciple people. Discipling another presupposes a personal relationship with them. They cannot have a personal relationship with an institution. The church was never intended to be an institution, but always was the Christian people as the Body of Christ.

The relationship implied is between the unsaved and the people making up the church. That's why it takes all of us doing our individual part within the fabric of the whole to disciple people properly.

Let's talk about faith then. My text for today is I Corinthians 1:17&18 (ESV), 17For 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. 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.

The context is the church in Corinth was full of people seeking personal status. That's really the easiest way to describe what was going on there. Many of the people in the Christian community there were jockeying for position and influence, for importance and power.

One of the ways that they were doing that was by elevating themselves over their peers by their alignment with a particular minister. In verse 12 Paul wrote that some declared that they were with him – that they were disciples of Paul. Paul repudiated such thinking and that's the meaning of him stating that Christ did not send him to baptize.

Baptism is part of how we Christians are commanded to “make disciples,” as we saw last week. Paul was in no way denying that but was indicating that his personal role was as an Apostle proclaiming the Gospel Message of Truth, not performing baptisms.

Here's where we get to the salient bit for today... The Gospel was never to be proclaimed with “words of eloquent wisdom.” Why? Because doing so empties the “Cross of Christ” of its power.

That might seem just a little confusing, so Paul further explained in verse 18. He equated the Gospel with the Word of the “Cross of Christ” and as such he said that it is pure folly to those who are in the process of perishing, for those who are on their way to ruin it is nonsensical.

But, on the other hand, the Word of the “Cross of Christ” is the very power of God displayed to us who are in the process of being Saved, to those of us who are on our way to entire Salvation.

Okay, we need to break all of that down to make sure that we get it. I must tell you that no one can cram more profound theology in a couple of verses that the Apostle Paul did. If you're a little unsure about the details, you are in good company.

First, Salvation is usually thought of as the moment in time when a person is transferred from the kingdom of darkness into the Kingdom of Light. Well at that

moment of transference we are usually “a ways away” from realizing it in its fullest sense – we’re still physically here. Salvation in its fullest sense is entire Salvation and includes the moment of transference as well as Sanctification or Christian growth into maturity as well as Glorification the actual entrance into the presence of God forevermore.

With that clarified, the gist of what Paul was trying to teach the Corinthians back then and what we are to learn from him today is that human beings are always spring-loaded to focus on themselves, and as such, we are constantly trying to make our Christianity about us.

That’s the reason we compare ourselves to others, just like the Corinthians did twenty centuries ago. Such comparisons are always inappropriate because Christ is the standard against which we are to measure ourselves, not other frail, fallen, mortal human beings.

It is the reason that the Pentecostal aspect of their worship services was so incredibly divisive and unhelpful. Each person was trying to outdo the others in their spiritual superiority. Any measurement can be applied and misused, whether it comes to divine gifts, personal ministries, financial giving, church positions,

spiritual maturity, or theological understanding, we can use it to compare ourselves with others.

If we feel that we measure up favorably against others we will become self-righteous. If we feel that we fall far short of others we will become resentful. If we don't really know, we will struggle to find our significance or to find our security by competing against our own team.

What Paul was on about in the opening section of his first Letter to the crazy Corinthians, who incidentally, acted just like modern Americans, is a very simple notion. It is that all the talk, all the understanding, all the information, all the knowledge, all the wisdom, and all the other stuff you could possibly imagine is pure sewage when compared to the very Word of Life.

What that means is that I could go on and on teaching the deeper things of the Bible with tremendous accuracy in an engaging fashion and as long as they are my words they will have zero ultimate effect on any human soul.

Let me expound further, I, you, or someone else, might accurately proclaim the Gospel using all kinds of fancy arguments and compelling stories and masterful



language and, in so doing, convince thousands of people to “walk the sawdust trail,” down to an old-time religion altar call where they would give their heart to Jesus, and it wouldn’t mean a thing eternally.

If the words are merely the winsome wisdom and persuasive words of man, it would empty the “Cross of Christ” of its power. Why? Because, my dear friends, such proclamation would be a human endeavor glorifying the speaker and then anyone accepting those words and believing them would be doing so due to their own incredible intelligence and wisdom to understand and commit and would likewise glorify them as well.

I’ll put it more simply, can you see that if you accept Christ because you were good enough, smart enough, blessed enough to do so, it is about you and the more that it is about you the less that it’s about the “Cross of Christ”?

More than that, as a human labor that naturally diminishes the Cross by the same degree that it elevates the person, we are also compelled to focus on Christ’s preincarnation, on His birth, on His ministry, on

His Resurrection, on His ascension, on His return, on His anything other than on His brutal death.

It is His brutal death that brings Life. What God the Holy Spirit was saying through the Apostle Paul was that God made man being taken by corrupt men and being brutalized unto a viciously violent and horribly demeaning death on a Cross is the greatest display of weakness imaginable to those who don't get it.

To those who do get it that horrific weakness is the greatest strength Almighty God has ever displayed. God allowed Himself to be mocked, ridiculed, and scorned. God the Father allowed what was to Him, His One and Only Son to be assaulted, brutalized, and stricken. Jesus allowed Himself to be humiliated, scourged, and tortured. The entire Heavenly Host watched the strength of God as the restraint from intervening in the horrific death of God in the flesh.

It sure enough looks like weakness to everyone perishing, but to those who are being Saved it looks like what it truly is – the most magnificent display of strength imaginable. It is the power of the Cross of Christ that Saves. You know who else sees the Cross as weakness? Self-righteous Christians.

In this passage I have tried to convey the progressive nature of both Salvation and of condemnation. Paul repeatedly used very specific and unusual verb tenses and grammatical structures that I will not bore you with except to say that the depiction of both of these outcomes is like paths going in opposite directions. The Didache, which may be the oldest surviving Christian document outside of the Bible itself begins by depicting the “Two paths.”

As life unfolds, no one is standing still. Everyone is walking down one of the two paths – you are either walking towards eternal destruction or you are walking towards eternal Life. Another way to look at it is like having two raging rivers, one flowing towards outer darkness and the other flowing towards eternal Light. You are in one river or the other, right now, and no matter how hard you swim against the current, you are being taken downriver to its terminus.

You cannot take yourself out of the river that you are in. Please get that. It’s really important to get that otherwise you cannot get what the Bible is teaching in this Corinthian passage.

You not only have no ability to get out of the river, you cannot even understand that you're in a raging river. Your mind is so deluded and irrational that you think you're basically in a lake where you have control over your destination. You actually think that you can easily swim to any shore around you without realizing that you are actually rushing by all other shores and are caught in a current that can only ever take you to one place.

Both rivers are like that. During your life you are being taken further and further downstream to the inevitable destination no matter how much you fight the current and no matter how much you have convinced yourself that you have control to change direction.

That's the gist of what Paul was trying to explain and whenever the Bible explains some bit of theology it always follows up with practical application and in this Letter the follow up is stop thinking about yourself. Your wisdom, your effort, and your status, but instead, think about the "Cross of Christ." Which "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 is 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.

Now the passage goes on and what God does next is humbling so prepare yourselves... 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... In other words, God is saying through this inspired text, that it isn't because you are so worthy that you are a Christian, quite the opposite.

We continue... 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.”

We really want to think that there is something special about us as individuals that caused God to choose us or enabled our choosing of Him and according to these verses there is... We are specifically “foolish,” “weak,” “low,” and “despised.” We are “nothing” and so, we have no reason whatsoever to boast in ourselves.

Which of course is the very thing that empties the Cross of its power – this boasting in ourselves as though we are Saving ourselves to some degree. No, we don’t in any way, shape, or form, deserve to be plucked out of the river flowing to destruction and to be plopped down into the river flowing to Life. That’s His work, not ours.

Our boast is a boasting about Him, never us and when we get that straight it eliminates all the reasons for division in the church. Oh, my friends, please see that. It is the purpose of this Letter to the church. It is our

human fear driving us to claim glory for ourselves and then the resultant pride driving us to boast in ourselves that causes “divisions,” “quarrels,” and “factions,” in the Body of Christ.

It's when we empty the “Cross of Christ,” of its power by taking that power for ourselves that the Cross no longer has power. Most churches around the globe have no power of Life, because there is no power of Christ, because the people have emptied the Cross of its Saving Power by elevating themselves.

We do it by forgetting that we are Saved by the “Cross of Christ,” alone and not by any bit of wisdom, strength, goodness, or value of our own. Only when you actually get that can you ever hope to get the true magnitude of Love, Grace, Forgiveness, Mercy, and Life there is in God through Christ.

Now, I want to go back and clarify a couple of things because some of you will begin second-guessing what I've said.

When Jesus, or an Apostle, or a preacher like little ole me, are trying to drive home a point, we don't give the full picture simultaneously because it would distract

you from the point. In other words, to make a point we need to focus on that point without talking about every other point related to it.

From God's perspective there are two raging rivers, and every person is going with the irresistible flow of the river that they happen to be in. Further, everyone started out in the river to destruction and God plucked some of the people out of that river and put them in the river to paradise. He continues to do that.

Whichever river that you are in is going to take you where that particular river empties itself out. That's God's perspective as shown to us throughout the Bible.

Whether you believe in human free will or not and to whatever degree you think that you have free will to choose your river is irrelevant. What is relevant is that from our perspective we do have free will and make choices nonstop.

From your perspective you chose to be here this morning, and you are now choosing to remain and listen to what I'm saying. Choices imply free will and that is Biblically true as well – again, from our human perspective.



I could give a thousand examples but will suffice it to point out that if there were no choices for us to make from our perspective there would be no need for the Bible in the first place, let alone have within it constant encouragement and exhortation to believe, to do, or to be.

I'll give you a single verse that illustrates the Truth of what I'm telling you, Philippians 2:12&13, 12So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; 13for it is God who is at work in you, both to desire and to work for His good pleasure.

The Apostle Paul again, so I could easily preach another sermon or two on these two verses, but the gist is that the Apostle is urging the Philippians to continue to obey and, in so doing, for each of them to “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.”

Once again, we see a progressive Salvation – Salvation is in process – you're moving down the river leading to Life and you do that by obeying Christ.

Obedying His command to Love, which is partly worked out as “making disciples,” as we saw last week.

What drives us to obey? Well, hopefully we have enough motivation from understanding what Christ has done for us, but we don't. So here Paul was saying remember Who Christ is. It's somewhat comforting to know that Christians 2,000 years ago struggled to obey Jesus just as we do now. Why did they and why do we? Because we constantly forget Who Jesus is.

My friends “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling.” Never forget that Jesus is the Word of God through Whom He created and sustains all things in the universe and beyond.

From a human perspective God is asking us to make a choice – a choice that implies free will and then He immediately follows up with a little tidbit from His perspective in the second half of this single Greek sentence... 13for it is God who is at work in you, both to desire and to work for His good pleasure.

You're in His river because He put you there and you are being carried by the current to where He wants you to end up – from His perspective.