Responding to the Cross

First in the Lenten series “Come to the Cross”

# Scripture: 1 Corinthians 1:18-25

# Key Thought: How we respond to the cross of Jesus is crucial.

# Intro:

In 1899, an article in the literary Digest declared that the automobile would “never, of course, come into as common use as the bicycle.”

In 1911 Marshall Ferdinand Foch declared, “Airplanes are interesting toys, but they have no military value.”

In 1912, an official of the White Star line speaking of the firm’s newly built flagship, the Titanic, which has just been launched declared that the ship was “unsinkable.”

In 1945, Vennevar Bush, an explosives expert and then president of the Carnegie Institute told Pres. Harry Truman of the United States that the atomic bomb would “never go off.”

Forecasting the relentless march of science in 1949, popular mechanics magazine said, “Computers in the future may weigh no more than 1.5 tons.”

In 1956, one year before Sputnik, British Royal astronomer, Richard Van Der Riet Woolley, declared that, “Space travel is utter bilge.”

Those were a lot of foolish quotes. No doubt you and I have also said some foolish things in our lives. But in the passage that we read today Paul is saying that both the Jews and the Greeks around him were speaking of the cross of Jesus Christ as foolishness. Those statements by Paul’s contemporaries have to rank as among the most foolish statements of all time considering how the sacrifice of Jesus has changed world history and brought about so much good in the lives of so many people. Certainly, there have been many detractors who in the name of Jesus have done evil. But there have been so many more disciples who have fought evil, who have chosen the good over ill and transformed themselves and the lives of others because of Jesus.

Paul challenged the statements of his contemporaries head on. He affirms that the cross of Jesus, is rather the power of God for the salvation of all who will believe. This morning I want us to look at Paul’s reasoning and learn from it and be encouraged by it.

# Why did some think of the cross as foolishness?

## To the Jews:

The Jewish people looked upon the cross of Jesus as foolishness because it did not meet their expectations for a kingly ruler. They heard the claims that Jesus was the Messiah, but the expectation of a Messiah was that he would be a Davidic king, victorious over the Romans who were enslaving them. When Jesus was crucified, that was a contradiction to their chosen scenario. It was foolishness for the coming Messiah to be crucified instead of become the earthly king. So to the Jews, the cross was foolishness.

## To the Greeks:

The Greek world was a world of philosophy. From a religious standpoint, it was a world ruled by many gods who were detached from the world, untouched by human suffering, evil, and death. They were gods represented by idols. To the Greeks the very idea of a God – man who suffers and dies was a contradiction to their worldview. To the Greek philosophers it would be considered an insult for a god to be involved in human affairs in that way. When Paul went to Athens he found the Athenians to be much about talk. Jesus was a person of action. To the Greeks, the crucifixion made no sense.

## Today:

Unfortunately, in our world today, there are many people who for very different reasons find the message of the cross to be foolishness. I have even heard of Christian churches where pastors forbade musicians from singing songs with the word “blood” in them, fearing lest they offend the sensitivities of modern people. I certainly understand the need to frame our conversations in ways that people of every age can understand for themselves. But I’m afraid that sometimes moderns look at the cross as foolishness too. The key reason for this is that we are unwilling to face the seriousness of our sinful condition, personally and collectively.

In the Garden of Eden, after the first couple had sinned, God made them clothes of animal skins. An animal died in order to clothe them.

In the Passover story, the blood of a sacrificial lamb was placed over the door, so that the angel of death would pass over the homes of the Israelites. A lamb died in order that the Israelites might live.

In the Levitical sacrificial system, the worshipers confessed their sins over the head of the animal, which was then sacrificed. An animal died in order that the worshiper might be atoned for.

The writer of Hebrews was drawing his conclusion from the Old Testament sacrificial system and relating it to Jesus. His summary is not pleasant, but is quite simple,

“Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.” Heb. 9:22 NIV

But the modern mind does not want to accept this thinking. We live in an era when people expect to get away with bad behavior with little or no consequence. They engage in vices, sexual sins, and fits of temper and then expect to get up the next day and to on as if nothing had occurred. But sin has consequences. We have trouble with the cross because the idea that the cross of Jesus was somehow part of the consequence of our sinfulness seems like foolishness. As long as that is the case we can’t receive the forgiveness that Jesus came to bring.

# How was the cross a demonstration of God’s wisdom?

In Jesus' death and resurrection, a divine drama unfolds, a masterpiece is seen, a concerto is heard that leaves those who ponder it speechless and moved to the depths of their souls. It is intended to move the one hearing or viewing the cross to repentance, to an awareness of God's redeeming love, grace, and mercy. If a picture is worth a thousand words, then the image of Jesus' suffering and death on the cross speaks a message that has the power to redeem the world. (Creed by Adam Hamilton p. 58)

## Only a dying Savior could show us the full extent of the humanity of Jesus

Jesus came to earth to be fully one of the human race. That is what the incarnation means. As the writer of Hebrews says, he needed to be like us.

He had to be made like them, fully human in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people. Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.   
Heb 2:17-18 NIV

Because he became fully like us, even to death, we know that he can fully understand our sorrows and all our troubles.

We do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Heb 4:15 NIV

It is ultimately the death of Jesus that shows the full extent of his humanity.

## Only a dying Savior could meet our need for a sacrifice for sin

A good moral teacher would not be enough. A political leader would not be enough. Even a miracle worker could not fill the bill. An earthly king would be insufficient for our real need.

“He himself bore our sins” in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; “by his wounds you have been healed.”   
1 Peter 2:24 NIV

Jesus himself declared that his death was absolutely necessary. On the road to Emmaus, after his resurrection, Jesus instructed the two disciples with whom he was walking;

He said to them, “How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?” Luke 24:25-26

The sacrifice of Jesus for us upon the cross was the fulfillment and the perfection of the traditions of sacrifice for sin that God had ordained to be practiced by the Jews. His act was so perfect that he superseded the OT way. The writer of Hebrews had a handle on this.

The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean. How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God! Heb 9:13-14 NIV

For one of my Lenten exercises, I’m reading a book by Henry Blackaby called “Experiencing the Cross.” In it he says,

In Christ and in the cross, God has already abundantly provided us with everything we need to deal with everything that confronts us. (Experiencing the Cross by Henry Blackaby p. 16)

## The message of the cross is simple enough for anyone to see

In life and death situations we see humanity at its worst and humanity at its best. This past week as news came about the horrific shooting in Florida, it was obvious that we had once again seen humanity at its most depraved. Yet as the news unfolded about more than one hero teacher who had at the cost of their own life, helped students, intentionally stood in front of students, it became clear that we had again also witnessed humanity at its most selfless.

In the wisdom of God, even a child can draw the same clear lines when they hear about the crucifixion of Jesus. On the one hand are those who are defending their own interest and refusing to believe, things that we too often do. These are responsible for putting Jesus to a violent death. On the other hand, Jesus is innocent of any crime. Yet the Bible tells us that he is somehow bearing all this suffering for us.

We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. Isa 53:6 NIV

# How is the message of the cross God’s power for our salvation?

## The dying Savior prepared the way for the ultimate sign of God’s victory

The Jews were always clamoring for a sign of who Jesus was. Despite the signs Jesus gave them along the way like changing the water into wine, healing many people, including those who had been ill for many years and those considered demon possessed, and feeding 5000 people at one time –still the Jews were asking for a sign. They wanted something even more spectacular. This upset Jesus and he condemned their desire for more signs but He did promise them one sign that he would give them. He called it the sign of Jonah.

“A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. Matt 12:39-40 NIV

The sign was the sign of his resurrection. But in order for the sign to happen, it had to be understood that Jesus would die first, something his followers did not want to hear.

So Jesus’ death on the cross prepared the way for the ultimate sign of his victory over death and hell - his resurrection from the dead. It was the ultimate confirmation of all that he had taught them. This ultimate miracle was essential to our faith. In the cross, the enemy of our souls seems to have won the day. The enemies of Jesus thought they had won the day. Spiritual darkness seems at first to have triumphed. But on Easter morning, darkness flees away in defeat. The devil is a defeated foe, waiting only the word of the returning Christ to be chained in the Abyss forever. Death itself has met its match and lost its power. The power of life through Jesus has triumphed.

## Only a dying Savior could give us new life

What is God up to in saving us through Jesus? Listen to the summary of the Apostle Paul.

For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good. Titus 2:11-14 NIV

Would we have either the motivation or the power to change without the death and resurrection of Jesus? No.

## The dying Savior teaches us to die to ourselves

In winning this victory for us, Jesus now teaches us to win the victory over ourselves.

God did not need Jesus to suffer and die on the cross in order to save us. Rather we needed it, so we could know the depths of human sin, the breath of God's graciousness and love, and ultimately God's triumph over sin and death. Jesus did suffer and die for our sins – not because God insisted on torturing his son in order to satisfy or appease his wrath, but because by this dramatic act God hoped to finally break through to us, to affect and change us, to save us from our sin and alienation from God. (Creed by Adam Hamilton p. 58)

Paul teaches us that we need to think of ourselves as dying with Jesus. That is, we need to identify with Jesus death in regard to our sinful natures.

For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his. For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin— because anyone who has died has been set free from sin. Rom 6:5-7 NIV

## His example of self-giving inspires us to self-giving

Sometimes doing our part for Jesus is called taking up our cross. It seems a stark way to say it, but Jesus knew our selfishness needed a direct challenge. He’s the one who put it that way. Here is Henry Blackaby’s quote from Jesus and comment on it.

In plain words [Jesus] declared: "Whoever does not bear his cross and come after me cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:27).

The cross is not just [Jesus’]; the cross is mine, and the cross is yours. It's an unconditional and uncontestable requirement if we would follow him as a disciple. Would it not be important, then, for us to clearly understand the cross's role and meaning in our lives?

There is nothing more central to the entire Christian life than this theme. It's an absolute essential in the experience of every believer, the very heartbeat of our faith…. We cannot begin to appreciate God's eternal purposes – or his eternal nature – without a thorough understanding of the cross of Christ."(Experiencing the Cross by Henry Blackaby, p. 5, 6)

On the cross, Jesus gave his all. Jesus expects us to be willing to give whatever is needed to be his disciple.

“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Mark 8:34-36 NIV

# Conclusion:

Far from being foolishness, the message of the cross of Jesus is the heart of the good news. Because of the cross of Jesus, we can receive forgiveness of sins. Because of the cross of Jesus we have inherited the power of victory over sin in our own personal lives. Because of the cross of Jesus, we have been reconciled to our heavenly Father, not because of righteous acts of our own but because of the free gift that comes to us through the cross of Jesus Christ our Lord. And it is because of the cross, that we can prepare ourselves to celebrate Easter, the Day of Resurrection.