

Calibrating Our Expectations for Gospel Ministry

1 Corinthians 1:18–2:16

Introduction

- ❑ Our mission is to take the gospel to the ends of the world
- ❑ But what is our expectation of the outcome of that mission? What do we expect will happen when we tell people the gospel?
- ❑ The gospel at its core is a simple message
- ❑ But just because it's simple doesn't mean it's easy to believe
- ❑ The gospel is actually *hard* to believe...even *impossible*

1. One Message

- ❑ The Corinthian church was rife with problems, the most prominent being factions that had developed. There was, for all intents and purposes, a cult of personalities based on the various leaders who had baptized the various members of the congregation.
- ❑ Paul emphasizes that Christ sent him to “**preach the gospel**,” not to baptize (1:17). This becomes the anchor point for the discussion to follow.
- ❑ Other epithets for the “gospel” used throughout 1:18–2:16 include the following:
 - ◆ “the cross of Christ” (1:17)
 - ◆ “the word of the cross” (1:18)
 - ◆ “what we preach” (1:21)
 - ◆ “we preach Christ crucified” (1:22)
 - ◆ “Jesus Christ and him crucified” (2:2)
- ❑ Despite the diversity of expression, each of these refers to one singular message.
- ❑ “**The word of the cross**” → signifies “God’s total revelation, i.e., the gospel in all its fullness, which centers in the Incarnation and Crucifixion of Christ (2:2); the entire divine plan and provision for the redemption of sinners, which is the theme of all Scripture” (MacArthur, *MSB*, 1566).
- ❑ In summary, the gospel was *central* to Paul’s ministry because he was convinced that it was the exclusive message of salvation.

2. Two Groups

- ❑ **“those who are perishing”** → those who reject the gospel, i.e., unbelievers. They are perishing they are actively part of the mass of unredeemed humanity marching down the broad road which leads to destruction (Matt. 7:13).
- ❑ **“those who are being saved”** → those who believe the gospel, i.e., believers. They are being saved because the process of salvation which began at conversion continues on through sanctification until it’s finally completed at the redemption of the body (cf. Rom. 8:23; 13:11).

3. Two Responses

- ❑ The one message of the gospel elicits two opposing responses
- ❑ **The gospel to the unbeliever** = “folly” (*moros*). He sees no power or wisdom in the message. There is nothing profitable. It is a stupid waste of time.
- ❑ **The gospel to the believer** = “power of God.” He sees divine power, beauty, and wisdom in the gospel message. He sees it as a message which can affect real spiritual change because it can do what man can’t do: save the soul from hell.

4. One Problem

How can two groups of people hear the same message and yet come to two completely different conclusions about it?

a. The Wisdom of the World

- ❑ “World” = *cosmos* (< “cosmetic”). It refers to that which is arranged and orderly. Often in the NT is simply refers to “the sum total of everything here and now,” i.e., the universe, the earth (cf. Matt. 13:35; 24:21; Mark 14:9; Rom. 1:20; 4:13)
- ❑ It But it can also refer to the world system arranged against God and hostile to him.
 - ▶ Pharisees and Romans belonged to this “world” but Jesus’ kingdom was not “of this world” (John 8:23; 18:36)
 - ▶ Believers do not belong to this world (John 13:1; 17:16)
 - ▶ The world hates believers because it hates Christ (John 15:18–19; 17:14, 15)
 - ▶ The world is ruled and arranged by “the god of this world” (John 12:31; 1 John 5:19; cf. 4:4)
 - ▶ Unbelievers belong to this world and are influenced by it (Eph. 2:1–2)

- ▶ The world as a system and unbelievers are so closely linked that the term *cosmos* can refer to all of unredeemed humanity (John 1:10; 15:18, 19).

□ The world has its own values:

- ▶ Possessions and materialism
- ▶ Power and prestige
- ▶ Freedom and autonomy
- ▶ Pride and self-esteem
- ▶ Happiness and pleasure
- ▶ _____?

□ The world has its own logic:

- ▶ Human beings are basically good
- ▶ Do what feels good and makes you happy
- ▶ You need to love yourself
- ▶ You're an innocent victim and others are to blame for your problems
- ▶ Humans are capable of solving any problem if they try hard enough
- ▶ You decide who you are

□ The world has its own methods:

- ▶ Government
- ▶ Elite education
- ▶ Influential platform
- ▶ _____?

□ Two Examples

- ▶ "the wise" → people who understanding life's mysteries
- ▶ "the scribe" → the well-educated elite
- ▶ "the debator of this age" → those good with words and speeches
- ▶ "Jews" → religious elites who demand proof for everything...the gospel offends their religious sensibilities
- ▶ "Greeks" → value sophisticated philosophical arguments...the gospel offends their intellect

b. The Foolishness of God

- All the wisdom of the world is incapable of bringing them to a knowledge of God (1:21)
- This is by God's divine design

- ❑ The world hears the gospel and evaluate it through the lens of their values, logic, and methods.
- ❑ They conclude that the message is moronic.
- ❑ **1 Cor. 2:6–8** explains why this happens. Cf. **Matt. 11:25**
- ❑ The gospel offends because it confronts the world at every level of its values and ideas with the “foolishness of God”:

The World	The Gospel
Man is basically good	Man is inherently evil (Rom. 3:9–18)
You should feel good about yourself	You should feel terrible about yourself
You don’t love yourself enough	“Whoever loves his life will lose it but he who hates his life in this world will keep it to eternal life” (John 12:25)
Do what feels good	“Deny yourself, pick up your cross, and follow Christ” (Matt. 16:24)
You’re the author of your own identity	God is the author of life and the definer of reality (Gen. 1:26–28)
Your problems are caused by other people	God will hold each person accountable for their own actions and decisions

- ❑ **1 Corinthians 1:25** – “the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men:

5. One Solution

- ❑ If the world can’t come to know God by its wisdom, then how can people every come to know God?
- ❑ Remember **Luke 18:27**? “What is impossible with man is possible with God.”
- ❑ **1 Corinthians 2:10–16** identifies the single factor makes the foolishness of the cross become wisdom?
 - ▶ **Key:** impartation of the Holy Spirit

- ▶ **Unbelievers:** “natural” (non-spiritual), “darkened in understanding (Eph. 4:18), depraved in mind (Rom. 1:28), blinded to the gospel by the god of this world (2 Cor. 4:4)
- ▶ **Believers:** darkened heart illuminated by God (2 Cor. 4:6), renewed in the spirit of the mind (Eph. 4:23)
- Suddenly what was once foolishness appears as true wisdom, and what was once weakness proves to be true power. The person who once had a darkened and depraved mind now by the Spirit’s presence and enabling, can be said to have the very “mind of Christ” (2:16).
- See Matthew 11: 16:17

6. One Conclusion

- Why did God design it this way?
- The gospel demonstrates God’s unilateral plan of redemption/
- **1 Corinthians 1:28** – “God chose what is low and despised in the world, even the things that are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, **so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.**”
- Believers don’t see the gospel as “the power of God” (1:18) because of his superior intellect, higher education, etc.
- The sole reason is because God has opened his eyes and ears and heart through the Spirit to recognize the message as wisdom and power rather than folly and weakness.
- **1 Corinthians 1:30–31** – **Because of Him** you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, **“Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”**

Summary

- What are our expectations of our mission? *How do we define success?*
- See **Isaiah 6:8–13**
- Based on 1 Corinthians 1:18–2:16, **we can’t define success by the number of people who believe the gospel**
 - ▶ The biggest temptation for evangelism and missions is making the gospel more palatable and socially acceptable to the world

- ▶ But by doing so, we remove from the gospel its power to save because it now relies on something other than God. See **1 Cor. 1:17**
- Success in gospel ministry comes down to four qualities:
 - ▶ **Faithfulness** → to the pure, unadulterated gospel message
 - ▶ **Humility** → the desire to be used by God as his instrument in the process of salvation without getting in the way
 - ▶ **Holiness** → make sure your life matches your message
 - ▶ **Compassion** → look upon the unbeliever with compassion, not as the enemy, but as those just like you who desperately need the gracious gift of God's mercy in the gospel.
- As long as those four things are there, your mission will be successful and you will hear the words, "Well done, good and faithful servant!"