

1 Corinthians 1:17-1:31

OPEN: I once read about a dishonest manager who was wanting to hire someone for his accounting department who thought like he did. He ended up with 3 applicants for the job and he proceeded to interview them the next day.

The first applicant came in and sat at the desk and he and the manager engaged in some small talk. But eventually, the manager asked the applicant this question:

"What does two plus two equal?"

The man was a bit puzzled, but eventually answered, "Well, that's simple: the answer is four."

The manager thanked the man for his time and then ushered him out of the office.

The next applicant came in and again the manager engaged him in a pleasant conversation. But eventually he got around to asking this man the same question. And the 2nd man responded,

"Well, there are several possibilities: two and two make four, but so does three and one -- or two point five and one point five -- they also make four. There are a number of ways to arrive at that same answer."

The manager thought that was a pretty good reply and told him he might get back to him. Finally, the 3rd applicant came in and again the manager some time talking about several subjects, but eventually the man was asked the same question as the others: "What does 2 plus 2 equal. The man seemed startled by the question. He looked at the manager, cautiously looked around the room, got up out of his chair, went over and closed the door... then he came back and leaned across the desk and said in a low voice, "Tell me, what would you like the answer to be?"

He got the job.

Our series for this month is called "Hard Questions" and the question for this Sunday is:

"Is Christianity Reasonable?"

Is it logical?

Can you "hang your hat" on what our faith says?

And the answer to that question is this:

It all depends.

What ANSWER are you looking for?

"What would you like the answer to be?"

You see, if Christianity offers the answer you're looking for... then it IS reasonable. But Paul tells us in our passage this morning that there are people out there who don't like Christianity because it doesn't offer the kind of answer that they want to hear.

Paul wrote: "... we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" 1 Corinthians 1:23

The cross is a stumbling block to many.

It's foolishness to a lot of folks.

In fact, there's something about the message of the cross that make people uneasy, annoyed, upset... sometimes even downright nasty.

- There was the Roman historian Tacitus called Christianity a "pernicious superstition".
- Freud believed that religious in general, and Christianity in particular, was a psychotic illness.
- And former Attorney General under Bill Clinton - Janet Reno - declared:
"A cultist is one who has a strong belief in the Bible and the Second Coming of Christ; who frequently attends Bible studies; who have a high level of financial giving to a Christian cause; who home schools their children; who has accumulated survival foods and has a strong belief in the Second Amendment; and who distrusts big government. Any of these may qualify a person as a cultist..."

Morning, folks.

Welcome to your cult! (Smile)

Tacitus, Freud and Janet Reno are just a few of those who are offended by the message of the cross. It makes them angry to think anyone would embrace what we believe.

And yet for those of us who understand what the cross means we KNOW that the cross of Christ is the answer to POWER OF GOD. As Paul wrote: "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." 1 Corinthians 1:18

The cross IS the right answer... IF it is the answer you're looking for.
But most of the world that is NOT the answer they're looking for.

Many people only want an answer that will give them control of their lives.
They want to be "in charge!"

The Bible offends them because it declares that our lives are to be controlled by God. The cross declares that God bought you with a price - you are not your own. If you accept the answer of the cross you cede authority in your life over to Christ.

That answer doesn't sit well with a lot of folks.

Many even reject belief in God because they don't want someone else in control.

Or, if they do believe in God, they don't want a God Who demands change in their lives, they want a God who will change FOR them... they want to say how their lives should be run.

That was the problem for the Jews of Jesus' day.

Paul wrote that the Jews of his day rejected the cross because "Jews demand miraculous signs."

1 Corinthians 1:22

They demanded signs?

But didn't Jesus do miraculous things during His ministry on earth?

Well, yes He did.

He healed the sick. Raised the dead. And fed 1000s with just 5 loaves and 2 fish. And because He did the multitudes followed Him. Wherever He went people would crowd the hills and seashores where He would speak. Sometimes for hours on end. Thousands followed Jesus.

(PAUSE) That is... until He was crucified.

As long as Jesus was doing what THEY wanted Him to do... they'd follow Him. But once He was arrested, condemned and crucified... they walked away. The cross was not the answer they were looking for.

A lot of people who've rejected Christ in their lives have done it for that reason. God didn't answer their prayer in the way and in the time they wanted, or something happened in their lives that hurt them terribly and they felt betrayed because God didn't protect them from that pain. And they walked away.

As long as God did what they wanted done, they were willing to follow. But this was different. He didn't protect them from suffering and hardship. That wasn't what they signed up for. That wasn't the God they wanted.

They wanted a God who would protect them from the difficulties of life.

But the cross defies that notion. The cross speaks of death, and suffering, and pain, and loss. It speaks of a world that is often unfair and unjust. It speaks of a world where even God's people are often required to endure suffering and tragedy... hardship and pain.

The cross declares that life won't always turn out the way YOU want it to... But that that life will ultimately turn out the way GOD wants it to.

Jesus said: "... In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." John 16:33b

The cross declares that this world WILL be hard. (You WILL have trouble). BUT there's something better on the other side. (I have overcome the world). If you're looking for GOD'S answer... then that's perfectly reasonable.

The cross of Christ tells us the truth about life. There WILL be suffering. There will be pain. But if you are willing to wait on Him, Jesus will carry you through. As Psalm 23 says: "Yea, though I walk through ..." what was that? (The valley of the shadow of death.)

The cross tells you the truth about this reality.
And that's because it is the answer the world needs to understand.

So, 1st – the world looks for an answer that allows them to be in control.
2ndly – the world looks for an answer that allows them to be wise.

Paul wrote that "... Greeks look for wisdom" 1 Corinthians 1:22
They wanted to be able to understand the world on THEIR terms/ according to their wisdom.

The Greeks were into wisdom... their wisdom.
They were a culture known for their philosophers and sages.
But their philosophers were looking for wisdom based on their perceptions and their views of life.
When it came to God, if they couldn't explain Him or understand Him on their terms they weren't going to be happy. God had to fit in the box they had built for Him.

A college student once told a Christian professor: "For me to believe in God, I have to have a God that I can understand."
The professor smiled and replied, "God refuses to be that small!"

God refuses to be small enough for us to understand on our terms.
In fact, we couldn't understand Him in that way if we wanted to.
In Isaiah 55:8-9 God declared:
"... my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD.
"As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."

God doesn't fit in a neat little box.
He's not easily understood.
He's different than we are.
He THINKS differently than we do... and He ACTS differently than we do.
And that's why it is so important to read and study the Bible. It tells us all we need to know about WHO God is and WHAT He's like. It tells us of a God we wouldn't have guessed existed.

One of the major characteristics of God is found in the Cross.
Isaiah 59:15b-17 describes it this way:
"...The LORD looked and was displeased that there was no justice. He saw that there was no one, he was appalled that there was no one to intervene; so his own arm worked salvation for him, and his own righteousness sustained him. He put on righteousness as his breastplate, and the helmet of salvation on his head; he put on the garments of vengeance and wrapped himself in zeal as in a cloak."

There was no one else to intercede on our behalf, so God clothed Himself with righteousness and came down to intervene on our behalf.

But the Greeks couldn't understand that.
They couldn't understand a God who'd sacrifice Himself for them.

ILLUS: Back when I was in High School I loved to read the stories of the Greek (and later Roman gods). They were intriguing stories of the multitude of deities the Greeks worshipped.

It was called the "Pantheon".

But none of their gods were like the God of Scripture.

There was Zeus, Poseidon, Aphrodite – and numerous other gods and demi-gods. But there stories described them as being egotistical, selfish, bickering, petty, vindictive, adulterous and heartless.

And those were their good traits.

What's baffling is that the Greeks actually worshipped these gods.

They made sacrifices to these petty, mean-spirited gods.

And you just KNOW they made these gods up out of whole-cloth.

These are all made up stories.

But why would the Greeks portray their gods as being so selfish and evil beings?

Well, because these were the kinds of lifestyles the Greeks identified with.

These were the kinds of behaviors they could understand.

Because this was how the average Greek viewed life itself. It's how they lived their lives.

The Greeks could not understand a God who would sacrifice Himself for them, because they wouldn't be willing to do that for others. The Cross declared a God they could not understand in their own wisdom.

ILLUS: I've had several people in my life describe me as an "optimist". An "idealist" who really doesn't understand "reality". And I can see where they get that.

Most people know when I've entered a building even before they see me... I'm whistling, or humming or singing a song. They are right! I am truly an optimist.

But that doesn't mean I'm not a realist.

And do you know why?

Because I have a God who is real. Not a god that I've cooked up in my imagination. Not a god that is the result of my own personal wisdom. My God is real.

My God stepped down out of heaven and took my place on the cross.

My God loved me so much that He gave His only begotten son that (since) I believe in Him I will not perish, but have everlasting life.

And if I have a God who is willing to do that... what else would He do for me?

My God isn't based on "my wisdom" and my perception of life.

My God is based on reality. And so is my attitude.

Yes, I'm an optimist. But since I have a God who is real, and who really cares for me, that makes me a realist.

So, 1st – the world looks for an answer that will give them control of their lives.
2ndly – the world looks for an answer that that allows them to be wise on their own terms
And 3rd – the world is looking for an answer that will give them strength... on their terms

I Corinthians 1:25 says "... the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength."

Many in this world want to be strong. If they tell you a story about themselves they come across as the heroes of that story. That's what my daddy always did. He'd tell you hundreds of stories about himself... each and every one had him be the hero. It wasn't until later that I heard someone else tell me a story about how dad's brother had beaten him in a race. Dad didn't tell story. His stories had him being the hero. And (for the most part) so does everyone else's.

Folks don't like to come across as being weak.
They don't like being shown as having failed.
They don't like hearing that they have messed up.

They know they have messed up - they just don't like hearing it.
And so they tend to reject the message of the cross because it describes them as having sinned.

ILLUS: Billy Joel, for example, was very offended by the message of the cross.
".. I viewed the whole business as a lot of very enthralling hocus pocus. There's a guy... nailed to a cross and dripping blood, and everyone's blaming themselves for that man's torment, but I said to myself, 'Forget it. I had no hand in that evil. I have no original sin. There's no blood of any sacred martyr on my hands. I pass on all of this.'

Joel didn't like the idea that his personal sin put Jesus on the cross.
That would mean he was guilty of sin. That he was weak. That he had failed
He didn't want to hear that.

But the message the cross isn't so much that Billy Joel killed Jesus by his sins.
The message of the cross is that Billy Joel deserved to die on the cross for HIS OWN sins... and Jesus simply offered to take his place.
Jesus came to die for those who had failed. For the weak and broken and the losers of life. And that's why the message of the cross is so powerful for people like that.

Jesus didn't come for the "healthy", He came for the sick.

ILLUS: One person has observed that:

Anybody could come up with a religion whereby those who "deserved" to get into heaven might do so. But at the cross God promised that those who DID NOT deserve heaven could receive it.

All the other religions in the world are designed to assure the "righteous", the "deserving" that by their own strength and goodness can buy their way into a heaven. But the Cross declares that not only does NO ONE deserve heaven... the only way you CAN get into

paradise is by accepting the sacrifice of Christ. You have to admit that you are weak and undeserving and need God's help.

The world views that as an insult to their reliance on strength.

The want power not weakness.

But the cross is all about power. Not ours, but God's

1 Corinthians 1:18 says "the message of the cross... to us who are being saved.. is the power of God."

The cross supplies power the world does not want to accept.

It supplies an answer the world can't provide.

And we have got to understand that.

The Cross IS our answer to this world, because it is only through the Cross that lives can be changed. That's the power of God unto salvation. And that is the answer the world needs to hear.

CLOSE: Over a century ago there was a minister who worked in the slums of London.

His name was Hughes. And he was a man of great faith and was a man through whom God had done great things for the hurting there.

In London there was also a man named Charles Bradlaugh ... one of the most outstanding atheists in England. Apparently Bradlaugh had heard that Hughes had claimed that Christianity offered the answer men needed in their lives.

That was a notion that deeply offended Bradlaugh, a man dedicated to confronting and destroying the faith of Christians, and so Bradlaugh challenged Hughes to a debate on the validity of the claims of Christianity. In essence Bradlaugh was challenging him to a debate on whether Christianity was reasonable.

Soon news of the challenge spread throughout London. Bradlaugh was a famous debater and he had humbled more than one preacher in England in these contests. How would this humble worker of the slums survive such a confrontation? More skilled debaters and more scholarly theologians had been brought to their knees by Bradlaugh's talent on the stage.

Hughes accepted the challenge... but with one condition.

"I propose to you that we each bring some concrete evidences of the validity of our beliefs in the form of men and women who have been redeemed from the lives of sin and shame by the influence of our teaching.

I will bring 100 such men and women and I challenge you to do the same.

If you cannot bring 100, Mr. Bradlaugh, to match my 100 I will be satisfied if you will bring 50 such men and women who will stand and testify that they have been lifted up from lives of shame by the influence of your teachings.

If you can't bring 50, then bring 20 people who will say as my 100 will, that they have a great joy in a life of self-respect as a result of your atheistic teachings.

If you cannot bring 20, I will be satisfied if you bring 10.

"Nay, Mr. Bradlaugh, I challenge you to bring one, just one man or woman who will make such a testimony regarding the uplifting of your atheistic teachings."

Bradlaugh withdrew his challenge.

Essentially Hughes was saying this: The reasonableness of Christianity is in the changed lives it produces. That's the ANSWER of the Cross and the POWER of the cross .

Man's attempts to seek to control their lives, man's attempts to live by their own wisdom, man's attempts to live on their own strength - they all fail... because those are really not life changing answers.

Most of us here are Christians. We've already accepted the answer of the cross in our lives. But perhaps you know someone who doesn't accept that. Someone who is living by answers that reject the cross. It's time we learned to ask these folks:

"How's that working out for you?"

"Do you sleep well at night? Or do you struggle with sleeplessness because of things you've done or said? Do you feel good about yourself? Do you believe that if you died tonight... you'd be able to stand confidently before God?"

As Christians we need to realize that the Cross IS the answer the world needs.

We need to say with Paul:

"For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified."

1 Corinthians 2:2

The cross gives the answers to all those struggles of life.

But first you have to lay your life down at the foot of the cross.

INVITATION