



I have a friend called Murray, most of the Murrays that I know are pastors but he's not. He was a very successful accountant in the 1980s, and made a lot of money in the property market. His passion was cars and he owned at least six, he was living the dream. Another passion was alcohol, he worked hard and played harder. Then came the property crash of 1989, and his millions turned to ashes and he came within a whisker of being declared bankrupt. Probably the only thing that saved him was the reality that had his creditors bankrupted him, he would have lost his accounting practicing certificate, and so not able to pay them anything back.

About that time that this was all going down his dad Max died, and naturally he and many of his friends went to the funeral. Now his dad had been a big wheel in the local brethren assembly, but Murray had lapsed out of faith some years before. As he sat there his father's best friend gave the eulogy, saying what a fine man of God Max had been. Then he said and you know that Max's biggest disappointment in life, was that you Murray are not following the Lord Jesus, and you are wasting your life, frittering it away. Talk about show stopping eulogies.

At the after match function all of Murray's friends were outraged on his behalf, but Murray was quite subdued and thoughtful. Shortly afterwards to his friends' amazement, he repented and recommitted his life to the Lord. He quit the bottle and did his best to settle up with his creditors, so he was living poor.

One day some of his old friends came for dinner and one asked him, so Murray, you believe in Jesus who turned water into wine, haha. Murray said yes I do and he has done a similar thing in my life. That got their attention, tell us about that Murray they said. Well in my life, he has turned beer into furniture, because if he had not helped me to stop drinking we would not now have anything to sit on.

As it says in 1 Corinthians 1:18,

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

Murray's friends probably thought that the gospel was fairy tales, but to Murray it was the power of God changing his life.

Not long afterwards he managed to sell his building for a fraction of what he owed on it, sold the cars bar one and the fancy house, settled the lawsuits against him, and at 42 he and his wife started again with a clean slate. Once again he is a man of some means but he has been generous with his time and his money, as befits a follower of Jesus.

However, his life makes no sense unless you have experienced the power of God in your own life, and so have some understanding of what being saved means. In our world you don't admit your financial misdeeds like he did, you don't confess your sins to a Jewish tribal deity, and you don't trust yourself to an archaic myth – those are options for the weak willed or weak minded. Who needs an invisible friend? You look after you and yours as best you can, and you trust in your own abilities to see you through. If that requires telling porkies or a little dutch courage out of a bottle then that's ok. You do what you need to do to survive and ultimately to thrive.

The Christian faith, Christian wisdom, practices such as confession just do not make any sense. That was true in AD50 and its true today. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 2:14

Those who are unspiritual do not receive the gifts of God's Spirit, for they are foolishness to them, and they are unable to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.

Face it you are a fool, a non-Christian person just will not get it. But if perchance they do, then it is a sign that God's Spirit who is at work in you, me and Murray is doing his thing in them.

In Corinth in AD50 there was a baby Christian church made up of Jewish believers and pagan converts. The Jews had massive hurdles to get over to accept faith in Jesus. To them the Messiah that they were hoping for was a combination of prophet and king, who would conquer all before him and restore the kingdom of Israel. A combination of David and Solomon. The messiah would not die a criminal's death outside the city, shamed by his nakedness and covered in his own filth. Crucifixion was a sinner's death, the death of someone abandoned by God. The Messiah was a victorious figure, not a suffering servant or a self-effacing man with little to commend him.

The gentiles came from pagan greek culture which taught that the one thing that God could not do was change. So if you could make God feel something then you had power over him, but Jesus wept and was mobbed by people. It's all through the gospel stories. He suffered in life and on the cross, how could an all powerful God suffer? To them matter was bad and Spirit was good, so how could God become a human? It was just ridiculous and that was a real problem for them, because for an idea to be worth listening to it had to be clever. The gospel of a God who was born of a woman, empathised with the outcast and human suffering, and then died – that did not cut the mustard. It was a non-starter.

Does Paul try and take these objections into account? Does he try and engage with these ideas? Listen to this

For it is written,

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,  
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”

<sup>20</sup>Where 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? <sup>21</sup>For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. <sup>22</sup>For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, <sup>23</sup>but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, <sup>24</sup>but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. <sup>25</sup>For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

The answer to both of my questions is no. God's wisdom, the gospel is diametrically opposed to the Jewish hope and Greek wisdom and Paul just says that. The gospel is God kicking the door down, it almost sounds like a deliberate confrontation. He will take an axe to human wisdom and discernment.

Paul goes on

Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. <sup>27</sup>But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; <sup>28</sup>God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, <sup>29</sup>so that no one might boast in the presence of God. <sup>30</sup>He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, <sup>31</sup>in order that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

Did you notice that word call in verse 24, then again in verse 26. Call. And then in verses 27 and 28 the words 'God chose' are repeated three times.

I am one of these people whose life turned around on a ten cent piece, no gradual process for me. I reluctantly repented and turned to Jesus one night in bed. I decided to follow Jesus, I asked him into my heart, I gave my life to him. Nonsense, now I hate those phrases.

He called and I followed, like Paul says here he chose me. If it was up to me and my will alone no chance, I would still be where I was. I have no boast. I was dragged kicking and screaming into the kingdom, CS Lewis described himself as the most unhappy convert in Christendom and I can completely relate. Lewis' faith, your faith, my faith are gifts of God not something that we did.

I woke up the next morning feeling at real peace, until I remembered that I had become a Christian the night before. Dolt. Curiously I did not doubt the reality of what had happened to me. My thought was, I need to see John who was the guy who had witnessed the most to me, Hadn't seen him for ages. I went to university and ran into him, the first time that he had been there for months. He was pleased for me but I wasn't.

I was at the lowest point of my life, almost a university drop out in a depressed space. I had had vast opportunities which I had frittered away, I was not the answer to any maiden's prayer. Living a dissolute life.

The church is and always has been a losers convention. One of the issues that greeks had with the church back in the day is that there were so many lowborn people in it, how could anything pure, holy and good attract the great unwashed. Likewise, in India the social caste most receptive to the gospel has been the untouchables, those scorned by everyone else.

In fact, there is quite a good argument to be made that when the great and the good get into the church en masse it does not go well. Examples would be the roman empire, the medieval church, and the English church of the 17 and 1800s.

One thing that Murray and I have in common is that God met us at the bottom, at a real low point of our lives and I imagine he did that for many of you also. Why? I used to think that most of us have to get to the end of ourselves before we are open to hearing the gospel.

But look at verses 27-29, its so that we could not boast. If we want to boast we can boast in the mercy of Jesus that saw fit to pull our lives out of the pit. When I resigned as Chief Legal Advisor for WINZ to become a youth pastor, one of the wise Christian women at our office told me Rod you are doing a good thing, but God is no man's debtor. And she was and is absolutely right, our conversion and our Christian lives are not favours that we do for God. He does not need us, but loves us nonetheless in a pure self giving way.

If you read chapter two Paul talks about his own inadequacy, when seen against the utter sufficiency of the gospel and God's power that drives it. Cute arguments and clever words are unnecessary. One of the great revivalist preachers was a guy called Jonathan Edwards, thousands of people committed and recommitted their lives to Jesus during and immediately after his sermons. People would run up the front groaning and crying, if that happened here this morning most of us would be checking the exits. And I think that we tend to think of such men as great orators, who had big rich voices like James Earl Jones or Morgan Freeman. And there would be lots of arm waving as they prowled up and down the stage, with great quantities of eloquent speech spilling forth from their oral cavities, as their hearts overflowed with spirituality and scholarship.

By contrast, Jonathan Edwards took great pains to speak in a monotone so that was less of him and more of Jesus.

We approach /God on our knees, acknowledging our need for him and his salvation in our lives. It just does not work if we don't. And that is a huge obstacle for our world, who aspire to self-sufficiency and if you have doubts or insecurities, well fake it till you make it. Do a Tony Robbins course or do something, but the last thing. That you need to do its that you need help from an invisible friend. Only Christians and alcoholics do that.

It's a nonsense, all this gospel stuff

Jesus said the last will be first, first up against the wall maybe but if you don't take in this world nobody will give you anything. Get real, the last are called the last because they are the last.

Jesus stopped the people making them their King. Why would you stop them? Let them, think of the good that you could do and the fun that you could have along the way.

Jesus said do your giving in secret. Well, you won't get an OBE that way or anybody's respect. If I am going to be generous I at least want to be well thought of, otherwise what's the point?

Jesus said take up your cross and follow me. That looks pretty uncomfortable to me. I care about being happy and providing for my family, anything else is a bonus. However I live I will not be embracing suffering and pain.

Jesus calmed the storm, healed diseases, and raised Lazarus from the dead. Just doesn't happen, can't happen, it's impossible.

Jesus rose from the grave on the third day. If it comforts you to believe that then that's fine, but it's up there with the tooth fairy, Father Xmas and a child who thinks he is a helicopter.

To be a faithful Christian is by definition to be a fool by the standards that rule out there. If we can embrace that reality then God can do great things with us and through us. Because there are other losers that don't cut the mustard as far as the world is concerned, we are not the only people that are uncool.

This church has done some good things with people who have been to prison, with solo mums, with drug addicts, they aren't cool either. If we can give up our need to impress then that enables us to accept the humanity and value of anyone who comes through that door. I was a dropout and Murray was an insolvent dodgy businessman, but God's people embraced us and we have both been profoundly changed by that experience.

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to Murray and I who are being saved it is the power of God.

One final story. When I was a youth pastor Murray was the church treasurer, and I brought one of our least together young adults Karl to talk with him. He was 23 and owed 35K and none of it was student loan, he was insolvent and had so little that there was no point in anybody bankrupting him. He was all over the place, flitting from job to job. Murray contacted his creditors and arranged deals to pay some of what he owed to settle his debts.

I have caught up with Karl over the years as we have run into each other, and then one day I heard that he was training to be a pastor. Hmm. We had a chat, in which I told him that it was good that he had not given me as a reference. He laughed and told me his story. He agreed that he was a really bad risk, but talked about what he had learned from Murray and how eventually he had repaid all of his debts. He told me about the ten years journey that he had been on with complete recall of all the chats that we had had along the way, most of which I had long forgotten. He is now a humble very effective pastor of a significant regional church.

Two losers helping another loser find his way.

The message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to Murray, Karl and I who are being saved it is the power of God.