**The necessity of the gospel**

Text: 1 Corinthians 1:21

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**Scriptures:** Isaiah 29:13-16; 1 Corinthians 1:18-25

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 34, 169, 411, 439, 527

**Series:** Canons of Dort (#9, Articles 3.4-3.6)

**Theme:** The inadequacy of the remaining ‘light of nature’ in mankind after the fall and also of the law - as a means to reveal a solution to the misery of sin or to provide power to save - in contrast to the gospel by which God is pleased to save those who believe.

**Proposition:** The gospel is essential as the means by which God is pleased to save all His people throughout history

**Introduction**

Have you ever said or thought ‘I didn’t think that would happen!’ Unintended consequences are the results of decisions and actions that were not foreseen. What do you need to prevent, or at least reduce the number of unintended consequences in your own life? Wisdom. Human wisdom can be gained through the accumulation of reflections on personal experiences.

Personal failures can be a fruitful source of human wisdom if accurate conclusions are drawn, and corrective action taken in the future. The failures of others, individuals and groups, can be an even more fruitful source of wisdom as the painful consequences of personal error can be avoided. Human wisdom is largely built on an analysis of past events.

Whilst some people attempt to make predictions about a future where circumstances are radically different from the present these guesses usually prove to be wrong. Many people over the past 2,000 years have forecast a date for the imminent return of Christ, so far, they have all been incorrect. Many people over the last few decades have predicted a housing market crash, a third world war or a catastrophic ‘extinction event’ for planet earth. So far, they have all missed the mark. Many people today speculate about where the COVID-19 pandemic is heading: soon to be an endemic disease like the flu? Likely to worsen again as new variants, more deadly than Omicron arise? Who really knows? Only those who can see the future with precision accuracy. No mere man or woman has that ability. We are fundamentally time-bound. What tomorrow will bring is a profound mystery to us all. There is no knowing with any solid certainty.

That is why Jesus, speaking to people like you and me, living in a broken world, said: “*do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble*” (Matt 6:34). We all exist with an ongoing uncertainty about the future to a greater or lesser degree. However, we can be absolutely sure than God will always act in a way that is entirely consistent with His perfect character. In the future, as in the past and in the present, God will always be righteous, truthful, trustworthy, merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love (Ps 103:8).

However, we know from past history that God does not necessarily do the same things throughout all times. The exodus from Egypt, the captivity of the Israelites in Babylon, the incarnation, life death and resurrection of Christ are all examples of God’s extraordinary activity whereby He sovereignly ‘*works all things according to the counsel of His will*’ (Eph 1:11). The Protestant Reformation is another example of God’s unusual work in history.

During the time of the prophet Isaiah, the Lord declared that he would ‘*again do wonderful things with this people, with wonder upon wonder; and the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the discernment of their discerning men shall be hidden*’ (Isa 9:14). Here the Lord reveals both His promise to rescue His people from bondage in Babylon, but also to continue to do unpredictable wonders to further the good purposes of His plan of salvation. The Apostle Paul picks up and quotes from Isaiah when he writes to the Corinthian church about wisdom and the gospel. This sermon captures the content of Canon’s of Dort Articles 3.4-3.6 under three points:

1. The natural foolishness of mankind
2. The ineffectiveness of the good law
3. The power of the gospel to save
4. **The natural foolishness of mankind**

Paul asks the Corinthians ‘Where is the one who is wise?’ Back then people might have replied – the wise are the virtuoso Greek orators who often taught crowds of people in public places. Or they might have thought of the Jewish scribes, steeped in the Old Testament Scriptures, as the wise ones. Today popular speakers with big followings on social media and podcasts may come to the minds of many. Names like Joe Rogan, Jordan Pedersen, Elon Musk, Robert Kiyosaki, or perhaps Jeff Bezos. Paul writes “*Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?*”. Great men and women fall. Their predictions do not always become reality. They are usually people who have failed many times before they have found success in one area of endeavour.

The focus of 1 Corinthians and of the Canons of Dort Article 3.4 is not wisdom in general, but more specifically, wisdom about who God is and what He has done, is doing and will do in the future. We are, by nature, able to observe this world and to arrive at conclusions about the way things work that can be helpful to scientific, medical and social development. By nature we are spiritual beings, who although ‘*dead in our trespasses and sins*’ (Eph 2:1) yet still retain a moral conscience. In the words of Canons of Dort Art 3:4 this ‘light of nature’ enables us to know to some degree ‘*the difference between what is honourable and shameful, and shows some regard for virtue and outward order*’.

As we saw in the previous sermon in this series, ‘total depravity’ does not mean that we are as bad as we could possibly be, but rather that every part of us is affected by the Fall of our first ancestor Adam. There is one thing that total depravity makes us totally incapable of and that is ‘*arriving at the saving knowledge of God and true conversion*’. No matter how hard a person may try, how many clever and insightful thoughts they may have about God, however much Bible knowledge they may accumulate, they cannot by themselves reach ‘upwards’ to God and find Him.

Paul describes natural wisdom as ‘*the wisdom of the world*’ which God has made foolish. This does not mean that there have been no clever godless people who have lived but that we all naturally suppress the truth about God. Think about it like this. I am not a very tall person. If I jump without the aid of a trampoline or springboard, I can get up to at least 2m, but not 2.5m. My physical upward reach is quite limited unless I have a ladder a large mountain or some other way of climbing higher. We vary in the height of our bodies with some being able to reach up more than others. I remember once having a 6ft 6-inch guy in our home who found something we’d lost many months before just lying on top of a high cabinet. He wasn’t even looking for it!

Spiritually we are all have limited ‘reach’, ‘*retaining some notions about God*’ but not being able to know Him in such a way that we can be saved. The natural foolishness of mankind, when it comes to knowing God in a saving way, is the reason why ‘*the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing*’ (1 Cor 1:18). The gospel makes no saving sense to the unbeliever without the divine help of God Himself. It’s like a person who is drowning out at sea. There is a lifeboat coming towards them, they could reach out and grab a trailing rope that would lead them to safety, but they have no ability to recognise the lifeboat for what it is. Perhaps to them it is just an annoying object distracting them from staying alive. Perhaps to them it is not what they were expecting so they wait in the water for the ‘*right kind of rescue to come along*’. Perhaps they do not know that drowning is fatal so even the idea of needing to be rescued seems stupid to them.

Just as there are many different possible reasons why a drowning person would not be able to reach out and be rescued, so there are many reasons why people cannot reach out to God and be saved, but underneath all these is a lack of true wisdom. Just as we say in the ‘T’ of TULIP that natural man is ‘totally depraved’ we could say that he or she is ‘totally foolish’ when it comes to having sufficient wisdom to know God and to be saved. The natural person cannot save themselves, nor can God’s law, which brings us to our second point:

1. **The ineffectiveness of the good law**

There are good laws and bad laws made by human governments and authorities, but having no law is never good. Lawlessness can be defined as ‘*a state of disorder due to a disregard for the law*’. When the good civil laws of a country are not regarded as binding by her citizens, chaos follows - with the oppression of the weak by the strong. Society becomes a place where ‘survival of the fittest’ governs the outcome. The law-abiding and vulnerable become the victims of the lawless and resilient. Human history has many examples of this anarchy. However, lawlessness generally doesn’t last for long. Often an oppressive regime will assume authority and impose harsh laws to restrict the freedoms of many.

Unlike the less than perfect laws imposed by civil governments, God’s Law is entirely good and right. That is exactly what we would expect because God Himself is perfectly good and righteous. As the Apostle Paul declares in Romans 7:12 “*The law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good*”. The law ‘convicts man of his guilt’ if he or she has sufficient moral conscience to recognise his or her failure. However, without the aid of the Holy Spirit, that awareness of sin is insufficient to drive a person to seek God for salvation. The good law of God provides no remedy for dealing with sin and guilt neither does it give a person power ‘*to rise out of this misery*’.

Many people in the past and today have sadly misunderstood the law of God. Much misery and deception arise when obedience to Divine Law is understood to be a pathway that can result in acceptance by God for the descendants of fallen Adam. Trying to be a good person in order to be saved is never successful because our natural selves always prevent us from full obedience and therefore from being complete law-keepers (e.g. James 2:10). The Apostle Paul writes with open honesty as a struggling saint “*For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing*” (Rom 7:19).

If we preach, proclaim and teach a mere moralism for people to obey then we are presenting a way of salvation that no person can follow for their spiritual good. The best that a person can do is to reduce the standard of God’s law to a level that they can reach or to ignore the actions, words, thoughts or motives that break God’s law and so pretend that they are in fact perfectly obedient. Deception and failure are the only outcomes when the law is believed to be a way of obtaining salvation. Yet it is such an attractive idea to think that we are strong and wise and can ‘do religion well’. Pride, self-righteousness and boasting in ourselves remain hugely attractive to our fallen natures.

For us, in our Reformed Churches where we wholeheartedly confess the doctrines of grace, and profess the five solas: by Scripture alone, by faith alone, by grace alone, through Christ alone, for the glory of God alone, a ‘works-righteousness’ can creep in ‘through the back door’ of our minds. Then we can begin to behave as though our partial obedience to the law is contributing to our salvation rather than that God enables us by His grace to do some law-keeping. The Canons of Dort uphold the inadequacy of the law to obtain saving grace from God and point us, as does the Word of God, to our need for the Gospel, which brings us to our third point:

1. **The power of the gospel to save**

Paul writes ‘*it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe*’ (1 Cor 1:21). The Canons of Dort affirm the mysterious saving power of the gospel in Article 3:6 stating that God uses the ‘*power of the Holy Spirit through the word or ministry of reconciliation, which is the gospel of the Messiah*’ as the means ‘to save men who believe’: This is why the gospel is the central message of the church and the essence of her existence. This is why gospel preaching is essential. I would describe it as an ‘essential service’ for fallen humanity.

There are two different types of response when the ‘word of the cross’ is heard by people like us. These responses are ultimately determined by God’s sovereign decree of election to save some, but to leave others to the fate they deserve – eternal separation from Him. The two possible outcomes when a person hears the gospel are revealed consistently throughout the Bible, for example: And he said (to Isaiah), “*Go, and say to this people:* ‘*Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.’ Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed*.” (Isaiah 6:9-10).

Simeon declared to Mary “*Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed… so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed*” (Luke 2:34-35). Paul says of the gospel ministry “*For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life*” (2 Cor 2:15-16).

Our calling, brothers and sisters is to declare to those around us that human ideas about God, this world, our own nature and identity and the future are foolish unless they agree with God’s revealed truth. It doesn’t matter how well educated a person is, how high their position is in society or how morally exemplary their life appears to be, unless their faith is ultimately in Christ alone, they are ‘totally depraved’ and living in what God calls the foolish wisdom of the world. It doesn’t matter how mature a fellow Christian is, whether they serve in a prominent position in the church or how well they know the Scriptures, they remain partially depraved, having the remnant of an old nature that even though they strive to put it to death, yet remains active within them to a greater or lesser degree. It doesn’t matter how upstanding and moral a person is they are not able to fully obey God’s Law. In this the Law shows the person with eyes to see that we all need God’s grace.

We all need to regularly hear the gospel, to know and to be reminded of God’s power of salvation through His Word accompanied by His Spirit. We who believe have faith ‘*the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen*’ (Heb 11:1). We have not yet seen the Lord Jesus in the flesh, face to face, yet we believe the gospel, the power of God, the ‘word of the cross’. Likewise God’s elect in Old Testament times, people like Abraham, Jacob, Moses and Elijah also have not seen Christ. ‘*They died in faith, not having received the things promised but having seen them and greeted them from afar*’ (Heb 11:13).

The Canons of Dort confirm the teaching of Scripture that God saves His people by the gospel ‘*both under the old and new dispensations*’. There is, and has only ever been, one way to be saved and that is through saving faith in the power of the cross of Christ, the long-promised Messiah.

When you and I, brothers and sisters, faithfully proclaim the gospel of Christ there are no unintended consequences because God is pleased to use this means, together with the convicting, regenerating power of the Holy Spirit to save His elect and only His elect without fail. We can trust God completely in this, and in all things, because in comparison to His wisdom, all the so-called wisdom of this world is foolishness.

AMEN.