

Approximately Billions 1 Corinthians 1

3-7-21 Pastor Bill Mosley

Bernard Madoff confessed to taking fifty billion dollars. Madoff was once the Chair of the Nasdaq Stock Market and had been a “force on Wall Street” for fifty years. Which for those keeping score means he was already a force on Wall Street when he was twenty.

The Wall Street Journal said, “In a separate criminal complaint, Federal Bureau of Investigation agent Theodore Cacioppi said Mr. Madoff’s investment advisory business had ‘deceived investors by operating a securities business in which he traded and lost investor money, and then paid certain investors purported returns on investment with the principal received from other, different investors, which resulted in losses of approximately billions of dollars.’”

What a phrase! “losses of approximately billions of dollars”. Sounds like they tracked billions of dollars the way I track quarters in an old coffee mug. I know there are some in there, but don’t press me too hard on how many...

In December 2008, the Elie Wiesel Foundation for Humanity issued a press release stating that nearly all of the foundation’s assets (approximately \$15.2 million USD) were lost through Bernard Madoff’s investment firm. “We gave him everything, we thought he was God, we trusted everything in his hands,” Wiesel said. Wiesel and his wife Marion, lost all of their life savings as well.

Approximately Billions. No one seems to know how much Madoff conned people out of, or how many people he scammed over 3 decades. Most of them, like Elie Wiesel lost everything.

What is wise? And What is foolish?

Well, most of the time, we don’t know.

Maybe the best we can do is say, “approximately billions.” Most of us don’t understand what a billion is, so to add “approximately” just says we don’t really

know. We’re just guessing.

Today we look at the buying and selling of salvation, different ladders by which people think they can climb their way to heaven, hearing and obeying God, and believing and being saved.

The Gospel reading is Jesus driving the moneychangers from the temple. The moneychangers were necessary, because they changed the Roman coins to temple shekels. The Roman money had a graven image on it, making it unsuitable for bringing to God. The point of the passage is that Jesus replaces the temple, his sacrifice replaces the sacrifice of animals, and anyone who tries to buy God makes of his temple a house of trade. God and man come together in the body of Jesus. That is the best temple.

The nation of Israel was subjected to slavery in Egypt, due to a wicked Pharaoh who did not remember Joseph and his wisdom and power under God. A new Joseph has arisen from among the Israelites, the prince Moses, who himself suffered exile from his people and his throne to become a wandering shepherd. God directs Moses to bring plagues on Egypt until Pharaoh would let the people go. He finally does, and then the nation wanders in the Wilderness, to all appearances lost, but these 40 years serve to weld the people together into one nation. Then he gives them his law.

St. Paul writes from Ephesus to Corinth, a church where he spent 18 months. The problem in the church is disunity and right here in the first chapter he pinpoints the reason for their disunity, that people by their own power seek their own proofs. God’s wisdom is an obstacle to those who half understand it, and foolishness to those who believe in their own powers of intellect, but we see his wisdom at last when we look to the cross of Christ.

What is wise? And what is foolish?

Sounds sophomoric. The word “Sophomore” is the classic oxymoron, a contradiction in terms. It comes from combining the Greek words for “wise” and “foolish.” Sophomoric applies to someone who is overconfident but poorly informed. If you’ve had a little school you might think you know a lot, but you don’t yet have any idea of how much you don’t know, so we apply the term somewhat ironically to the second year of school.

The most valuable thing I learned in school is how much I don’t know.

Where is Bernie Madoff now? Well, on paper he looks like he was worth 823 million dollars, with two yachts (one he kept in France), 22 million dollars worth of real estate at the end of 2008, including a seven million \$ Manhattan apartment. But he pleaded guilty to 11 counts of fraud, perjury, money laundering and theft. Incarcerated at Butner Federal Correctional Institution. And is scheduled for Release: Nov 14, 2139. Or 2137, reduced for good behavior. When he’s 199 years old.

He’s \$823 million wise & 150 years foolish.

What about those people who fell for the scam? Elie Wiesel said, “We thought he was God.” He promised them money. Must have looked good.

They wanted to be a winner. They wanted someone who would make them feel good about themselves, someone who would be their leader.

Paul writes to the Corinthians about just such people. Jews demand signs & Greeks seek wisdom, but what does Paul offer them?

Jesus of Nazareth. They rejected him because in Jesus they saw one who was meek & lowly, one who deliberately avoided the spectacular, one who served. And he ended on a Cross -- and that seemed to them an impossible picture of the Chosen one of God.

He didn’t have two yachts. He hardly had

two sandals. What he had was a scandal. That’s the same word as “stumbling block” in Greek.

If you’ve seen any movie, or in fact any depiction of the Crucifixion, you know that Jesus doesn’t look like a Savior, a Messiah, or anything like a God.

He looks like a fraud.

To Paul’s readers, to most people, the Cross is a barrier to the belief that Jesus is the Son of God.

Paul says, “the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.” What may seem foolish to our eyes is indeed wisdom to God, what might seem like weakness in our eyes, is really strength in the eyes of God.

But it actually makes perfect sense. Because of sin, a death is required. The wages of sin is death. Whose death? Someone who is blameless.

Not mine, I’m sinful. Not yours. You’re sinful. But God is blameless. And he sends us his son.

Paul says, instead [of us] Christ died on a cross and rose on Easter morning. God worked not through the means that most people expected, an army, a political ruler, but God worked through a simple carpenter’s son, twelve simple men and a cross to bring salvation and deliverance to the world.

Where are the wise of this world? Hard to know. Some get caught; some lose everything.

Where is the wisdom of God? Dying on a cross. For what? Approximately billions. And we are wise to realize how much we don’t know. But we do know to follow him.

Some material from Timothy Zingale Madoff & Wiesel info from Yahoo News.

Lord, make us wise in your way, saying no to whatever makes it more difficult to say yes to you. 1215 words