

Wisdom and Foolishness

Lesson for February 5, 2023

Unit III: God's Call and Its Responsibilities

Scriptural Background: 1 Corinthians 1:18-31

Printed Text: 1 Corinthians 1:18-31

Key verse: *“God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are,²⁹ so that no one may boast before him.”* (1 Corinthians 1:28-29)

Wisdom is the power to see and the inclination to choose the best and highest goal, together with the surest means of attaining it.

J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*

Today's lesson contrasts the wisdom of an omniscient God with the foolishness of men.

Key Terms

1. **Foolishness** (verse 18) – Folly; absurdity. The heaviest concentration of the Hebrew words referring to foolishness is in the Wisdom literature, where the fool is constantly contrasted with the wise. The fool is not so much stupid (except when the context demands such a meaning) as immoral and pernicious. The fool's problem is not so much intellectual as practical and spiritual. In fact, the terms "wise" and "fool" are used by the sages to designate respectively the faithful and the sinners.
2. **Weak** (verse 27) – Without strength; feeble; sick; helpless.
3. **Wise** (verse 19) – Learned; skilled; clever; cultivated.

Lesson Background

The letter is named for the city of Corinth, where the church to whom it was written was located. The church in Corinth was founded by Paul on his second missionary journey (Acts 18:1). As usual, his ministry began in the synagogue, where he was assisted by two Jewish believers, Priscilla and Aquila, with whom he lived with for a while and who were fellow tradesmen. Soon after, Silas and Timothy joined them, and Paul began preaching even more intensely in the synagogue. When most of the Jews resisted the gospel, he left the synagogue, but not before Crispus, the leader of the synagogue, his family and many other Corinthians were converted (Acts 18:5-8).

The church at Corinth was a mess. I count 15 distinguishable problems that Paul addresses in 1 Corinthians: partisanship, with the Corinthians factionalizing behind rival leaders (1:10–4:21; 16:10–18); incest (5:1–13); prostitution (6:12–21); celibacy within marriage (7:1–7); Christians married to one another asking about divorce (7:8–11, 39); Christians married to pagans asking about divorce (7:12–16); questions surrounding marriage and remarriage (7:25–40); lawsuits

(6:1–11); idolatry (8:1–11:1); concerns about women praying and prophesying in immodest ways (11:2–16); chaos in worship, with speaking in tongues and competing voices (chapter 14); inequality in the communal meal (11:17–34); denials of the bodily resurrection of Jesus and of Christians (15:1–58); the collection of a large sum of money to be sent to Jerusalem (16:1–4); and a change in Paul’s travel plans (16:5–9).

Underlying this mess, there were four main difficulties: a basic failure in relating to one another in love; a dramatic failure of the local church leaders to act considerately in the face of their competition for status and influence; arrogant theological reasoning that denied the importance of the body (which we might call “Christian intellectualism”); and tensions arising from the pressures that Paul’s teaching about sex placed on his converts. Each of these problems would have been bad enough, but when they were all present together, the combination was toxic.

Lesson in Depth

I. By Foolishness (1 Corinthians 1:18-21)

In the first 17 verses of 1 Corinthians 1, the Apostle encouraged unity in the church by being thankful for one another. He also let them know that he was thankful for their salvation, the spiritual gifts God had given them, and for their knowledge and eagerness for the Lord’s return. He went on to encourage their unity by focusing on Christ. In verse 13 he raises the question “Is Christ divided?” Paul then proceeds to tell the Corinthians about Christ’s crucifixion. It is at this point that this lesson begins.

The central point of verse 18 is how the perishing see the cross, and how the saved see the cross.

For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness: To the unbelieving world it would seem as if this type of preaching was foolish. “Foolishness” translates the word from which “moron” is derived.

To the Christ rejecters who are in the process of being destroyed, the gospel is nonsense. To those who are believers, it is powerful wisdom.

To truly understand the magnitude of what Jesus did for us on Calvary, we must study the sacrifice of the unblemished lamb sacrifice in the book of Leviticus. All sin is punishable by death of the sinner. There must be blood shed to do away with the sin. Jesus became our substitute on the cross. He shed His precious unblemished blood and paid our penalty in full for us.

We are counted not guilty of any sin, because Jesus abolished sin for those who will believe this and accept it for themselves. You can see why the world would not understand this. With His blood, He has saved us, and by His power He has raised us with Him to eternal life.

For it is written: In this quotation from Isaiah 29:14, Paul shows that in spiritual matters, God opposes the wisdom of man. He will **destroy the wisdom of the wise**, not bow down before it.

Where is the wise? Paul says, “In light of what God says in Isaiah 29:14, *now* where is your ‘wise’ man? Where is your **scribe**? Where is your **disputer of this age**? God has made them all foolish through His wisdom. He has destroyed the wisdom of the wise, just as He said He would.”

The point is plain: There is no wise man, no scribe, and no debater who can do what Jesus Christ has done.

The world through wisdom did not know God: There is a constant tendency to think that the smartest and wisest humans will know the most about God. But God cannot be found through human wisdom, but only through the *message of the cross*. The pursuit of human wisdom may bring an earthly contentment or happiness (though this is rare), but in itself, it can never bring the true knowledge of the true God.

Through the foolishness of the message: The Corinthians wanted to believe that the gospel itself was a sublime form of wisdom, as the Greeks considered wisdom (*sophia*). Paul replies, ‘how foolish can you get? What is there ‘wise’ (in the Greek sense of wisdom) about a crucified Messiah?’

The phrases **foolishness of the message** and **foolishness of God** do not mean Paul actually considered the message and God foolish. He is describing them as they appear to the perishing man, the “wise” man of this age.

God’s wisdom is not man’s wisdom multiplied to the highest degree. It is wisdom of a different order altogether. *For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts.* (Isaiah 55:8-9)

Paul isn’t condemning all learning or education; he merely says that by themselves they are useless for obtaining spiritual wisdom.

It pleased God: God takes pleasure in accomplishing our salvation in a way no one would have expected. He is *happy* to do it in this way, which offends the height of human wisdom.

II. By Faith (1 Corinthians 1:22-25)

For Jews request a sign: In Paul’s day, the Jewish world was looking for a **sign**. Specifically, they wanted the sign of a miraculous Messianic deliverance. They were not looking for the *message of the cross*. Their desire for deliverance was not bad, but their rejection of God’s way of deliverance was. “Their idolatry was that they now had God completely figured out; he would simply repeat the Exodus, in still greater splendor.” (Fee)

Greeks seek after wisdom: The Greek culture valued the pursuit of wisdom, usually expressed in high, academic, philosophical terms. They did not value the wisdom expressed in *the message of the cross*. Their desire for wisdom was not bad, but their rejection of God’s wisdom was.

“Their idolatry was to conceive of God as ultimate Reason, meaning of course what *we* deem to be reasonable.” (Fee)

We preach Christ crucified: Instead of giving the Jews and Greeks what they demanded in deliverance and wisdom, God gave them something unexpected: a crucified Messiah.

Christ (Messiah) meant power, splendor, and triumph. **Crucified** meant weakness, defeat, and humiliation. **Christ crucified** was the ultimate oxymoron, and this was what Paul preached! If the cross doesn't seem strange to you, then you either don't understand how the cross was seen in Jesus' day, or you don't understand who Jesus is. You don't understand the tension between **Christ** and **crucified**.

The great Roman statesman Cicero said: “The cross, it speaks of that which is so shameful, so horrible, it should never be mentioned in polite society.” If we were witnesses to the trial of Jesus – when the crowd was shouting out “Crucify him! Crucify him!” – if we had our wits about us, we would have shouted back, “Don't crucify Him! If you must execute this man, do it honorably. Let him die the death of a dignified man. But don't expose Him to the horror and the humiliation of hanging on a cross.” But God wanted **Christ crucified**, and if we don't embrace the cross, even with all its strange contradictions and demands, then we are *lost*.

To the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness: The Jews regarded *Christ crucified* as a **stumbling block**; perhaps this is better understood as an *offense* or a *scandal*. The Greeks regarded *Christ crucified* as **foolishness**. But God did not respond to the polling data. He kept to His gospel, because for those who believed it (**both Jews and Greeks**), *Christ crucified* is **the power of God and the wisdom of God**.

If the cross and its message *seem* weak, they are not; they are powerful and wise. But our expectations of what God should do keep us from receiving that power and wisdom.

ii. Paul knew this by experience. He was once scandalized by a crucified Christ; it infuriated him that one obviously cursed by God (according to Deuteronomy 21:23) should be honored as Messiah and Lord. So, he persecuted the church before being confronted by Jesus on the road to Damascus (Acts 9).

As much as Paul was once offended by a crucified Messiah, so the Greeks thought a message of salvation through a humiliating instrument of death foolish. A well-known piece of graffiti in Rome shows a worshipper standing next to a crucified figure with the body of a man and the head of a donkey, and it says, “Alexamenos worships his god.” This is how foolish the Greeks saw the cross.

Those who insist that we must change the emphasis of the gospel because people can't relate to it today must realize that the people of Paul's day couldn't relate to his preaching either, yet he kept it up, and with great results.

The foolishness of God is wiser than men: God was at His most “foolish” and very “weakest” at the cross, but it was infinitely wiser and stronger than anything man could do.

Salvation is not the achievement of human wisdom; it is the embrace of God's dramatic, unexpected act of love at Calvary.

III. By Frailty (1 Corinthians 1:26-31)

You see your calling, brethren: Paul says to the Corinthians, "Look at yourselves. You're no great bargain." There were **not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble** among the Christians at Corinth.

But God has chosen the foolish things of the world: Looking again at the Corinthians, Paul can say "you aren't wise according to the world, you aren't mighty, you aren't noble – but you are among **the foolish things of the world.**"

Many of the Corinthian Christians were beginning to think of themselves in high terms because of God's work in them. Paul will not allow this. They have not been chosen because *they* are so great, but because *God* is so great.

To put to shame the wise: This explains part of the *pleasure* of God described in 1 Corinthians 1:21. God loves to rebuke the idolatry of human wisdom, and He often does it by choosing and using the **foolish things of the world.**

God isn't saying that it is better to be foolish or uneducated. Rather, He is saying that the world's wisdom and education does not bring us salvation in Jesus Christ. "In putting the strong and wise and great to shame, God does not exalt the weak and uneducated and worthless but brings all of them down to one common level." (John Calvin)

God has called the weak and ignorant *first*, but not exclusively; shepherds first, then wise men; fishermen first, then the educated (like Paul, who was himself an educated man).

iii. "The ancient Christians were for the most part slaves and men of low station; the whole history of the expansion of the church is in reality a progressive victory of the ignorant over the learned, the lowly over the lofty, until the emperor himself laid down his crown before the cross of Christ." (Alford, quoting Olshausen)

That no flesh should glory in His presence: This is the end result. No one will stand before God and declare, "I figured You out" or "You did it just like I thought You should." God's ways are greater and higher, and nothing of the **flesh will glory in His presence.**

Jesus, who became for us wisdom: Jesus perfectly shows us, in His teaching and life, God's wisdom. This wisdom is often in contradiction to man's expectation. True wisdom isn't about "getting smart." God's wisdom is received in and through the person of Jesus.

Who became for us: Jesus is not only **wisdom** for us; He is also **righteousness and sanctification and redemption.** In His work, He communicates three things to those who are **in Christ Jesus.**

Righteousness means that we are legally declared not only “not guilty,” but to have a *positive* righteousness. It means that the righteous deeds and character of Jesus are accounted to us. We don’t become righteous by focusing on ourselves, because Jesus **became for us... righteousness**.

Sanctification speaks of our behavior, and how the believers are to be separate *from* the world and *unto* God. We don’t grow in **sanctification** by focusing on ourselves, but on Jesus, because Jesus **became for us... sanctification**.

Redemption is a word from the slave trade. The idea is that we have been purchased to permanent freedom. We don’t find freedom by focusing on ourselves, because **Jesus became for us... redemption**.

He who glories, let him glory in the LORD: Paul uses this reference to Jeremiah 9:23-24 to show that God did it all this way so that God would get the glory. The *path* for God’s glory is Christ crucified; the *evidence* of God’s glory is His choice of the lowly.

Lesson Summary

In this lesson Paul contends that the gospel has a way of taking all of our expectations and turning them on their head. God did not send us a messiah so that Christians can outpace the world in its own game. Instead, God’s work comes as a genuine surprise to the watching world. Where the world’s measuring stick would indicate “folly” or “weakness,” the gospel proclaims (to those with ears to hear) “wisdom” and “power.”

As Paul begins his defense of the “foolishness of the gospel,” he places his informational key front and center. It is the cross that is foolishness and weakness to outsiders. Because Christ crucified is the way that God has acted to save the world, Paul insists that our normal ways of assessing smart practices and displays of power are prone to deceive us. Is the work of God powerful? Yes, Paul insists, but this power will only be seen as foolishness and weakness to others (1 Corinthians 1:18).

Paul proclaims that the God of Israel is at work in the cross of Christ, and that the death and resurrection of Jesus are the ultimate revelation of this God, and of why what the Old Testament says about this God is, in fact, true.

Isaiah had prophesied before the exile that the vision of the prophets would be like a sealed document. Unreadable. Undecipherable. “The wisdom of the wise will perish” (Isaiah 29:14, 1 Corinthians 1:19).

Paul takes hold of two categories for greatness in the ancient world, wisdom and power, and turns them on their heads. Paul simply claims that worldly understanding and worldly power are the wrong tools for apprehending the work of God.

The only way to know that the execution of a pretender to the Roman throne was, in fact, the means of God's salvation of the world, is through proclamation. This "foolishness" is the means God has chosen to save (1 Corinthians 1:21).

It might be possible to translate "the foolishness of preaching" as the act of preaching itself, but the NRSV wisely steers us toward another interpretation when it says that God saves "through the foolishness of our proclamation" (1 Corinthians 1:21). The point is not simply that "preaching" is how God saves, but that what is preached is "the word of the cross," as Paul makes clear in verse 23.

We should take stock of how differently Paul approaches his society than we often approach ours. Rather than showing the world how much better God is at wielding the kind of power it expects, or the sort of wisdom it demands, Paul proclaims the cross as an alternative means of enacting both wisdom and power. The gospel turns the economy of the world on its head.

In verse 26 Paul makes the transition from the message itself to the Corinthians who have believed it. In fact, though many of our modern translations omit the word, verse 26 begins with "for," telling us that Paul intends for this part of his argument to furnish the proof of what he has just said. How do we know that God's folly and weakness outpace the wisdom and power of people (verse 25)? Because the Christian community in Corinth, those defined by their acceptance of the gospel message, were not mighty, wise, and noble when they came to faith. Their own testimony is proof of how different God's ways are than the ways of the world.

In all of this, Paul continues to argue that being divided denies the gospel of Christ. Flocking to teachers who bear the marks of worldly power and wisdom undermines the economy of the kingdom, in which God's wisdom and power so outpace their human counterparts that defining ourselves by wise and powerful leaders is shown up to be a denial of the gospel itself.

What, then, is power? It is God, by God's own doing, uniting people to Christ (verses 27-30). Christ is wisdom and power (verse 30). Union with the crucified Christ, then, is to play out in all aspects of the church's life.

Realizing that Christ is the substance of everything we could want, the wind is taken from the sails of any argument that would draw us to a person in a display of partisan spirit within the church. We do not boast in earthly leaders, we boast only in the Lord Jesus Christ (verse 31).