

“The Wisdom of God”

The Third in a Series of Sermons on Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians

Texts: 1 Corinthians 1:18-31; Isaiah 29:13-24

When we hear someone who claims to be an evangelical state that understanding Christ’s cross as a sacrifice for sin is in reality a twisted form of cosmic child abuse—because it teaches that the death of Jesus is an act of a vengeful God pouring out his anger on his innocent son¹—we are shocked. While the sentiment is shocking, we shouldn’t be surprised that people think like this. It is the apostle Paul who tells us in 1 Corinthians 1:18 that the cross is folly to those who are perishing. The message of Christ crucified was foolishness to ancient Greeks, and a stumbling block to Jews. The cross is both to modern Americans. While sinful men and women mock the cross because they claim to wise, God, in turn, mocks them, because from God’s perspective, human wisdom is nothing but sinful folly. If you’ve ever wondered why Christianity is so difficult for non-Christians to understand and accept, well then, Paul has your answer.

As we continue our series on Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, and we take up the subject of God’s wisdom and human folly, or as non-Christians see it, our folly and their wisdom. As we saw last time, factions had formed within the Corinthian church as people claimed to be followers of Paul, Apollos, Peter and even Christ himself. In verse 10, Paul exhorted them “*I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment.*” Factionalism had become a cancer in this church, and Paul wants it stopped. The Corinthians are to be united around their common faith.

As we continue to follow Paul’s response to the factions which had formed in Corinth, we quickly learn that the divisions within the Corinthian congregation reveal a much deeper intellectual problem than people merely over-identifying with the person who baptized them. The divisions within the Corinthian church stem from the fact that people are placing far too much confidence in human wisdom (*sophia*) instead of the gospel, which is centered upon the preaching of the cross.² Over-reliance on human wisdom was a serious problem throughout the Hellenistic (Greek-influenced) world. Paul’s response to this problem is to remind the Corinthians that the wisdom of God is revealed in the message of Christ crucified. This revelation of God’s wisdom stands in complete opposition to the so-called wisdom of the Greek philosophical tradition which regarded the preaching of the cross as utter foolishness.

In many ways, this is the same issue we face as Christians today—self-centered, prosperous and technologically advanced Americans are very much like the Hellenized citizens of first century Corinth. Both find the preaching of the cross either irrelevant or offensive.

We have much ground to cover, so we turn to our text, 1 Corinthians chapter 1:18-31.

In verse 18, Paul spells out the issue which explains virtually all of the problems facing the Corinthians. “*For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being*

¹ Steve Chalke & Alan Mann, The Lost Message of Jesus (Zondervan, 2003), 182.

² Barrett, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 51.

saved it is the power of God.” The “word” of the cross is folly (foolishness) to those who rely on human wisdom to understand the things of God (as Paul pointed out in verse 17). The word (*logos*) of the cross is but another way of speaking of the preaching of the gospel.³ The cross not only lies at the very heart of God’s redemptive work in Jesus Christ, the cross is the very heart of that message God commissioned his apostles to preach. In Galatians 3:1, Paul speaks of publically placarding Christ. In 2 Corinthians 2:15 Paul speaks of the cross as a sweet fragrance which is the aroma of life to a believer.

Yet the message of the cross is not something non-Christians want to hear, or something to which they will be attracted. When viewed from the Hellenistic categories of a city like Corinth, the very idea of God being crucified as a payment for our sins was mind-boggling. The seriousness of Paul’s point about the gospel being folly is easily lost upon us until we realize that crucifixion was that form of capital punishment reserved for the lowest dregs of society (slaves, prisoners of war) and the most heinous of criminals (murderers, insurrections, terrorists and so on). Pain and suffering aside, to die by crucifixion was to die in shame. The message of the cross was absolutely scandalous in Greek culture.

In our age, the cross is an established Christian symbol, but to speak to a Greek of a crucified God is to talk nonsense. Crucifixion was a form of punishment used by the Romans to make an example of criminals so that others would think twice about doing what the crucified had done. As a public form of horrific punishment, crucifixion was the symbol of Roman power. The cross says to all non-Romans, “don’t mess with us.” Yet, Paul is now proclaiming that it is through the cross that God triumphs over human sin and the powers that be—including Rome. As one writer points out, “rather than proving the sovereignty of Roman political order, [the cross] shatters the world’s systems of authority. Rather than confirming what the wisest heads already know, [the cross] shatters the world’s systems of knowledge.”⁴ That the cross was an offense to Greco-Roman sympathies can be seen in the fact that there is a first century graffiti found in Rome which depicts a crucified body of a man with the head of a mule, with the inscription, “Alexamenos worships his god.”⁵ No doubt, this was indicative of how many non-Christians of Paul’s day regarded the message of the cross. God incarnate was difficult enough. God incarnate crucified was too much.

Paul divides the human race into two categories, strongly implying a doctrine of particular redemption. There are those who are being saved and there are those who are perishing. Those who are being saved are those for whom Christ’s power is effectual. Those who see the cross foolishness are not included among those “being saved.” This raises the matter of election as well. Do people perish because they reject the gospel, or are they are perishing because the gospel is foolishness to them?⁶ Paul says the latter. Apart from God’s grace, people cannot understand the cross for what it is—the power of God.

According to Paul, the way the unbelieving world thinks about God is only so much foolishness. In fact, Paul associates worldliness not so much with immoral conduct, but with the non-Christian way of thinking, which leads to immoral conduct. The antithesis (distinction) between Christian and non-

³ Barrett, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 51.

⁴ Hays, First Corinthians, 31.

⁵ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 43.

⁶ Barrett, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 52.

Christian thinking can be seen in the fact that Christians understand the meaning of the cross, while non-Christians do not.⁷ This not only has serious implications for Christian apologetics because of the intellectual prejudice of non-Christians towards the things of God (the effects of sin on human thinking), but there are important implications for ethics and culture as well. This is why Reformed approaches to apologetics regard all non-Christian thinking as darkened by human sin (cf. Ephesians 4:18-19). This explains why it is that a supernatural act of illumination is required to overturn the prejudicial effects of sin on human thinking, and to remove the innate hatred people have toward the things of God.

The way in which God saves sinners manifests his wisdom and his power. This indicates that only the elect can see the cross for what it is—on the cross Jesus Christ dies for sinners, turning away God’s wrath, reconciling them to an angry God, redeeming and purchasing them, and dying in their place. In the crucifixion, God demonstrates his supreme love for a lost and fallen world, without in any sense sacrificing his justice. But this can only be fully understood (in a saving sense) through the eyes of faith. Non-Christians don’t get it and never will. For them, the cross is Alexamenos worshipping his God.

To bolster his point, in verse 19 Paul cites Isaiah 29:14 (part of our Old Testament lesson): *“For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”* According to Isaiah, sinful humans will never figure out nor understand the ways of God—especially in the redemption of sinners. In Isaiah’s prophecy, the prophet warns God’s people not to go against his will by seeking protection through an alliance with Egypt. Israel must trust in God to protect them and not make alliances with pagans. In Isaiah 29 we read that the people draw near to God with their lips, but their hearts are far from him. The application to the Corinthians is simply that talk of human wisdom is cheap. Human wisdom jumps from the lips of a people whose hearts are actually far from God.⁸

The cross demonstrates the huge gap between God’s ways of dealing with his creatures and the way sinners think things ought to be done. The cross frustrates non-Christian wisdom and intelligence. God’s ways are not our ways. His thoughts are not our thoughts. When we try and be wiser than God, God will expose human wisdom for what it is—foolishness. All the wisdom of the ancient philosophers (great though it was in worldly matters) cannot figure out the cross. The cross remains intellectual and philosophical foolishness to them, in addition to being morally scandalous. Human wisdom (great as it may be) cannot comprehend the gravity of human sin, the complete helplessness of the human condition, and what is required for God to deal with our sin without sacrificing his love for his justice. This is not a matter of human wisdom or intelligence. Rather, God must reveal this to us in the person of his son.

In fact, in verse 20, God mocks the sage, the philosopher, and all those who think themselves wise. *“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?”* Can the sage truly understand God’s dealings with his creatures? Can the scholar? Can the philosopher? Despite the eloquence and rhetorical skill of such men—prized in Greco-Roman culture—Paul’s rhetorical questions demand only one answer—“no.” The sage, the scholar, the philosopher, can only offer the wisdom of “his age.” God’s wisdom confounds them all. His wisdom is not the wisdom of this age, nor this wisdom of this world. His wisdom is of the age to come.

That God’s wisdom confounds the pagans is clear from verse 21, *“For since, in the wisdom of God, the*

⁷ See Hays, First Corinthians, 30.

⁸ Hays, First Corinthians, 29.

world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.” Given the context—God’s wisdom revealed in the cross in contrast to human wisdom revealed in the sage, the scholar and the philosopher—when Paul speaks of God’s wisdom here, he is not speaking of natural revelation. Rather, since God chose to reveal his wisdom in the cross (specifically through preaching—*kerygma*), the world (with its wisdom firmly anchored in this age) did not know God, nor understand the nature of the salvation that the cross secures for us. God was pleased to save people who believe a message which the world regards as foolishness. Paul is drawing our attention to the fact that God was pleased to do things in a certain way. It was never God’s intention to save sinners through the discoveries of human wisdom, nor through the means of human merit.

This also means that the gospel is not part of natural revelation. The gospel is not found in the sunrise nor in the grandeur of Yosemite. Nor is the gospel a message which will make sense to people using the lens of worldly wisdom. It is the wisdom of the world which claims that good people go to heaven and that only very bad people go to hell. But the content of the gospel is not something which can be discovered by human wisdom. It is something revealed by God which must be believed. We are not saved through the means of human wisdom (and the things associated with it), but through the means of believing a particular message, a message which the world regards as foolishness. This says a great deal about all those attempts (however well-intentioned they may be) to tinker with the message for the sake of reaching greater numbers of people. To tinker with the message is to rob it of its power. It is to substitute the wisdom of men (which is foolishness) for the wisdom and power of God.

As we see in verses 22-23, Paul’s comments are particularly germane to two distinct ethnic groups in the Corinth. “*For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles.*” Those Jews in Corinth were not at all interested in the kind of speculative wisdom that the Greeks were famous for. They believed that God had acted in redemptive history, made his covenant with them (by grace), and then gave them the law as a means of blessing and curse, with circumcision being the badge of covenant membership. Recall that throughout the gospels, the Jews kept demanding miraculous signs from Jesus because these signs would demonstrate that he was Israel’s Messiah. But even the countless miracles Jesus did do were not enough to convince the Jews that he was the one promised throughout the Old Testament. It was the fact that Jesus must suffer and die for sins which became an intolerable stumbling block (*skandelon*) to the Jews. As Leon Morris so aptly puts it, to a Jew “a crucified Messiah was a contradiction in terms.”⁹

To the Greeks, on the other hand, the solutions to life’s problems were to be discovered through the means of human wisdom. Greeks came to regard sages, scholars and philosophers as the center of political, cultural and even religious life. These were the men who provided the answers to life’s questions and discovered solutions to life’s problems. The Greeks regarded those who did not exalt such ideals as barbarians who were unable to understand true wisdom. Given this set of categories, who needs a revelation from God when we have such deep human wisdom? What use is a crucified God, when the sages, scholars and philosophers have discovered the keys to living a successful and rewarding life? This is much like contemporary America with our gurus, prosperity preachers, and life coaches.

But as Paul reminds his hearers, the critical difference between Christianity and Judaism, and between Christianity and Greek wisdom, is a crucified savior. Paul reminds the Corinthians that this is exactly what he preached to them, and this explains why Jews stumble before the cross while the Greeks dismiss

⁹ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 45.

it as unsophisticated nonsense. And yet, there is more to the story than just the fate of the Jews and Greeks. Paul goes on to say in verse 24-25, “*but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.*”

While the cross may be an intolerable stumbling block to the Jew and foolishness to the Greek, it the very means by which God has called elect Jews and Greeks to faith in Jesus Christ. The cross is where the power of God (to redeem sinners and to call them to faith) and the wisdom of God (both his love and justice) is fully displayed (cf Romans 3:21-28). Though foolishness to most, and a stumbling block to others, it is in this message of the cross (and only in this message) that God supremely demonstrates his wisdom and power. And this divine wisdom completely transcends the wisdom and power of men.

In light of this, Paul exhorts his readers, “*consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth.*” Paul asks the Corinthians to stop and consider their social and economic standing *before* they came to faith in Christ. The Corinthian church was filled with people of low-social standing, and with people who lived lives which went virtually unnoticed outside their immediate circles. Not many of the members of the Corinthian church were wise by human standards. Few were present in this church who had formal training in philosophy, logic, or rhetoric. There was no one in this church who “discovered” the secret wisdom of God and then came to faith. There may have been a philosopher or two in their midst, but they came to faith like everyone else—they were called through the preaching of the gospel! They did not come to faith because they were wiser than others! They came to faith because God called them!

The same thing holds true for influential people or people of noble birth. There may have been a leading light or a blue-blood or two from the leading families of Corinth in the congregation, but they were not called because of their high-standing or reputation. By and large, this church is made up of ordinary people from the various stages and stations of life. It is interesting to note that one of the earliest attacks upon Christianity by the pagan philosopher Celsus is the fact that so few intellectuals became Christians, a charge easily refuted.¹⁰ This lack of worldly-wise intellectuals, people of high-social standing and noble birth is not by accident. This is exactly what we find throughout the gospels when we read that the kingdom of God cannot be “entered” because of good works or social status. Rather, entrance into God’s kingdom must be bestowed upon us. It is God’s purpose that the Corinthian church is filled with people who are in no way worthy of the kingdom, nor held in high esteem by the world.

The reason for this is spelled out in verses 27-28, “*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; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are.*” Again, Paul emphasizes the sovereign purposes of God in his choice of specific individuals who will be called, and who believe the gospel. God chose a foolish message (the cross), to call those the world truly regards as foolish (those not wise by worldly standards, those not of high-standing or noble birth) so as to shame the wise (those who are truly worldly wise, and of high-standing). God chooses weak and foolish things because his power and wisdom are magnified by the salvation of weak and foolish men and women. Anyone who is of the elect and chosen by God in Jesus Christ to be delivered from his wrath, cannot boast in any sense about being worthy of God’s choice. In fact, just the opposite is the case.

¹⁰ Origen responded to this charge in *Contra Celsum* III, cited in Morris, 1 Corinthians, 47-48.

To confound the wisdom of the world, God chooses to save many of lowly birth and those whom the world despises, so as to bring to nothing the “things that are.”¹¹ The reason God does this is stated in verse 29: “*so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.*” At the end of the day, we have nothing whatsoever to boast about! The gospel is about the power of God, not our goodness.

Turning now from the negative (that God’s wisdom flies in the face of worldly wisdom) to the positive (God’s method of saving), Paul now speaks to the fundamental fact that God saves sinners (weak and foolish) so as to magnify his power and wisdom. In verses 30-31 we read: “*And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”*” To speak of Christ as “wisdom from God,” is a loud echo from the Old Testament, specifically Proverbs 8:22-32, where wisdom is personified. But it may also come from first century Jewish thinking, where Wisdom (personified) was understood to play a major role in the creation of all things, as well as serving as mediator between God and man in terms of the communication to man of the divine will about God’s salvation of his people.

When Paul speaks of Christ as “wisdom” he is making the point that Christ is that one the Jews whom had expected, thereby allowing Paul to set forth Christ as true wisdom (personified), over against the so-called wisdom of men.¹² This may not only be a point of contact with the Jews in Corinth, it certainly is offered as a challenge to the so-called “wisdom” of the Hellenistic world. Paul makes the critical point that it is because of God (*ex autou*) that believers are in Christ Jesus. This is Pauline shorthand for the doctrine of union with Christ—which becomes a central theme in the writings of John Calvin and the Reformed tradition. For all those united to Jesus Christ through faith, Christ is not just the source of all true wisdom—he is true wisdom. Christ stands over against all forms of Greek and Roman religion.

Union with Christ is a major theme in Paul’s letters. To be united to Jesus Christ through faith is to receive all of Christ’s saving benefits. But union with Christ has a corporate dimension which has an important bearing upon Paul’s understanding of the organic nature of the body of Christ. To be in union with Christ is to be united to all others who are in Christ and who are members of his body (which is his church). This is especially important to consider given the fact that Paul is dealing with the tragedy of schism and division. Here, Paul tells us that true wisdom consists in those things now enumerated as benefits of our union with Christ: “righteousness, sanctification, and redemption.”

Righteousness refers to the right standing given us by God in Jesus Christ (our justification). The word (*diakiosune*) comes directly from the law courts of Paul’s day and is used repeatedly by Paul to indicate that God’s just verdict of “not guilty” is rendered of Christ, not us. But because we “in Christ” through faith, Christ is now said to be our righteousness. Our sins are forgiven because of Christ’s death upon the cross and that we are regarded (reckoned) to be as righteous as Jesus Christ himself was righteous. By virtue of our union with Christ, our guilt is reckoned to him and his righteousness is reckoned (imputed) as though it were ours. Paul has already spoken of believers as “sanctified in Christ” in 1:2, and will go on to unpack this a bit further in 2 Corinthians 5:21, when he puts it this way: “*For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*”

Sanctification refers to Christ’s ethical purity (perfect obedience), which is not only a reference to

¹¹ Used 27 times in the NT and translated 17 different ways), cf. Morris, 1 Corinthians, 48.

¹² Barrett, First Epistle to the Corinthians, 60.

Christ's active obedience (his obedience to the covenant of works and the law of Moses), but is also connected to the sanctification (mortification and vivification) that Christ works in all those united to him through faith. According to Hebrews 12:24, without holiness, no man will see God. But Christ is our holiness by virtue of our union with him. Because he is truly without sin, he will not only mortify sin in us, but because we are holy, we will see God, something which ultimately results from our glorification. As Paul has stated earlier, those sanctified (reckoned as "holy" because Christ is their righteousness) are also called to be holy (that is to demonstrate through their conduct that they are sanctified and in union with Christ). Paul is reinforcing the idea that all those who are justified will also be in the process of sanctification. Paul will tolerate neither Jewish legalism nor Gentile antinomianism.

The third term Paul uses here (redemption), points forward to future deliverance from God's eschatological wrath on the day of judgment and to the resurrection of the body (Ephesians 1:3-14). The term also conveys the idea of liberation from that which holds us captive.¹³ Because we are in union with him through faith, Jesus Christ is our righteousness, holiness and redemption. In Christ (who is true wisdom) we have the divine revelation of what is truly wise, holy and good. Nothing in either Jewish or Greek thinking can compare. Although the pagans think they are wise, God mocks them as foolish, and the pagans in their foolishness return the favor. Paul is saying to the Corinthians, "you want wisdom? All right, here is the wisdom that God has provided. It is found in Jesus Christ and in him crucified!"¹⁴

Because Christ is our righteousness, the conclusion stated in v. 31 (a quotation from Jeremiah 9:24) is now obvious. Instead of boasting in our wisdom, our high-standing and our nobility, let all Christians boast in the Lord, who has done all of this for us in Christ. This too is nearly a parallel passage with Paul's declaration in Galatians 6:14: "*But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.*" Christian preaching must challenge the boasting of those who are confident in their own righteousness, their own wisdom, their own high-standing in the community and their nobility. In effect, God mocks these things when the cross is preached because God exposes this pagan wisdom for what it truly is—foolishness.

IV. What then, do we say by way of application?

If you have ever wondered why it is that when you make the best presentation of the gospel you possibly can, and then all you get is a blank stare, or if you've ever felt the sting of having people think you are an idiot because you are a Christian, Paul has given you an explanation. The cross is the revelation of both the wisdom and power of God. Yet, to non-Christians the message of Christ crucified is either a stumbling block or foolishness, perhaps both. And this will always be the case unless and until God changes a person's heart (the theme of 1 Corinthians 2) through the power of the Holy Spirit so that they now can understand that what they thought was foolishness is in reality the wisdom and power of God.

Although the pagans think themselves wise, God mocks them by saving sinners through the message of a crucified savior, something they simply cannot comprehend. Yet, it is only in the message of the cross that we find righteous, sanctification, and redemption, the eternal fruit of the wisdom and power of God. These are the very things the pagans are seeking, but cannot find. And these things are but part of the blessings found in the message of the cross—foolishness to Greeks, a stumbling block to Jews, but for us

¹³ Cf. Barrett, First Epistle to the Corinthians, 61; Morris, 1 Corinthians, 49-50.

¹⁴ Hays, First Corinthians, 33.

who are being saved, that message where we find the wisdom and the power of God, the greatest of all treasures.