

Challenges Christians Face

Human Wisdom and the Wisdom of the Gospel

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

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Human Wisdom and the Wisdom of the Gospel

Scripture

Today we continue studying *The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians* in a series I am calling *Challenges Christians Face*.

Christians in the church at Corinth had misunderstood the nature of wisdom with regard to salvation. From Paul's perspective human wisdom opposes God's wisdom that is revealed in the gospel. Human wisdom is based on human knowledge and leads to destruction. God's wisdom is based on the gospel and leads to eternal life. Let's see how Paul expresses the difference between human wisdom and the wisdom of the gospel in 1 Corinthians 1:18-25.

Let's read 1 Corinthians 1:18-25:

¹⁸ For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹ For it is written,

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

²⁰ 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? ²¹ For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. ²² For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. (1 Corinthians 1:18–25)

Introduction

Every time they did anything, he had something smart to say. The Sunday school class went on an all-day picnic at the national park. It could have been a great time, but Jimmy seemed interested only in picking everything apart.

“Well, *that* was really a lot of fun!”

“So this is supposed to be *good* food?”

“I don’t see why everybody is so excited about coming here.”

Jimmy just loved quoting statistics, giving trivial facts, and scrutinizing everything with the biggest words he could use. Jimmy was not a happy fellow, and, unwittingly, he made everyone else unhappy, too.

After a day of this, the bus driver could not take it anymore.

“Jimmy,” he shouted, “we all know you think you’re the only one on this bus with any sense, and you may be the smartest guy here. But let me tell you something, you’re not a wise man—you’re just a wise guy.”

What’s the difference between a wise man and a wise guy?

I suppose we could list a dozen things or so. But one thing is true in every case. Wise people know how to use their intelligence to serve others and to help those around them.

Wise guys are out for themselves. They use their intelligence in a way that destroys.

In the passage that we are going to study today, Paul addressed those in the church at Corinth who claimed to be wise. They used their “wisdom” in a way that divided the church and set themselves in opposition to Paul. They took pride in the human “wisdom” of the world. Initially, they had not trusted worldly, human wisdom for their salvation, but now they had begun to emphasize such wisdom over the gospel itself.

In their pursuit of wisdom, they became arrogant wise guys.¹

¹ Richard L. Pratt, Jr, vol. 7, *I & II Corinthians*, Holman New Testament Commentary; Holman Reference (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 19.

Review

In a previous lesson I mentioned that the traditional understanding of the situation in Corinth is that there was internal division and strife in the church. Paul wrote his letter to correct the division that existed among the various factions. However, I think that commentator Gordon D. Fee is correct in saying that “the historical situation in Corinth was one of conflict between the church and its founder.”²

That is not to say that the Corinthian church was not experiencing internal strife and division; they were. But the primary problem was between the church as a whole and Paul as the church increasingly disagreed with Paul and his teaching. For Paul this presented a twofold crisis—over his authority and his gospel.

After the introductory salutation (1:1-3) and thanksgiving (1:4-9) of the letter, Paul immediately addressed the issue of divisions in the church in Corinth (1:10-17). Paul urged the Christians in Corinth to heal the divisions in the church because they are contrary to the unity that exists in Christ’s body.

In today’s passage (1:18-25) Paul says that the Corinthian Christians had moved back to human wisdom. He showed how their so-called wisdom was worthless. It could not save anyone; it could not further the cause of Christ. All it did was destroy. In fact, the wisdom the Corinthians were so proud of actually opposed the gospel. As far as Paul was concerned, these people were not truly wise—they were only wise guys.³

Paul urged the Christians in Corinth to recognize the folly of human wisdom and to embrace the wisdom of the gospel.

Lesson

And so, in today’s lesson we are urged to recognize the folly

² Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), 6.

³ Richard L. Pratt, Jr, vol. 7, *I & II Corinthians*, Holman New Testament Commentary; Holman Reference (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 19.

of human wisdom and to embrace the wisdom of the gospel.

Let's use the following outline for today's lesson:

1. There Are Two Kinds of People in the World (1:18)
2. Human Wisdom Will Be Destroyed (1:19)
3. Human Wisdom Has Been Made Foolish (1:20)
4. People Are Saved through the Folly of Preaching (1:21)
5. There are Two Kinds of Unbelievers in the World (1:22)
6. Only the Gospel Saves the Two Kinds of Unbelievers in the World (1:23-24)
7. Human Wisdom Is Outclassed by God's Foolishness (1:25)

I. There Are Two Kinds of People in the World (1:18)

First, there are two kinds of people in the world.

Paul said in verse 18: **“For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”**

It is important to remember that Paul is writing a letter, so there is continuity of thought with what precedes our current paragraph. Paul is about to explain what he had said at the end of the previous paragraph. He said in verse 17: “For Christ did not send me to baptize *but to preach the gospel*, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.” So, Paul is about to explain the message of his preaching.

Paul first wanted people to understand that there are only two kinds of people in the world: unbelievers and believers.

Paul began by explaining the message of his preaching in terms of the way unbelievers and believers view the message. On the one hand, **those who are perishing** (unbelievers) live according to human wisdom, and therefore conclude (wrongly) that **the word of the cross is folly**.

On the other hand, the Holy Spirit changes the perspective of those **who are being saved**. Those who believe the gospel, that is,

those who receive the word of the cross, perceive that the word of the cross is not folly, but is instead **the power of God** that brings salvation from sin and death.

Paul pressed this radical difference between unbelievers and believers in order to remind the Corinthians that the way of Christ does not rely on human wisdom. The reason he pressed this difference between unbelievers and believers leads us to his second point.

II. Human Wisdom Will Be Destroyed (1:19)

Second, human wisdom will be destroyed.

Paul said in verse 19: **“For it is written, ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.’”**

Paul quoted Isaiah 29:14, where the prophet rebuked Israel for challenging God by relying on **the wisdom of the wise** and **the discernment of the discerning**. In times of trouble, the Israelites to whom Isaiah spoke relied on their own wisdom instead of God’s wisdom. James described this kind of wisdom as “earthly” wisdom (James 3:15).

Isaiah warned Judah that God would destroy human wisdom. He would do things to frustrate the intelligent, philosophical, and religious outlook that humans raised against his revelation. Paul used this Old Testament quotation to show the Corinthians that a fundamental antithesis exists between the true wisdom of God and the wisdom of the world, which God will eventually destroy.

But, not only will human wisdom be destroyed.

III. Human Wisdom Has Been Made Foolish (1:20)

Third, human wisdom has been made foolish.

Paul said in verse 20: **“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?”**

Paul continued to point out God's opposition to human wisdom in several questions.

He asked, **"Where is the wise man?"** Isaiah spoke similar words in Isaiah 19:12 to mock the Egyptian wise men who could not comprehend the ways of God.

Then he asked, **"Where is the scribe?"** Isaiah again used similar words to ridicule the Assyrians for their arrogance in assuming they would be victorious over the God of Israel (Isaiah 33:18).

Again he asked, **"Where is the debater of this age?"** Here Paul focused more on the situation at hand. He associated the wisdom of words with those whose boasting God opposes.

Paul ended with a question to which he expected a positive response. He asked, **"Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?"** God had certainly done so in the days of Isaiah by defeating the Egyptians and the Assyrians. But Paul's idea was greater than this. God had also demonstrated the folly of human wisdom in Christ in that human wisdom would never lead anyone to think that God would allow his Son to be crucified to save man. By acting in a way that human wisdom would label "foolish," God actually made foolish human wisdom.

IV. People Are Saved through the Folly of Preaching (1:21)

Fourth, people are saved through the folly of preaching.

Paul said in verse 21: **"For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe."**

Paul explained that human wisdom was unable to find ultimate reality, namely God himself. As hard as they tried to raise themselves to heights of wisdom, the greatest religious leaders and philosophers of **the world did not know God.**

Paul did not mean that unbelievers were unable to know truths about God. God has revealed himself to all people in the general revelation of creation (Romans 1:18–20). Moreover, many

unbelieving Jews understand much in the Scriptures. Instead, Paul was saying that the religious leaders and philosophers had not come to know God personally, in a saving way, through their human wisdom.

In opposition to the efforts of sinful humanity, **it pleased God** to choose another way **to save those who believe**. In the world's terms, the way of salvation through the gospel is viewed as **the folly of what we preach**. Here Paul contended that God's sovereign pleasure was to choose something that the wise of this world would consider foolish—a crucified Savior. By ordaining this seemingly foolish means of salvation, God made the world's so-called wisdom to be foolishness. Nevertheless, people are saved through the folly of preaching.

V. There Are Two Kinds of Unbelievers in the World (1:22)

Fifth, there are two kinds of unbelievers in the world.

Paul said in verse 22: **“For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom. . . .”**

Previously I said that there are only two kinds of people in the world: unbelievers and believers. Now, Paul is showing us that there are two kinds of unbelievers in the world: **Jews** and **Greeks**.

Jews, Paul said, **demand signs**. The gospels record that the Jews repeatedly requested signs from Jesus to prove he was from God (Matthew 12:38–39; John 2:18; 6:30). Yet, even the miracles he performed did not satisfy them because he would not perform at their bidding. They reasoned that the true Messiah would provide whatever proof they required. For this reason, many Jews rejected Jesus.

Paul also pointed out that **Greeks seek wisdom**. By and large, the Greeks (many Corinthian believers were Greek) did not demand miracles to corroborate the gospel. Instead, they exalted the standards of their pagan philosophies and poets. Ancient Greece was well known as the seat of many influential philosophers. The Greeks took great pride in their philosophical sophisti-

cation. Many Greeks also rejected the gospel because it did not meet their standards of human wisdom.

VI. Only the Gospel Saves the Two Kinds of Unbelievers in the World (1:23-24)

Sixth, only the gospel saves the two kinds of unbelievers in the world.

Paul said in verses 23-24: “. . . **but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.**”

In contrast to the standards of judgment used by Jews and Greeks, the apostle said he simply preached **Christ crucified**.

Paul constantly used the word *cross* to represent the redemptive work of Christ. He was under direction from God not to reduce the Christian message to something acceptable to Jews or Greeks. In fact, the gospel of the cross was a **stumbling block** to Jewish listeners and **folly** to Gentiles.

The Jews understood the cross of Christ as a demonstration that Christ was cursed of God (see Deuteronomy 21:23), not blessed as they expected the Messiah to be.

Many Gentiles, in turn, could hardly have imagined a more ridiculous religion than one that proclaimed salvation through the death of one man on a Roman cross. A God who could not overcome his human enemies and who died at their hands like a common thief was not a God one should reasonably trust for salvation.

Although most Jews and Gentiles rejected the true gospel because it did not meet their standards of judgment, one group of people joyfully accepted the gospel of the cross: **those who are called** by God to himself by the power of his Spirit. When God's grace touched their lives, their old standards of judgment fell away.

In fact, they discovered that in a stunningly marvelous way the gospel answered both the Jews and the Greeks (also known as the Gentiles). To the Jews who demanded some miraculous sign,

the gospel is **the power of God**. And to the Greeks who sought wisdom, the gospel is **the wisdom of God**.

Thus, only the gospel saves the two kinds of unbelievers in the world.

VII. Human Wisdom Is Outclassed by God's Foolishness (1:25)

And finally, human wisdom is outclassed by God's foolishness.

Paul said in verse 25: **"For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men."**

Paul closed this paragraph by explaining how a person could accept the way of salvation in Christ as wise when most people considered it foolish. Believers have come to recognize something about the gospel of the crucified Christ: it is **wiser than men**. In other words, the message of Christ peers into reality in ways that far exceed any human wisdom.

Moreover, the gospel is also **stronger than men**. People cannot rescue themselves from bondage to sin or its punishment by their own power. Human wisdom is unable to conquer "the wages of sin" (Romans 6:23), that is, death. Even so, the good news of Christ rescues and delivers. It overcomes even death (2 Timothy 1:10). Those who believe the gospel know the reality of its wisdom and power. For this reason, they exalt above all Christ and his saving work.

Conclusion

Several years ago I remember Tim Keller, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan, NY, say that there are three groups of people in the world. He said that there are:

1. Religious people,
2. Irreligious people, and
3. Gospel people.

In a sense, he is saying what I am saying. Or better yet, since I am a mouse and he is a lion, I should say that I am saying what he is saying! (And we are both saying what Paul is saying.) Here is what I mean.

Paul says that there are only two kinds of people in the world:

1. **Those who are perishing** = unbelievers, and
2. **Those who are being saved** = believers.

Believers are those who believe in the word of the cross, that is, the gospel. They believe that they are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

But then Paul goes on to say that there are two kinds of unbelievers in the world:

1. **Jews**, and
2. **Greeks**, who are also known as **Gentiles**.

We could classify the **Jews** as *religious* people. They had the Scriptures, they attended worship, they tried to gain God's favor by obeying the Law, and they wanted signs that proved that Jesus was the Messiah.

We could classify **Greeks** and **Gentiles** as *irreligious* people. They sought wisdom. They did not need religion. They were above it.

As you know, we have all three groups of people today. We have *religious* people. They may be Jews, or Muslims, or Hindus, or, frankly, even Presbyterians! They are seeking heaven by their own efforts and sometimes demand some sign from heaven before they will believe.

We also have *irreligious* people. They may be post-modern, or agnostic, or atheistic. They don't need religion. They are above it.

And then we have *gospel* people. Friends, only gospel people are saved. For only they are saved by the power of God because only they believe in the word of the cross.

And so today I urge you to recognize the folly of human wisdom and to embrace the wisdom of the gospel. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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PRAAYER:

Our Father, you have shown us the folly of human wisdom, which is in stark contrast to the wisdom of the gospel.

We know that there three kinds of people in the world: religious people, irreligious people, and gospel people.

Help us to embrace the word of the cross. Help us to believe in the truth of the gospel. May there be no-one here today who is confused about the message of the cross.

And for this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

CHARGE:

Now, brothers and sisters, go and live as those who embrace the wisdom of the gospel!