

## Wisdom and Power

### *I Corinthians 1:18–2:5*

In the text we will examine this morning, Paul is going to talk about perspective. Webster's defines perspective as "a specific point of view in understanding things or events; the ability to see things in a true relationship."



Different people see the same things differently. For example: what do you see in this picture? Who sees a young, fashionably dressed woman with a feather in her hair? Who sees an old woman with a white scarf on her head?

We are looking at the same picture, but have a different perspective; we see differently, therefore we understand differently.

Or how about this:



What happens if you rotate the picture?



Quite a difference! The thing, the event that Paul is going to address in our text this morning is the cross and its meaning. Turn in your Bible to the book of First Corinthians, chapter one.

Last week, we saw how Paul addressed a major problem in the church at Corinth. It was the problem of disunity. People choosing sides, rallying around personalities, and basically operating like armed camps within the church.

Paul ends his appeal to these believers by saying 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.”

He now goes on to describe the effect of the cross of Christ.

### **I Corinthians 1:18**

There were only two of groups of people in the world in Paul’s day as there is in our day: those who are perishing and those who are being saved. There isn’t any other category when it comes to relationship with God and one’s eternal destiny.

Both verbs are present participles, speaking of a present, on-going state. You are either perishing spiritually/eternally, or you are being saved spiritually/eternally. This is a very stark description of the condition of the human race.

It doesn’t matter how good a person you are, how many good things you have done, what your Sunday habit is, what country you were born in, or what religious affiliation you claim. You are either in the process of perishing or in the process of being saved. It’s as simple as that.

To those who are perishing, the word of the cross, the message of the gospel is folly. But to those who are being saved it is power. The word *power* speaks of the effectiveness of the cross, an effectiveness that accomplishes salvation, making forgiveness and reconciliation possible.

Those who respond to the gospel by faith see the cross as evidence of God’s power. Paul writes in the first chapter of the letter of Romans:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. – *Romans 1:16*

In both these places, the word “power” is *dunamis*. From this Greek word we get our English word *dynamite*. Dr. James Boice writes about this word *dunamis*:

Paul’s statement is not that the gospel is about God’s power or even a channel through which that power operates, but rather that the gospel is *itself* that power.

That is, *the gospel is powerful*; it is the means by which God accomplishes salvation in those who are being saved.

Now look what Paul goes on to say:

### **I Corinthians 1:19-25**

Paul asks about the wise, the scribe, the debater of this age. These would all be seen as experts. They were those who looked for truth through the lens of human wisdom and who disparaged all those who didn't match their expectation, their methods, their conclusions.

Their wisdom was ego-centric. It was the spirit of "self-importance" and "self-glorification," driven by conceit and pride. The Apostle Paul was not anti-intellectual. He didn't dismiss every exercises of reason and rationality. In fact, he will argue throughout his letters that it is the most reasonable and rational thing to believe the truth about Jesus.

The wisdom he speaks against here is a human wisdom, a wisdom that derives alone from reason.

Wisdom and power. The world has always valued wisdom and power. Think of the Queen of Egypt coming to plumb the depths of the wisdom of Solomon. The world understood the doctrine of power expressed through national, military, might – nations like Egypt, Babylon, Rome.

But Paul says that the world cannot know God through human wisdom. In light of that, Paul says that "it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe." This speaks of God's free and sovereign choice. The world believes that people must save themselves.

But God never intended for people to come to him through human reasoning, by exercising human wisdom. This is so unexpected that it can only be called foolishness.

This is where perspective comes in. The Jews see the cross as foolishness because they valued signs – physical proof. This is one reason why the Jews rejected Jesus as the Messiah. They could not understand a suffering Messiah.

David Garland tells of a conversation between Justin Martyr, one of the second century church fathers, and Rabbi Trypho. Martyr was seeking to persuade the rabbi from Daniel, chapter seven, that Jesus was the Messiah. The rabbi responded:

Sir, these and such-like passages of scripture compel us to await One who is great and glorious, and takes the everlasting Kingdom from the Ancient of Days as Son of Man. But this your so-called Christ is without honour and glory, so that He has even fallen into the uttermost curse that is in the Law of God, for he was crucified.

The Jews rejected Jesus because he didn't fit their "view," their "image" of a conquering king. It was a contradiction in their minds for the Messiah to be hanged on a tree.

The Greeks, on the other hand, thought it foolishness to conceive that God would allow his Son to die to save others. It was totally outside their bandwidth of understanding and comprehension. To them, the very thought of a god being crucified was moronic, foolish.

They were absorbed in speculative philosophy. They looked down on those who neither possessed nor honored their brand of wisdom. As a result, their reasoning often progressed to the absurd. Do you remember the incident in Acts, chapter 17, when Paul was in Athens? Luke, the historian, tells the story:

So, Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: "Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, 'To an unknown god.'" – *Acts 17:22-23*

Paul counters with this statement in verse 24: "But to those who are called (that is, those referenced in verse 18: those being saved) it is Christ, the power of God and the wisdom of God.

Paul turns the tables on Jew and Greek alike, as well as speaking to Romans who would have valued power above all: "Do you want to know what power really looks like? Do you want to know what wisdom really looks like? Then consider the cross."

Here's what God did. Through the cross, God transformed weakness into strength and foolishness into wisdom.

The "foolishness" of God's wisdom in the cross is as relevant today as in Paul's day. Human wisdom still stands in the way of believing the gospel, of trusting in Christ and his work on the cross.

Human reason says that all that exists is explained by Darwinian evolution. Only those things which are scientifically, empirically, provable are real.

Human wisdom today says all truth is relative; there are no absolutes. Therefore, no one can say what is right or wrong, true or false, good or evil. What might be wrong for you could be right for me.

God, however defined, wants me to be happy. If I am married and my spouse doesn't meet my needs, fails to live up to my expectations, I am free, with God's blessing, to have an affair with a co-worker who makes me happy. Because, God wants me to be happy.

Acceptable human sexuality is whatever you want it to be – as long as you are loving and caring. The Bible is an old, out-of-date, out-of-touch book and has no relevance today. Who are you to say what is right and what is wrong.

Human wisdom says that you can reason your way to God. After all, every path ultimately leads to God; any road will get you to heaven. Jesus is one of many paths, one of many voices. And maybe not the best one at that!

Let's look on to Paul's argument as he continues:

### **I Corinthians 1:26-31**

God's calling is not patterned after human criteria. We are so caught up in our culture with credentials, resumes, academic degrees, honors and awards. This is not God's criteria for his divine choosing. Turn over a few books to Ephesians, chapter one. Look at the basis of God's calling.

### **Ephesians 1:3-8**

God cannot be put into a box. The Jews valued miraculous signs; the Greeks valued human wisdom; the Romans valued raw power. God chooses often what is low and despised so that no one may boast. This language resonates with that of the prophet Jeremiah.

Thus says the LORD: "Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the LORD." – *Jeremiah 9:23-24*

The cross eliminates any grounds for boasting. The Jews see it as a stumbling block and the Greeks see it as foolishness. So, to believe the gospel, the message of the cross, is to reject human wisdom and power and embrace what God did through Christ – seen as weakness and folly by the world.

You see, here's the problem. The message of the cross necessitates the discussion of sin and judgment and condemnation. If you are to believe the message of the cross, you must admit your sin and the utter impossibility of doing anything to save yourself. It goes against the grain of every human effort and intent. We would rather come to God on our terms than his, our way rather than his. There is something deep within our morally fallen nature that says, "Salvation is of me, my efforts, my work, my choice."

The message of the cross is offensive because it declares human effort null and void. Christianity is very attractive if you just leave out the part about sin and moral failure.

CCC conference: summer after freshman year in university. Beach evangelism – 4 Spiritual Laws – "skipped over Law 2"

Paul declares that to come to God you must come by way of the cross. What the world views as weak and stupid, God displays as strength and wise.

Verse 30 is a call to unity for the believers in Corinth and throughout the world and throughout time:

And because of him (that is, God) you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption.

Paul says, "You want to know what wisdom really is? It is a person – Jesus." The result of believing the message of the cross is that one is in Christ Jesus. This takes us right back to the point of the early verses in the letter – your identity in Christ, position in Christ.

The English text doesn't put in two words from the Greek text which I think are important to us as to impact of our being in Christ. The sentence should probably read:

...you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, that is, righteousness and sanctification and redemption.

These are three very profound theological words. Kenneth Bailey, in his book *Paul Through Mediterranean Eyes*, writes:

Through his grace flowing from the cross, God grants believers the status of acceptance in his presence which is *righteousness*. Through faith and baptism they receive the Spirit that “makes holy” which is *sanctification*, and in the process are rescued from the power of sin through the cross of Christ which is *redemption*. The first word focuses on God, the second on the Holy Spirit and the third on the work of Christ. These three noble words clarify mightily what Paul means when he affirms “Christ Jesus who became wisdom for us from God.”

The flow of this passage goes on into chapter two. Remember, all these divisions of chapters and verses were added hundreds of years later. So let’s continue with Paul’s thoughts here.

### **I Corinthians 2:1-5**

Paul reminds the church of his time in Corinth, the nature of his ministry. It wasn’t flashy, not flamboyant, not worldly, not with the wisdom of the Greeks or the power of the Romans.

The central focus of his ministry was Christ crucified. This doesn’t mean that was all he talked about. Resurrection is also part of the gospel story, an essential part. But Paul saw the importance of proclaiming the crucified Christ. David Garland sees why Paul had to choose this focus:

The cross was repugnant to ancient sensibilities and assailed the world’s self-centeredness and self-destructive ways.

We need to realize that the same is probably true today. Our culture is so fixated on relative truth, on the power of human effort, on the proposition that all paths lead to God. The message of the cross declares all those things as spiritually impotent, and utterly bankrupt as the way to salvation.

Three things to think about as we close:

1) The message of the cross is viewed as weakness and foolishness today just as in Paul’s day. It is rejected because it runs counter to popular thinking and reasoning. It requires an admission of being unable to save yourself, to define the terms of salvation your own way.

2) The message of the cross is still the power of God for salvation. This is the good news we have to declare and to share with others. God has provided the only way of salvation and the pathway goes by way of the cross.

3) By virtue of the shared experience of the cross, we are one in Christ. The disunity experienced in Corinth and in so many churches today betray the oneness God created in the Body of Christ through the cross of Christ.