

Studies in 1 Corinthians

▶ LESSON VI: The Foolishness of God

Text: 1 Corinthians 1:18-30

17. For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. 18 The message of the cross is foolish to those who are headed for destruction! But we who are being saved know it is the very power of God. 19 As the Scriptures say,

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise
and discard the intelligence of the intelligent.”^[a]

20 So where does this leave the philosophers, the scholars, and the world’s brilliant debaters? God has made the wisdom of this world look foolish. 21 Since God in his wisdom saw to it that the world would never know him through human wisdom, he has used our foolish preaching to save those who believe. 22 It is foolish to the Jews, who ask for signs from heaven. And it is foolish to the Greeks, who seek human wisdom. 23 So when we preach that Christ was crucified, the Jews are offended and the Gentiles say it’s all nonsense.

24 But to those called by God to salvation, both Jews and Gentiles,^[b] Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25 This foolish plan of God is wiser than the wisest of human plans, and God’s weakness is stronger than the greatest of human strength.

26 Remember, dear brothers and sisters, that few of you were wise in the world’s eyes or powerful or wealthy^[c] when God called you. 27 Instead, God chose things the world considers foolish in order to shame those who think they are wise. And he chose things that are powerless to shame those who are powerful. 28 God chose things despised by the world,^[d] things counted as nothing at all, and used them to bring to nothing what the world considers important. 29 As a result, no one can ever boast in the presence of God.

30 God has united you with Christ Jesus. For our benefit God made him to be wisdom itself. Christ made us right with God; he made us pure and holy, and he freed us from sin. 31 Therefore, as the Scriptures say, “If you want to boast, boast only about the LORD.”^[e]

Footnotes

a. Isa 29:14. b. Greek *and Greeks*. c. or *high born*. d. or *God chose those who are low born*. e. Jer 9:24.

Questions for Thought & Discussion

1. In the context of this discussion, what do the phrases “foolishness of God” and “wisdom of men” refer to? (See commentary below.)
2. Is Paul extolling anti-intellectualism or stating that the Gospel is beyond the scope of reason? Are philosophy, common sense, and wisdom ruled out entirely? (See Acts 17:7, 18:4, 26:25; 1 Peter 3:15)
3. In verse 17 Paul identifies the power source behind the gospel. What is it? Does the success of the gospel depend on slick preaching, sales techniques, or master debating skills? (see John 12:32)
4. The cross of Christ is the one teaching that sets Christianity apart from every other religion and philosophy. Why does the world consider the message of the cross to be “foolishness” (vs. 18)?
5. The one issue that human philosophy seems to ignore is _ _ _.

Human Wisdom explained

Commentator Albert Barnes writes:

The wisdom here mentioned refers, doubtless, to that which was common among the Greeks, and which was so highly valued. It included the following things:

(1.) Their subtle and learned mode of disputation, or that which was practiced in their schools of philosophy.

(2.) A graceful and winning eloquence; the arts by which they sought to commend their sentiments, and to win others to their opinions. On this also the Greek rhetoricians greatly valued themselves; and this, probably, the false teachers endeavored to imitate.

(3.) That which is elegant and finished in literature, in style and composition. On this the Greeks greatly valued themselves, as the Jews did on miracles and wonders.

Reading

Will Willimon has asked some good questions about this foolishness of the cross. What kind of sense does it make to worship a God who, instead of rescuing us out of trouble, rescues us by entering into the trouble with us? A God who, instead of helping us to avoid pain, heals us from our pain by entering the depths of our pain with us? A God who, instead of fixing things for us, addresses them by becoming weak with us in our weakness?

But this is the foolishness of the cross. All of us know pain and grief and disappointment in our lives. Our human wisdom wants a God who will heal us and make us feel better. The foolishness of the cross is a God who enters into our pain and bears our pain with us. To the part of us that is human and perishing, this is incomprehensible and we want something more. But to the part of us that is being saved, it is the very power of God.

And even more foolishly, this very same God expects us to do the same with each other: to enter into each other's pain, to bear each other's burdens and those of the world around us. To the world, that is an utterly foolish way to live, but to those who embrace the cross, who take up their cross and follow Jesus, and who are ready to lose their lives to save their lives, it is the only way to live. It is the power of God within us.

(“The Foolishness of the Cross,” Sojourners Magazine, August 2007)