

# 1 Corinthians 1:18-31

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- [ 0 : 00 ] We're looking today at 1 Corinthians 1, 18-31. We saw last week in our series on 1 Corinthians, what we saw last week is what I think is the main proposition of the whole letter, there in verse 10.
- Let me turn to it real quick. 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.
- And if that's the main proposition of the whole letter, what we would expect next in terms of typical Greco-Roman rhetoric would be a series of arguments starting with problems or challenges that are preventing Paul's desired outcome.
- And that's actually, I think, what we saw last week, that there is a problem in Corinth, factions surrounding particular teachers. That was one of the problems.
- But we also saw with verse 17, the beginning of a shift. Paul's holding up not himself, but a message, a gospel message.
- [ 1 : 30 ] And it's in contrast to what is literally the wisdom of words. And nothing less than the cross is at stake.
- And so it's from this point that he jumps into our passage and to the next argument, a different kind of factionalism. I think our text divides into two sections.
- The first is verses 18 to 24, and it concerns a contrast of two wisdoms. The second is verses 25 to 31, and it starts to ask questions of what are the implications for us, the church, in this scheme of gods.
- So first, let's look at 18 to 24. You've probably already noticed the word wisdom is there a few times. In fact, in verses 17 to 31, it appears 13 times.
- And in the next chapter, it appears an additional seven times. So it's wisdom, Sophia is clearly Paul's focus here. But it's two kinds of wisdom.
- [ 2 : 41 ] So I want you to see it here. What Paul calls the wisdom of the world there in verse 20, where has God made the foolish the wisdom of the world.
- And that's in contrast to the wisdom of God, which shows up in verses 21 and 24. So what is the wisdom of the world?
- Let's take that first. What is it? Well, it's how we as humans, left to our own devices, imagine knowing God.
- In a sense, it's how we prefer to know God. Do you see it there in verse 21? For since in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom.
- So there's this attempt. Humanity may not have been successful in knowing God through wisdom, but goodness, we're trying.
- [ 3 : 43 ] And Paul actually gets very specific. He identifies two tendencies. The next verse, verse 22. For Jews demand signs, and Greeks seek wisdom.

The Jews historically had challenged Jesus by demanding signs of power. Example, Matthew 12, Matthew 16, John 6. But it wasn't an earnest desire to see the power of Jesus, but it was a way of testing Jesus to see if he lives up to their expectations of what the Christ, the Messiah, should be.

The Greek tendency, on the other hand, was to pursue wisdom. They pursue the divine through wisdom, through philosophy. Divine truth is apprehensible, but it's through reason and intellect.

Now, there's something dangerous about both of these methods, in that they put humanity in the driver's seat. And over time, what happens is the good of humanity becomes the goal.

And so we've arrived at the inescapable truth that I've been neglecting so far, and that is, the wisdom of the world won't get us to God. This is where Paul started back in verse 18.

[ 5 : 04 ] He appeals, you see that, his first support is an appeal to Isaiah 29, 14, to show that it was always God's plan to destroy the wisdom of the wise.

That was never the path to knowing God. Then he moves on, his next support is this invective.

See the rhetorical questions there in verse 20? Where is the philosopher? Where is the scholar? Where is the orator? The answer being, not where you think they are.

And then he follows this with the simple resignation of verse 21. See that there? The world did not know God through wisdom.

God was never going to save his people through the intellectual achievement of man. And here is, at least in terms of Aristotelian drama, here's the great reversal.

[ 6 : 07 ] The wisdom of mankind is folly to God. And the folly of mankind is wisdom to God. It's God's wisdom.

So the other wisdom. I mean, this is the great irony of history is that God chose to save mankind through a sign so profound and so horrifying in its weakness. The cross.

Through the cross, the wisdom of the world, even the philosophy of the great Greeks of old, is ironically destroyed. In the cross, ironically, the Jews have their sign of God's power.

So whether humans rely on philosophies or signs, the cross turns our expectations on its head. The cross is, as verses 18 and 24 put it, the very power of God to save man.

So this brings me to my second point. Really a question. If human achievement is not critical to God's plan, what are we to do?

[ 7 : 08 ] How are we to view ourselves in this scheme of God's based on folly? See, Paul starts the next paragraph with shifting the contrast a bit.

It goes from wisdom and folly to strength and weakness. See verse 25? For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

He turns next, relating human weakness to the church. And I love his tactic here. He's just finished explaining how wisdom and human strength and human achievement will not save them.

And then he gets to verse 26. And the notion here is something like, and it's a good thing too, because most of you were not all that wise, all that intelligent, all that powerful, or all that important.

it's actually a really good thing. God decided not to work through human accomplishment, because you weren't accomplishing much. Y'all weren't going to make it.

[ 8 : 20 ] Rather, God chose to work through what we call weakness. He chose to work through what we call despised. He chose to work through a cross.

He chose to work through weakness for a reason, and it's a simple reason. Righteousness, sanctification, and redemption were won by Christ alone. So that, as verse 29 puts it, no human being might boast in the presence of God.

Paul ends the passage on a similar note in verse 31. Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord. It's a quotation from Jeremiah 9, 24. In fact, Paul's been layering bits of Jeremiah 9 in this passage.

Let him boast in the Lord. Let him boast in this, that he understands and knows the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness on earth. That's from Jeremiah 9. And so, what is the implication for us?

What's it mean? Well, this is us. We so easily get seduced by the secular humanist aspiration.

[ 9 : 36 ] The greatness of humanity is the end, and it will be achieved through human endeavor. It's an attractive philosophy, isn't it? Like Plato, we want philosopher kings.

We elect the smartest, best orators, the most eloquent people. We go to events like this past week and see people like Rosalind Picard and N.T. Wright, some of the brightest minds of a generation.

We put our trust in the Constitution to deliver our society from evil. We pursue science as the final, undeniable authority of truth.

Logic, philosophy, and scientific observation rule the day. It certainly rules in this neighborhood, and it may actually rule some of us. Now, I want to be careful here.

I'm not anti-intellectual, and I don't think Paul is either. I mean, there's actually something really funny here, and that is, despite his note about not preaching with words of elegant wisdom there in verse 17, this passage is at home among the most elegant, sophisticated pieces of rhetoric in the first century.

[ 10 : 51 ] Paul is, Paul is quite elegant here. He's not saying that the pursuit of wisdom is itself evil.

He's saying it's a very short and incredibly dangerous step from being wholly invested in a philosophy to that philosophy will save you.

And taking that next step is precisely the thing that Paul, through Isaiah and Jeremiah, argues against. It's this overestimation of our own abilities. See, the wisdom of the world makes distinctions.

It divides people. It convinces us that we are a little better and should be in a different class than those other people. It causes us to think and possibly even quite nobly to think that we can help that other class of people.

And so we look upon them condescendingly. I do this. I don't, I don't think it's always a healthy thing to be self-disclosing in a sermon, but this particular passage stings me in my core.

[ 12 : 12 ] because I do this unconsciously, subconsciously, sometimes even consciously. I put distance between me and somebody else because of things like intellectual capacity or philosophy or convictions about theology.

I put distance between me and other Christians. And when I do, I am implicitly boasting in myself. And in arrogance, I forget that it's human weakness.

the human folly of a cross that saved me. So may I, may we cling to the crucified and risen Christ.

Let me pray. Heavenly Father, forgive us. Forgive me of overestimating my role in salvation, of denying the power of the cross and using it to separate us from others.

We are grateful to you, O God in heaven, for securing our redemption through that cross. We are grateful to your Son for securing forgiveness. May we ever more humbly submit ourselves to him, being conformed to his image.

[ 13 : 29 ] I pray these things in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.