

Being a disciple who is wise and powerful (part a)

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning, church family. If you can turn your Bibles or devices open to 1 Corinthians 1, and we're picking up from 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. For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.

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?

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.

For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles.

[1 : 0 3] 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.

For consider your calling, brothers. Not many of you were wise according to worldly standards. Not many were powerful. Not many were of noble birth.

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. So that no human being might boast in the presence of God.

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.

[2 : 1 5] Well, looking at you this morning, there's a lot of people here I don't know after six months, which is a lovely thing, but I'm assuming that since you belong to this church, you want it to not only survive, but thrive.

Those are two important words in the life of a church family. And I'm assuming, therefore, on the basis of that, you're not just sitting back on your backside waiting for somebody else to make it survive and thrive, but you see that you've got a really important part to play in that.

So I'm assuming, therefore, that you each want to be useful in growing this church, humanly speaking, into the future. That is, that you each want to make a difference.

That you each want to have a significant impact on the health and unity of this church family. But having said that, perhaps you feel stuck.

You think, well, great intention, but I actually don't think I've got the skills or the ability or the gifts which are required to be really useful in this congregation.

[3 : 46] So yes, I would love to be useful, but I just don't think I can cut it. And so what you find yourself doing is relying on or remaining in the background, convinced that others in the church, those that you might think are upfront people, the go-getter type people, they're the ones that will carry the church into the future.

Back in February, I planned this series of four sermons, plugged in and switched on to Jesus. Because I wanted to conclude formal ministry here at GECN, have encouraged you to understand what a truly helpful disciple looks like on the ground and how you actually get to be a truly helpful disciple and what it looks like in the context of, say, this church family.

I want to encourage you this morning and over the next three weeks, last week and this three more weeks, I want to encourage each of you to be convinced that you will have the most influence in this church family and make the most difference in the lives of those around you here this morning and others who are yet to join the congregation in the future.

As you're not only plugged into Jesus, that is, as you're a believer, but as you're switched on to him in every aspect of life. Picking up from last week, as you be what you are in Christ, that will overflow into expressing Christ in your interactions at a hundred different levels in this church family.

being will lead to doing. You'll be the most, you'll be the wisest, most powerful agent for unity and growth in this church family going forward as a disciple of Jesus, plugged in and switched on.

[5 : 49] That is, switched on to your identity in Christ. I said last week, you have it all, every blessing in Christ. He defines you.

Your security isn't him. Your future isn't him. Your present isn't him. So as you understand that and express that then in an overflow of passion to see others become more like Jesus in this church family, then my friend, you will be incredibly useful, incredibly wise, incredibly powerful in this church family.

And that's something that's open to each one of you if you're plugged into Jesus. So let's jump into the text this morning recapping the problems in the church at Corinth.

Perhaps you weren't here last week, so I'll recap some of it. So the situation in Corinth, young church, many people had become Christians, part of this new gospel community or church family, but their old Christian, their old pre-Christian worldview was dominating and shaping their thinking and actions more so than Jesus.

Again, going back to the heading of this series, they were plugged into Jesus, but not switched on. So worldview is like the lens of my glasses.

[7 : 28] It's the matrix or the lens through which you understand the world. It's a framework of thinking and understanding that shapes how you operate practically in the world.

It determines how you think of people. It determines what you think is important to do. It determines how you evaluate things. It determines what you seek after as the most important.

Well, the Corinthian worldview in Paul's day was driven by an incredible confidence in human thinking and ability to define and create the good life they so much desired.

Corinthian culture promoted personal freedom and happiness. Promoted pleasure. These are the measures of the good life.

I have to stop and say, as I said last week, that sounds so, so familiar to the Australian culture, doesn't it? So if you want to be an authentic person in Australia, well, you pursue freedom, personal freedom, happiness, pleasure.

[8 : 34] And that means, essentially, when you look at it in practical terms, that means each person does what they like in order to be the best possible version of themselves.

And the city of Corinth prided itself on its tolerance and unity in inclusive society, we'd say, in these days. Any viewpoint apparently was accepted equally.

But when you sort of scratch into us a culture like ours, like theirs, as is the case with ours, when you scratch below the surface, it's anything but exclusive inclusive.

In fact, this whole notion of inclusivity actually thinly covers disunity and dislike. And so, what they had in the church at Corinth was competitive individualism.

So, yes, different views, but they weren't harmonious. They were all vying for dominance and preeminence. They were all after status.

[9 : 48] My view is the best view and so, subtly, perhaps, I'm going to diss your view. And the worldview was causing major problems in the church.

Factions dividing over different personalities, different emphases, and competing to make their favored personality dominant while perhaps, as I say, being a bit subtle, but they're passive-aggressively, perhaps, we could say.

As they try to make their favored personality dominant, then they're actually working to undermine others, dismiss others in the church family.

And Paul's antidote, as we saw in the verses 1 to 17 last week, was to remind the believers that in Christ they had a deep unity. Why?

Because they were defined by him. They were blessed equally in him, plugged into Jesus. As I've already said, they had it all and needed to think and act practically in the light of who they were in Jesus.

[11 : 00] And this point was very simple. If they're doing that, then factions, divisions, disunity, and enmity would disappear. How would that work? Well, as they were focused on expressing their indebtedness to Christ, and expressing their being defined by Christ, and their security in Christ, rather than expressing all those things in terms of allegiance to people, then all those things would disappear.

As they focused on making Jesus dominant, and preeminent, then they wouldn't also make individuals within the church family dominant, and preeminent.

In our focus verses today, that was read to us, Paul presents the gospel as a radically new worldview at odds with human ideas of what is wise and powerful, and of who is wise and powerful.

His point is very simple and very blunt, I think. He's really saying to these believers at Corinth, your old pre-Christian worldview is wrong, and has no place in the church.

Why? Because it's actually contrary to the gospel. Your old pre-Christian worldview, your Corinthian culture worldview is not grace-based or Jesus-focused living.

[12 : 41] So, one aspect, and it's just one aspect, behind their competitive individualism and striving for dominant status, was a worldly view of leadership. If you read through the two letters to Corinth, you see that leadership comes up time and time and time again.

A worldly way of ranking usefulness within the church family. That's what was happening in the church at Corinth. They were using a worldly category of what was essential to the health and growth of the church.

And so, a wrong understanding of wisdom and power was destroying the church, diminishing the lordship of Jesus, because it was taking them away from Jesus and putting the focus on individual people.

So, let me give you a little bit of a glimpse into what wisdom in Corinth was deemed to be. In Corinthian culture, wisdom was about self promotion.

The person who was confident and out there, particularly with the ability to win arguments, to out-argue those around you, to impress others with your words and with your demeanor and with your aggressiveness, perhaps, in argument.

[14 : 09] That's wisdom. power was the reward for wisdom. Because as you were dominant by taking others down, then you became powerful and influential.

And so power was actually very transactional. To remain powerful, to get powerful, you actually had to use and at times even abuse other people to gain dominance over them, to gain high status, to gain reputation.

It was a very powerful aspect of Corinthian culture. And boy, oh boy, do we see it in our own Australian culture these days. It drives social media, doesn't it?

But when you look at it, it's pretty ugly. ugly. It's pretty ugly. Transactional and destructive.

Well, verse 18, Paul says, for the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing.

[15 : 23] That word folly there is the word in Greek, moron. the word of the cross is absolutely moronic to those who are perishing.

That's how unbelievers think about the gospel, isn't it? It just makes no sense to unbelievers to talk of Jesus being God's son. And then to add to that that God's son would be crucified as a criminal.

And all of that in order to secure forgiveness and make us people acceptable to God. And then add to that resurrection.

And then add to that modeling yourself on this Jesus who was defeatist and who urged self-sacrifice and generosity towards other people. Putting other people before your own rights.

It was moronic to the unbelieving mind. people will only take advantage of you if you try to be selfless and generous towards others.

[16 : 35] You can't do that. You have to stand up for yourself. Stand up for your own rights. Take people down before they take you down. The gospel is moronic.

Their assessment of the gospel you see was based on their own wisdom. What was that wisdom telling them?

That well I have inherent goodness. And that if I do the right thing with my inherent goodness then I have already what I already deserve and I can earn God's acceptance.

So it's moronic to talk to me about needing to be saved. Needing to be rescued. Because I'm bad. But against that you see believers have come to understand their rebellion, their guilt, their helplessness before God's justice and gladly accept Jesus as God's powerful means of salvation.

And there the second part of that. The word power there is dunamis. That's the word we get dynamite from. So that which unbelievers consider moronic is actually God's dynamite that blasts us free from our sin, clear out of hell into heaven.

[18 : 01] There's no point of overlap between those two worldviews, is there? What unbelievers despise will always be central to believers?

And when God's people are operating practically in line with God's wisdom and power, they will always be totally at odds with the world around them. And don't we feel that particularly in this time in our culture?

Paul illustrates this point with three case studies of disastrous consequences of worldly wisdom and power. Verse 19 refers back to Isaiah chapter 29.

In Isaiah's time, God's people were facing invasion, imminent invasion, by the ruthless Assyrian army, which hitherto had swept all resistance before them, brutally and ruthlessly.

God says to his people, trust me, I will care for you and I'll protect you. God's people, in their own wisdom, decided that that wasn't good enough.

[19 : 18] And so, contrary to God's explicit statement, they went and formed a political military alliance with Egypt. That's where our security and future will be.

Well, you can go and read it for yourself. But essentially, when push comes to shove, the Egyptians did nothing. But God destroyed the Assyrian army miraculously overnight and delivered his people.

Paul's point? Their wisdom, their own wisdom, almost destroyed them. But the Lord graciously and miraculously delivered them as promised.

Verse 22a, that the Jews demand signs. Well, I think, what does that mean?

Well, it's a little bit hard to know. I think this is what it means. The Jews, in their wisdom, were convinced that Messiah, when he would come into the world, would do spectacular things.

[20 : 30] And so, their measure of Jesus' ministry was in terms of show us more spectacular things, because that's what we expect that God would do through his Messiah. Give Israel dominant status among the nations.

But when they confronted Jesus, Jesus, he was not spectacular. And his message appeared to them as one of defeat.

So, in their wisdom, they rejected Jesus and missed out on the salvation that they had waited for for generations. man's wisdom against God's wisdom.

And verse 22b, the Greeks seek wisdom in a similar process. I think that's what Paul's saying here. In a similar process, the Greeks decided, well, the gospel is just weird.

It's certainly not intellectual enough for us Corinthians, who pride ourselves on learning and philosophy. And again, it just doesn't fit with our idea of how God would do things in this world.

[21 : 51] It didn't leave any room for people's own cleverness, for people's own ability to impress God. Paul's point, once again, their so-called wisdom was in danger of making them miss out.

on the very thing they needed. And in verses 21, Paul, I think, saying, look, you guys in Corinth, you've got the same choice to me.

So he says to them, where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe, the great writer? Where is the debater of this age? Again, high status, high dominance in Corinthians society, being able to use your words to achieve great things.

Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it plays God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.

life. Practically, the church in Corinth needed to decide who and what was important in the church.

[23 : 09] Would they do it based on their old pre-Christian ways of thinking? And there's already evidence they were doing that in the church with the factions and divisions. Their old pre-Christian ideas of who was wise and who was powerful.

Or would they frame their thinking and actions in light of God's wisdom and power displayed in Jesus? In 23, 24, and 25, Paul, I think, affirms his choice of God's wisdom and power.

But we, it might just be Paul and his companions or it might be we collectively as believers, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and moronic to Gentiles.

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, if such a thing could even exist, it's a hyperbole, for the foolishness of God is wiser than men.

And again, the hyperbole, the weakness of God is stronger than men. In other words, it's a no-brainer, says Paul. It's a no-brainer.

[24 : 32] Paul's not aiming to make God number one on his agenda. Rather, he recognizes that God is in Jesus, has set him a complete new agenda, a complete new worldview.

Therefore, to change the gospel message, move away from the so-called foolishness of Christ crucified would be to reject God's wisdom, would be to promote competitive individualism, would be to give worldly wisdom dominant status, even though it leads to destruction.

people. And the weird thing is, I was having two conversations this morning before church, two guys at least in this church know what is to be in another church where precisely that has happened.

world. Well, in sharp contrast to the destructive impact of worldly wisdom, Paul describes the Corinthian Christians as a case study in God's wisdom and power.

And this, I'm just going to read it again, it's going to take extra time, but I'm going to read it because it almost speaks for itself. He's just asking them to reflect on this issue of wisdom and power.

[25 : 56] It's almost as if he said, look, just guys, just stop for a minute and look around the church family you're now part of in Corinth and just ask, where's the wisdom and power evident?

For consider your calling, brothers. Not many of you were wise according to worldly standards. Not many were powerful. Not many were of noble birth.

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 or of no consequence, to bring to nothing things that are.

So that no human being might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Jesus Christ, whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness, our sanctification and redemption.

Therefore, as it is written, that the one who boasts, boasts in the Lord. So just look around. Just do a brief survey of the church family around you and you will see that God doesn't pick intellectuals.

[27 : 14] He doesn't pick influential people. He doesn't pick people of status necessarily in our society. He doesn't pick the best educated people. There's nothing about the church family in Corinth, says Paul, that's elite or highbrow or preeminent.

In fact, says Paul, the point of the gospel is that quite unremarkable people are saved and become incredibly remarkable people in Christ.

And that proves that God doesn't care for the values and assessments of this world. The end point of that, here's the really practical term, the end point of that is no believer can big note themselves as a Christian, either because of their personality or because of their understanding or because of their actions.

In fact, says Paul, if you want to brag, and that bragging was one of the baseline features of Corinthian culture, Paul says, well, okay, let's just look at the word bragging.

If you only brag, if you only boast, well, boast about Jesus.

[28 : 43] Because that's the only thing you have to boast about. The only thing you have to boast about or brag about is God's amazing grace in saving you.

Friends, I hope you see Paul's point here. The categories that matter in God's church are not being clever, not being necessarily naturally gifted, not being influential as our society would call influential, not being sophisticated as our society would deem sophistication, but those who happily show God's wisdom and power by reflecting the character and death and resurrection of Jesus.

people. And that, my friends, is every one of you here who is a believer. So putting Paul's argument together, verses 2 to 9, we're not far from being finished.

Jesus defines you as a believer individually and together as a church family. And it's Jesus and the gospel in verses, that's verse 2 to 9, and it's Jesus and the gospel in verses 10 through to 31, that should define their thinking and actions in respect of each other and in respect of the message.

So, circle back around to my introduction. The most important takeaway from these verses, I believe. You will be most useful in this church family.

[30 : 29] You'll be most powerful in this church family. You'll be outstanding in wisdom in this church family as you strive to promote Jesus.

As you strive to be like Jesus before others. That will be wisdom and power that, humanly speaking, will not only help this congregation survive, but will make it thrive.

if you can do that, if you can see those things as the defining categories of everything that happens in this church family, then you have every reason to be confident moving into the future.

Remember, you have everything you need in Jesus to be grace-based and Jesus focused. Making, as I say, your own involvement in this church a model of God's wisdom and power.

And qualifying you, therefore, also, my friend, to challenge others when you see worldly wisdom or worldly means of power creeping into this church family if and when that happens.

[31 : 52] you, individually, each one of you, has a responsibility to make sure the church survives and thrives by being grace-based and Jesus focused.

And the overflow of all that will be the deep unity, verse 10, that we spoke about last week. So, simple, very simple, practical question.

You need to look at your own engagement in this church family and ask, are you predominantly driven by grace-based, Jesus focused categories?

Or are you predominantly driven by human categories of who and what is important in the church? So, let me just tease that out a little bit.

You need to ask yourself, who is it in the church that you value? What is the personality in the church you think, yeah, they're the people I want to be like? Who is it you desire to be around in the church family?

[33 : 01] Yeah, I just need to hang out with this person because he will, his grace-based or her grace-based Jesus focus will just flow over onto me and that's exactly what I need.

Or are you still drawn to the high profile people? The cool people?

Maybe the fashion-savvy people like myself? The nice people like Simon? It's really bad when a pastor holds a grudge, isn't it?

The successful people. The people with formal positions in the church. The people, perhaps, who just talk enough about godliness and use the language of the Bible but don't really actually challenge you to change your views, change your behaviors.

Churches are full of people like that. Are you applying God's wisdom and power to your relationships?

[34 : 14] I talked about that last week, especially broken and strained relationships with your brothers and sisters in this church family. Or as I said last week, are you living happily with spiritual disfigurement because we got spiritual breaks, we got relational breaks?

See, at the heart of the gospel is reconciliation. The reconciliation that God effected between us and him is far, far more costly and profound than anything we will be called to do in reconciling with brothers and sisters that we fall out with.

It's the model of carrying offense at a personal level rather than demanding rights.

That's God's wisdom and power. It's forgiving when the person who's offended you isn't necessarily truly repentant.

That's God's wisdom and power. It's a challenge to us. We need to address hurts and differences on the basis of God's wisdom and power.

[35 : 39] Reminding yourself as you engage at that level that you have so much in common in Christ. You actually have the platform from which you can resolve those issues.

Last Sunday, as I wound up, I asked, based on verse 10, about the idea of knitting together, I asked each of you to be knitters. Yep, and that included the blokes. You need to take the lead in this church family in being knitters.

Well, today I'm asking you to be braggers, boasters. Make it your goal to be known in this church as someone who just boasts incessantly.

not about your own abilities, not about your clever use of words, not about your grievances with others and how I gave them a bit of a rev up and I took them down and I sorted them out and they'll never speak to me like that again.

But boasting about being shaped and blessed in Christ together with every other believer in this church family. Would that we were a congregation of boasters in that context.

[37 : 01] Well, pray with me, please. Lord, we just get it so wrong.

We know what's right, we want what's right, but we get it so wrong. We just default back and under pressure, we default back into that old pre- Christian way of thinking and evaluating and acting.

Help us to be grace-based and Jesus-focused. Help us to be those who boast in nothing other than our identity in Christ, our security in Christ, and our unity in Christ.

in Jesus' name we pray. Amen.