

1 Cor 1:18-25

This passage is an elaboration and explanation of the contrast Paul introduced in v. 17 between the Gospel and “words of human wisdom.” Paul rejected human wisdom so that the cross would not be emptied. For Paul, it is either the cross of Christ or human wisdom, and that is the contrast he emphasized throughout this passage. The cross destroys the need to rely on false human wisdom, because it is the power and wisdom of God. Paul was not arguing against wisdom per se, but against false human wisdom which was subjectively conceived by its own standards, and without reference to the objectivity of God and His standards. Such human wisdom was prideful in its own ability and therefore, was a hindrance to receiving true wisdom and salvation from God.

I. The message of the cross is purposely opposed to human standards (18-21)

A. The message of the cross is received differently by different groups (18)

1. Neg: For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing (18a)

Paul literally used the phrase “the word of the cross” to contrast with the phrase “wisdom of word” which he had just used in v. 17. This emphasized the mutually exclusive options of trusting in human wisdom and accomplishment, or trusting in the cross of Christ. And the cross is the dividing line.

The cross is foolish to those who are perishing. The philosophers at Athens (see Acts 17:16-34) and Festus at Paul’s trial (see Acts 25:23-26:32) called Paul foolish because they did not understand or believe what he was talking about. But that demonstrated more about their own ignorance and pride than it did about Paul and his message.

2. Pos: But to us, to those being saved, it is the power of God (18b)

The cross is the power of God, but it does not seem powerful to sinful humans at first glance. We need new eyes as part of the new birth for us to truly see how wonderful the cross really is. What the unbelieving world thinks is wise is really foolish. And what the world thinks is foolish is really wise.

This inversion of conclusions happens because of the inversion of the foundational standards on which we make these conclusions. You may have noticed that many times, different people see exactly the same thing, or hear about the exact same event, and come to completely different conclusions. And this usually shows that the way they thought about this event was colored by their worldview – by their underlying standard with which they understand and judge everything. Everyone does this to some extent. Everyone has mental goggles through which we see the world. And we all have a standard by which we measure what is right and what is wrong. The real issue is having the right foundational standard. We need to have the correct worldview glasses that let us see the world clearly, and not distorted in some way.

At the heart of the issue for Paul is whose standards are used to determine if something is wise and strong or not? Whose definition of wisdom should be used? The Corinthian definition, which comes from their pagan background? Or God’s definition, shown in the crucified Messiah?

This passage is somewhat negative to make a positive point – Their standard and evaluation is wrong! And therefore, here is the true standard and evaluation. The message of the cross is received differently by different groups, and one group is wrong! Because their standard is wrong! Because it is built only upon subjective human wisdom, and not on God’s wisdom shown in the cross.

B. God purposely made the standard for salvation opposed to human standards (19-21)

This differing reception (v. 18) is part of God’s plan. God purposed to highlight the massive difference in standards of evaluation. He designed to show that mere human wisdom is not the same as God’s wisdom. His purpose was to confront merely human wisdom as inadequate. God invalidated human merit and standing as the reason for salvation, and even as the requirement for understanding salvation. God judges human wisdom. Human wisdom does not judge God.

1. God promised to invalidate human wisdom and intelligence for salvation (19)

a For, it is written: (19a)

This is a standard formula introducing the following quote from Isa. 29:14.

b God promised to invalidate human wisdom and intelligence (19b-c)

1) I will destroy the wisdom of the wise (19b)

2) And I will invalidate the intelligence of the intelligent (19c)

These two propositions are in parallel, and basically restate the same overall truth using two similar assertions. God promised that He would bring human intelligence and wisdom to nothing. This raises the question “Why would God do this?” Aren’t wisdom and understanding desirable and good? And why did Paul quote this verse here in Corinthians? The issue being addressed is, what *kind* of wisdom and understanding is being talked about? Is it the kind of wisdom and knowledge that pridefully elevates human achievement without God? Or the kind of wisdom and knowledge that depends on God and submits to God? Can we even have true knowledge and wisdom independent from God? Or are we dependent on God for true wisdom and knowledge?

Remember, back in Genesis ch. 3 that the original temptation included the promise that we could gain wisdom and be like God – knowing and determining good and evil for ourselves, independent of God. And that is the same lie that God was confronting in the Isaiah quote, and which Paul was confronting in Corinth. Do we think we are smarter than God? We are the ones that need to be saved! Therefore, we are not the ones smart enough to save ourselves, and especially not smart enough to determine the best way for us to be saved.

2. And by the cross, God has actually invalidated human wisdom (20-21)

The implication in these verses, that Paul drew from his previous statements, is that mere human wisdom is not viable, it is insufficient. And this is on purpose.

a People of human standing are not important by God’s standards (20a-c)

Paul used a series of rhetorical questions to show that these people are insignificant compared to the cross

a) Where is the wise man? (20a)

This means that the wise man is nothing compared to the wisdom of the cross. I’m reminded of the old detergent commercial, where the shirt looks white and clean until it is compared with the other shirt that really is bright white. And then the first shirt looks dingy grey by comparison. The wise man certainly can be much wiser than other men. But he is nothing compared to God’s wisdom.

b) Where is the scholar? (20b)

The scribe, the learned man, the legal expert, is not significant compared to the wisdom of the cross. The “wise man” (20a) was the trusted expert in gentile society. And the “scribe” was the trusted expert in Jewish society. Paul was covering both backgrounds. And the third term (20c) is an overarching term that applies to both.

c) Where is the debater of this world? (20c)

The professional communicator, the talking head of this age is not significant compared with the truth of the cross.

The phrase “of this age” (20c) probably goes with all three questions (20a-c), and this is the main point. These people and their approach to life comes from this age, from a merely human mentality that will always fall short of God’s wisdom, power, and plan, which encompasses all of eternity.

“Thus Paul is asking rhetorically, ‘in view of what God *has done* in the cross, what is left of the wise of this present age? Where now are all the teachers of wisdom, both Jew and Greek; has not God by this deed not only rendered the wise as foolish but also nullified their very wisdom itself?’” Gordon Fee, The New International Commentary on the New Testament – The First Epistle to the Corinthians, p. 70, emphasis original.

b) God has purposely excluded human wisdom as the basis of salvation (20d-21)

Then Paul gave the general principle behind his previous questions via another rhetorical question. And then he explained the purpose behind this principle.

1) Hasn’t God shown the wisdom of the world to be foolish? (20d)

Wisdom “of this world,” like the wise men “of this age” (20c) are both connected to what is merely human and finite. And so, they fall dramatically short and are inadequate for salvation. The wisdom of this world is not as significant as they thought. Rather, it is foolish, especially when compared to God’s wisdom.

“God fixed values without regard for human assessment and according to His own good-pleasure. Thus the wisdom of this world is folly before Him.” Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Vol. IV, p. 846

2) God purposed to reveal salvation in a way that excludes human merit & standing (21)

In this verse, Paul explained the reasoning and purpose behind this principle and God’s action in salvation. God purposely made salvation in a way that excludes human wisdom, merit, and standing.

a) Neg: For, because in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom (21a)

God’s wisdom is to *not* reveal Himself through human wisdom (or else we would rely on human wisdom, and not on Him). Paul assumed as a given fact that the world does not and cannot know God on its own, by its own wisdom. And in historical fact, the world gets farther away from knowledge of God as the superstition of its own “wisdom” tends to obscure this knowledge rather than revealing it. We need God’s revelation in order to truly know Him. And this happened, as Paul said, in the wisdom of God. “[in the wisdom of God] does not modify ‘the world did not know,’ but an understood ‘God so arranged things in his own wisdom that the world did not know’” Fee, p. 73. It was God’s wise choice to exclude human achievement and standing from our salvation. This was to protect us from pride and idolatry. No one is able to say “I found God by my own wisdom” or “I earned my way with God” or “I am more qualified to be saved than the next guy.” God is passionate that part of the Gospel is humbling of human pride and pretense, so that we no longer can put our hope and trust in ourselves, or in any human things (including human leaders). And God is loving to destroy this false wisdom that will keep us from Him, and from His true salvation and true wisdom. So, we can only trust in God and His provision in the cross and resurrection of Christ. He loves us too much to let us settle for a counterfeit. Salvation is not just for the elite who can figure it out and understand God by their accomplishment of wisdom.

b) Pos: God was pleased to save those who believe through the foolishness of what is proclaimed (21b)

This is God's good pleasure, to reveal salvation in a way that excludes human boasting. The true way of salvation is something totally unexpected and outside our ability to attain on our own. None of us would have thought up the cross on our own, not in a million years. But that is what God did. And that is what the Scripture and the church (to the extent that it is faithful) proclaim. And that is how people are saved – the only way people can be saved. It is by Christ's accomplishment, not ours. And it is simply through our hearing and trusting in what Christ has done.

It is not those who are wise enough, or strong enough, or virtuous enough, or socially connected enough, who are saved. It is those who believe the message of the crucified Messiah. And this message has proved more powerful and life-changing than anything humans have ever dreamed up, by far. No social, educational, or political idea or program has done even the smallest fraction of good for human thriving as the preaching of Christ crucified has done over the centuries.

God's wise purpose was to show that human wisdom is inadequate compared with God's way of salvation. It is inadequate even to evaluate God's way of salvation. And therefore, the Gospel divides all humanity into two and only two categories: Those who are perishing because they think the cross is foolish, and those who are being saved because they believe the Gospel.

II. God's way of salvation is contrary to human standards (22-25)

In these verses, Paul summarized the implications of what he had just written. Because the message of the cross is purposely contrary to human standards.

A. Neg: Humans value those outwardly impressive by human standards (22)

Humans value those things and people that are outwardly impressive by our skewed standards. An important life lesson for Christian maturity is to learn to discern what is real – to find out what is true among all the noise of mere opinion, to recognize what is reality and not just appearance and image and propaganda. Often what someone puts forward as truth and reality is not genuine. Sometimes we have to dig deeper to discern what is really the case. Human wisdom often gets it wrong in mundane things, and human wisdom always gets it wrong on salvation. And even worse, we become prideful in our own wisdom and accomplishments and ignore God. Unless we conform our entire mindset to God's revelation, we will be wrong! Paul gave two examples of this:

1. Because both Jews ask for signs (22a)

Jews desire to somehow tap into God's power for their own benefit. Back in the Gospels, the Jewish leaders asked Jesus for a sign, even though He had already been doing many signs. They demanded signs on their own terms, when they demanded it, and by their standards, so that they could stand in judgment of Jesus. But Jesus refused and rebuked them. Because God refuses to dance whenever we snap our fingers. God refuses to be a genie or a vending machine. God refuses to do things just to impress people and live up to our standards of what is impressive. God refuses to be manipulated and controlled by people. God refuses to even give the impression that He could be manipulated or controlled. We are not His boss. He is our Lord. God gently, but clearly shows that He is God, that He is in complete control, and that we are not. God is the authority standing in judgment over us, not vice-versa.

2. And Greeks seek wisdom (22b)

Greeks desire to somehow tap into special knowledge for their own benefit. This wisdom that the Greeks sought, was an explanation of the world in order to successfully navigate life in conformity with that understanding. They thought that they had to figure everything out in order to bring order to the world. Their attitude was similar to the modern attitude of “if we just had enough science and technology, we could create a perfect society.” But God refuses to conform to our latest principles of success. God refuses to go on the talk shows and explain Himself to our satisfaction. God refuses to be relevant by our standard of relevance. Instead, He gently, but firmly, shows that He is smarter than we are. He knows what He is doing, and He is not accountable to us to explain Himself.

In other words, Paul has described humanity’s two basic idolatries – power and knowledge. And we typically seek both in order to exercise control for selfish use. But God rejects all forms of human pride and makes salvation out of reach of our attainment. So, He frees us from such selfish idolatry. He will not do it that way.

B. Pos: God values the truth, wisdom and power of His way of the cross (23-25)

1. But we proclaim Christ having been crucified (23a)

And so, Paul said that faithful Christians do it completely opposite from the world’s way. We minister God’s way. We proclaim Christ crucified. Christ crucified is infinitely more important than human works or wisdom, which accomplish nothing.

And Paul proclaimed Christ crucified, even when it was not popular, and even when it was not well-received. What else could he do? What else could he possibly preach that would have been more helpful, more powerful? It may have been very popular or outwardly successful if Paul would have preached moralism or self-help philosophy or various human methods of wisdom and success. It certainly would have gotten him beat up a lot less. But Paul cared for people so much that he would not give them medicine which does not heal. And so, he proclaimed the crucified Messiah, Who is our only true hope.

2. This is opposed to human standards (23b-25)

Paul explained why He proclaimed Christ crucified, first by acknowledging some mistaken views about Christ crucified, and then stating the correct view.

a Neg: This is offensive to human standards (23b-c)

These are the mistaken views about Christ crucified.

1) This is a scandal to Jews (23b)

The word “scandal” means something so offensive that we viscerally react against it and strongly oppose it.

We need to understand how Jewish people came to this conclusion. For a Jew of that time, a crucified Messiah was an oxymoron – like a victorious loser. All Jews knew that Messiah is a conqueror, not a victim. They could not connect the idea of a conquering King like David with Isaiah’s suffering servant. How could they believe in a God who loses? They were scandalized because they did not see the entire picture. He was a conquering Messiah *by* suffering.

2) And it is foolishness to the Gentiles (23c)

It is folly, it is insanity, according to this way of thinking. Again, we can understand how they came to this conclusion. Because kings are powerful and heroic and proud, and demand that others serve them. Kings and gods don't lose and give themselves and serve others and die for them. We often forget that the cross is a symbol of a shameful execution. To be crucified was the ultimate failure and disgrace, never discussed in polite company. But now, we glory in the cross and use it as the Christian symbol, because we now see the entire story. What seemed foolish and bad was actually part of God's good wise plan all along.

b Pos: God's power is greater than human standards (24-25)

This is the correct view about Christ crucified and an explanation why it is correct.

1) But to those that are called, both Jews and Greeks, it is Christ, the power of God and the wisdom of God (24)

Those who are called (both Jews and Gentiles) recognize the cross as the power and wisdom of God. Even though we don't fully understand, and it goes against many of our expectations. It doesn't make sense from a worldly perspective, but from God's perspective, it is perfect, because it puts Him at the center, and displays His true power and genuine wisdom as infinitely greater than ours. For those who are called, the proclamation of the cross shows itself to be greater than any human standard and achievement and hope.

And ethnic background doesn't matter at all. What matters is the call of God in the message of the cross. The cross divides humanity into the only division that should matter to us – those who are perishing and those who are being saved (v. 18) – those who reject the cross as foolishness and those who see the cross as God's wisdom and power. And this is humbling. We could easily get behind a powerful king who is fighting our enemies. But the cross challenges us that we are our primary enemies, and we need to die to ourselves, to our own plans and strategies and self-sufficiency. God's power and wisdom defeats all our enemies, but this includes our own sin and pride.

2) Because God's ways are better than human standards (25)

a) Because the foolishness of God is wiser than that [wisdom] of humans (25a)

When Paul wrote "God's foolishness," he meant air-quote "foolishness" – foolish from a human perspective, but in reality, it is wisdom higher than anything humans could even comprehend. There is profound wisdom in the cross. It is a "foolishness" so wise that it reconciles us to God and renews the entire universe. That is some mighty wise foolishness. And it will take us all eternity to begin to comprehend the depth of God's wisdom, even though it seems foolish to worldly people now.

b) And the weakness of God is stronger than that [strength] of humans (25b)

In the same way, this is air-quote weakness, "weak" from a human perspective. But in reality, it is infinite, divine strength and power beyond our comprehension. There is profound strength hidden in the weakness of the dying Messiah on the cross. It accomplishes eternal salvation by dying in weakness. It is weakness so strong that it brings eternal life from eternal death. That is some mighty strong weakness. And it will take us all eternity to begin to comprehend God's power shown in the cross.

Application:

If the cross is God's wisdom and power (which it is), and if human wisdom and insight is weakness and folly by comparison (which it is), then those who think the cross is foolishness, they are the ones who are fools. And if we think it is weak, then we are the ones who are really weak. If we reject it as insufficient and look for something better in human wisdom and strength and technique, then we just don't get the cross of Christ to the extent that we should.

Imagine someone claiming to be a great composer when Beethoven was in the room, or claiming to be a great golfer when Tiger Woods was standing there. That person would prove themselves to be a boastful fool. How much more should we not rely on our own standards of wisdom and power to stand in judgment of God's wisdom and power in the manner that He chose to save us, by a crucified Messiah!

So, we need to ask how this is reflected in our lives and ministries. Are we trying to work to save ourselves and others based on our own skill, experience, insight, or talent? Or are we fleeing to Christ and His cross and leading others to do likewise? Are we trying to win the world using the latest techniques and fads, or are we proclaiming the cross? Do we point to ourselves, or our leaders? To our methods or to our hipness and niceness? Or do we glory in Christ crucified and God's power and wisdom inherent in the cross? Can we truly say with Paul – "I am not ashamed of the Gospel, for it is the power of God for the salvation of all who believe" (Rom. 1:16)? Do we trust God's wisdom and power in the cross, or do we try to supplement it with our own wisdom and power? Do we act like we are smarter than God? Don't be a fool! Reject relying on mere human wisdom, so that you don't empty the cross.