

| 1 Corinthians |
Week 3 Scripture Guide | 1 Corinthians 1:18-31

Biblical Context

Paul's preaching in Corinth focused on the central message of Christ crucified. The Corinthians, however, were more fascinated with rhetorical ability and words of wisdom than with the simple message of the gospel. The message of the cross goes against all purely rational thought, and those with worldly wisdom as their aim miss it.¹ In 1 Cor 1:18, Paul contrasts the "word of the cross" with the preceding "words of eloquent wisdom" (1:17). To those who are in futile pursuit of the world's wisdom and are perishing (ἀπόλλυμι, *apollumi*) apart from God, the "word of the cross" is folly; yet to those being saved, the cross is the power of God to save. At its core, the message of the cross is both powerfully simple and simply powerful; so much so that it does not require eloquent words or persuasive speech to proclaim this truth, as that would detract from its power (1:17).

In 1 Cor 1:19, Paul quotes Isaiah, "I will destroy (*apollumi*) the wisdom of the wise..." (Isa 29:14).² The unquoted part of the verse reads, "Therefore, behold, I will again do wonderful things with this people, with wonder upon wonder" (Isa 29:14).³ Paul's use is effectively stating that God has made good on his promise—he has destroyed the wisdom of the wise through the wonderful work on the cross.⁴ The Corinthians who still value "the wisdom of the wise" have failed to notice God's judgment on this worldly wisdom through the crucified Christ. Their "fascination with the rhetorical ability of the ministers rather than their message demonstrated that they were living contrary to the power of the cross."⁵ The world cannot know God through wisdom, but rather through "the folly of preaching" the gospel (1 Cor 1:21).

The cultural expectations and desires of both Jews and Gentiles missed the mark. "For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block (σκάνδαλον, *scandalon*) to Jews and folly (μωρία, *moria*) to Gentiles" (1 Cor 1:22-23).⁶ To the Jews, the Messiah "meant power, splendor, triumph; crucifixion meant weakness, humiliation, defeat."⁷ They had a triumphant Messianic expectation, not knowing that it was necessary for Christ first to die (cf. Acts 17:3). A crucified Messiah was scandalous to an unbelieving Jew because a man who hanged on a tree (i.e. the cross) was viewed as cursed by God.⁸ Yet, the power of God was to make Christ a curse on our behalf, to make atonement for our sins through his sacrifice.

Conversely, the Gentiles, who seek after wisdom found the cross of Christ to be folly. This culture used crucifixion as "the ultimate penalty, reserved mainly for rebellious subjects of various kinds (insurrectionists and the like) and slaves."⁹ Corinth, and Roman culture in general, worshipped *many* gods, including the god of

¹ Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, "1 Corinthians," in *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, UK: Baker Academic; Apollos, 2007), 698.

² Paul is quoting from the Septuagint (aka, LXX; the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures).

³ New Testament writers will often quote passages from the Hebrew Scriptures. The portion that is a direct quotation is often presented with the weight of its original context. For instance, the preceding verse, Isa 29:13 reads, "Because this people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me." Paul may be drawing a correlation between religious "lip service" with an uncommitted heart and the Corinthian church pursuing wisdom as opposed to the simple message of the cross.

⁴ Adding to the verse, Paul asks, "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?" In this verse, "Wise" (σοφός, *sophos*) = Greek thinker/philosopher; "Scribe" (γραμματεὺς, *grammateus*) = teachers of the Mosaic law (in biblical context); "Debater" (συζητητής, *szetetes*) = a more general term related to ζητέω (*zeteo*, "to seek"). Paul is addressing a culturally mixed group and is leaving no one behind. Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, ed. Ned B. Stonehouse et al., Revised Edition., The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 74.

⁵ Crossway Bibles, *The ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 2193.

⁶ The word "stumbling block" is the Greek word σκάνδαλον (*scandalon*), from which we get the English word, "scandal." Likewise, the word "folly" is the Greek word μωρία (*moria*) from the root word μωρος (*moros*) from which we get the English word, "moron." The simple message of Christ crucified was *scandalous* to the Jews and *moronic* to the Gentiles.

⁷ Fee, 78-79.

⁸ Galatians 3:13 quotes Deuteronomy 21:23, "his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God. You shall not defile your land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance." Though the Jews did not crucify anyone in Roman times, "they did afterward hang those who had been stoned, especially blasphemers and idolaters." Fee, 79. Jacob Neusner, *The Mishnah : A New Translation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), 595.

⁹ Fee, 79.

Reason.¹⁰ They believed that the gods “operated above the limitations of people and would not have allowed themselves to be treated as Jesus was.”¹¹ This Jesus, who is claimed to be God, allowed himself to be crucified. To the Gentiles, this either makes him a foolish god, or no god at all. Yet, the wisdom of God was for Christ to come in the likeness of flesh and die the death that we deserved (Rom 8:3). Whether Jew or Gentile, the cross defies the logic of the culture. Human wisdom cannot make sense of this. Yet, to those who are being saved, Christ is the *power* of God and the *wisdom* of God.

Paul is not writing to those who are perishing, but to those who are “being saved” (1 Cor 1:18)—those who are both called (1:24) and believe (1:21).¹² Paul reminds them that their very existence as the church in Corinth validates the message of the cross, and that this was not earned by their wisdom, power, or position (1 Cor 1:26).¹³ The irony is that these are the standards by which the Corinthians seem to be judging Paul. Rather, God chose that which is considered “foolish” to shame the wisdom of the world.¹⁴ He chose the weak to shame the powerful, and the insignificant, lowly, and despised “nothings” to shame the “somethings.”¹⁵

Connect to our Context

Paul addresses the various cultures represented in the Corinthian church. Time and again, he points out how the cultural condition and expectations are not adequate to lead someone to God. In contrast to the surrounding culture, the gospel—Christ crucified—flew in the face of all logic and expectation. Our surrounding culture attempts to answer the deep questions of life—origins, suffering, and expectation of something better. Our culture values status, fame, success, ability, income, etc., as things that indicate identity and security. Pick the culture, pick the religion; their best answer (i.e., the wisdom of the world) pales in comparison to the power of God and the wisdom of God in Christ’s redemptive work on the cross.

To the dying world around us, the concept of sin, the need for a Savior, and Christ’s death on the cross is absurd. But to those who are being saved, the cross is the power and wisdom of God—sinners redeemed. Like the Corinthians, many of us have certain expectations or desires. Thus, we are presented with a conundrum: “trust God and be saved by his wise folly, or keep up our pretensions and perish.”¹⁶ Just how the existence of the first century Corinthian church was evidence of the validity of the gospel, so the existence of the twenty-first century church is evidence that God is still calling a people to himself, saving those who believe in Jesus.

Principle and Application

Neither the wisdom nor power of the world can accomplish what the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus has done for humanity. God presented the ultimate foil for the best the world has to offer—both then and now—Christ crucified (1 Cor 1:23). God chose not the “wise,” but the “foolish things of the world”; not the “influential,” but the “weak things of the world”; not the “well born,” but the “lowly things of the world” (1:27-28). God is not moved to save us based on what we bring to the table. In our wisdom, we are foolish. In our power, we are weak. In our position, we are nobody. Our boast is not in our wisdom, power, or position. Our boast is in Christ alone—the *power* of God and the *wisdom* of God. It is around this gospel we unite.

¹⁰ The Greek advances in learning “caused many to abandon the traditional gods and turn to sophia, or philosophia.” Fee, 78.

¹¹ John D. Barry et al., Faithlife Study Bible (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012, 2016), 1 Co 1:18.

¹² In 1:24, Paul harkens back to his introduction, identifying himself as “called by the will of God” and the church as “called to be saints.”

¹³ In most Greco-Roman religions in the first century, only wealthy people of noble birth were called for salvation. Barry, 1 Co 1:26. Also, remember that Corinth was likely repopulated by freedmen from Rome whose status would have been just over that of a slave.

¹⁴ “Professional rhetoricians (sophists) of the first century mocked those of low status, considering them foolish and weak because they had not succeeded in gaining wealth and power. Paul argues against this view, suggesting that those who consider themselves better than people of low social standing are unwise and will be subject to public humiliation.” Barry, 1 Co 1:27.

¹⁵ Nothings (τα μη οντα, *ta may onta*, “the not things”), Somethings (τα οντα, *ta onta*, “the things”).

¹⁶ Fee, 81.