

Session 1

FINDING OUR WAY

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

Memory Verse

For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but it is the power of God to us who are being saved.

– 1 CORINTHIANS 1:18, CSB



Finding Our Way

THEOLOGICAL THEME: The wisdom of God manifested in Jesus Christ infinitely surpasses human wisdom.

Before his death in 2013, Dallas Willard was a well-known philosopher and writer in the area of Christian formation and spirituality. The description that remained on his website after his death read: “Dallas Willard spent his life making eternal living concrete for his friends. He encouraged us to use our own lives to demonstrate Jesus’s message. We must be transformed people living out a life reflective of Jesus himself, a life of love, humility, and gentleness. He leaves behind a legacy as friend, philosopher and reformer of the church.”¹ Many who become acquainted with Willard through his writings are surprised to find out that he taught philosophy at the University of Southern California. This man, who surprised those he met with his meekness and humility, did not seem to fit the expected depiction of a philosophy professor. He was quiet, but the words he spoke carried incredible weight because of their wisdom. Still, his conservative persona just didn’t seem to fit the Southern California context in which he carried out the bulk of his ministry.

In a video that was recorded as part of his Hearing God conference, Willard humorously acknowledged his dissonance with the culture at USC. He mused that he was asked frequently by students why he followed Jesus. His equally humorous, but poignant answer was, “Well...who did you have in mind?”² The implication of his answer with its accompanying tone was the reality that there is no rival or comparison. Still, this question illustrated much of what Paul dealt with in writing to the Corinthians. There was great disparity between the culture’s view of Christ as Savior and the believers’ view of Christ as Savior. Because Willard knew Christ intimately, the idea of following anyone else was nothing short of foolishness.

? How would you answer the students' question from above—Why do you follow Jesus?

? Describe a time when you felt conspicuously out of place as a believer. How did you handle that feeling of alienation? What cultural clues signified how your faith made you different?

In this week's session, Paul wrote to the church in Corinth to confront and correct their fascinations with the various schools of worldly philosophy and wisdom. The various pathways to wisdom were all counterfeits compared to the surpassing greatness of God's wisdom. However, because God's wisdom was such a stark departure from the self-centeredness of worldly wisdom, the "wise" could not perceive it.

1. The Wise Perspective (1 Corinthians 1:18-20)

It would be difficult to identify a group toward whom Paul was more direct and confrontational than the Corinthians. One of the major sources of contention between Paul and the Corinthian church was the dangerous emphasis and importance the Corinthians placed on entertaining philosophical orators. The danger of such an emphasis was highlighted by Paul earlier in his letter when he spoke of the Corinthians aligning themselves according to their favorite preacher in 1 Cor. 1:11-13, creating rivalries among themselves.

The background of this fascination was the thriving business of sophistry, which was practiced by traveling philosophers. Not only would these men make a substantial living traveling from city to city lecturing about whichever new philosophy they championed, they would speak of it in such ornate, emotional, theatrical ways that the crowds were excited as much by their delivery as by their content. This was all done in the name of gaining wisdom. So when Paul arrived in Corinth to preach in person, the man of such

bold letters was found to be subpar in his speech by the Corinthians' estimation. How could this man be the bearer of true wisdom with such average speaking skills? This was the background behind Paul's explanation in 1 Cor. 1:17, that he was sent by God to "preach the Gospel – not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ will not be emptied of its effect."

Thus, the topic of true wisdom versus worldly wisdom was brought into Paul's rhetorical address. In pointing the Corinthians to the source of true wisdom, Paul emphasized repeatedly the power of God through the weakness of the gospel. That is certainly not to say that the gospel is weak; but that the physical weakness put on display in the atoning work of Christ displayed the wisdom of God in a way that the world could not understand. This was the reason for Paul saying, "the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but it is the power of God to us who are being saved." Those who are perishing were those that did not know Christ as Savior and, as a result, had no ability to grasp the depths of God's atonement. In verse 19 Paul quoted Isaiah 29:14, as though to underscore the prophetic fulfillment of the "wise" not understanding the wisdom of God.



What is the most moving speech you can remember hearing? Do you remember more about the content of the speech or the emotion of its delivery? What was the context?



What sources of "wisdom" would you identify in our culture today? How much do you know about each of those schools of thought? How comfortable are you in distinguishing the faulty points of those belief systems in comparison with the gospel of Jesus Christ?

Verses 19-20 work in tandem to point out the eternal knowledge of God regarding this confusion of what true wisdom is. According to Gordon Fee, the rapid-fire list of rhetorical challenges from Paul “would be reflecting the sarcasm of a passage like Isaiah 19:12, in which the prophet asks in light of what God was about to do, ‘Where now are your wise men?’ Thus, Paul is asking rhetorically, ‘In light of what God has done in the cross, what is left of the wise of this present age...has not God by this deed not only rendered the wise as foolish but also nullified their very wisdom itself?’”³

2. Saved through Belief (1 Corinthians 1:21-23)

Noted scholar John R. W. Stott characterized verse 21 by saying, “it rests on the fundamental fact that human beings cannot reach God by themselves. On the one hand, God is infinite, whereas we are finite. On the other hand, God is holy, whereas we are sinners. In consequence, we are doubly cut off from God. So God has taken the initiative to do what we cannot do, namely, to bridge the gulf between us.”⁴ The world’s wisdom, which was so popular in Corinth, could not point to someone to God. The “wisdom” spouted by sophists was valued by the world while the preaching of the gospel was regarded as foolishness.

In verse 22, Paul got to the heart of the delusion of the populace by breaking them into three groups: Jews, Greeks, and Christians. Why these three groups? Because each group carried a distinct expectation in hearing the gospel. Jews demanded signs, Stott notes. “They were expecting a political Messiah who would drive Roman legions into the Mediterranean Sea and reestablish the lost national sovereignty of Israel.”⁵ Stott further explains that the Greeks sought wisdom, with a “long tradition in of brilliant philosophy...they listened to every new idea, every speculation, so long as it seemed to them ‘reasonable.’”⁶



The faulty expectations of the Jews and Greeks hindered them from being able to hear the gospel clearly. What faulty expectations are you aware of that people might bring with them to Christianity? What expectations did you have when you became a believer that you later discovered were untrue?



What about Christ crucified was so difficult for the two groups mentioned above to accept? What groups or types of people would you identify in our culture that would struggle for similar reasons?

Verse 23 states with force the difference between the first two groups (Jews and Greeks) and believers – namely, “we preach Christ crucified.” Paul acknowledged the stark impact the crucifixion had on each group. For Jews, it was a “stumbling block” because of their expectation for a powerful military leader. Jesus as Messiah was, in their estimation, a poor, weak man who was killed publicly and shamefully. Stott comments, “It was an insult to their national pride. How could God’s Messiah end his life under the condemnation of his own people and even under the curse of God? It was impossible.”⁷ For Gentiles, it was foolishness because of the public humiliation of crucifixion. It was so detestable that no Roman citizen or free man would ever be allowed to be crucified. For the true wisdom of God Incarnate to suffer such a fate was laughable and repulsive to the Greeks. But then, there was a third group...

3. God’s Wisdom Versus Worldly Wisdom (1 Corinthians 1:24-25)

The third group was those that were called, which included people of all backgrounds, for whom “Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God.” This indicates effectual calling that leads to salvation at the hearing of the gospel. So, Paul said, for all those who have been saved through the gospel’s preaching, they have understood that the weakness of the cross was indeed God’s power because, according to Stott, “through it God saves those who cannot save themselves.”⁸ The preoccupation of the world with power, both in Paul’s day and presently, leads humanity to repeatedly and tragically attempt to control its own eternal condition. Such a temptation was equally evidenced in the Pharisees’ relentless manipulation of the Law to “make” themselves holy, as well as the philosophers’ endless quest for the ultimate wisdom that would lead to eternal enlightenment. Both man-fueled, man-initiated, man-controlled approaches were pungent with the stench of futility.

Additionally, the saved understand that the cross is the manifestation of God's wisdom. It is God's wisdom because, as Stott says, "through it God has solved not only our problem (sin and guilt) but His own...How could He express His holiness in punishing evil without compromising His love? How could He express His love in forgiving sinners without compromising His justice? How could He be at one and the same time 'a righteous God and a Savior' (Isaiah 45:21)? His answer to these questions was and still is the cross." In God's wisdom, His redemptive plan involved Him paying our sin debt Himself through Jesus Christ on the cross.

? What implication does God calling "both Jews and Greeks," or, in other words, people of every conceivable background to Himself in salvation have on your understanding of sharing your faith? How do you intentionally engage those that are of a different background in gospel conversations?

? How comfortable are you in explaining how God satisfied His own wrath for your sin? Why is it important to equally emphasize God's righteousness and love?

In the cross, God nullified the world's wisdom, which was based on what humanity could comprehend and a falsely-created self-value that advocated personal perfection and eternal enlightenment based on accumulating human knowledge. Such "wisdom" not only failed to deal with human sinfulness, it would ultimately deny it altogether. In like manner, God overpowered the human strength of those that would futilely seek to provide their own righteousness through personal achievement, wealth, status, social connection, etc. Instead of such vices of impotence with regard to providing righteousness, God used the cross's cruelty as the ultimate expression of His love.

Conclusion

Paul's first letter to the Corinthians dealt squarely with the contrast between worldly wisdom and the true wisdom of God, as expressed in the cross of Jesus Christ. The application points for this text are numerous.

First, the cross is still a stumbling block to anyone trying to save themselves through their own power. The forms that personal power takes will vary widely. Yet, in any possible instance, the need for a Savior seems out of place in light of all the perceived personal achievement that has been gained. The cross is still a stumbling block, which means it still needs to be preached.

Second, God's wisdom is considered folly to the intellectually proud. In a number of different avenues, from social media to college campuses, believers are frequently depicted as mentally lazy, academically challenged, and superstitious pawns of institutional religion. The additional charge is that the believer's belief is a sign of weakness that any rigorous examination would readily dismantle. Very little has changed since Paul's day in this regard. Thankfully, Paul was a tremendous defender of both his faith and Christianity as a whole. It is critical that believers know how to give a reasoned defense for their belief in Jesus Christ. Still, all the answers in the world will not do what only God's calling on a person's life can do.

Third, if the first two points do not make this clear, there will always be opposition to the gospel. A lie always hates the truth. Rejection of the gospel should be expected. However, so should acceptance. As God continues to call people to Himself, believers have the opportunity to participate with God in that work. The fruit of gospel conversations are still under the control of the one who owns the harvest, remembering Jesus' metaphor about the fields being white for harvest. Knowing that rejection will be a part of the process, believers should be emboldened to share knowing that God goes before them.

❓ How does it impact you when someone rejects your presentation of the gospel? Does it make you less likely to readily present the gospel at the next opportunity? How does Paul's word about God's calling shape your understanding of what it means to be faithful?

❓ What places that you visit regularly would you classify as being opposed to the gospel? What form of worldly wisdom can you identify as reigning in those places? How are you received in those places as a believer? Why do you think so?

❓ How confident are you in your ability to, like Paul, present a reasoned defense for your faith in Christ? How does that faith factor in to the way you make decisions daily?

CHRIST CONNECTION: The work of Christ on the cross is the greatest example of God's wisdom.

MISSIONAL APPLICATION: Believers can expect to be misunderstood and even maligned for their faith, due to the world's blindness to the wisdom of God. Only when the Holy Spirit beckons someone can he or she understand the wisdom of God in the gospel.



FOR NEXT WEEK

True North: Finding Our Way With Race

Main Passages

- Revelation 5:8-10

Session Outline

1. The Lamb Takes the Scroll (Revelation 5:8)
2. A People Purchased (Revelation 5:9)
3. A Kingdom of Priests (Revelation 5:10)

Memorize

For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but it is the power of God to us who are being saved.

- 1 Corinthians 1:18, CSB

Daily Readings

- Monday - Matthew 28:18-20
- Tuesday - Romans 16:25-27
- Wednesday - Galatians 3:8
- Thursday - Psalm 67:1-4
- Friday - John 3:16-18
- Saturday - John 14:6

References

- ¹Dallas Willard | American Philosopher and Writer on Christian Spiritual Formation." Accessed April 25, 2019. <http://www.dwillard.org/>.
- ²Willard, Dallas. *Hearing God*. InterVarsity Press, 2014. Video. <https://www.rightnowmedia.org/Content/Series/1175>. Accessed 4/07/2019.
- ³Fee, Gordon D. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*. NICNT. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1987.
- ⁴Stott, John. *Basic Christian Leadership: Biblical Models of Church, Gospel, and Ministry*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002.
- ⁵Ibid.
- ⁶Ibid.
- ⁷Ibid.
- ⁸Ibid.
- ⁹Ibid.