



Session 2 – 1Corinthians 1:18-25; 2:1-5

HUMAN WISDOM OR GOD'S WISDOM

In **1:17**, Paul told his readers that, when he preached the gospel, it was not with words of “wisdom” – implying that this would be contrary to the message of the cross.

The Greek culture held wisdom (*sophia*) in very high regard and prized their philosophers (literally ‘lovers of wisdom’). Men who were skilled debaters and clever with words would travel around giving speeches which demonstrated their wisdom and their eloquence (while the actual content of what they said mattered little); they were much admired. It seems that many of the Christians in Corinth still thought in this way and Paul wants to correct them; he speaks very negatively about this sort of wisdom in **1:17, 19, 20, 25, 2:6**. He is concerned that the Corinthians should not think of him and his message being like that; his message is about God’s wisdom – something which is so different that, to Greeks, it seems like foolishness.

1. 1:18-25 The Foolish God – a Crucified Messiah

In these verses, Paul argues, with Old Testament support (**v.19** – the admired wisdom and intelligence of the wise will be brought to nothing – **Isaiah 29:14**), that what God had always intended and foretold in the prophets, he has now accomplished through the crucifixion.

No human in their right mind would surely ever have dreamt of a crucifixion being the way of saving the world; but that is God’s way. To those who do not believe, it is worse than foolishness; but it is the wisdom of God.

Verse 18: The 'message' is literally 'the word', and contrasts with 'words of human wisdom' in v.17.

'So Paul presents an absolute contrast between God and the word about the cross on the one hand, and the wisdom of the world on the other. This is clearly the secret nerve of this section'. (Thiselton)

Verse 20: Three rhetorical questions: "Where is the wise person / scholar / philosopher (debater)?"

God has not simply disregarded this wisdom or shown it to be foolish; he has MADE it foolish and transitory – in two ways:

Verse 21: a) God designed it so that "the world through its wisdom did not know God".

b) God designed it so that some would come to know him; they would believe in the message that was preached even though it was through a means disapproved of by the "wise" people who dismissed the content of the message as foolishness.

'Think what it would be to proclaim a crucified criminal of modest status to those who sought honour, esteem and success – an affront indeed'. (Thiselton)

Verse 22: - For Jews, the words *Messiah* and *crucified* could not belong in the same sentence. **Deut 21:23** says that those hanged on a tree bore the curse of God.

- For Greeks, the idea of a god being humiliated and suffering would be utterly ridiculous – superstitious madness!

The message of the cross – foolish though it seems to the world – is that God, in his wisdom, chose to act in this way. The power of the cross opens the way for ALL to know God – his folly is wiser than human wisdom.

'The Christian good news is all about God dying on a rubbish heap at the wrong end of the Empire. It's all about God babbling nonsense to a room full of philosophers. It's all about the true God confronting the world of posturing, power and prestige, and overthrowing it in order to set up his own kingdom, a kingdom in which the weak and the foolish find themselves just as welcome as the strong and the wise, if not more so'. (Wright)

2. 2:1-5 God's Foolishness – Choosing a Weak and Unsophisticated Preacher

It is not only the means (the cross) and the people (the church in Corinth), but also the preacher (Paul) which show that God is in the process of overturning and undermining the systems and methods that the world holds dear.

- Paul, the man sent by God to take the gospel to Corinth, made no attempt to preach in a way that would appeal to their ideas of wisdom.
- He was aware of the danger of PRIDE and of seeking human praise. The gospel is jeopardized by any kind of eloquence or rhetoric that does not reinforce the message of a crucified Messiah.
 - The *content* of his preaching was simply about the cross, even though he knew that they would consider it foolish (**v.1,2**).
 - The *style* of his preaching was unimpressive and made no attempt to use the sort of oratory that the Corinthians liked to hear. So it was that they considered that “he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing” (**2 Cor 10:10**). Paul simply relied on the Holy Spirit to take his words and touch his hearers' hearts, even though he felt nervous and rather shaky (**v.3,4**).

'Clever, witty, amusing, glittering discourse may be warmly applauded by the literati, but it does not easily square with the odium of the cross. So Paul will have none of it.' (Carson)

- Choosing Paul to carry the message of salvation might seem foolish to the Corinthians, but by working in this way, God ensured that people would give their allegiance not to the preacher (who might then be forgotten when a better speaker came along) but to God and all that he has done through the Lord Jesus.

Verse 5: “A demonstration of the Spirit’s power” meant that many people became Christians when Paul preached and the Church at Corinth was formed.

‘The supernatural conviction and force that accompanied the preaching furnished a better proof of its truth than any logical process.’ (C.K. Barrett)

For homegroups

1. In what ways do you think God’s ways of operating might be seen as ‘foolish’ in the eyes of the world?
2. The Greeks were used to boasting about their wisdom and eloquence. In what ways does God’s “foolishness” put an end to such boasting?
3. In Corinth, many of the Christians were from the ‘lower’ classes. In many churches in England, members are predominantly from the ‘middle’ classes. Why do you think this is? Does it matter?
4. Why was Paul not trying to make his preaching the most eloquent and polished media presentation available in Corinth?
5. If we follow Paul’s example in **2:1-5**, how will we speak about our faith to our not-yet-Christian friends?
6. You meet a pastor who leads a large church who thinks that good, relevant preaching must include flashy media presentations and computer displays, which help to keep people’s attention. How would you respond?
7. If you wanted to make sure that, when you spoke to your not-yet-Christian friend, you focussed on Jesus and the cross, what things would you say?