

# Foolishness & Wisdom

1 Corinthians 1:17 – 2:5

## Foolishness of the Message → Wisdom

☐ Read 1 Corinthians 1:17-25.<sup>1</sup> Paul says the “message of the cross is foolishness” to the fallen world (1:18, 23).



1. In what ways is the “message of the cross”<sup>2</sup> foolishness to the world?<sup>3</sup>

☐ Of course, the message of the cross is not foolishness to everyone! While this present world is perishing (heading toward destruction), Jesus Christ came to deliver people from this destruction. Those who embrace the message of the cross recognize its power, and are saved. Those who consider it foolishness remain part of the perishing world (1:18).

2. Verse 20 refers to the various “wise ones” of the ancient world, including the scholar and the philosopher,<sup>4</sup> who are perceived as professional experts. Today, many of the educated elite reject the message of the cross. Why do you think this is so?<sup>5</sup>

☐ Verses 22-23 say that Jews demand miraculous signs (practical proofs) and consider the message of the cross a “stumbling block.”<sup>6</sup> Greeks demand wisdom (philosophical proofs) – that is, what *they* deem reasonable, and consider the message of the cross “foolishness.” In both cases, mere humans are setting the criteria<sup>7</sup> for the acceptability of God’s message, according to their “wisdom.”



3. Does this passage mean that knowledge and wisdom should not be sought? Is there a conflict between faith and reason? Is there anything wrong with seeking evidence for the truthfulness of God’s message? Explain.

<sup>1</sup> 1:17: “words of human wisdom” (σοφία λόγου, *sophia logos* – lit. “wisdom of word”) – may refer to content and/or form of communication (“cleverness of speech,” NASB; “words of eloquent wisdom,” ESV). Rhetoric (the art of using words skillfully) is not necessarily bad. However, when sophisticated rhetoric is used to elevate the status of the preacher, or promote over-reliance on the knowledge and skills of the preacher, it robs the power of the cross.  
<sup>2</sup> “message of the cross” - see Isaiah 53:4-6; 1 Corinthians 15:3; Philippians 2:6-11; Colossians 1:19-23

<sup>3</sup> The “message of the cross” speaks of a savior (who is God in the flesh) who came into our world; was rejected by those he came to save; suffered a humiliating and shameful death on a cross, administered by legitimate government. Furthermore, this savior’s followers are called to carry their own cross and follow him. This is the way of salvation. Fee writes, “No mere human, in his or her right mind or otherwise, would ever have dreamed up God’s scheme of redemption – through a crucified Messiah. It is too preposterous, too humiliating, for a God,” (Fee, Gordon D., *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987], 68).

<sup>4</sup> “scholar” (*grammateus*) – perhaps referring to the Jewish rabbi (“scribe” – NASB); “philosopher” – lit. debater.

<sup>5</sup> Consider Matthew 11:25-26. This passage does not promote anti-intellectualism. As Carson says, “The point of interest is not their education ... The contrast is between those who are self-sufficient and deem themselves wise and those who are dependent and love to be taught” (Carson, D. A., *Matthew, Volume 1*, EBC [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995], 275). Of course, many intellectuals, scholars and philosophers do accept the message!

<sup>6</sup> “stumbling block” (σκάνδαλον – scandal). The Jews viewed Jesus’ crucifixion in light of Deuteronomy 21:23: “anyone who is hung on a tree is under God’s curse.” Jesus did not meet Jewish expectations for the Messiah.

<sup>7</sup> “criterion” – rule or test by which something can be judged – *pl.* criteria

- ❑ Yet God has “made foolish the wisdom of the world” (1:20). The world does not know God through “its wisdom” (1:21). A true knowledge of God comes only by revelation through the Holy Spirit (2:6-16). God is not merely an object of philosophical and scientific inquiry.



### Lowliness of the Recipients → Salvation

- ❑ Read 1 Corinthians 1:26-31. Not many of the Corinthian Christians were wise, influential or well-born by human standards, though they highly valued such things.<sup>8</sup> Yet God chose them.
  4. Why does God choose to express his power through the “foolish,” weak, and lowly? (1:27-31)<sup>9</sup>
- ❑ While many desire the wisdom of the world (with its values of knowledge, strength, influence, and status), God has made Christ true “wisdom” for us (as believers). In Christ, we have “righteousness, holiness, and redemption” – that is, salvation (1:30)!<sup>10</sup>

### Weakness of the Messenger → Power

- ❑ Read 1 Corinthians 2:1-5.<sup>11</sup> Paul says that his preaching was not characterized by “human wisdom” (1:17), “eloquence or superior wisdom” (2:1) or “wise and persuasive words” (2:4). Instead he came in weakness, fear and trembling.
  5. Why does Paul think this is good?<sup>12</sup>
  6. Does this mean that Christian preachers, teachers and evangelists should avoid development of skills and techniques in speaking, teaching, and communication? If not, how should we apply these verses?



### Reflection/Application

- Is it difficult for you to fully accept the message of the cross? If so, how does this lesson challenge the *basis* (foundation) of your believing?
- As a Christian, are you more impressed with academic credentials and eloquent, persuasive speech than you are with the straight-forward teaching of the Bible? Do you tend to modify (or hide) “the message of the cross” to make Christianity more acceptable to your colleagues and friends? If so, how does this lesson challenge you?
- How does this lesson encourage you in your attempts to communicate the gospel?

<sup>8</sup> While not many, some apparently were wise, influential, or well-born (e.g. Crispus, Gaius, Erastus, Stephanus).

<sup>9</sup> God is infinitely greater than the greatest human, and He is not limited by human knowledge and ability (1:25). Fallen humans tend to have attitudes of self-importance and self-sufficiency, but this is self-deception. Salvation does not depend on anything in man; it is all God. Thus “no one can boast before him” (1:29).

<sup>10</sup> “righteousness” – right standing before God, sharing Christ’s righteous character ; “holiness” – set apart in fellowship with God; “redemption” – deliverance from bondage to sin and its penalty.

<sup>11</sup> “eloquence or superior wisdom” (ὑπεροχὴν λόγου ἢ σοφίας) is more literally “superiority of speech or of wisdom” (NASB); “weakness” (ασθενεία, *astheneia*) – the specific type of weakness is unknown; “fear and much trembling” – opposite the strength and boldness of the skillful public speaker.

<sup>12</sup> Paul’s intent is for hearers to concentrate on the message, not the messenger. “Faith is not based on how entertaining, informative, or compelling the speaker is but on the power of God transforming the hearts of hearers,” (Garland, David E., *1 Corinthians*, NCNT [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003], 87.)