

I Corinthians 1:18-31

God's Foolishness

Sermon

Hobart, July 31st, 2016

© *Phil Hopwood, 2007, 2016*

OLD TESTAMENT SCRIPTURE:**Isaiah 20:11-14**

¹¹ All the future events in this vision are like a sealed book to them. When you give it to those who can read, they will say, "We can't read it because it is sealed." ¹² When you give it to those who cannot read, they will say, "We don't know how to read."

¹³ And so the Lord says,
"These people say they are mine.
They honor me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me.
And their worship of me
is nothing but man-made rules learned by rote.

¹⁴ Because of this,
I will once again astound these hypocrites
with amazing wonders.
The wisdom of the wise will pass away,
and the intelligence of the intelligent will disappear."¹

¹Tyndale House Publishers. (2004). *Holy Bible : New Living Translation*. "Text edition"--Spine. (2nd ed.) (Is 29:11-14). Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers.

NEW TESTAMENT SCRIPTURE:**I Corinthians 1:18-31***The Wisdom of God*

¹⁸ The message of the cross is foolish to those who are headed for destruction! But we who are being saved know it is the very power of God. ¹⁹ As the Scriptures say,

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and discard the intelligence of the intelligent.”

²⁰ So where does this leave the philosophers, the scholars, and the world's brilliant debaters? God has made the wisdom of this world look foolish. ²¹ Since God in his wisdom saw to it that the world would never know him through human wisdom, he has used our foolish preaching to save those who believe. ²² It is foolish to the Jews, who ask for signs from heaven. And it is foolish to the Greeks, who seek human wisdom. ²³ So when we preach that Christ was crucified, the Jews are offended and the Gentiles say it's all nonsense.

²⁴ But to those called by God to salvation, both Jews and Gentiles, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ This foolish plan of God is wiser than the wisest of human plans, and God's weakness is stronger than the greatest of human strength.

²⁶ Remember, dear brothers and sisters, that few of you were wise in the world's eyes or powerful or wealthy when God called you. ²⁷ Instead, God chose things the world considers foolish in order to shame those who think they are wise. And he chose things that are powerless to shame those who are powerful. ²⁸ God chose things despised by the world, things counted as nothing at all, and used them to bring to nothing what the world considers important. ²⁹ As a result, no one can ever boast in the presence of God.

³⁰ God has united you with Christ Jesus. For our benefit God made him to be wisdom itself. Christ made us right with God; he made us pure and holy, and he freed us from sin. ³¹ Therefore, as the Scriptures say, “If you want to boast, boast only about the LORD.”²

²Tyndale House Publishers. (2004). *Holy Bible : New Living Translation*. "Text edition"--Spine. (2nd ed.) (1 Co 1:18-31). Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers.

INTRODUCTION:

I. AMAZING WORLD

A. THINK OF WHAT HAS BEEN DISCOVERED SINCE THOSE IN THERE 80'S AND 90'SS WERE BORN

1. Or grandparents who were born in the late 1800's
2. In a bit over a century our society has witnessed the arrival of electricity, radio, the telephone, motor vehicles, plane travel, refrigeration, immunisation, television, open heart surgery, space travel, satellite communications, computers and the internet.

II. NAME SOME INVENTIONS...

A. THINK ABOUT THE DIFFERENCE THESE HAVE MADE

1. Transport, electricity, flying
2. Health
3. Computers

III. MANKIND PRETTY SMART

A. NEW INVENTORS ETC.

1. **Our total store of information doubles faster and faster**
 - a) Some say every six months, others each year, others every five to eight years..but it is getting faster
2. **President of Ohio University;**

It has been estimated, for example, that half the facts some of you have learned in engineering while in college will be obsolete in five years; half of what others have learned in the computer industry will be outdated in just two years, thus some of it is already "old" by now. And, it is the same story in medicine, business, education, law, and the arts - nearly

every field. Certainly, technology is changing our lives rapidly, but the most significant changes are happening because information and knowledge are expanding at an almost incomprehensible rate.

...And information is stored everywhere - in print and electronically. ³

3. David Schilling writes that,

Buckminster Fuller created the “Knowledge Doubling Curve”; he noticed that until 1900 human knowledge doubled approximately every century. By the end of World War II knowledge was doubling every 25 years. Today things are not as simple as different types of knowledge have different rates of growth. For example, nanotechnology knowledge is doubling every two years and clinical knowledge every 18 months.

But on average human knowledge is doubling every 13 months. According to [IBM](#), the build out of the “internet of things” will lead to the doubling of knowledge every 12 hours.⁴

A. BUT WHERE HAVE WE GOTTEN WITH ALL THAT INFORMATION AND ALL OUR INVENTIONS?

1. What do our 90 year olds think about how much benefit all our clever inventions have been to the state of our world?

- a) I am sure there would be a mixed response. There have been some wonderfully beneficial inventions, but the world in so many ways is a more lost, ignorant and unhealthy place to live.

2. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, our world was full of hope.

- a) Science had become the new hope, the new God, the new saviour.
- b) It promised to solve all our problems, to lift and transform us to a new level of living. The feeling was that there was nothing the human mind and ingenuity couldn't solve or explain.
- c) To believe in God no longer seemed necessary.

³ Address to the Graduating Class: Winter Commencement 2003, Ohio State University, http://president.osu.edu/speeches/commencement__wi03.php

⁴ David Schilling, <http://www.industrytap.com/knowledge-doubling-every-12-months-soon-to-be-every-12-hours/3950>

d) In fact it became looked upon as foolishness!

3. It was believed that human beings were the masters of their own fate, and could solve any problem, and bring about an earthly utopia, where there would be peace, and solutions to all food and health problems

4. Then came the first world war, the war to end all wars

a) But that failed to bring peace or solve the world's problems

(1) **Then along came the Great Depression**

b) Soon after that came World War II and the Holocaust

(1) **Then the atomic bomb**

5. For a while society was shaken to its foundations

a) People started questioning science, and the way society was going

b) During the 60's and 70's there was a time when many turned against the established values, science, big business and government and turned to alternate life styles, communes, and eastern philosophies

(1) **The phrase was all you need is love and a little chemical help.**

c) People put their faith in finding answers in themselves

(1) **All you needed was to look inside and be positive, have faith in your inner goodness and wisdom**

(a) **There was the Human Potential movement, and Self actualisation was a commonly used term**

d) But communes broke down, hippies turned into business people and scientists as they grew older and had mortgages on their mind more than peace and love

e) In recent years mankind is recognising more and more huge problems that face us, both socially and environmentally

(1) **And are struggling desperately to get control of it all**

6. So the search for wisdom and understanding of the world, and how to master it and the future is one of man's main pursuits

a) Economics is one of the central focuses

7. In the midst of all our information and knowledge, our vast wealth, and myriad of astounding inventions

a) God is still seen as foolish, old fashioned, and deemed unscientific, ignorant superstition

B. TODAY WE ARE LOOKING AT A TEXT IN I CORINTHIANS

1. That reminds us that God's wisdom and ways are foolishness to mankind,

a) But that so called foolishness, is really the only real answer to our world's problems, and for our lives

C. PRAYER



BODY:

I. I CORINTHIANS 1:18-31

A. IMMEDIATE CONTEXT –

1. Paul's teaching about the cross has brought much ridicule and opposition

B. I CORINTHIANS 1:10-17 DIVISIONS IN THIS COMMUNITY OF FAITH IN CORINTH

1. Disputing about leadership, and a lot of problems dealing with the materialism of their culture and time

¹⁰ I appeal to you, dear brothers and sisters, by the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ, to live in harmony with each other. Let there be no divisions in the church. Rather, be of one mind, united in thought and purpose. ¹¹ For some members of Chloe's household have told me about your quarrels, my dear brothers and sisters. ¹² Some of you are saying, "I am a follower of Paul." Others are saying, "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Peter," or "I follow only Christ."

¹³ Has Christ been divided into factions? Was I, Paul, crucified for you? Were any of you baptized in the name of Paul? Of course not! ¹⁴ I thank God that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, ¹⁵ for now no one can say they were baptized in my name. ¹⁶ (Oh yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas, but I don't remember baptizing anyone else.) ¹⁷ For Christ didn't send me to baptize, but to preach the Good News—and not with clever speech, for fear that the cross of Christ would lose its power.

C. OUR PASSAGE IS IN THIS CONTEXT

I Corinthians 1:18-31

The Wisdom of God

¹⁸ The message of the cross is foolish to those who are headed for destruction!

D. THIS STATEMENT SUMS IT ALL UP

- 1. The message of the cross, the real answer for all our problems today, and our hope for the future, is total foolishness to our lost world**
- 2. It doesn't make any sense to the natural mind, and logic, that God should die**
 - a) And that through Jesus' death should come life for all
- 3. It doesn't make sense just as putting the interests of others doesn't make sense to those who are competing to get to be rich and number one in their world**
 - a) The Corinthians seemed to be falling into that trap

4. Bible Knowledge Commentary;

The message of the Cross cuts to the heart of self-centeredness. Paul saw it as central to salvation which he understood to be a process begun by justification, advanced by sanctification, and climaxed in glorification.

Paul spoke most pointedly in this verse and in the letter as a whole to the second of these phases, progressive sanctification. "The message of the Cross" is the message of self-renunciation, of obedience to God which may lead as it did in Jesus' case to humiliation and death, but which ultimately leads not to self-destruction but to preservation (Mark 8:34-35) and exaltation (2 Tim. 2:12; Rev. 22:5). That was the recurring theme in these verses (1 Cor. 1:17-18, 23-24; 2:2, 8), an idea **those who are perishing consider foolishness** (cf. Luke 9:23-25).⁵

18b But we who are being saved know it is the very power of God.

- 5. We know that we are saved by grace, not by our might or wisdom, we are saved by the message of the cross!**
 - a) But this is so hard to accept for people who take pride in not accepting charity, on paying their own way, solving their own problems, getting there under there own steam without help.

cf. *confer*, compare

⁵Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., & Dallas Theological Seminary. (1983-c1985). *The Bible knowledge commentary : An exposition of the scriptures* (2:509). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

¹⁹ As the Scriptures say,

"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise

and discard the intelligence of the intelligent."

²⁰ So where does this leave the philosophers, the scholars, and the world's brilliant debaters? God has made the wisdom of this world look foolish.

6. v 19 is quoted from Isaiah 20:14;

Isaiah 20:11-14

¹¹ All the future events in this vision are like a sealed book to them. When you give it to those who can read, they will say, "We can't read it because it is sealed." ¹² When you give it to those who cannot read, they will say, "We don't know how to read."

¹³ And so the Lord says,

"These people say they are mine.

They honor me with their lips,

but their hearts are far from me.

And their worship of me

is nothing but man-made rules learned by rote.

¹⁴ Because of this, I will once again astound these hypocrites

with amazing wonders.

The wisdom of the wise will pass away,

and the intelligence of the intelligent will disappear."⁶

7. The theme of foolishness is found often in the OT, particularly the Proverbs.

⁶Tyndale House Publishers. (2004). *Holy Bible : New Living Translation*. "Text edition"--Spine. (2nd ed.) (Is 29:11-14). Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers.

a) As one commentator says;

On the whole the OT fool or view of folly is the opposite of wisdom, the latter being the gift of God's revelation

In Greek culture [fool] "moros" is the one who is dull-witted, though the term is used in a variety of contexts.

As regards the human condition the closest parallels concern the deficiency of intellect or spiritual capacity or the impossibility for some to follow another in reasoning and understanding.⁷

8. Well known theologian, William Willimon points out that it is only the humble, the weak of the world that see and accept Jesus.

Only the very young, the very old, the women and the simpletons see him. They are standing in the right place to get a proper view. Along with the poor, the maimed, the blind, the lame, the prisoners and the poor old crazed men like Paul, these "fools" see things as they really are.⁸

²¹ Since God in his wisdom saw to it that the world would never know him through human wisdom, he has used our foolish preaching to save those who believe.

9. William Loader;

Paul takes wisdom very seriously, but works with a different model. Being deliberately subversive he makes the apparent stupidity and shame of the cross his starting point (1:21).

What people despise and see as failure and shame, Paul sees as the beginning of wisdom. God's wisdom shows itself not in winning the speaking games and wowing followers, but in love which is prepared to face the worst. This love-wisdom overturns the ambitious success driven models which strive for power. Indeed true power lies in truly profound love.⁹

⁷ 1 Corinthians 1:18-25, in Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary's An Exegetical Study of the Common Lectionary, coordinated by Prof. John E. Alsop <http://home.netcom.com/~jealsup/13137e.html>

⁸ William Willimon, "Looking Like Fools," The Christian Century, 1982. At Religion Online

⁹ William Loader, *Epiphany 4: 30 January 1 Corinthians 1:18-31*, <http://www.staff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/AEpEpiphany4.htm>

²² It is foolish to the Jews, who ask for signs from heaven. And it is foolish to the Greeks, who seek human wisdom. ²³ So when we preach that Christ was crucified, the Jews are offended and the Gentiles say it's all nonsense.

10. Loader

In 1:22 Paul sets up stereotypes which doubtless find their fit in Corinth as they do in our world today. Those whom he calls Jews, probably because those he had in mind were Jews, hankered after signs, especially miracles as proofs of God's support. They will be winners because God, the winner, the magician is on their side.

Paul is not against miracles and would have been had far less difficulty with the notion of miracle than most of us today. But he refused to make such miracles the foundation for his theology, which would be to make a power-model the framework for this thinking about God.

Against this he sets the powerlessness of the cross.

It was probably actual Greeks whom Paul thinks of when he sets up his second stereotype: Greeks seek wisdom. We should not generalise this, as though Paul is attacking Greek philosophy, from which he has learned much. He is addressing a context in which his surrounding comments show us that the issue is certain trends in Corinth which elevate claims to knowledge and wisdom and finesse in speaking.

Against those who made the sensational central, or who made knowledge power central Paul affirms the contradiction of the cross (1:23).

Power matters, as does wisdom.

But for Paul it is the power and wisdom evident in the cross.

Real greatness is the life poured out in love. That is also the heart of the real God.

God's kind of foolishness is wiser and God's kind of powerlessness more powerful than these other schemes (1:25).¹⁰

²⁴ But to those called by God to salvation, both Jews and Gentiles, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ This foolish plan of God is wiser than the wisest of human plans, and God's weakness is stronger than the greatest of human strength.

¹⁰ Loader

²⁶ Remember, dear brothers and sisters, that few of you were wise in the world's eyes or powerful or wealthy when God called you. ²⁷ Instead, God chose things the world considers foolish in order to shame those who think they are wise. And he chose things that are powerless to shame those who are powerful. ²⁸ God chose things despised by the world, things counted as nothing at all, and used them to bring to nothing what the world considers important. ²⁹ As a result, no one can ever boast in the presence of God.

11. William Loader;

In 1:26-29 Paul bolsters his argument by noting that the people who have really grasped this are often the apparently simple people and people without great claims to wisdom and lacking the skills of the great orators. Such people expose the emptiness of those who climb the rankings of power in the usual ways. ¹¹

12. A pastor made the following observations about the perceived foolishness of God and Christianity;

So let's look at the foolishness of God. The foolishness of Sunday services. Why bother coming to church? Why bother with prayer and worship? Well many of you here can answer those questions. The voice of God, heard perhaps in a hymn, or a prayer or perhaps even in the silence of our worship, pointing the way forward in a life situation that seemed lost. The power of prayer during an illness. And those who are estranged from God, call this foolishness - but to us it is the power of salvation.

The foolishness of patiently hanging in with a friend who is hurting, or who has lost their way. The wise of the world might say why not just walk away. They're hopeless. You can only do so much. Cut your losses. But the person is a friend, a loved one. And the foolishness of God dictates that you could no more give them up for lost that our God could give us up. So we foolishly hang in there, like the story of the father in the prodigal son. Hanging in there, despite the odds.

Then there is the foolishness of forgiveness. Rather than holding on to our anger, our grief, our sense of betrayal, we chose to forgive. The world's wisdom says that we need to be compensated. Our legal system grows fat on lawyers ensuring we don't forgive. Our hurt is an earner. The world's wisdom sees forgiveness as foolish weakness. Yet God is

¹¹ Loader

forgiving us every hour every day. And we are called to be a forgiving people.

And then there is the foolishness of service. Serving our fellow sisters and brothers. The world's wisdom talks of everything having a price-tag. In the past 25 years volunteers have all but been swamped by paid professionals. Something done out of Christian service, free of charge, is by the world's standards worth little. How often have we heard - put a price on it and people will value it more. ...Yet as Christ's body on earth we are called to service, to ministry. We are called to community, community that cannot exist without individuals freely choosing to serve one another. This is God's wisdom!

And of course there is the foolishness of the cross. How crazy is that! A religion bragging about its founder being executed as a common criminal. Whose major belief is about losing oneself, about trusting in an unseen God.

E. V 30 GOES ON TO REMIND US OF THE BENEFITS OF JESUS BEING OUR WISDOM

³⁰ God has united you with Christ Jesus. For our benefit God made him to be wisdom itself. Christ made us right with God; he made us pure and holy, and he freed us from sin.

F. BIBLE KNOWLEDGE COMMENTARY:

Were not the situation so grievous, one could almost imagine a smile of incredulity on Paul's face as he wrote these words and urged the Corinthians to survey their own congregation.

From a human viewpoint wisdom, influence, and high breeding were apparently in short supply. If God had chosen on the basis of such criteria, He would have passed them by.

But when God called, he turned the world's standards upside down and usually chose the ordinary rather than the outstanding in order **that no one may boast before Him** (v. 29) but only in the Lord.

For **Christ** alone personified the **wisdom from God** (v. 30) and in Him the Corinthians experienced **righteousness**, that is, justification (Rom. 4:24-25), **holiness**, that is, sanctification (2 Thes. 2:13-15), and **redemption**, that is, glorification (Rom. 8:23; Eph. 4:30). In the wisdom of God the plan of salvation was accomplished by a crucified Christ

hidden from the wise and learned but revealed to simple believers (cf. Matt. 11:25-26).¹²

³¹ Therefore, as the Scriptures say, "If you want to boast, boast only about the LORD."¹³

1. Loader;

If there is anything to get excited about and to be engaged in, let it be in God's life and the success of God's life reaching into us and passing through us (1:31).

Paul will boast or take pride in that and wants us to do the same. When we do so, we are in tune with God's own enthusiasms and loves. That makes it much more likely that we are going to be wise and caring human beings and powerfully so. The cross leads us into this and leads us on - if we can appreciate its subversive message.¹⁴

cf. *confer*, compare

¹²Walvoord, J. F., Zuck, R. B., & Dallas Theological Seminary. (1983-c1985). *The Bible knowledge commentary : An exposition of the scriptures* (2:509). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

¹³Tyndale House Publishers. (2004). *Holy Bible : New Living Translation*. "Text edition"--Spine. (2nd ed.) (1 Co 1:18-31). Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers.

¹⁴ Loader

II. CONCLUSION:

A. SO WHERE DO WE PUT OUR TRUST?

1. Where do we look for wisdom?

- a) For answers to life's problems?

2. To ourselves, economics, science?

- a) We have seen where science and economics and all our human endeavours have led us
- b) And we have seen where the road to self-fulfilment leads.

B. SO WE HAVE COME TO REALISE THAT WHAT SEEMS FOOLISH, THE MESSAGE OF JESUS, DIEING ON A CROSS

1. Is actually infinitely wiser and more powerful than any human ideas or efforts

2. A foolishness that sees God continuing to love us in spite of our unloveable ways.

- a) A foolishness that sees God continuing to offer us forgiveness despite our rebellious ways.
- b) Where would be without out our God and his foolish ways!

Conclude with the words of a hymn written by Brian Wren; "Here hangs a man discarded."

- c) And then we will listen to a song by Michael Card, called God's Own Fool.

Here hangs a man discarded
 A scarecrow hoisted high
 A nonsense pointing nowhere
 To all who hurry by

Can such a clown of sorrows
 Still bring a useful word

Where faith and love seem phantoms
And every hope absurd?

Can he give help or comfort
To lives by comfort bound
When drums of dazzling progress
Give strangely hollow sound?

Life emptied of all meaning,
Drained out in bleak distress
Can share in broken silence
My deepest emptiness;

And love that freely entered
The pit of life's despair
Can name our hidden darkness
And suffer with us there.

Christ in our darkness risen
Help all who long for light
To hold the hand of promise
And walk into the night.¹⁵

C. PRAYER

¹⁵ Brian Wren, 1936