



CHARIS-MATTERS

STUDIES IN FIRST CORINTHIANS

Text

First Corinthians 1:18-31

Topic

The behavior of the believers in the church at Corinth led the apostle Paul to warn them to quit glorying in themselves and live in such a way as to bring glory only in God

Title

“Glory Bound Glory Hounds”

Introduction

An effective method of biblical counseling is to apply an Old Testament story or example to the person you are speaking with. It can immediately bring spiritual perspective to their problem and suggest the Scriptural principle for resolving it.

The Corinthian believers had problems. We’ve already seen their divisions. As we continue in the book we will see disputes and defilements. As he began to counsel them the apostle Paul suddenly used two Old Testament examples:

1. In verse nineteen he quoted Isaiah 29:14.
2. In verse thirty-one he quoted from Jeremiah 9:23 & 24.

The Isaiah passage refers to the time when the Assyrians threatened to overrun the nation of Judah. The counselors of the king advised him to

make an alliance with Egypt. Isaiah opposed this worldly alliance and told the king to trust in God alone. Isaiah's counsel was mocked by the wise men of the nation. In the end Egypt never came to Judah's aid but God did. In one night God's angel killed 186,000 Assyrians and in the morning the remainder of the invading army retreated.

The passage in Jeremiah is from the time just prior to Judah's being overrun by another world power, the Babylonians. In that case the Israelites were again trusting in their own wisdom rather than look to the Lord. This time God allowed them to suffer the consequences of trusting in worldly wisdom. They were defeated and taken captive.

Simply yet powerfully Paul was telling the Corinthians that their problems could not be resolved by trusting in the wisdom of the world. The wisdom of the world would prove powerless to help them and leave them defeated.

Christians and churches need to pay attention. It is still too easy to begin trusting in the wisdom of the world rather than the wisdom of God.

I'll organize my thoughts around two points: #1 The Wisdom Of This World Leaves You Perishing And Is Powerless To Help You, and #2 The Wisdom Of God Saves You And Is Powerful To Help You.

#1 The Wisdom Of This World
Leaves You Perishing And Is Powerless To Help You
(v18-23)

We're not saying that mankind isn't smart. We are and as a race have accomplished some amazing things.

But when it comes to the most important thing we are helpless. A man cannot save himself from sin and its inevitable consequence, death. When it comes to the issues of life and how it should be lived the wisdom of this world is pathetically deficient.

Nonbelievers look to this world's wisdom to save them. A current example would be Oprah Winfrey's new 'religion.' I don't need to tell you how

popular she is or how much good she's done. But she has been fully converted to the New Age movement and is using her power to influence millions of others to follow a wisdom that is very anti-Christian.

Before Paul tackled more of the problems the Christians in Corinth were having he established the basic understanding that they ought to stop looking to the world and its supposed wisdom and get back to trusting in the Lord.

1 Corinthians 1:18 For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

Paul divided the world into two groups: "Those" and "us." There are "those who are perishing" and there are "us who are being saved."

Men and women are born "perishing." In this context it means lost and looks forward to an eternity separated from God.

If you are a Christian you are "being saved." It doesn't mean you are not really saved yet. On the contrary, it means you **are** saved and that God will definitely complete the work He has begun in you. It speaks of the entire process of salvation from start to finish.

The "message of the cross" encompasses the plan of God to save lost mankind by coming Himself as a man and dying on the Cross. We'll see the wisdom of that plan described in verse thirty.

Paul was talking to Christians and pointing out that the very "power" that had saved them was seen as "foolishness" to those still unsaved and in the world. The Cross is not the kind of plan that a man would devise. We can see the kind of plan a man would devise by looking at the religions and the philosophies of the world. They are all ultimately man-centered and involve good works. The Cross is God-centered and cancels-out good works in favor of grace.

Since the world despises the very thing that saved you, why, then, would you look to the world and its wisdom for help? You wouldn't; or at least you shouldn't.

1 Corinthians 1:19 For it is written: "I WILL DESTROY THE WISDOM OF THE WISE, AND BRING TO NOTHING THE UNDERSTANDING OF THE PRUDENT."

The Jews in Isaiah's day were looking to the armies of Egypt. It made sense from a strictly worldly point of view. Isaiah was looking to the Lord. It made no sense from a strictly worldly point of view. It made perfect spiritual sense for a saved people.

It can seem foolish to trust in God - even for a Christian. I mean, seriously, if a huge army was encamped around you, wouldn't an alliance with Egypt seem to make more sense than a prayer meeting?

The situation's you are in, the problems you face, **all** have a spiritual component. God expects us to apply common sense but we must never adopt the world's supposed wisdom.

Paul next introduced three sources of worldly wisdom:

1 Corinthians 1:20 Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?

These were designations for unsaved men the Corinthians would recognize in their culture. We might recognize them like this:

- The "wise" are those we would call philosophers.
- The "scribe" are those we would call religious.
- "Disputer[s] of this age" is a phrase that describes those who try to solve everything by careful investigation to denote cause and effect relationships. It's a scientist.

Philosophy and religion and science all attempt to 'save' mankind in their own lame way. They cannot. God has "made foolish" their wisdom. The next verse explains what Paul meant:

1 Corinthians 1:21 For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe.

No one has ever gotten saved by adopting a philosophy. Or by following a religion. Or by trusting in the scientific method. Yes, we have achieved great things on the earth. But we have not, as a race, achieved *anything* with regard to improving our spiritual condition as lost sinners.

God accomplishes the improving of our spiritual condition by saving those who believe “the message preached” about the Cross.

1 Corinthians 1:22 For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom;

1 Corinthians 1:23 but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness,

Paul broke-up those who are perishing into two further groups: “Jews” and “Greeks” (Gentiles).

- The Jews had the Word of God but were looking for a conquering political Messiah rather than a spiritual Savior. Even though Jesus gave all the miraculous signs of the promised Messiah, they were fixated on the political situation rather than their spiritual condition. Thus they thought the Cross “foolishness.” How could a dead Messiah deliver them from Rome? It became “a stumbling block” to them - something they could not get beyond because of their thinking.
- Gentiles never had the advantage of being God’s people and having His law. If you want to understand how they thought you can read Acts seventeen. Paul tried to explain the Cross to them on Mars Hill but they rejected the message as being “foolishness” from an intellectual point of view.

Because we can review nearly two thousand years of church history we tend to forget how offensive and foolish is the Cross. In the first century “Christ crucified” was a reproach. It seemed madness that God would come to save mankind by dying a shameful, criminals death on the Cross. According to some historians it took about a thousand years before the Cross even became a symbol that Christians widely used.

The Cross and a crucified Savior are not the kind of plan any man would come up with. As we will see shortly, it is the only possible plan for the real problem mankind has: Sin.

Let's not get ahead of ourselves. Paul was telling them all this for a practical reason. **They were thinking and acting like the Jews in Isaiah's day.** They were looking to the world and adopting its principles to resolve their problems.

We can expect that the Cross and a crucified Savior would seem foolish to those who are perishing. Sadly, *they all too often seem foolish to believers!* When we look to the world and its wisdom we are looking away from the Cross and God's wisdom. There is no in-between. There is no integration of the world's wisdom with God's, as if to improve the Word of God.

How can you tell if you are adopting the wisdom of the world? Well, for one thing, you will find yourself involved in divisions or disputes or defilements. Instead of growing in personal holiness you will find yourself demanding more-and-more liberties in the grey areas. Rather than becoming more separated from the world you will be less indistinguishable from it.

There are any number of indicators. God can show you. He wants to show you! His Word comes to us with the same prophetic impact that it did to Judah from Isaiah and Jeremiah. We need only hear it and heed it.

#2 The Wisdom Of God Saves You And Is Powerful To Help You (v24-31)

Paul turned his full attention to those who are being saved.

1 Corinthians 1:24 but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

“Called” refers to the point in time when they heard the message of the Cross and received it by faith. It was sufficient to save “Jews” and “Greeks” (Gentiles). It is God's universal provision for the universal problem of sin.

“Christ” coming in human flesh to be crucified on the Cross is the “power of God.” Philosophy, religion, science... They confer no power if you follow

their teaching. Only the Gospel of Jesus Christ promises you that you will be both born-again and experience the indwelling of God the Holy Spirit.

“Christ” coming in human flesh to be crucified on the Cross is the “wisdom of God.” If you truly understand the problem of sin you see there could only be one resolve. God must come as a man to die.

1 Corinthians 1:25 Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

Think first century. *Even the Lord’s closest followers were confused by the Cross!* Even though Jesus told them repeatedly He was going to the Cross to die they could not process it. It seemed “foolishness”; it seemed “weakness.”

It was! It was a foolishness and a weakness “of God stronger than men.” It was and is amazing in its beauty and simplicity, in its humility and strength.

Don’t lose sight of the fact Paul was writing to a church that was blowing it in terms of their testimony. They were reverting to behaviors characteristic of the wisdom of the world. So next he analyzed them.

1 Corinthians 1:26 For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called.

“For you see” can be translated *consider*. “Consider your calling.” Look back and see that when you got saved, Corinthian, you were not among the “wise” or the “mighty” or the “noble.” Some; a few perhaps. But for the most part they were average or below average in the categories that the world so values. When it came to intellect, influence, and inheritance, **they had been losers.**

1 Corinthians 1:27 But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty;

Understand that Paul was saying **they** were “the foolish things of the world.” **They** were “the weak things of the world.” The very fact they were “called” and “chosen” eliminated anything within them that they might boast about. They were, in fact, examples of what God could do that would “put to shame” those who trusted in the world.

The world was never a friend to them. Why look to the world for help now?

1 Corinthians 1:28 and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are,

He piled it on. They were “base” and “despised.” They were “the things which are not,” meaning *below contempt*. Not exactly building self-esteem.

Truth is, if you think that there was something, anything, about you that commended you to God so that He would save you - **you are wrong**. If the Cross is God’s method (and it is) it presupposes you are a doomed sinner with no hope unless God intervenes and saves you.

After you are saved in this manner, totally by grace, you “bring to nothing the things that are.” Those who are yet perishing look at you and wonder how **you** could be chosen by God. *God must be crazy!*

He’s not. He’s wise and in His infinite wisdom He is showing those who are perishing the power of the Cross.

You and I circumvent that example, that power, when we act like the world.

1 Corinthians 1:29 that no flesh should glory in His presence.

At this point Paul began to introduce his application. He used, for what some scholars say is the first time in his writing, the word “flesh.” It is Paul’s term to describe the present worldly existence of men on earth who are perishing.

The sad fact is that the Corinthians *were* “glory[ing] in His presence.” Their divisions and disputes and defilements were all ways in which their “flesh”

was reigning over them. Everything they did was bringing “glory” to themselves rather than to God.

1 Corinthians 1:30 But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God - and righteousness and sanctification and redemption -

This is who they really were - if they would just remember it. They were saved and therefore “in Christ Jesus.”

What does it mean to be “in Christ Jesus?” It means that you experience the three things that flow from this “wisdom from God” in His becoming a man and His being crucified on the Cross. The three things are these:

1. “Righteousness.” You who were born dead in trespasses and sins, hopelessly lost, are declared “righteous” when you are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.
2. “Sanctification” is the on-going spiritual process by which God is changing you day-by-day into the image of Jesus.
3. “Redemption” is your final redemption when you are either raised from the dead or raptured and have a new, glorified body free from all sin and death.

Some commentators describe it this way:

- “Righteousness” means you have been saved once-for-all from the *penalty* of sin.
- “Sanctification” means that you are being saved every day from the *power* of sin.
- “Redemption” means you will be fully and finally saved from the *presence* of sin - both within you and around you.

It is “the wisdom of God” to save you past, present, and future.

1 Corinthians 1:31 that, as it is written, "HE WHO GLORIES, LET HIM GLORY IN THE LORD."

Paul condensed Jeremiah 9:23 & 24. The Jews in Jeremiah’s day ignored this warning and went on glorying in themselves. The Babylonians came

and took them away captive. Thus there is an implied warning to the Corinthians and to any Christian or church.

Wherever there are divisions, disputes, and defilements, Christians are in the flesh and glorying in themselves. We may not see it but those who are perishing certainly do.

Wherever we are demanding our liberties, flaunting them even, then we are glorying in the flesh.

Wherever our morals are eroding and becoming more like those of the world then we are glorying in the flesh.

We must remain people of the Cross. When people look at our lives they ought to see the “foolishness of God” and the “weakness of God” at work in us and upon us molding and shaping us into the image of Jesus.

- They ought to see us living in a way that represents our only hope for daily living is Jesus and His indwelling Holy Spirit. Not some program we follow; not some philosophy we've adopted; not some psychology we've applied. Power that comes from relationship with a risen, living Savior.
- They ought to therefore see and hear forgiveness, mercy, compassion, kindness, love, and the like. They ought to see and hear these things most loudly when we are being despised and abused, mistreated and overlooked.

After all, they are perishing and only the message of the Cross can save them.

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