

Series on First Corinthians

By Doug Hamilton

1 Corinthians 1:18-31 “The Strong Wisdom of God”

Isaiah 55:8–9, “For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways,” declares the LORD. ⁹ “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways And My thoughts than your thoughts.”

- It would behoove us to remember in this world of humanism and elitism, that we might not know as much as we think we do. Isaiah reminded the Israelites that they were not as bright as they thought. They had followed their “*earthly, sensual and devilish*” (James 3:15) ways and the result was destruction of their nation at the hands of the Babylon. They thought they were wise, but did not possess the true wisdom of God. *Isaiah 5:21 Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes And clever in their own sight!*
- We are at our very best when walking humbly in God’s wisdom and at our worst when chasing our own desires. Perhaps it would be good to use 1 Corinthians to better acquaint with God’s wisdom. The second half of the first chapter of this letter can reveal much..

1) The Wisdom of God is Powerful.

1 Corinthians 1:18-19, For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹ For it is written, “I WILL DESTROY THE WISDOM OF THE WISE, AND THE CLEVERNESS OF THE CLEVER I WILL SET ASIDE.”

In this section, we are introduced to a major contrast of the wisdom of God and the wisdom of the world. The world and God are on two contrasting realms.

- To the lost, of this world, the preaching of the cross is foolishness. The ancient Greeks were big into worldly wisdom. There were a group of “mental elites” called *sophists* (the Greek word for wisdom is *sophia*). They would display their eloquent speaking skills of memorized lectures to appear as all-knowing experts. Often their clever attitudes would lead them to talking down to others with disdain. In fact, to the Greek, there were only two people in the world, the Greeks and barbarians. The term *barbarian* came from the expression for the person for whom Greek was not their primary language. It came from the term *to babble*; and to the Greek, all others were not even worth listening to. *1 Cor 14:11, If then I do not know the meaning of the language, I will be to the one who speaks a barbarian, and the one who speaks will be a barbarian to me.* This disdain was captured when Paul first went to Athens. *Acts 17:18, “And also some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers were conversing with him. Some were saying, “What would this idle babbler wish to say?”*
- To the church, the gospel is the lifeline extended to lift us out of a world of darkness and into the safety of His everlasting arms. It is a powerful message which opens the door to submit to a new Master and carry a new hope. God’s wisdom is empowering for the longing-heart in search of the Creator of the universe. God’s wisdom, predominantly through the gospel account, is powerful. *Romans 1:16, For I am not ashamed of the*



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gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

- Paul quoted Isaiah 29:14 as his proof passage. *“Therefore behold, I will once again deal marvelously with this people, wondrously marvelous; And the wisdom of their wise men will perish, And the discernment of their discerning men will be concealed.”* In that passage, Isaiah described the ignorance of the Jewish people prior to the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BC. They honored God with their lips, but their hearts were far from Him. In the same way, the “clever” ones would not listen to the gospel message, for to them it was like babbling.

2) The Wisdom of God is Simple.

1 Corinthians 1:20-21, Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹ For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not *come to* know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. ²⁵ For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; ²³ but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, ²⁴ but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.



- I am not attempting to criticize education, but simply to properly contrast it to the wisdom of God. Simply put, it is better to have a GED in Christ than a PHD in the world. Paul used three terms which made up the educational system of the day.
 - a) Wise Man: The word is *sophos* and it meant one who was an educated philosopher. He was one that carried much wisdom in the head. He was considered the smartest of the three.
 - b) Scribe: In the Greek culture the *grammateus* was one whom was able to reason with the education which was embedded in the head. The city clerk of the town who reasoned through Paul’s trouble in Acts 19:35 was that same word. He was the man of reason.
 - c) Debater: This was the individual that was trained to argue the information which was learned through his education. He was the communicator and defender of wisdom.
- Even those three well-trained and well-educated men could not touch the simplicity of the gospel. Their too much studying hath made them mad (Acts 26:24) in comprehending the wisdom of Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection. Try as they might, they would tend to overcomplicate that which was never meant to intellectualize.
- When it came to the message of Jesus, the Jews often required signs. He would communicate to them in parables, simple analogies and direct statements. He would even back up His testimony with a miracle; yet they would still want more signs (Mark 8:11-12). To the Jew, anyone hung on a cross was shamed (Dt 21:22-23). Therefore, Jesus was a stumbling block to the wise of this world. They expected their Messiah to set up an earthly reign, but what resulted was a stumbling-block. To Jews who held a worldly perspective of Jesus, He was nothing more than an unproven stumbling-block.

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- The Greeks actually desired a deep and lengthy explanation in their standards of wisdom. The more complicated and difficult to learn, the better. To hear such a simple message was utter foolishness. It is to this which Paul could testify concerning wisdom and the Greeks. For those in the Corinthian church who tried to overcomplicate Paul's preaching, he wrote, *1 Cor 4:10, We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are prudent in Christ; we are weak, but you are strong; you are distinguished, but we are without honor.*
- God's wisdom is simple. Everyone that is searching is able to understand for God made it that way.

3) The Wisdom of God is fair.

1 Corinthians 1:26-31, For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; ²⁷but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, ²⁸and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, ²⁹so that no man may boast before God. ³⁰But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, ³¹so that, just as it is written, "LET HIM WHO BOASTS, BOAST IN THE LORD."

- Roman colonies, such as Corinth, were organized in terms of citizenship, birth and wealth. There were basically the "haves" and "have nots". You were either somebody or a nobody. Paul again identified three types of people making up the social elite.
 - a) The Wise: As covered before, these were the well-educated.
 - b) The Influential: These were those who held power in the colony. They would have likely worked for the government.
 - c) The Noble Birth: These are the ones that were born into royalty or nobility.
- They were the social elites of the day and in control of the information, decisions and outcomes for the populace. If you were not privileged to be in that elitist group, then you were a peon.
- In the church at Corinth, there were a few of these in the congregation, but the bulk of the members were not so. They were just your average, every-day, run of the mill saints. In the world, it might work one way, but when it comes to the wisdom of God, they all are the elite. In other words, the message of Jesus Christ was reaching the full range of social strata at Corinth (and presumably elsewhere).
- We must see that the wisdom of God is fair. He is no respecter of persons, but a lover of all. His wisdom is fair. It is through Him that all are made righteous, are sanctified and are redeemed.

God's wisdom is Powerful, Simple and Fair.

Application: We live in a world where there is heavy emphasis on worldly wisdom, but the Christian would be wise to cling to the gospel wisdom for which we yielded to in the beginning of our relationship. Never forget that God's wisdom is powerful, simple, and fair. It is powerful, for it saves. It is simple, for any searcher can understand. It is fair, for it is for all. Don't ever neglect the wisdom of God.