

Working it Out wk3: Wisdom & Foolishness of the Cross
January 21, 2024

There are often roadblocks that people have in responding to the Gospel. Some of those roadblocks have to do with personal experience with Christians or religion in general.

But often, those roadblocks have to do with the way we think about God. We either think He should act like us-so that He makes more sense to us. Or we can think that this whole thing just seems too simple. Why would God do all the work and shouldn't there be levels to this?

This kind of thinking isn't new, and Paul is going to spend some time addressing a couple of these roadblocks that people in Corinth had when coming to the Gospel. As he does, he's going to talk about wisdom and foolishness in a way that resonates with the people he's writing to, that are steeped in a culture that elevated philosophy.

Philosophy is the study of the fundamental nature of knowledge, reality, and existence. The word philosophy literally means, "love of wisdom." There are some really important things that have come from the study of philosophy and I don't want to belittle it – there are few things more dangerous or silly sounding than a couple of freshman philosophy majors. It can become an exercise in sounding smart or asking questions that border on absurd and you wonder if anything productive can come of it.

I came across a couple of jokes about philosophy this week to share. How do you get a philosophy student off your front porch? Pay the for the pizza.

Second one – I went to a Comedy and Philosophy night recently. I laughed more than I thought.

I'm not really wanting to rip on philosophy but it is something that Paul is going to address at the end of the 1st chapter of 1st Corinthians. He's going to spend some time talking about wisdom and apparent foolishness and how the cross will seem

like foolishness and a stumbling block to different groups of people as they hear the gospel message.

Remember that Paul is writing to this church in Corinth, which although it was a Roman colony, was still in ancient Greece. Philosophy and ideas are a major part of Greek life. Paul started this church after first visiting Athens where it says they spend all their time sitting around talking about and listening to ideas. While Athens was probably the peak of that culture, Corinth was close in proximity and certainly had similar cultural influences.

He had begun his preaching in the Jewish synagogue where the first synagogue ruler, Crispus, converted and began following Jesus – and eventually the man who replaced him, Sosthenes was beaten by the Jews in the synagogue leading to his conversion- and him becoming a co-signer of this letter to the church in Corinth.

In the section we are going to look at today, Paul is addressing the problems that both groups – Jews and Greeks – have in accepting the Gospel. And he is reminding them why they came to believe and follow Jesus.

He begins the address – with a verse we looked at briefly last week; but I want to look at the end of that verse a little more today remember the emphasis is not on baptism in the verse, but God’s call on Paul’s life to preach, to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus.

1 Corinthians 1:17 For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with wisdom and eloquence, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

The last part of this verse is an incredible comfort and reminder to me. Sometimes, if you do what I do, there is this pressure that can build up that you need to say everything just the right way. You need to be engaging, you need to be forceful, you need to move people emotionally – I believe deep down that we dare not bore people in our preaching – but the power of the preaching is in the cross. There is a temptation to compare yourself with other pastors – good and

bad – when, as we talked about last week, we are all just servants. The message is what matters.

The imperative in all preaching is the cross of Christ. The power to change lives comes through the work of the Holy Spirit through the message of that cross. And anytime we try to out clever, out argue, out persuade people into following Jesus, we are misguided and fall into the trap of relying on our own strength and wisdom. And that does everyone a disservice.

Paul's focus is on the cross. He's going to say that when we preach the cross, the world sees a **Foolish Wisdom** and a **Weak Power**. Yet that wisdom is the answer we need and that power is what sets us free from sin and death.

1 Corinthians 1:18-25 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. ¹⁹ For it is written:

"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise;

the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate."^[c]

²⁰ Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher 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 know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. ²² Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

Foolish Wisdom – One of the stumbling blocks that many people have is that God doesn't behave like they think He should. Maybe you've had some of this experience. Have you ever thought, "If I were God, I wouldn't do it like that?"

It's a little amazing how easily we can play that game, without even pausing to think about our inability to understand or do any number of things. We treat God a little bit like the intense Chiefs fan who watches the game and can't believe how

dumb Andy Reid is for some of his play calls. If he would just run what I want, they would easily win every game. It's a little silly during the games – multiply that idea exponentially when it comes to playing God.

One of the biggest struggles of the Greek's who heard this message of Jesus, God in the flesh, dying on a cross to pay the price of sin for whoever would put their faith in him, begin to do life the way he taught and modeled, and they would live with Him forever; was that it just didn't compute.

They had lots of gods in their culture. The gods would not take the place of and pay a price for humanity to be forgiven. Greek gods were not in the habit of loving people; humans were as step below them. They might show mercy and bestow favor on people from time to time, but a loving relationship did not make sense.

When it came to the idea of forgiveness the thinking was, and this is still an argument that I see today –**why couldn't God just forgive?** Why did Jesus need to die? It seems like foolishness. It seems like a waste. How can one man's death, pay the penalty for all mankind?

There is a sports radio personality that I enjoy and I have followed on social media for a couple of years. He's not one of the loud, crazy sports people – he's calm and makes a habit of making sure that the things he says about sports isn't just his emotion, but that there's data to back it up. He would say he's an atheist I think; doesn't say it on the radio-just from his social media interactions, I think it's fair to say. But this is one of his lines of reasoning and rebuttal's – it's a stumbling block to him. The idea that someone had to die on a cross, so he could be forgiven...just doesn't compute with him.

The theological answer to the question is that Jesus' death on the cross is what God's justice demands. There is a price to pay for sin. Jesus didn't dismiss or discount that price, he paid it with his life.

Mercy is what allows God to substitute that death for ours.

And as Paul correctly points out, that seems like foolishness to many.

Then he addresses the other stumbling block – **Weak Power**

For centuries, the Jewish people had looked for a promised Messiah. They expected that this messiah would come in power and would return Israel to independence and military prominence. He would be a king that all nations would acknowledge and bow before. In their minds that means they would bow because of his overwhelming military might.

Christians, like Paul, would proclaim that Jesus was this promised king and instead of the unquestioned military and religious leader they expected, he would be crucified as a common criminal. What kind of Messiah was that?

Furthermore, if it is true, why would God rely on messengers like Paul to share this news. Why would God not use a series of powerful signs that make it obvious that Jesus is the Son of God?

The demand for signs works against faith. It is telling God what He has to do for it to be enough for you to believe – and belief that is seen isn't really belief; it's knowledge.

The weakness of the cross was a stumbling block to Jews, and it can still be a stumbling block today – not because we have an idea about the Messiah. But because in some circles, we have this expectation of Jesus as a warrior king. We embrace the parts of Revelation where Jesus is leading an army on a white horse defeating Satan's army. There's a militant Christianity that can't get enough of that imagery – while ignoring the parts in Revelation where Jesus is portrayed as a lamb that had been slain.

It was through the cross that God demonstrated his power, and achieved victory. It was not a victory over Israel's perceived enemies, but its greatest enemy sin and death. Now that stumbling block of the cross is giving hope to us all.

Then Paul moves from the wisdom and weakness arguments to remind them that they are **Chosen People of the Cross**.

1 Corinthians 1:26-29 Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. ²⁸ God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, ²⁹ so that no one may boast before him.

Paul is reminding them that they were not chosen to hear the message of the cross because of their wisdom or because of their social status. The simple message of the cross lowered the bar for who could be saved.

It was not about keeping the law or knowing all of the rules. It was not a club that was looking for influential people to join so others would follow.

Paul places this section in between his appeals for unity and it is his basis for that appeal to unity. We unite under the primacy of the cross of Christ. He brings us from the various places we've scattered and divided and he brings us together in him.

The repeated theme that we see throughout the life of Jesus, until his dying breath on the cross was a reaching out and welcoming in of those who most would consider on the outside.

He was born to parents with little means and the birth was announced to shepherds. He continually ate with tax collectors and sinners. He taught using a parable where the hero of the story was a despised Samaritan. He revealed that he was the Messiah to a Samaritan woman at a well. And in his dying moments he offered forgiveness to the soldiers who executed him and the crowd that cheered his execution. He even declared that one of the criminals executed with him would be with him in eternity.

That message is an invitation to everyone to come. Don't come thinking that your goodness makes you acceptable. Don't come thinking that your superior intellect has qualified you to know what God is doing.

Come knowing that the cross of Christ was God's solution to your sin. Come knowing that the punishment we deserved was poured out on Jesus because his great love compelled him to take it for us.

And he has given us the Holy Spirit to work in us and unite us and shape us into His body – the church.

If you are here today, and you have never embraced the power of the cross by turning from sin, identifying with his death and resurrection in baptism, I want to encourage you to take a step towards that. Meet in prayer room to talk about next step.

Homework – read chapter 4