

Sermon: Who Is Wise: Two Kinds of People?

Text: [I Corinthians 1:18-2:5](#) ESV

Gary L. Wackler

January 15, 2023

Introduction: The gospel writers, Apostles John and Paul, have many things in common in the way they present ideas that are opposites. Here Paul makes it clear that spiritually there are only two kinds of people in the world: those who are perishing and those who are being saved ([v.18](#)). The Bible constantly talks about two kinds of people in the world: wise and foolish, weak and strong, etc.

[I Corinthians 1:18](#) JB - The language of the cross may be illogical to those who are not on the way to salvation (**and there is a needed change in direction for this to be possible - GLW**), but those of us who are on the way see it as God's power to save.

Paul had just come from Athens where he had had very limited success with presenting Jesus as Savior to the culture. He had quoted their own poets and philosophers to try and bridge the gap, but only a few men accepted Christ. So when Paul made his way into the pagan town of Corinth he decided his message would be more direct. He would preach the cross and Christ crucified. But there is a risk in preaching that theme.

Illustration from *The Collected Sermons of Fred B. Craddock*, p. 237 - We hear about people, especially in the entertainment industry, who have left their churches to join Scientology like Tom Cruise and others (**or maybe a health and wealth prosperity teaching church where there is no talk of sacrifice, judgment or hell**). They testify to receiving what they did not get in their traditional churches, namely, a sense of caress and comfort and health and coping and healing. There are no crosses. As theologian Reinhold Niebuhr said some years ago when he was teaching at Union Theological Seminary in New York, 'This is a view that insists on a God without wrath bringing men and women without sin into a kingdom without judgment through a Christ without a cross.'"

Lightfoot says: "The cross occupies a central place in proclaiming the gospel. It is both the crowning point of a life of self-renunciation and also the ordained instrument of salvation. He found that when he left the results to God and just preached about the cross he was able to deliver:

I. A Message of Power (1:18-25)

I Corinthians 1:18-25 ESV 18 For the word of the cross is folly 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 discernment of the discerning I will thwart.” 20 Where is the one who is wise? 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 did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. 22 For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, 23 but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, 24 but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25 For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

It was a simple message that required faith because for the Jews the message was a:

A. Stumbling block (v. 23)

literally a scandal...the stick which an animal stumbled over causing the trap to shut

For the Jew, even their own Scripture seemed to not allow for the possibility of a crucified Messiah. **Deuteronomy 21:22-23 ESV** 22 “And if a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, 23 his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is cursed by God. You shall not defile your land that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance.

Even with **Isaiah 53** and the whole concept of “The Suffering Servant,” the Jew could not comprehend their Messiah being disadvantaged. In fact they believed that when the Messiah would come there would be freedom from oppression and unmatched prosperity.

The Jews looked for signs and wonders from their Messiah...

That is why they were so easily fooled so many times.

(Barclay, p.20) In A.D. 45 a man called Theudas persuaded thousands of Jews to abandon their homes and follow him out to the Jordan where he promised he would lead them across by parting the waters so to speak.

In A.D. 54 another false messiah arrived from Egypt in Jerusalem and led 30,000 people out to the Mount of Olives by promising to collapse the walls of Jerusalem by his command.

You can see all of this in the background during the temptations of Jesus recorded in Matthew and Luke, i.e., stones into bread, throw yourself down from the temple, or receive political power by worshipping Satan.

Yet Jesus refused all these attempts to meet man's expectations. Jesus demonstrated humility, love, and faithfulness to God's purpose for Him even though it might not endear Him to His audience or gain Him wide acceptance. His way was narrow and hard not wide and easy (like what we normally want).

and to the Greeks (GENTILES)...the cross was viewed as:

B. Foolishness (v. 23)

Matthew 11:25 ESV ²⁵ At that time Jesus declared, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children;

John 7:17 ESV ¹⁷ If anyone's will is to do God's will, he will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority.

Proverbs 14:12 ESV (also 16:25) ¹² There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death.

You can't *always* trust your feelings or even what others may teach you. The truth has to be checked and tested.

The Greeks also had a concept of what God was like. They believed the deity was apathetic towards humanity, unmoved by people's problems, etc. Plutarch declared that it was an insult to God to involve Him in human affairs. The idea of the incarnation was utter nonsense to the Greek. And **Philippians 2** not even possible, i.e., who would choose such a demotion (from LORD to servant or literally slave)?

This message of power surprises us when we hear ideas like "the last will be first. You have to die to live. You have to become poor to be rich." The Greeks went after wisdom, but it was man's wisdom which Paul says doesn't even compare favorably to God's foolishness.

Anyone who disbelieves or disobeys God is counted as foolish (lit. moron). The message that is preached may seem like foolishness, but what really is foolish is not believing and following God.

Matthew 7:24-29 ESV (from the Sermon on the Mount) ²⁴ “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. ²⁵ And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. ²⁶ And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. ²⁷ And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it.” ²⁸ And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, ²⁹ for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes.

When the gospel of the cross is believed, it creates:

II. A People of Power (1:26-31)

I Corinthians 1:26-31 ESV ²⁶ For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, [*lit. according to the flesh*] not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; ²⁸ God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, ²⁹ so that no human being [*flesh*] might boast in the presence of God. ³⁰ And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, ³¹ so that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

And this is not a people of power like you might think based on human position or accomplishment. In fact Paul would say **Philippians 3:7-10 ESV** ⁷ But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— ¹⁰ that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death,

Christians are people from every possible walk of life. Paul says that the makeup of the Corinthian church was:

1. not many were wise by human standards (v.26)

Illus. Standards are very important. Who we compare ourselves to is also important, AND compared to Jesus, none of us fare that well. We all have sinned and fall short of the glory (reputation) of God.

2. not many were influential (mighty, KJV; powerful; Greek=δυνατοι (v.26)
3. not many were of noble birth

It only matters who your *spiritual* father is. It does not matter who your earthy parents are. That may be an advantage or a disadvantage.

“Selina, Countess of Huntingdon, thanked God for the letter ‘**m**’ in ‘many’; a few members like Erastus, the city treasurer (Romans 16:23), occupied fairly influential positions” (F.F. Bruce, p.36). **Reread I Corinthians 1:26 ESV-26** For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards,[**lit. according to the flesh**] not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth.

About Christians, a second-century man by the name of Celsus said: “Let no cultured person draw near, none wise, none sensible; for all that kind of thing we count evil; but if any man is ignorant, if any is wanting in sense and culture, if any is a fool let him come boldly.”

And yet God says just the opposite: **Psalm 14:1 ESV (53:1)** ¹ The fool says in his heart, “There is no God.” They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds; there is none who does good.

Paul is NOT saying that there were no people of importance or regard from a human perspective. There certainly were.

(Barclay, p.23) In the time of Nero, Pomponia Graecina, the wife of Plautius, the conqueror of Britain, was martyred for her Christianity. In the time of Domitian,...Flavius Clemens, the cousin of the Emperor himself, was martyred as a Christian. Towards the end of the second century Pliny, the governor of Bithynia, wrote to Trajan the Roman Emperor, saying that the Christians came from every rank in society.

Paul reminds us in **Galatians 3:26-29** **ESV** ²⁶ for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. ²⁷ For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. ²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

The playing field is leveled and any separation into parties, factions or classes is utterly ridiculous and without merit.

Christians are a “people of power” based on their relationship with Jesus Christ which when real (genuine, legitimate) produces a heavenly wisdom resulting in a “new nature” producing:

1. righteousness
2. holiness
3. redemption

And because this is nothing we have accomplished by our own effort, but only by the grace of God and his gift of the Holy Spirit, we cannot boast except in the Lord.

So because everything is from God and because of Him, we have been entrusted with:
III. A Ministry of Power (2:1-5)

I Corinthians 2:1-5 **ESV** ¹ And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. ² For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. ³ And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, ⁴ and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, ⁵ so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God. (comment on variant reading mystery or testimony in verse 1.)

A question one could ask after reading the description of Paul's ministry with the Corinthians: Would you hire him?

He is NOT:

1. eloquent
2. very wise
3. strong or poised in his presentation of the gospel
4. a persuasive speaker

In fact the only thing Paul has going for himself as a minister is the simplicity of his message AND God's power which accompanied it. Other than that, not much. Right?

How many churches do you think would have hired Paul?

The power of any ministry for God should be in changed lives. It is measured in how we are better for having known each other. God is not impressed with big attendances and record offerings or large campuses. He looks to see if hearts are devoted to Him.

Comment: The church has not grown, but I have, said my friend (M.D.). Those are the kind of comments that can change others. The proof of a powerful ministry is changed lives.

Conclusion:

Illus. of a changed life that changed me - Cy (Ruth) Hall

(adapted from Barclay, p.28) Too often we try to talk people into becoming Christians on the basis of apologetics or air-tight arguments, when what they really need to see and hear is Jesus in us, and how much we care.

There are those who would say: "believe in God and put your faith in Jesus and your life will be a positive experience full of victory." The *Collected Sermons of Fred B. Craddock*, p. 240 - "If you believe in God, that is sometimes when your trouble starts. One day Jesus said to his disciples, 'Get into the boat and go to the other side' ([Matthew 14:22-33 ESV](#)). They did what he said, and they hit a storm (*Thanks, Jesus*). It was not because they disobeyed that they hit a storm; it was because they *obeyed* that they hit a storm. Believing in God means putting yourself in situations that may cause you to say, 'Why did I do *that*?' I thought God blesses you when you do right.' Because of their faith, some people have stopped the mouths of lions, have won wars, have raised the dead, have had every kind of triumph in the world. But other people, because of their faith in God have suffered, They have been chased, and pushed, and hurt, and talked against, and imprisoned because of their faith. Faith is not a success story; faith is a story that says, 'I take this up as my way of life.'

But I think the primary reason Paul had to preach the cross is because the cross tells us how God is. God identifies with human suffering; God comes to us and suffers with us, and that sympathy is extraordinarily powerful...

You might remember a movie a few years ago called *The Last Temptation of Christ*. This was developed from a novel whose story line became very controversial in the movie. “The novel basically said that when Jesus got into Jerusalem and the noose was tightening around his neck and there was no way out and death was in front of him, Jesus thought, ‘Why don’t I just go back to Nazareth, marry, have a family, take up carpentry again, and get out of this? Nobody seems to care anyway.’

If Jesus had done that, if he had slipped out of town, gone back to Nazareth, married, had children, lived like everybody else, would we be able to sing ‘What a Friend We Have in Jesus’? No, no, not at all. If he had skipped out before the pain started... But Jesus did not do that. He went to the cross.

Sometimes a child falls down and skins a knee or an elbow, then runs crying to his mother. The mother picks up the child and says--in what is the oldest myth in the world--‘Let me kiss it and make it well,’ as if a mother has magic saliva or something. She picks up the child, kisses the skinned place, holds the child in her lap, and all is well. Did her kiss make it well? No, no. It was that ten minutes in her lap. Just sit in the lap of love and see the mother crying.

‘Mother, why are you crying? I’m the one who hurt my elbow.’
‘Because you’re hurt,’ the mother says, ‘I hurt.’

That does more for a child than all the bandages and all the medicine in the world, just sitting on *that mother’s* lap.

What is the cross?

Can I say it this way? It is to sit for a few minutes on the lap of God, who hurts because you hurt.

Paul said, ‘I have to preach that.’ So do I...and so do you!