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1 Corinthians 1:18-31

Third Message

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THE CROSS AND THE WISDOM OF GOD

SERIES: EXAMINING LIFE IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

Early in the 1980's, *Fortune* magazine published an article entitled "On the Fast Track to the Good Life." The story described the modern young entrepreneur, and gave research findings on the attitudes and values of 25-year-olds who were taking their places in the business world. The purpose of the research was to give readers an idea of what to expect from young adults during the next decade. Talk about an accurate crystal ball! One man has summarized the results in the following six observations:

1. These young people believe that a successful life means financial independence and that the best way to gain financial independence is to be at the top of a major corporation.
2. They believe in themselves. They believe that they have the abilities and capacities to be the best. There is no "humble talk" among them.
3. They believe in the corporate world. They are sure that the corporations they would lead are the most worthwhile corporations in the world.
4. They view as "a drag on success" any relationship that slows their ascent of the corporate ladder. Marriage is an acceptable option only if it does not interfere with their aspirations for success. Having children, for most of them, is something to which they will have to give a great deal of thought.
5. Loyalty is not high on their list of values. Unlike "The Organization Man," described by William Whyte Jr. in his book of the same name during the '50's, the young Turks of this new breed have their resumes ever at hand. They are ready to move from one company to another and believe that loyalty to one company could lead to staying in a system that might not maximize upward mobility.
6. They are convinced that they are more creative and imaginative than those who now hold top corporate positions, and they believe that there is not much they can learn from those older types before they take their places.

That attitude reflects the spirit of our age, and well portrays what the apostle Paul calls in his first Corinthian letter the "wisdom of the world." These young men would feel right at home in Corinth, with its exaltation of the human mind and its love of philosophies and status symbols, things which were producing division in the church in that city. The fact that the Corinthians boasted in party slogans is a clear indication that they overvalued human wisdom and misunderstood the nature of the gospel.

Last week we talked of the importance of our unity as a body of believers and of discovering the mind of Christ. This process involves "unlearning" the wisdom of the world as much as it does absorbing the wisdom of God. I don't think we appreciate how much we have been influenced by the secularism of our age. We need to become aware of and deal with this because it is a serious threat not only to the gospel but to the church as well. In our last study we saw that

it is the cross that heals our divisions. As we will see this morning, however, secular wisdom subtly empties the cross of its power.

In our passage, from 1:18-31, Paul contrasts this wisdom of the world with the wisdom of God. In verses 18-25 we will come to understand the centrality of the cross in discerning between these two wisdoms. In verses 25-31 the apostle illustrates this truth by showing us that our own lives are testimony to the fact that God does indeed work through weakness.

I. The wisdom of God explained: The word of the Cross (1:18-25)

For the word of the cross is to those who are perishing foolishness, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written:

**"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise;
and the cleverness of the clever I will set aside."**

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? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block, and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. (1 Cor 1:18-25 NASB)

The theme of this section is the cross as the wisdom and the power of God, in contrast to the wisdom and power of the world.

Paul has already said he has been sent to preach the gospel. That has triggered his thoughts, because he knows immediately that he is faced with a decision about its content. He is faced with a choice between the "words of human wisdom" and the "cross of Christ." If he were to choose human wisdom the cross would be destroyed (1:17). So he chooses the cross, which he knows to be foolishness to those who are perishing, but at the same time it is the power of God to those who are being saved (1:18). *Powerless wisdom or foolish power:* it was and still is a fateful choice. The one combination which is not an option is the wisdom of the world plus the power of God. This is the choice we are faced with every day of our lives. I pray this will become clearer for all of us as a result of our study this morning.

We can summarize the wisdom of God and the wisdom of the world as follows: God's wisdom centers on the cross and symbolizes divine dependence; the world's wisdom centers on intellect and eloquence and symbolizes human rebellion.

But I don't think we feel the power of that symbol of the cross in our day. Many people wear the cross as a symbol around their necks.

We have become so familiar with it we have lost the sense of horror it represented for people in the first century. Ray Stedman once said we would better understand the cross if we substituted for it a symbol of an electric chair. Supposing we had an electric chair mounted on the wall here. Supposing all churches had electric chairs on the top of their steeples, or if those who wear crosses around their necks substituted an electric chair instead. We need to remember that Jesus Christ was crucified on that Roman gibbet. God's wisdom is seen in the Messiah hanging on a tree.

The cross is central in Paul's mind because it represents the basic difference between human and divine wisdom. In fact it is the cross that separates humanity into two camps: those who are being saved and those who are perishing. Although it is not obvious by outward appearances the fact remains, according to Scripture, that there are only two kinds of people; and the element that produces the divergence between those two groups is the cross.

Why is the cross so critical? When we begin to understand the meaning of the cross, we will know why. The cross makes a judgment on human life. When we say we believe in the cross, we are admitting that God substituted himself for our wickedness. The sinless One died in our place. The cross condemns my righteousness. It tells me that I am a sinner and that I am in need of a Savior. The cross declares that all my abilities and intellect and good works are deeply marred and therefore worthless. That is the word of the cross, and thus it is an offense to those who are perishing; a crude, absurd attack on their pride. But to those who are being saved the cross is the key that opens the gate to all of God's blessings in human life. The cross is the way to experience forgiveness, healing, wholeness, peace and joy.

I would like to make two observations from the text we have just read that will help us understand the importance of the cross in discerning the difference between God's wisdom and the wisdom of the world.

A. The Cross reminds us that God's wisdom is never acquired through human ingenuity

The gospel is not a product of human philosophy. In fact it involves a reversal of human expectation. Who would have thought that God would work through the scandal of the cross? Only God could demonstrate his power through a dying, powerless "criminal."

But Paul tells us that this is not a new thought. This has always been the way God has worked. He has never depended on human ingenuity. To illustrate his point, the apostle quotes a verse from Isaiah 29. Judah was being invaded by the Assyrians, and King Hezekiah called in the politicians and the intellectuals to discuss this dilemma. Their advice was that the only way to survive was to make an alliance with Egypt, a pagan nation. Sign a mutual defense treaty, they suggested. They were planning and acting out a scheme that completely ignored the transcendent God. Then God spoke through the prophet Isaiah and announced that he would deliver his people without any help from their so-called intellectuals. Isaiah goes on to record how God did that very thing. The Assyrian army came right up to the gates and surrounded the city, but God sent an angel who killed 185,000 Assyrians that very night. The rest of the pagan army fled in fear. God did exactly what he said he would do. He did not need any human help. He had set aside the cleverness of the wise.

Paul asks, "Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age?" Here he uses three terms that describe all the learned of the world, and asks, "Where are they?" He is not

asking for their address. He is asking what is the real value of human wisdom. What real standing does it give to you? How much value can be discerned by the degrees you have? How much trust should we put in men to solve their own problems? None, is Paul's implied answer.

Maybe there is an Assyrian crouching at your doorstep this morning demanding your surrender. It could be a difficult marriage, a debilitating illness with endless hospital bills, an immoral relationship. Who you are going to turn to for help? There are all kinds of people whom you can ask for human advice, but Paul's counsel is turn to the transcendent God who can help you.

Referring to the foolishness of this kind of wisdom, Paul in no way underestimates its impact. It is a subtle threat that strikes at the very heart of our message. He clearly admits the effectiveness of human wisdom. Notice the phrases he uses to describe it. In 1:17 he describes as *cleverness of speech*; in 1:19 He calls it the *cleverness of the clever*; in 2:1 he says he did not come with *superiority of speech or of wisdom*; in 2:4 he says his message and his preaching were not in *persuasive words of wisdom*. One of the ways you can detect human wisdom is by its emphasis on eloquent, persuasive presentation with its surplus of words.

Paul was not against the right use of persuasive arguments. He often used them himself. But he constantly discounted the dependence on persuasive speech alone for transformation. Throughout the pastoral epistles in his counsel to Timothy he explained the futility of endless verbal debates. He told him to look for changed lives: faith, love and purity. He told him to avoid the kind of religion that sounds religious but in essence was as myths, speculations, vain discussions, quarrels and stupid controversies. Such wisdom can achieve a lot of things. It can impress people and earn accolades, but because it is nothing but words it can never meet our deepest needs; it can never satisfy a hungry soul.

This was the kind of wisdom that walked the streets of Corinth, the kind that filled the boardrooms where decisions were being made. The Greeks were intoxicated with fine words. And, unfortunately, this had infiltrated the church. Christians were glorying in men and comparing each other's gifts.

We need to say at this point that Paul is not condemning knowledge or the pursuit of knowledge. God always encourages the discovery of truth. Christianity is not anti-intellectual. God gives us minds to use, and they are not to be set aside when we become Christians. To give yourself to the wonder of discovery in the fields of medicine, physics and psychology is perfectly right and good. But there is a distinction between human knowledge and wisdom. Wisdom is a skill. Wisdom is the ability to use knowledge and truth. And the Scripture says that there is something terribly wrong with human wisdom. It does not know how to use the truth it uncovers. It becomes obvious if you are well read that many secular writers surpass Christians in their discovery of truth. But the truth they discover is often misused, twisted and distorted. They end up worse than they were before they began their search.

It is this kind of intellectual pursuit that caused T. S. Elliot to write,

All our knowledge brings us closer to our ignorance.
All our ignorance brings us nearer to death.
But nearness to death, no nearer to God.
Where is the life we have lost in living?

That is why you ought to be careful that you do not begin to worship human wisdom. The true nature of human wisdom is foolishness, says Paul. You young men and women who are about to go off to college need to understand this. You will be hearing from professors with persuasive arguments about the truth they have discovered. But listen for their application of the truth they know. It may sound impressive, it may radiate optimism, but in the final analysis it changes nothing. That is why every generation wrestles with the same problems. It is the Scriptures that put the discovery of truth in its proper perspective.

Here is a second observation on this passage.

B. The Cross reminds us that God's wisdom is obtained only through repentance and faith

Isn't it amazing that in spite of man's claims to have penetrated the secrets of life he has failed to discover the greatest fact of all—God himself. On the contrary, whenever he comes across an inkling of the fact of God he suppresses it.

Despite man's denial of God, however, Paul says that man attempts to construct a way to God, in one of two ways. The Jews wanted irrefutable evidence and tangible proof, so they demanded a sign. Their idea of a Messiah was a victorious King reigning in majesty. A Messiah hanging on a tree was a stumbling block, a scandal. Deuteronomy said, "cursed is every one who hangs on a tree." To the Jew, a crucified Messiah was a contradiction in terms.

Whereas the Jews wanted signs, the Greeks sought wisdom. They preferred to speculate their way to God. They loved to reason and argue. Their God was a stoic philosopher who had no feelings. They argued that God could not feel. That God would become a man did not make sense, never mind that he would suffer and die. For the Son of God to be born in human form, then to grow up into manhood virtually unrecognized, to quietly go about doing good and healing sicknesses, to surrender his life to wicked men and die a criminal's death of crucifixion defied their human understanding. It didn't make sense. It was non-sense, foolishness, stupidity!

Paul indicates that this worldly wisdom arose out of man's rebellion against God, his refusal to bow his knee to God, and his determination to make God fit his criteria and needs. But God has chosen to set aside the searchings, the demands of proud, stubborn men and confront them with a simple story of a crucified Messiah. As long as man clings tenaciously to his own criteria he will continue to go around in circles on the spiral that descends ultimately to destruction.

The key question in Paul's mind to both Jew and Greek, and the key question for all of us this morning, is: Do you want to be saved or do you want to perish? Will you continue to hang on to your demand for signs rather than asking to be saved? Will you perish in your endless pursuit of wisdom instead of admitting that you need a Savior? It is to this issue of eternity in our souls that God addresses the word of the cross.

C. S. Lewis wrote:

It is hardly complimentary to God that we should choose him as an alternative to hell. Yet even this He accepts. The creature's illusion of self-sufficiency must, for the creature's sake, be shattered. And by trouble, or fear of trouble on earth, by crude fear of the eternal flames, God shatters it, unmindful of his glory's diminution. I call this "divine humility," because it's a poor thing to strike our colors to God when the ship is going down under us, a poor thing to come to Him as a last resort, to offer up our own when it is no longer worth keeping. If

God were proud, he would hardly have us on such terms. But He is not proud. He stoops to conquer. He would have us even though we have shown that we prefer everything else to Him, and come to Him because there is nothing better to be had.

It is human wisdom that has inflated man to the condition where he is unable to admit his need for a Savior, to talk about such things as eternal destruction, to bring him to his knees and cause him to say, "Lord, save me!" God has made himself unknown and unknowable by means of human wisdom. He has decided to save, not those who are particularly gifted intellectually, or who do good, or who work to the best of their ability, but those *who believe* in this crucified Christ. When you bow your knee to Jesus Christ as Lord, then and only then you begin to taste God's power to save.

We can see even more clearly God's wisdom in the way he operates. Verses 26-31:

II. The wisdom of God illustrated: The ways of God (1:26-31)

For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble. But 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. And the base things of the world and the despised, God has chosen, the things that are not, that he might nullify the things that are, that no man should boast before God. But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption, that, just as it is written, "Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord." (1:26-31)

If you don't believe that is the way God works, then look around you, says Paul. He saves those who believe, not the wise or the mighty, and thus expresses his desire to knock down human pride. All through Scripture we are taught that God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. He is so intent on destroying pride that he acts in a way that reveals its futility and emptiness. He did so at Corinth: "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. And the base things of the world and the despised, God has chosen, the things that are not, that he might nullify the things that are."

This new life of purity, hope and peace was evident there in the Christian community—and nowhere else in Corinth. God took that simple message and began to change lives. People who were swindlers became ethical in their business practices. Adulterous men went back to their wives. Harsh, cruel fathers began to love their children. Homosexuals had their orientation on life changed. The power of God to change lives was evident right in their midst. And yet, look around, says Paul: "there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble." The philosophers, the noble, the business executives, the people walking the corridors of power—they were notable by their absence. There were some exceptions, but not many.

Paul tells the Corinthians, and us as well, that we should learn something from this observation. By working in this manner God is revealing the error of one of our unspoken values, and that is, that those who matter to him are the wise, the gifted, the articulate, the wealthy, those who have power and influence. That value system is still present today, even in the church, and it hinders God's glory.

Corinth was by no means unusual in that Christianity spread in the lower classes of society. It was this fact in part that made it so offensive to some. God was making kings and priests in his kingdom among the poor and the shabby. Jesus himself told us that this would be his mission when he came and announced, "He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor." That is the way of God. James has a word to say to believers who give preferential treatment to influential people. But God's way is to give special treatment and honor only to his Son. God has made him to be everything to us: our *wisdom*, our *righteousness*, our *sanctification* and *redemption*. If you are looking for those things, you will find them only in Jesus: depth, status, purity and freedom. God's way is to exalt and glorify his Son. Those who are truly wise will humble themselves before the crucified Savior. And yet we must say that it is from a motive of love that God resists the proud. His method of humbling the proud is so that they can enter his presence in repentance and faith.

Dr Martyn Lloyd Jones writes:

We Christians often quote "not by might nor by power, but My Spirit saith the Lord," and yet in practice we seem to rely upon the mighty dollar and the power of press and advertising. We seem to think that our influence will depend on our technique and the program we can put forward and that it would be the numbers, the largeness, the bigness, that would prove effective. We seem to have forgotten that God has done most of his deeds in the church throughout its history through remnants. We seem to have forgotten the great story of Gideon, for instance, and how God insisted on reducing the 32,000 men down to 300 before he would make use of them. We have become fascinated by the idea of bigness, and we are quite convinced that if we can only stage, yes that's the word, stage something really big before the world, we will shake it and produce a mighty religious awakening. That seems to be the modern conception of authority.

Divine and human values are completely at variance with one another. Foolish power, or powerless wisdom: This is the choice we must make. The cross, the very figure of feebleness and folly to the world, is actually the greatest manifestation of God's wisdom and power. Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord!

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