

01/24/10

## Coming to Grips with the Wisdom of God – 1 Corinthians 1:18-25

- Q – are people like you and me ever guilty of inappropriate boasting?
  - does that ever happen even among God’s people?...
    - and I’m not talking about the statement of clear and indisputable facts like, the Colts are going to whack the Jets today...let’s leave ideas like that out of the discussion...
    - but do we ever boast?...do you ever boast?...
  
- 1. About our accomplishments...you may have seen the commercial that was running around Christmas time about 3 siblings who were driving to their parent’s home for the holidays...
  - and they each had a different version of a particular kind of car...and in each case it was brand new...and the notion was – if you buy one of these before Christmas, you’ll have bragging rights when you travel home for the holidays...
  - never mind the fact that you can’t afford such a vehicle and have no idea how you’ll make the payments...what’s important right now is being able to boast in front of your brother-in-law...as if his approval should be a ruling desire in your decision making process..
- 2. Or we boast about our academic achievements...
  - we just casually mention the grade we received on the last exam...
  - or how well we did on the SAT, or ACT, or the MCAT, or whatever...
  - and we’re thrilled if our score was the highest in the room...
- 3. We can boast in the way we disagree with others...
  - it is not a discussion that holds out the distinct possibility that the other person could be right...
  - the words drip condescension and sometimes pride...if you were only as smart as me, you would automatically agree with what I think...boasting...it takes many forms...
- 4. What about in the way we think about, or speak about, or relate to those who do not know Christ...
  - is the reason you’re not strung out on drugs today because you are inherently smarter than the person who woke up this am with no idea of where they were...
  - is the reason you’ve been married to the same person for 40 years while your co-worker’s on his 5<sup>th</sup> wife because you are just inherently wiser...when it comes right down to it, you’re better than them...
    - can Christians ever carry themselves like that?...
- 5. What about boasting about your favorite authors or positions?...
  - you might say – how could that be boasting?...
  - doesn’t it sometimes become – I’m of this person, or I’m of that writer...
  - and it can be a very short walk from, I’m of this person to, and I’m smarter than you because I’m of that person – my guy’s really smart, and since he’s my guy—that makes me smart too...
  - boasting among the people of God can take a lot of different forms...
- now let me ask you this – what impact does that have on unity...in any relationship on any level?...does boasting bring people together...whether we’re talking about in the home, or in the church, or in the community...?
  - no, there’s no question that boasting can tear relationships apart, and distance us from others about as rapidly as anything else...
  - do you know one of the best antidotes to this problem...it’s a greater understanding of the wisdom of God...

- with that in mind, let me invite you to open your Bible to 1 Corinthians chapter 1...page 130 of the back section of the Bible under the chair in front of you...
- we're talking this morning about **Coming to Grips with the Wisdom of God...**
  - last week we began a study of the book of I Corinthians and we learned that the apostle Paul had been used of God to plant this church during his second missionary journey...you can read all about that in Acts 18...
  - we also learned that Corinth was a very strategic location---that was true geographically, it was true athletically, and it was true religiously...
    - so it was a great place for the good news of Jesus Christ to be proclaimed...
    - and Paul had had a wonderful ministry there...
  - however, after he left, the church became riddled with problems...one of which was their lack of unity...they had even divided up according to the person they thought was the smartest teacher, or the most polished speaker...some were saying – I'm of Paul, others I'm of Apollos, others I'm of Peter and even some, I'm of Christ...
  - what we saw in the first 17 verses was that Paul didn't send them some sort of flaming e-mail, but nor did he simply ignore the problem and look the other way...
  - he came to them graciously and reminded them of the great identity and provisions they enjoyed in Christ...
    - he reminded them that God had provided clear truth through his apostolic authority and leadership...so they had everything necessary to develop unity with one another...so he started by recalling the good things about them...
    - but then this problem had to be faced head on...
    - so he said -- **1 Corinthians 1:10 - Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment.**
  - one of the take away's last week for you was to consider whether you had any unsolved problems with other people in your life and whether it was time to face those problems head-on in the same manner Paul used in this text...with the goal of honoring God by promoting unity and harmony in the relationships God has given you to the degree that it relies on you...
  - now, in these next verses...Paul is going to go to more of the heart of the matter...what is motivating all of this divisive behavior?...and what is the antidote?...
  - with that in mind, please follow along as I read **1 Corinthians 1:18-31...READ**
  - so we're talking about Coming to Grips with the Wisdom of God and with the time we have remaining, let's think about **3 principles we need to know to understand God's wisdom.**

### **I. God's Wisdom is Foolishness to Many.**

- now, I realize there's a lot going on in this text...so let's just break it down with...

#### **A. Some introductory questions.**

##### **1. What is Paul contrasting?**

- if you're in the habit of writing in your Bible – you might want to circle the word “speech” in verse 17 (assuming you're using a NASB) – “the cleverness of speech”...and then go to verse 18 and circle the word “word”...as in the “word of the cross.”...
- in the original language, that is the same Greek word...and Paul is setting up a contrast...between the words of man – what humans believe constitute wisdom,

and the Word of God – the wisdom we find in Scripture...now let's break that down even further...

## 2. What is the “wisdom of man?”

- Paul's not knocking man's objective intelligence...
- Christianity is a proponent of good science – we see that as a natural outgrowth of the creation mandate to go forth and multiple and subdue the earth...
- we're glad we didn't all have to walk to church today – I don't understand everything about the way a car motor works but I'm glad somebody does...
- I'm glad when I or one of my family members is ill, we can go to a doctor or a hospital and receive compassionate care...it's amazing what doctors and nurses can do...that's not in focus here...
- Paul's talking about what was known in that day as “philosophia”...the word “phileo” means “love of” and “sophos” means “knowledge or wisdom...”
- so philosophia (philosophy) means “the love of knowledge/wisdom”...
- while the word can be used positively (for example—the book of Proverbs is all about knowing, loving, applying biblical wisdom), here it used in a negative sense to denote man's attempt to explain his existence apart from God and His Word...we see that in many ways today...

**a. in regards to the origin of man** – there are all sorts of theories about how the human race developed or evolved...many of them making an absolute mockery of what Scripture says about the subject...that's the wisdom of man

**b. in regards to human ethics** – decisions have to be made about what's right and what's wrong...and there are all sorts of voices clamoring to be heard, many of them proposing ethical ideas that are the polar opposite of what Scripture says about the subject...

- for example, when a person says – this is my body and I ought to have the right to decide whether my unborn child lives or dies, that is nothing but the wisdom of man...

**c. in regards to human behavior** – psychological theories are manufactured by our world on a daily basis – hundreds and hundreds of different psychotherapies currently in use in our country, none of them agreeing with one another because there is no objective standard and no possible way to reach any level of consensus...that is the wisdom of man...and we're not anti-psychology per se but we are against any discipline whose fundamental we are against any discipline whose fundamental pre-suppositions are diametrically opposed to scripture...

- and the issue with the Corinthians was – they loved this kind of thing...
- they loved to be thought of as being great philosophers, people who were smart because of the latest answers they had composed to the mysteries of life...

## 3. What is the wisdom of God?

- especially in this passage, Paul's talking about God's simple plan of salvation through the finished work of Christ on the cross...
- in contrast to these complex philosophical systems, Paul points them to an approach that on the one hand could be understood and embraced by a child...but on the other hand, made absolutely no sense to a person who refused to believe...and purposely so...

- now, we're not saying that God's Word was intrinsically foolish...

### **B. The gospel is foolish to those who are perishing.**

- v. 18 – for the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing.

- that's the same word, by the way, that Jesus used when He said that He came to seek and save that which was “lost”...

- some of you remember the old hymn, Rescue the perishing, care for the dying, Jesus is merciful, Jesus will save...that's the picture here...
- but the problem is that men and women in their unbelief refuse to believe God's antidote to the problem...they consider it to be...
- foolishness – **Greek work moria** – from which we get the English word **moron, or moronic...**
- that's what many people think about the cross...

- and here's the point...

### **C. This news would have been very disappointing to many Corinthians.**

- because they wanted to believe in something that would make them look smarter...
- that's what was behind this whole "I'm of Apollos", "I'm of Peter," "I'm of Paul" business...
  - the whole point was – my guys smarter than your guy, and because he's my guy, that makes me smarter than you...
- and Paul is trying to help them see – there is nothing about the gospel that makes any inherent sense to the natural human mind...
- it's not like God is offering a superior philosophia that every person in the world is going to automatically believe if we just learn how to articulate it better...
- and then when we all get it, we'll all be able to boast about how smart we are because our view is so intellectually superior...
- Commentator **Gordon Fee** summarized this entire section in this way..."**Thus he says in effect, 'So you think the gospel is a form of Sophia? How foolish can you get? Look at its message; it is based on a story of a crucified Messiah. Who in the name of wisdom would have dreamed that up? Only God is so wise as to be so foolish (1:18-25). Furthermore, look at its recipients. Yourself! Who in the name of wisdom would have chosen you to be the new people of God (1:26-31)? Finally, remember my own preaching. Who in the name of wisdom would have come in such weakness? Yet, look at its results.'**"
- you can almost hear the Corinthians gasp "Oh no", you mean the unsaved world around us is not going to pat us on the back for believing the message of Christ?...no
- you mean we won't be able to boast and glory in this?...no, in fact some will call you fools and morons for believing what you believe...
- so you might as well stop all the boasting and arguing and fighting and trying to gain approval from others by the superiority of your ideas...
- now, there's a lot more to talk about but let's just start thinking about some take-aways...regarding the wisdom of man and the wisdom of God...
- let's say there's a married man here today who is dissatisfied with his wife in some way...
  - she doesn't treat him the way he thinks she should...she doesn't keep the house the way he likes...she spends too much money...she not as interested in sexual relations...you know the drill...
  - well, what would the wisdom of the world say about that?...
- it's time for him to get something going on the side...become emotionally attracted to some woman at work...or maybe physically involved...
- or start trolling around on the internet or getting involved in internet porn...

- or treating his wife in a mean spirited fashion because if he's not getting what he wants, then he's going to make her life and existence miserable...
- the world screams that kind of so-called wisdom in thousands of ways every day...
- and in contrast to that, for a Christian husband, stands the cross of Jesus Christ...an instrument of redemption, and sacrifice, and purpose, and hope...
- and that husband says in his heart – my life is not organized around what I get---Jesus delivered me from that...
  - and my Savior can help me crucify my demands, and my pettiness, and my sinful/selfish desires...
  - and I can go home tonight and try to love my wife and serve my family like Christ loved the church and gave Himself for her...
  - I can embrace the cross and serve others whether I ever receive anything in return in this life...
  - and I can do it with joy...like my Savior, **Hebrews 12:2 - ...Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.**
  - and the guys in the office will think he's an absolute fool...a moron...a chump...
  - because **1 Corinthians 1:18 - 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.**
- now, here's one of the questions – is God's wisdom foolishness...to you?...
- and are you all wrapped up in finding an approach to life which will gain approval from others and in which you can boast...or have you figured out that God designed an approach to salvation, and an approach to the Christian life...that is frequently the polar opposite of what the world would consider to be wise?...
- now, let's bring the next couple of verses into this...you could summarize it like this...

## **II. God is Actively Looking for Opportunities to Put His Wisdom on Display.**

### **A. He did that throughout biblical history.**

- verse 19 is a quote from Isa. 29:14 which speaks about an event from the history of Israel...
- in that passage, King Hezekiah, the king of Judah, was being threatened by the king of Assyria...
- the conventional wisdom of many of Hezekiah's counselors was to make a pact with Egypt and trust in that...
- God's response to that notion was -- **Isaiah 29:14 - 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.**"
- and here's what happened...King Hezekiah listened to the wisdom of man and made an alliance with Egypt...and then the nation of Assyria, surrounded the city where King Hezekiah was...
- and Egypt never showed up to fulfill their side of the bargain...so the conventional wisdom was wrong – you can't trust God – you better trust Egypt...
- so now it looks like Assyria is going to slaughter King Hezekiah and the nation of Judah...
- but if you know your Bible, you know what happened next, that night God took the lives of 185,000 Assyrian soldiers and rescued His people...
- Why?...Paul says that one reason was to accentuate the difference between the wisdom of man and the wisdom of God...

- and that's why it's so important for us not to try to water down the Word of God, believing that if we take enough out, then it will be viewed as wise by the world and universally accepted...
- see, that's the mistake that God's people frequently make...
  - if we just deny what the early chapters of Genesis say about the origin of man, then people will think God's Word is wise and choose to believe..
  - or if we deny that Jesus really did miracles, or come up with some intellectual way of explaining what occurred so that people who think science has the ultimate answers to life will be OK with it...then people will believe
  - or we better stop talking about the permanence of marriage between a man and a woman, or chastity in singleness...whatever ethical standards the world would find foolish today...
  - or the notion of the substitutionary death of Christ...or the inspiration of the Bible...or the resurrection of Christ...
  - and let me be clear – I believe strongly in learning the best ways to present the claims of Christ, and to interact with the ideas of those who do not yet believe...but the day we water down the truth of God's Word in order to be accepted by human beings is the day we lose...
    - God's Word could not be any clearer – I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and the cleverness of the clever I will set aside...
- do you agree with me this morning that God is actively looking for opportunities to put his wisdom on display?...
  - for example, let's take a single person who has chosen to be sexually pure during this time in his or her life...
  - and maybe this person has to endure some ridicule by classmates or people in the dorm...
  - they may be called some names, or made fun of in all sorts of ways...
  - but the day very well may come when a person visits them, probably like Nicodemus visited Jesus at night, and say something like – I've been sexually active for the first years of my college experience and I'm sick of the games and the guilt and the fear of disease and unplanned pregnancy...please tell me how and why you live the way you live...
- and here's the key – that's not the time to look down your nose at that person as if you are too good to talk to them or try to help...
  - nor is it the time to water down the gospel in hopes that this person will think it sounds really smart and sophisticated...it's time to...
  - **1 Corinthians 1:23-24 - 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.**
- and you have to help this dear person recognize that their immoral behavior is the result of an idolatrous heart...and the only way out of that is repentance...a acknowledgement that they have sinned against a holy God just like you have...coupled with the wonderful news that because of what Jesus Christ has done on the cross, they can be forgiven of their sin, and brought into a divine relationship with God where they can begin using their body in a way that honors Christ...

- that is the power of God and the wisdom of God...and you are risking being thought of as an absolute fool by living and proclaiming such a message...but when “how you look” is taken out of the equation, it’s amazing how much room there is for God to act...
- many of you have probably been thinking of this verse as we have been studying...**Romans 1:16 - For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.**
- writing about this section of Scripture, **Gordon Fee** said – **To the seekers of signs and wisdom Paul now presents the ultimate divine contradiction. “But we preach Christ crucified.” Rather than giving them the signs and wisdom they demand—and God has plenty of both—they get weakness and folly. Indeed, “Christ crucified” is a contradiction in terms, of the same category of “fried ice.” One may have a Messiah, or one may have a crucifixion; but one may not have both—at least not from the perspective of human understanding. *Messiah* meant power, splendor, triumph; *crucifixion* meant weakness, humiliation, defeat. Little wonder that both Jew and Greek were scandalized by the Christian message.**
- God is actively looking for opportunities to showcase the distinction between His wisdom and man’s.

#### **B. He’s doing that today as well.**

- when men and women are not concerned about looking wise to the outside world, they can stand for things that may appear laughable to some, but powerful to God...
- I don’t talk a lot about denominational debates for a lot of reasons...we are an independent church so our beliefs and practices are determined by our church family...
- but we have witnessed events in the last 10-20 years that fit right into what this passage is saying...
- one of those events is the reversal of the theological trend of the Southern Baptist Convention... the largest protestant denomination in our country...
- something happened there that to my knowledge has never occurred in American church history...that is that the denomination took serious steps into theological liberalism...and then turned around and came back to a more consistent reliance on God’s Word...
- one of their seminaries is right down the road in Louisville – we have some men from our church studying there right now...
- 20 years ago Southern Seminary had become significantly liberal in their approach...
  - many Bible faculty members denying the inspiration of the Bible...
  - denying the miraculous work of Christ...
  - His bodily resurrection, etc...
  - of course that eventually affects ethics and when I was down there teaching recently, they showed me the chapel where one of the classes during that day staged a homosexual wedding to flaunt their views over that of God’s Word...
- but then a man who was fairly young at the time, and certainly younger than many of the faculty members was hired to be Southern’s new president...
- and he reviewed Southern’s doctrinal statement which was very faithful to Scripture, and a document every faculty member was supposed to sign...
- and he called a number of those professors into his office and asked them if they believed God’s Word, and believed the confessional statement of their seminary...

- and they hem hawed around and said something like – you can't expect us to literally follow the words of human beings...(that was their view of Scripture)...
- what they didn't realize was – Al Mohler also had copies of their teaching contracts...and he tore them up right before their eyes and fired them all on the spot...and when some of them objected because they had a contract – his response was – you can't expect me to literally follow the words of human beings...
- and of course they had violated their contracts when they stopped believing the doctrinal statement they signed...
- but it's like 1 Cor. 1:20 has come to life (read)...
  - Al Mohler and Southern Seminary's ministry has grown dramatically...
  - why?...because God is looking for opportunities to put His wisdom on display...
- if time – could talk about the announcement from Southwestern this week
- could discuss the BCC
- could mention the Freud example of not standing the test of time...

### **III. God's Wisdom Should Produce Humility in His People.**

#### **A. God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise.**

**1 Corinthians 1:26-27 - 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,**

- sure there are some intelligent people in our church family, and some who have been blessed with financial means...
- but they would be the first to say – that's not what we boast in – we're boasting (promoting) the Lord, not ourselves...

#### **B. His purpose was so that none of us will boast in ourselves.**

**1 Corinthians 1:29 - so that no man may boast before God.**

- take aways?....

1. Have you trusted Christ as Lord and Savior?...is that possibly the case because the message didn't seem sophisticated enough for you?...can you get your arms around the idea that the fact that it's not sophisticated demonstrates that it's of God, not man
2. Does your tendency to boast create friction in relationships? Let the gospel humble you and remind you how your salvation was God's idea/design/doing...not yours.
3. Are you willing to embrace, to live, and to proclaim a message that our perishing world believes is foolish?