

SCRIPTURE LESSON TEXT

I COR. 1:17 For Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel: not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect.

18 For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God.

19 For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent.

20 Where *is* the wise? where *is* the scribe? where *is* the disputer of this world? hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?

21 For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe.

22 For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom:

23 But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness;

24 But unto them which are 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.

26 For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called:

27 But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty;

28 And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are:

29 That no flesh should glory in his presence.

30 But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption:

31 That, according as it is written, He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord.

NOTES

True Wisdom

Lesson Text: I Corinthians 1:17-31

Related Scriptures: I Corinthians 2:1-16; Jeremiah 9:23-24;
Romans 1:18-32; 11:33-36

TIME: A.D. 55

PLACE: from Ephesus

GOLDEN TEXT—"But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty" (I Corinthians 1:27).

Lesson Exposition

POWER FROM GOD—I Cor. 1:17-25

The cross and baptism (I Cor. 1:17). Last week's lesson ended with what may seem like an unusual statement: Paul wrote that he was glad that he had not baptized many of the Corinthians (vss. 14-16). In verse 17, he goes on to explain his reasoning—that baptism was not the focus of his ministry, but rather preaching the gospel.

Paul's point is not that baptism is unimportant but that the message of the gospel takes precedence over it. There is no saving power in baptism, but people do come to faith through the gospel. An unbeliever who gets baptized is still unsaved. Baptism is an act that *follows* salvation, not one that *produces* salvation. The emphasis of Paul's ministry was to bring the gospel to the lost and bring them to faith and repentance (cf. Acts 17:30-31; Rom. 10:9; II Cor. 7:10).

The power of the gospel rests in Jesus' completed redeeming work, the cross of Christ (cf. John 19:30). Paul did not want the Corinthians' focus to be on his speaking ability, but on God's glory in the cross.

The cross despised (I Cor. 1:18-19). The interests of the world are diametrically opposed to the interests of God. Genuine love does not give a person his harmful desires; it provides for his deepest needs. Christ met the world's deepest need in the cross, but on their own, the lost do not understand their need for redemption.

Because of this, the world rejects the message of the cross and considers it to be foolish. In the world's eyes, if a hero dies, he at least goes down fighting. It is honorable, if not glamorous, for the hero to go out in a blaze of glory.

While the world considers the message of the cross to be foolish, believers understand it to be the power of God. In the apparent weakness of the cross, the power of God for our salvation played out and was made manifest. It is by the power of Jesus' cross that God destroys worldly wisdom.

The cross and the world's foolishness (I Cor. 1:20-21). After establishing that the cross of Christ is the power of God for the Christian, Paul then turns his attention to the wise, the scribes, and the great debaters in Corinth. Like

a gunslinger in the Old West, he boldly calls them out to expose their weakness in the face of the power of God.

The cross and the world's expectations (I Cor. 1:22-24). The contrast between the world's thinking and God's thinking is astonishing. Man is impressed by things with high entertainment value. As a society, we spend billions of dollars on amusement.

For the Jews of Paul's day, the most impressive thing was miraculous signs from God. Jesus' opponents were constantly looking for a sign from Him that would prove to them that He was sent from God (cf. Matt. 12:38-42; 16:4; John 6:30). And out of mercy and compassion, Jesus gave them many signs. The Gospels contain many miracles, all of which served as signs that Jesus is the Son of God. Sadly, no matter what they saw, the Jewish authorities of Jesus' day were never satisfied.

The Greeks were more impressed by worldly wisdom than they were by signs. Not concerned with visible demonstrations of power, Greek culture was fascinated by philosophers and orators who could provide knowledge to the masses. The Greeks were very much in love with knowledge and human reasoning.

As far as the Jews were concerned, the cross was a stumbling block. The Greek word for this is *skandalon*, from which we get the word "scandal." To the Jews, there was something scandalous about the cross of Christ. They were offended by it. What they perceived as an instrument of torture and death was used by God as an instrument of deliverance and salvation.

The Greeks, on the other hand, considered the preaching of the cross to be foolish. They did not understand it, nor did they care to. They had absolutely no interest in listening to such nonsense, as they were much too wise to accept such a counterintuitive message. They failed

to see the power in a message that, to them, looked like a failure. The foolishness of the crucifixion made them unable to even consider the further proclamation of Christ's resurrection.

The difference between first-century Jews, Greeks, and Christians is quite clear. Jews were in love with signs, Greeks were in love with wisdom, but Christians are in love with Jesus.

The cross and its greatness (I Cor. 1:25). There is no comparison between the wisdom and strength of God and the wisdom and strength of the world. Paul states that the foolishness of God is greater than the wisdom of men and the weakness of God is stronger than the power of men.

Of course, there is no actual foolishness or weakness in God. God is omnipotent (all-powerful) and omniscient (all-knowing). Paul is speaking comparatively here, showing that nothing humans can do is worthy of comparison next to God. Men may consider God to be weak and foolish, but they prove their own foolishness and weakness when they oppose Him.

CALLING FROM GOD— I Cor. 1:26-29

Called by God (I Cor. 1:26-27). Paul calls on the Corinthians to consider themselves in light of God's calling. Not many of them were considered wise, strong, or noble by the world's standards. God is not out recruiting the cream of the crop and leaving everyone else out in the cold. He is looking for people who will by His grace bring glory to His name. The Lord specializes in using people the world would pass over because this displays His glory and power.

God chooses the things the world considers foolish and uses them to display the foolishness of the world. The Lord can use anyone who has come to faith in Him. He is not limited

by our weaknesses. By faith, Christ is our strength, which means we can do everything God calls us to do (cf. Phil. 4:13).

Exalted by God (I Cor. 1:28-29). Many of the Corinthian believers were not considered intelligent or strong by the elitists of their day. God saw value, however, in people whom the world had rejected. He chose the ones the world despised and used them for His mighty purposes. While history has forgotten the names of those faithful Corinthian Christians, heaven never will. They are still enjoying the eternal life that God gave them.

God can take someone who is considered nothing by society and use that person to glorify Himself. He has taken some of us off the trash heap of our world and given us powerful and impressive assignments as His ambassadors. Sometimes He uses us to do things that the world considers productive or great, leaving them befuddled and making it difficult to deny His power and glory. But believers know that we cannot brag about our accomplishments. We were helpless and hopeless without God.

BOASTING IN GOD—I Cor. 1:30-31

Identity in Christ (I Cor. 1:30). The key to our success as Christians is our new identity in Christ. And even that identity is not something we achieved. It is because of God that we are saved, as we could not come to God on our own. We had to be drawn by Him (cf. John 6:44).

Our salvation is completely the work of God. It is the grace of God that saves and keeps us. We are saved by faith (Eph. 2:8), live by faith (Hab. 2:4), and walk by faith (II Cor. 5:7). Everything that is worth having is found in Christ, as Jesus has become our wisdom by opening our eyes to His true worth. We no longer rely on worldly pleasures or power. We trust in Christ for everything.

Jesus is also our righteousness, sanctification, and redemption. We have no righteousness on our own, but Jesus gave us His righteousness so that we could be accepted by God (cf. II Cor. 5:21). He then sanctified us, or set us apart, for His service.

Boasting in Christ (I Cor. 1:31). The picture Paul has painted of the Christian is a person who was despised by the world and considered to be of little value. But God chose each believer, even in our desperate condition, and made His power evident in our lives.

Boasting does not have to be a bad thing—as long as we are boasting about the Lord. Paul refers to Jeremiah 9:23-24 as scriptural support that we must never seek our own glory, but only the glory of the Lord.

—Robert Ferguson, Jr.

QUESTIONS

1. What was Paul's main point about baptism?
2. What was Paul's emphasis in his ministry?
3. What was the power of Paul's message?
4. How does the world perceive the message of the cross of Christ?
5. How do Christians view the cross of Christ?
6. What were the Jews most impressed by?
7. What were the Greeks most impressed by?
8. How did the Jews receive Paul's message?
9. How did the Greeks receive Paul's message?
10. When is boasting a good thing for a Christian?

—Robert Ferguson, Jr.

PRACTICAL POINTS

1. Wise teachers study and prepare, but they understand that true power is in the saving gospel—not in the human knowledge and skills they acquire (I Cor. 1:17).
2. The world values human wisdom and information, but only the gospel of Christ will save (vss. 18-19).
3. God chooses the things that the world considers foolish to accomplish His purposes (vss. 20-21).
4. Philosophies and prejudices keep many from trusting in the saving gospel of Christ (vss. 22-23).
5. The gospel is so simple that a child can receive it, while geniuses often cannot understand it (vss. 24-28).
6. Christians should boast in Christ alone (vss. 29-31).

—Cheryl Y. Powell.

GOLDEN TEXT ILLUMINATED

“But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty” (I Corinthians 1:27).

The apostle reminded the Corinthians that not many of them were wealthy, influential, or wise by worldly standards. This was not something to be ashamed of, since God masterfully uses people who are rejected by the world. In verse 27, Paul twice reminds the Corinthians that God chooses weak and foolish things to confound the wise and mighty of this world.

Paul goes on to powerfully use the example of the cross, which ran counter to the thinking of both Jew and Gentile. The Greek philosophers taught a dualistic worldview: matter was evil, and spirit was good. Therefore, the Greeks scoffed at the idea of a deity who would descend in human form to suffer and die, since flesh was inherently corrupt.

To the Jew, the proclamation of the cross was a stumbling block, something scandalous and deeply offensive. The Jews were expecting a political messiah. They expected a great military leader and deliverer who would slay their oppressors and rule Israel in righteousness (cf. Isa. 11:1-5).

Yet the cross was precisely the instrument that God chose for the salvation of the world—and it is this same cross that today baffles those who pride themselves on moral efforts or worldly knowledge.

Paul wisely begins his letter to the Corinthians by reminding them that they cannot earn their salvation; it is only by accepting God’s “foolish” ways that they can be redeemed.

—Mark Winters.

RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION

1. What is the true purpose of baptism?
2. Is Paul teaching against Christians pursuing advanced secular education or wisdom? Why or why not?
3. What elements of the gospel might be most difficult to receive for those who boast high levels of worldly intelligence and wisdom?
4. In what ways can it be more difficult for believers to share their faith in this “information age” than at other times in history?

—Cheryl Y. Powell.