

WORSHIP

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Foolishness

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Jeremiah 9:23-26, 1 Corinthians 1:18-31

If you look up what the Bible has to say about fools and foolishness, in general it is bad. If you look up wisdom and knowledge in the bible, in general it is good. The book of Proverbs, sayings attributed to Solomon, the wise king of Israel, has a lot to say about wisdom versus folly.

The book opens with the well known verse, “Fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, fools despise wisdom and instruction” (Proverbs 1:7). Later on, it tells us , “The wise of heart will heed commandments, but a babbling fool will come to ruin” (Proverbs 10:8). Wisdom in the Old Testament could mean the creative love of God, “the insight, care and craft that shaped the world and made it good.” Wisdom could also mean the human virtue, “the capacity to handle life’s varied challenges with integrity, sense, and skill.” Those who are foolish reject the knowledge that God has given them or try to deny God in some form.



So, we learn from scripture that wisdom is good and folly or foolishness is bad.

That simple, right?

Well you would think so, if it wasn't for Paul. I will tell you that sometimes, I feel confident in my knowledge and understanding of God and the world. Then I read a letter from Paul. Then, I don't know what I know. Yet, there is good news in that. I think it means I am reading Paul's letters correctly, especially in the section we just read.

The people of the church in Corinth were sure of their beliefs, even if they could not agree on what those beliefs were. It appears from the way Paul writes, that each faction or group was fairly secure in their knowledge. They were a bit too sure in their wisdom. So, Paul needed to remind them of the truth. The truth that would orient them and guide them like the needle on a compass. A truth that is so radical that the world would think it foolish. This truth is the cross. This truth is the crucifixion of Jesus Christ.

In the world of Paul and the Corinthians, the people who were considered wise were the great orators of the age. Wisdom in Greco-Roman culture was the the possession of knowledge and the ability to express that knowledge in a powerful and polished way. Those who had mastered speaking and words. They were celebrities and received accolades for their skill. Yet, at times the topics and



knowledge they spoke on suffered for a better performance. Style trumped substances. Paul is quick to cut through this sort of knowledge and wisdom. Paul knew that the Gospel was not just a school of thought or a philosophy easily communicated like other thinkers of the time. So the Apostle was working to show the Corinthians the difference between what society called wisdom and the wisdom of God. Paul asks the rhetorical questions, “Where is the one who is wise?

Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age?” Paul lists those who would be considered the elite thinkers of the Roman Community or the Jewish Community. Yet, he answers these with another questions. Paul writes, “ Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?” Paul is teaching that God has shaken accepted knowledge from it’s pillar. The wisdom of the world is now folly. What was foolishness to the world is God’s wisdom. The foolishness of the cross is the truth of salvation.

This is why I feel that Paul always shakes my knowledge or surety. What was once a terrible characteristic or behavior is now the way God is communicating with us. We heard scripture that told us foolish behavior was bad and wisdom was good. If that is incorrect then we would have to remove a sizable portion of the book of Proverbs. So what does Paul mean that through foolishness



God saves those who believe?

The scholar and professor Richard Hays puts it well. Hays writes, “In that shocking event [Christ’s crucifixion] is the revelation of the deepest truth about the character of God, that our whole way of seeing the world is turned upside down.

Everything has to be reevaluated in light of the cross.” Paul does not believe that God lacks sense or is without thought. God does not do what we expect, especially in regards to his son Jesus. We are constantly surprised by the Gospel and the same remains true of the cross and God’s revelation to us. Hays continues his explanation of Paul’s argument saying, “God has exploded common sense by a revelation of the truth, ‘through the foolishness of our proclamation.’ The word *moria* (which translates in to foolish, where we get the word *moron* from) points to the utter craziness of the gospel message by commonsense standards. How can the ignominious death of Jesus on a cross be the event of salvation for the world? One would have to be a fool to believe that. Yet that is precisely what the gospel declares.”

Crucifixion was one of the most gruesome and terrible forms of punishment and death at the time. It was a way for one power to show utter dominance over an individual or a people. It was the ultimate punishment for criminals and served as a warning to the people that were ruled over. Yet, in this form of death, total domination, God reveals God’s power. When it seems as though all is lost we see



the truth that God reigns supreme. The world is turned upside down and all that we understood seems to be reversed. One scholar remarks, it is “utterly crazy that the world should be saved in such a wretched and awful way. In weakness, there is power. In this violence, there is peace. In pain, there is relief. In Christ’s death, there is eternal life. Paul reminds us that God, in the unexpected, shows us God’s wisdom.

We have seen this before in the witness to Jesus and the story of God and God’s people. Paul reminds the people of Corinth that they are not the group of people the world would expect a god to make a sacrifice for. Paul reminds them that not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth.” The world had seen false god’s make pacts with emperors, kings, and generals. From the perspective of the world gods did not deal with a random mix of believers who squabble amongst themselves.

Yet, this is not unique in the long story of God and God’s people. Our God is constantly surprising us and upsetting our expectations. In the story of Christ, Jesus was the Son of God, but we talk and sing of his birth in a rural backwater, to faithful but modest people, in a dirty spot surrounded by animals. The first people to come to see him were shepherds and in fact the powerful people of the day sought to do Jesus harm all his life.



Jesus' actions and teaching shook the establishment and accepted knowledge of those around him.

This was not the first time that God's work or word was shown in unexpected ways. David was the unlikely hero of the Israelites. Moses did not believe that he was the right choice to be a prophet. Why did God choose Abraham and Sarah and their descendants to be God's people? They were not the most powerful or wealthiest. The whole story of God and God's people is full of foolishness. Things that were unexpected, or things that do not make sense. Yet, to those who are called, they see the beauty and truth in what the world may call madness.

As I mentioned, Paul was writing to reorient the Corinthians in correct understanding and ground them in the most important aspect of Christianity, the saving death of Christ. It can be the same for us. Paul's letter is an excellent reminder during this season of Lent of all that we have received. As Paul reminds us that, "God is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption." So as we reflect on how we have been blessed, we consider how do we respond?

The easy answer is to be foolish. What the world might scoff or judge us for, that is where we should be going. But what does that look like?



Listen again to the word's of the Apostle because he describes it best, "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, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are." It is a reversal. It is a paradox. It is the unexpected.

The Reverend Chris Henry describes this part of Paul's letter as if a church had a sign in the front of it and it said "We proclaim Christ crucified. Only fools will be comfortable here."

If we are foolish we will be in good company. Jesus ate with prostitutes and tax collectors. The unclean and undesirables were given a place at the table. Paul, who once persecuted Christians, was given an important role and was personally called by God. The ones most deserving of judgement received forgiveness. We will be surrounded by those people whose faith showed the face of God. Paul pointed out to the Corinthians, that they were not the expected followers of God. So perhaps those John Calvin called the elect are not as polished and fancy as the name makes it seem.

We must begin to rethink everything. "All of human standards have been overturned." What was wisdom is now foolishness and foolishness is now wisdom. Well up must be down and in must be out. We will need to take a step



back and use different eyes to see what is before us. The Kingdom of God should not look the same after we understand the grand truth of the Cross.

We must act in unexpected ways. We have seen God and Jesus set before us examples of how they act in unexpected ways. God sets the tone and the example for us. So we must do the same. Our response may shock and surprise those around us. If God has shown God's ultimate power in an action the world has viewed as weak, we should do the same. Instead of seeking for dominance perhaps we seek submission. Instead of focusing on our own concerns and needs, we first seek to meet the needs of those around us.

Finally, being foolish means we will listen and think. When we are foolish in the eyes of the world, we are seeking God's word to us. We have heard this truth that God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so what does God say to us now? We will listen and we may hear that we are to reject our personal comfort and security. We will listen and we may hear that we will go where we have not been before or where we are not welcome. We will show the world that in our words and deeds we may look we have lost our minds, but God is revealing something deeper to God's creation.

So, today we heard from Paul that our understanding has been shaken to its core. What we thought was wisdom and what was valued is now worthless and



wrong. What was to be avoided, foolish behavior and thought, is actually the way to see the truth. It must be embraced. In the cross, God made it possible for us to see God's ultimate truth. That all of our lives and all of our knowledge rest in the crucifixion of Christ. In this all of our standards and our knowledge have been overturned. God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom. So now is the time to be foolish and be saved by the power of God.

