



*Gospel Atmosphere*  
**I CORINTHIANS**

So we are into our study on the book of 1 Corinthians and if you have been with us for this study you know that Paul opens up the book by contrasting the wisdom and power of the world with the wisdom and power of the cross.

And the contrast is sharp. The kind of wisdom and power the world admires is very different than the wisdom and power God admires.

Think about it: What do you have to do for the world to call you wise? What do you have to do for the world to call you powerful?

Whatever you answer, Christ pretty much wants you to do the opposite.

- If you want to be powerful in the world's eyes you've got to set your heart to make money. If you want to be powerful in God's kingdom you can't love money and you are blessed if you give it away.
- If you want to be powerful in the world's eyes you've got to get lots of people to serve you. If you want to be powerful in God's eyes,

you've got to be servant of all

- If you want to be wise in the world's eyes, you need to lean hard on your own understanding, if you want to be wise in God's eyes, you need to lean not on your own understanding, but in all your ways, acknowledge him.

God hides his power in weakness, his wisdom in foolishness.

That's what we've been discussing. And Paul is going to continue expanding on that idea today by explaining the nature of true wisdom. Paul has definitely confronted this pseudo wisdom of the world. But the question remains, what is true wisdom. This passage answers that.

So we want to learn what it is, but we also want to really understand the process of how to get it. We are not talking here about something that is strictly theoretical. This is very much something you can personally experience. Remember the words of James, "If any of you lacks wisdom, ask God." Don't you want this? Don't you want to have God's wisdom?

So that's where we are going. This week will be the sermon on what true wisdom is. Next week will be the sermon on how to get it. So let's first begin by looking at what it is. Now he's not going to give you the answer right away. He's going to set us up so we are ready to hear the answer. So verses 1-4 is a setup.

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

So again, we are looking for a definition of true wisdom and Paul is setting us up. Here's how he does it: first he says, I won't resort to human wisdom; I won't try and wrap the gospel up with worldly wisdom and clever tricks to try and persuade people toward Christ. Why? Because he doesn't want their faith to rest on the wisdom of men but rather the power of God.

Now it's worth taking a moment to really get at what Paul meant here and his purpose because I think it would be easy to misunderstand Paul's true meaning, especially if you just took this verse in isolation.

Some might hear this concept and conclude, "Well, we should never use persuasive language when it comes to presenting the gospel because if we were too clever that might undermine the gospels power. We should always just use the most plain language possible, the most simple word choices, never any lingo, we should never try to promote the church in any way. Some think Jonathan Edwards read from a manuscript and read in monotone for this very reason. We should never try to persuade with crafty words."

Why? Because if we do, then their faith rest on the wisdom of men, not the power of God. After all, listen to his words. Paul says his speech and his message were not in "plausible" words of wisdom or some translations say, "persuasive" words of wisdom.

Now. Let's step back for a second. Does Paul really mean, you can't be persuasive? It can be shown in two seconds that Paul didn't take his own advice.

It says about Paul while he was in Corinth:

Acts 18:1-4, After this Paul left Athens and went to Corinth... And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and tried to persuade Jews and Greeks.  
(ESV)

The narrative actually says the opposite. The narrative says he was trying to "persuade" Jews and Greeks and Paul is saying here in 1 Corinthians , I didn't come to you with persuasive words of wisdom.

Further when Paul finally makes it to Rome he comes before the Jewish leaders in that city and he collects this audience and Acts 28

says

Acts 28:23, When they had appointed a day for him, they came to him at his lodging in greater numbers. From morning till evening he expounded to them, testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to **convince** [same Greek word for persuade] them about Jesus both from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets. (ESV)

The same exact Greek word is used there.

2 Corinthians 5:11, Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we **persuade** others. (ESV)

So Paul is not against trying to string together ideas in winsome and

persuasive ways. Paul isn't pro-shoddy work. Paul isn't trying to say we need to abandon intellectual arguments, abandon reason, abandon polish.

So what does Paul mean here?

## **The Cross is Foolishness**

Look carefully at the context because it gives us the answer. Paul's statement that he was not trying to persuade people comes right off the heels of saying, "I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." We are so used to that but please, listen for a moment and try to break your mind free of your conditioning and hear that how it would have been heard in Paul's day.

Picture who he is talking to. Paul a Jew is trying to talk to citizens of Corinth who are smack dab in the middle of the Roman Empire.

Think about these two groups. The Romans were steeped in Greek philosophy, polytheism, Temples, Olympics, Gladiators. The Roman empire was enormous. It was at it's absolute Zenith during Paul's day.



And who were the Jews? They were this minuscule, powerless, people who had been conquered 400 years ago by the Babylonians and had lived in servile bondage ever since in tiny despised ghettos.

The Jews were nobodies. Sure they were around and people knew who they were but they were such an insignificant minority. It would be to us like hearing about a Chippewah Indian tribe in Wisconsin. Yeah, they were kind of driven out a long time ago. I'm sure there are some reservations up there somewhere.

Now to be fair, there were certainly more Jews in Paul's day than Chippewah Indians in ours. About 2% of our population is Native American; maybe 10% of the Roman empire was Jewish. But the concentration of Jews would have been around Palestine and so by the time you get to places like Corinth the Jews were an extreme minority and certainly didn't hold any of the imperial offices of influence.

So when Paul, a minority, a Jew, a Chippewah, says to his listeners, "I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and

him crucified, this is not so much a determination to be simple as much as it a determination to leave the message foolish."

To suggest that a no-name Jew who was nailed to a Roman cross and died is the savior of the world is a pretty large pill to swallow.

Image going to wall street to all these guys dressed up in suits and saying, "The Savior you've all been waiting for is actually a Chippewah Indian who lived an amazing life, did all this magic but then was deported and killed for political treason rose from the dead and ascended to heaven and wants you to believe in his tribal god."

That's the foolishness of the message preached. Paul determined not to change it. "I determined to know nothing among you, except Jesus Christ, a Jewish tradesman who was raised in Nazareth (the Melba of ancient Israel) died on a Roman instrument of torture reserved for seditionists and criminals - he is the Savior of the world, the king of kings, the emperor of emperor. The claim is almost laughable. Many did laugh. How in the world is that message going to save anyone? Who is going to believe that?

You understand why Paul said in Romans, "I am not ashamed of the gospel." There was plenty that were ashamed of it; it was despised and mocked. You worship a guy who got crucified? Really.

So I think when Paul says, "I did not come to you with persuasive words of wisdom" what he's saying is I'm not trying to make the message of the cross more attractive. I'm not going to come up with some complicated philosophical way of making the gospel sound sophisticated and more palatable to people who are attracted to and value worldly wisdom and worldly power.

Because there is no way to do that. To be a Christian you have to just be okay with being labeled a fool.

- The message of the cross sounds like foolishness in the ears of the world. I totally agree.
- A scholar would scoff at it. I get that.
- The message of the cross is crazy. I'm not going to even argue that point or apologize for it. That's what it is.

And I'm laying it out there for you to consider. Just because it sounds crazy doesn't mean it is. Maybe your whole understanding of wisdom and power needs inverted. Maybe what you need is to be offended at this counter-wisdom. And Paul will ask them to consider the foolishness of the cross eloquently, compellingly, persuasively, but he won't try to remove the offense, the foolishness of it.

He will use all his reason, brilliance, charisma to persuade people that this foolishness is the path to life.

So that's our setup. Paul determined to preach nothing except Jesus Christ and him crucified. He determined to be foolish in the world's eyes. He was okay with this idea of being a fool in the eyes of the world.

## **What Is True Wisdom.**

But Paul goes on to say in verse 6, there is a true wisdom and we are going to impart it. What is this true wisdom?

If you just look up the definition of wisdom, you'll get something like this:

Wisdom: the soundness of an action or decision with regard to the application of experience, knowledge, and good judgment.

Some have shortened this even further by saying, wisdom is applied knowledge.

Now there's a couple things helpful to note here. First wisdom or lack of wisdom always reveals itself when we are making decisions. If you make a solid decision based on your experience and you flourish you are wise. If you make a tragic decision and you knew better, you'd be labeled a fool. Wisdom is that thing you draw upon when there's a fork in the road.

Secondly, notice the definition says that it draws upon experience and knowledge (it's applied knowledge). This is usually why older people are wiser than younger people because they have more knowledge and experience to draw from.

Now understanding this link between knowledge and wisdom is important because you can only be as wise as you are knowledgeable. Right? You come to this fork in the road. Should I buy insurance for my house. You look at statistics, calculate the

risk/reward and then conclude, "It's wise to buy insurance on your house." But knowledge, could really change that. If you knew for absolute certain that your house would never have a single problem the entire time you owned it then it would actually be foolish to buy insurance. Do you see the correlation between knowledge and wisdom?

Why spend time on this? Because God through Paul is going to give us some knowledge that changes everything. He going to impart to us some secrete wisdom that can't be known by the world and it's going to give you new information to draw upon which will change the very fabric of your decision making process.

So what is this key piece of information? Paul doesn't state it directly in this text, he gives us a series of clues. And it's kind of fun to string them together and discover but what comes out the other side is obvious:

Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory.

So apparently we are recipients of some SECRET information? What does he mean when he says it's secret? He means, no amount of scientific inquiry could come to these conclusions. In order for us to know it, it must first be what...? Revealed. God had to reveal this wisdom to us because he created the world in such a way that you cannot find it without him choosing to disclose it. You can't run experiments to find it. You can't reason or philosophize your way to it. So this wisdom was first secret and then was revealed. So that's the first clue.

We also see that this wisdom was decreed before the ages meaning it was part of God's plan to thrust this upon humanity from the very beginning. That's another clue. It wasn't a plan that was hatched along the way. This was part of God's plan from the dawn of time. That's another clue.

It was also for our glory. God was going to reveal this predetermined mystery for our good. We've talked a lot about this concept of glory in the past. Glory in the Hebrew mind is the literal word for weight. You don't have a weight lifter. You have a glory lifter. So God says that this secret predestined wisdom was for our glory, somehow it gives us weight in the universe.

Now those clues are super interesting, maybe even shocking, but it's honestly still a little vague. This wisdom is hidden, predetermined and for our glory but what does that mean? We get our best clue in verse 8.

None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.

Now that really helps. This wisdom, whatever it is, when articulated by Jesus, was so offensive that people determined to crucify him.

Okay now we are getting somewhere. Let's put this together. We have a series of clues that point to the nature of this true wisdom. What could that be?

- What thing do we know about that Jesus preached that was not known in OT times,
- was predetermined,
- was for our glory and
- so offensive that people were willing to kill the very embodiment of it?

Well what did Jesus embody?

John 1:14, And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. (ESV)

This walking embodiment of grace and truth was simultaneously life and death to those who interacted with him. For some it was life,

- for blind Bartemaeus it was life,
- for the widow who gave her mite,
- for the fishermen who followed him,
- for Nicodemus,
- for the prostitute who washed Jesus' feet with her hair

For these it was for their glory and for others it was the very vehicle that carried them to the grave.

- For Judas it was death.
- For the swinekeepers
- For the rich young ruler
- For the Pharisees it would be.
- For the religious elite

These would be so outraged at this embodiment of grace and truth, this embodiment of wisdom, these would so misunderstand and

resist this embodiment of wisdom that they would nail him to a cross.

What was at the core of the offense? What did Jesus say that enraged them more than anything else and YET would be this cherished wisdom for our glory? What did he say? Jesus was actually called the Rock of Offense by Paul and Peter in their epistles. What is the STONE-hard immovable core of this intersection of grace and truth? What was the simple summary of everything Jesus said in his ministry.

John 14:6, Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. (ESV)

And here, I think we have arrived.

- This is the wisdom that cannot be discovered by human means. It must be revealed. How could we ever know the way to heaven unless God be revealed to us in the person of Jesus Christ and we be given his Word. It was a wisdom that could not be discovered by human means.
- This was wisdom that was predetermined by God. Over and over and over in the Scriptures we are told that God predetermined the incarnation and death of Jesus.

## Consider

Acts 2:22-23, "Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know-- this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. (ESV)

This wisdom was hidden, was predetermined by God.

- This was wisdom for our glory. I am the way, the truth and the life. It is through his life that we are given life. It is by his righteousness that we are given righteousness.
- And this offer of Life through the person of Jesus Christ was the VERY thing that the rulers of this age were so incensed by that when they saw the offer of salvation incarnate in Jesus Christ, it was so offensive that they called to have him nailed to a cross. They gnashed their teeth, rent their garments.

The message of Jesus is offensive because it is exclusive. There are not multiple ways to God. This is what our modern age hates most about Christianity. There is A SINGLE WAY, not multiple ways. In fact, you have to abandon all other ways.

In fact in Romans 9 where Paul uses the term Rock of Offense to describe Jesus, he is speaking of the Jews who tried to receive a

righteousness on their own, a righteousness of works. So when Jesus comes along and says, I am the way, the truth and the life, you cannot come to the father unless you come THROUGH me, not through your works, but through grace. It suggests everything you've done is worthless. It needs to be destroyed. You need to come a different way. And believe me, this is offensive. Let me give an analogy here that I hope will help.

I like to build things for my wife. But my problem is I'm a little bit over ambitious to get the project done. I am always anxious to make progress and get the project finished. So there have been many times when I'm working and building and she's out running errands and I come to a decision making point and she's not there. And I'll just plow through and do what I think is best, or maybe she tells me exactly what she wanted and either I wasn't listening very good or misunderstood. And then she'll come back and I can't wait to show her my progress.

And I've just poured my guts into this thing. By this time I'm emotionally invested. I'm so proud of my work. I've got all these trick features that I can't wait to show off. I'm literally salivating to show her everything I've done.

But I missed the whole point. Something major. I made a left door instead of a right. I got the completely wrong color. And when I look at her face, my countenance drops. There's the pregnant pause.

Oh, that's nice. Do you think we could rebuild it? And every time, no matter how hard I try, in my soul, there is this soaring offense. I've invested. Are you suggesting that my best effort, my treasured precious work is not good enough. It's an all-out attack on my pride. It's offends my competence.

And I have to work really hard to not say what I feel like saying

- "Do you know how much time I put into this?"
- "Why can't you be a little less picky?"
- "If you'd just lighten up your standard a bit this left-handed, purple, crooked door will work just fine."

This is why the gospel is offensive. It tells us that all our righteousness, all our work, all our effort is filthy rags. Here we are so proud of our work, so proud of work, so proud of our accomplishments. We smile at our lists of accomplishments and we bring them before the eye of the judge and Jesus looks at our tower and says, well, it's all worthless. That get's you nowhere. If you want to please me, then tear it all down. Start over. You were building with the wrong materials. I am the way, the truth and the life. NO ONE comes to the father but through me.

And you either come to terms with that and submit and humble yourself and tear down your entire life's work and receive or you try to kill the messenger.

This simple offer of life, this simple offer of grace, this revealed wisdom as to the path to glory ended up being a sword.

Matthew 10:34, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. (ESV)

What was that sword? That sword would slice up families, separate friends, cut spouses apart. Jesus said a person's enemies will be those of his own household? What is Jesus saying that is so offensive? What is Jesus saying that is slicing through families.

You are sick. Your righteousness is filthy rags. I am the way. I am LORD. No one comes to the father but through me. Whoever would come after me must take up his cross and follow me.

Acts 4:12, And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." (ESV)

Jesus was the embodiment of Grace and Truth.

1. The greatest piece of TRUTH we need is that we have access to the Father only through Jesus Christ. We have offended the King of Kings. Our sin is a barrier. We cannot work our way there. We cannot undo our sin with our petty acts of righteousness.
2. The greatest piece of GRACE we need is that an offer of life is made through the person of Jesus Christ. Do you see how this is both highly offensive and for our glory?

## **For Our Glory**

Now there's a final piece here that is so fun to think about. Paul really expands what he means when he says that this wisdom of God was for our glory. Paul really excites the mind here. For those who embrace Jesus as the way, for those who have made Jesus Christ Lord, for those who have abandoned self-righteousness and determined to find their righteousness in Christ, there is some serious glory awaiting.

But, as it is written, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him"--these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit.

Do you see what God wants to do? He wants to offend us with our brokenness but offer to restore and repair and redeem it and blow the doors off our anticipations for what is even possible.

There is a restoration on the horizon that is truly astounding.

You see, our whole creation is wrecked. We are wrecked. But it wasn't always that way. Imagine the universe as an old gear-driven clock. If you took the back off that clock you could see it working exactly as it was designed. You'd see God as the mainspring driving the whole thing and then you'd see us connected to God, being powered by him. And you'd see further that we are connected to the creation. We were made to rule over it and tame it and use it for our purposes.

But sin wrecked everything. We decided we wanted to try and power ourselves. We didn't like being directed by God so we pulled ourselves off the axle onto which we were placed so we could disengage from God and we found out that without him we are

powerless so we fell straight down into the gears.

And what happened to the universe is exactly what would happen to a clock if that happened. The universe began to groan inwardly. It smoked, gears ground and cracked and levers and springs and coils began to unwind. The whole universe is in a free fall of disintegration. Everyone agrees with this. As much as we try to reverse the effects of the fall, all the work of our hands is against us. Everything is breaking down. We are cultural deteriorating. Everything is falling apart, unraveling, our great accomplishments just unspool before our very eyes.

So disease and decay come in, injustice and oppression come in, and fear and guilt come in, all because we aren't meshed with our King above.

But redemption is coming for those who bow the knee and surrender their self-righteousness and receive a righteousness not their own.

- Our bodies, instead of breaking apart as they get older, we're going to be made whole.
- Our souls, instead of breaking apart, will be made whole.
- Our relationships ... Everything is united under one head.
- There will be this glorious moment in the future when everything has reached its fulfillment. Everything will be united.
- Everything will be healed.

His body, the church will be restored. What is a body? It's an integrated whole of interlocking organic systems. Instead of just a bunch of wheels and pulleys that are all fighting against each other, which is the way the universe is now, there will be a day when we reposition ourselves according to the design and we will be joyful. That is God's ultimate purpose. When the time is fulfilled, Jesus

Christ will be King of all. All the resistance will be put down. He will put us back on the axle and will begin to mesh with us again from above. When that happens, we don't really know what it's going to be like, but the text encourages us to run wild.

“Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor has it entered into the heart what he has in store for those who love him.”

There's that place in Star Wars where Luke Skywalker says to Han Solo, “We need to go rescue the princess. Why? Because she's rich.” “Really? How rich?” he says. “More than you can imagine.” Han Solo turns around and says, “I can imagine an awful lot.”

We can imagine an awful lot. And yet you have no idea. You can't even imagine true joy. You think you can. But that thing in your head is nothing compared to the reality of it.

## **Wisdom Applied**

So what is true wisdom? What is this true wisdom that the world calls foolishness and weakness? True wisdom is confession that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. That life is about Him. No man comes to the father except through Jesus Christ. True wisdom is the confession of Jesus Christ as Lord.

The Christian shorthand for that is the word gospel. Good news. So when you come to a fork in the road, you draw from that well of wisdom. It's the gospel atmosphere we are subtling this series

- Well if Jesus is Lord, then this is not about me but about him.
- Well if Jesus is Lord, then I must consult the king to see what he wants.
- Well if this world is not all there is, then I'd better be living for the

everlasting.

- Well if this world is broken and can never be repaired until God restores it, I'd better make minimal efforts in trying to make it my home. It's not my home.

To live life this way is to live in light of this great secret wisdom that is for our glory. For our glory! That is astounding.