

1 Corinthians 1:18-2:16 – Chapter Study

INTRO

Last week in our first study in 1 Corinthians, we took a little time to investigate the history of the City of Corinth.

As a result, we only made it to v. 17 & will pick it up there tonight.

I. GREETING 1:1-9

II. STATEMENT OF PURPOSE: A CALL TO UNITY 1:10-17

A. *The Appeal to Unity 1:10*

B. *The Report of Disunity 1:11-13*

C. *Paul's Role 1:14-17*

III. Main Body 1:18-16:18

A. *God's Way vs. the World's Way 1:18-2:16*

1. *Wisdom & power 1:18-25*

18 - For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

For those who reject the Gospel, the idea of being saved through the work of a crucified man is *moronic* – which is precisely the word here for *'foolishness.'*

It's *nonsense* to the lost. They scoff, "How can the death of a Jewish carpenter on a Roman cross in an obscure corner of the world 2000 years ago be the answer to the issues & problems of *my modern* life?"

As foolish as it seems to the lost in our day, it was even worse in Paul's time because while the words, "*message of the cross*" sound almost poetic to us, in the days of the Roman Empire it was equivalent to saying the "message of the hangman's noose" or "lethal injection."

Who would draw any hope or meaning from the capital punishment of a condemned criminal?

To the perishing, the cross means no more than that.

It's *painful* for the saved to realize the lost see the cross that way because for us it's nothing less than the power & love of God in all their glory!

The cross reveals how much God loves & yearns for our restoration to wholeness.

It exhibits the value God puts on each of us.

Someone once said, "I asked God how much He loved me. He said, 'This much.' stretched out His hands, & died."

Note the *tense* of the verbs Paul uses here – he speaks of the perishing & those being saved; they're in the present tense.

Those who reject the Gospel are perishing.

Every day they drift farther & farther from life & hope, their hearts become harder, sin corrupts more & more; their problems mount.

Those who respond to the Gospel are being saved.

They *were saved* when they were born again from the *penalty* of sin,

And *will be saved* from the *presence* of sin when they arrive in Heaven.

In the meantime, they are *being saved* from the *power* of sin.

The *power* for this change comes from God *through* the cross.

For it's at the cross that we by faith reckon ourselves dead, so that the resurrected life of Christ can move in & take over.

¹⁹ For it is written:

He quotes Isa 29:14 -

***"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent."*²⁰ Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?**

In order to get at Paul's meaning here, we need to know a little something about the situation in Corinth. As a major 1st Century Greek city & an important member of the Roman Empire, there were dozens of academies of philosophy & education there. It was a major business in Corinth.

They competed fiercely with each other for students because students meant prestige & tuition.

The main battle was waged in *speech-making*, in what was called *oratory & rhetoric*.

Public speeches were the rock-concerts of the day & speech-makers were the rock stars.

Oratory was called '*magic*' because it had the power to enthrall the hearers.

But here's the thing, the *content* of the speech wasn't important, only the *performance* mattered.

A speaker might give a speech on shrub trimming; that didn't matter.

What people listened for was the quality of his voice & poetry of expression.

Speeches were given with one goal in mind, to curry the admiration of the audience.

This was so common there, if you wanted to say someone was an especially entertaining speaker, you said he "used Corinthians words."

The story's told of a Hungarian opera singer many years ago who was touring the US & was given a glamorous dinner party.

Many dignitaries were present & following dinner, as dessert was served, the hostess asked the opera star to share something inspiring in Hungarian.

The diva rose & began to speak, at first quietly, then swelling with eloquence.

The passion in her voice rose to a climax as she concluded.

And when she sat down not a dry eye could be found at the table.

The woman next to her leaned over & asked, "Was that a famous Hungarian poem or speech?"

The diva replied, "No. I just counted to 100."

That's precisely the kind of thing oration in Corinth aimed at.

Paul says while his preaching might be understood as a form of public speaking, his aims were not those of the other orators.

He employed none of their tricks or styles.

He was not trying to gain an audience for himself.

He came with a message meant to gather people to Christ.

What's amazing is that even though Paul's preaching didn't follow the conventional speech-making forms, many had responded to the Gospel – proof that it wasn't the wisdom of man but the power of God that was at work.

²¹ For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God,

That is, in the world's form of wisdom -

it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe.

This verse is important to take to heart because we so often think that we can convince our lost friends & family if we could just find the right argument or proof.

Then certainly, they'd believe.

We hear a message, read a book, or watch a DVD & think, "Surely this will convince them."

23 CD's, 8 books & 5 DVD's later, they're not closer than they were.

Because salvation is not the result of piling up evidence.

It's a response to the work of the Holy Spirit in the human heart who convicts of sin & reveals that Jesus is the only way.

Some people have honest doubts & questions that evidence & reason can dispel.

But in the end the issue is of the heart, not head.

It's interesting that true intellectuals, people with higher than average IQ's, don't tout the fact that they don't believe in God because they know that statistically, the number of believers among them is the same as the rest of the population.

And some of the greatest thinkers of all time were serious & committed believers.

One day, students in one of Albert Einstein's classes were saying they had decided that there was no God.

Einstein asked them, how much of all the knowledge in the world they had among themselves collectively, as a class.

The students discussed it for a while & decided they had 5% of all human knowledge among themselves

Einstein thought that their estimate was a little generous, but he replied: "It is possible that God exists in the 95% that you don't know?"

²² For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; ²³ but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, ²⁴ but to those who 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.

History tells us during the 1st Century Jewish rabbis had spread the idea that the Messiah was coming & would affect the same deliverance for Israel Moses had.

Just as the plagues had smitten Egypt, judgments would fall on Israel's enemies.

So they were looking for dramatic signs to validate the work of God.

Interesting that Jesus' ministry was filled with miraculous signs & wonders affecting deliverance – but not political liberation.

His miracles brought deliverance from the ravages of sin.

While Jews looked for signs to validate the work of God, Greeks thought wisdom was the route to the divine.

They believed all they needed was to learn the deeper truths & once they did, they'd received a special enlightenment that would allow them to transcend to another dimension.

For Jews, the cross of Christ was a scandal, a sign of nothing but humiliation & shame, utterly void of anything god-like.

For Greeks, it was detestable silliness, something to be ignored & shunned.

They deemed **abhorrent** the thought anyone would claim it as the means of enlightenment.

Graffiti from the 2nd Century was found in Rome.

It shows a slave worshipping a crucified figure with the body of a man & the head of a mule. The caption: "Alexamenos worships his god."

This gives us an idea how unbelievers viewed the Gospel.

But to believers, whether Jew or Greek, the cross has become the sign of God's love & power & the ground of all true understanding.

Then in v. 25, Paul engages in a little sanctified reasoning of his own –

If God is God, so the very summit of wisdom & power, as both Jews & Greeks think, then even if He did possess a measure of foolishness, it would still be light years beyond the loftiness of human wisdom & at His weakest His power would still far surpass man.

2. Example of the Corinthians 1:26-31

²⁶ For you see your calling, brethren,

“Look around the church at Corinth,” he says, “Take a good, hard look at who it is that’s responded to the Gospel.”

that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called.

Note that Paul doesn’t say “any”, it’s “many.”

There *were* a few intellectuals, influential, & wealthy members of the church, but the Gospel had not been something that had been limited to just one socio-economic group.

Lady Huntington, a rich & influential friend of Whitfield & Wesley, said she was going to heaven by an “m”: the difference between ‘any’ & ‘many.’.

The reason Paul focuses on this is because of the situation he was seeking to correct; their sectarianism.

Remember – the entire church was divided into factions that were at war with one another.

There’s only one reason for that & it was because they thought they were better than others.

So he says, “Hey, look around. What do you have to be superior about?”

²⁷ But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; ²⁸ and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, ²⁹ that no flesh should glory in His presence.

Throughout history, with only rare exception, God has bypassed the refined high & mighty to raise up some poor, uneducated, rough nobody to be the agent & vessel through whom He works.

The reason is simple. If God used those the world considers the best qualified, the work done would be attributed to them instead of God.

When God uses the unqualified – it’s obvious where the real power is coming from.

This passage should never stop someone from seeking education or from learning the skills that would make them a more effective servant of God.

What it ought to do is alter our understanding of the WHY behind God’s choice.

It’s always about grace, not merit.

God can & does use the skilled & talented – but they must ever remember that their effectiveness is directly proportional to their dependence on God, not themselves.

³⁰ But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God—and righteousness and sanctification and redemption— ³¹ that, as it is written,

He quotes Jer. 9 (23-24)

“He who glories, let him glory in the LORD.”

While the world is all caught up in giving awards & accolades to those who excel in it’s values, believers live by an entirely different set of rules.

We understand *wisdom* from a completely different perspective.

Being *right* doesn’t mean winning an argument, it means being right & in fellowship with God.

And our chief joy isn’t self-advancement, it’s to see the Kingdom of God gain ground.

Paul didn’t just preach all this; he lived it . . .

3. Example of Paul 2:1-5

¹And I, brethren, when I came to you, did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God. ²For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. ³I was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling. ⁴And my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, ⁵that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

From reading Acts we know Paul was anything BUT timid & fearful.

As far as eloquence, there have been few in history who could match Paul.

Why then was his manner in Corinth one of fear & simplicity?

Some commentators say it was a reaction to his failure in Athens which is where'd he been just before arriving in Corinth.

In Acts 17 we read that while Paul was in Athens, he was invited to address the Areopagus; the center of Greek philosophy.

This was like being invited to address the general assembly of the United Nations of that time.

If you're a musician, Madison Square Garden or Albert Hall in London is the epitome of where to play.

If you're an athlete, the Olympics is the summit of competition.

For a preacher/teacher like Paul, the Athenian Areopagus was the ultimate place to do your thing.

Paul was incredibly strategic in his ministry.

He aimed at planting vibrant churches at key locations that could influence larger regions.

He knew if he could persuade the philosophers in Athens to follow Christ, the result could be far-reaching in spreading the Gospel far & wide.

Acts 17 records his message. It was nothing short of Brilliant!

Some came to the faith, but most dismissed Paul as a raving idiot.

Some commentators suggest Paul felt like a failure because of the poor response.

So at Corinth, his next city, they say he vowed to keep things simple so as not to repeat his error.

There may be merit to that, but I suspect there's something *else* going on in Paul as he arrived in Corinth. He knew the city's well-earned reputation. It was a moral cesspool.

He was going in to a city wholly devoted to immorality & an abundance of idolatry, which every Jew had a strong aversion to.

What would *your* state of mind be if your were the 1st person to try to plant a church in LV/SF/Hollywood/Amsterdam?

Being the strategic thinker he was, Paul realized the best way to reach the Corinthians was to focus on Christ & the Cross.

When speaking to the philosophers in Athens, Paul shared the Gospel in a way they could relate to, and they followed him until he got to the resurrection.

But that was a miracle most of them could not accept.

But when Paul preached in Corinth, he spoke in terms those trapped in a lifestyle of sin could understand.

He shared about the love of God & how He sent His Son to pay our debt of sin & restore the life we were originally created for.

Many of those who listened *knew* they were sinners.

They made no excuse for the evil they did.

They knew they didn't measure up to even their own ideas of what was right & felt guilt & anguish over their inability to do what their conscience told them.

His fear & trembling came from his apprehension at *how to relate* to people who were so morally far from God.

Pau knew that apart from Christ he too was a sinner, but in *comparison* to the Corinthians, he was innocent & naïve regarding sin.

There is an important lesson here for us.

When dealing with people deep in sin, share the simple message of the Cross.

Bring them to the Man who was crucified for sinners.

Those who are deep in sin usually know it & don't deny it.

They're often open & ready for the Gospel.

We see this in the life of Christ.

Who demonstrated a greater readiness to respond to & believe in Him, the religious or sinners?

The Pharisees or the tax-collectors & prostitutes?

Paul came to Corinth determined to preach 1 thing - the Cross of Christ; & to do so simply, not hiding it behind a wall of eloquence.

→ A certain church had a beautiful stained-glass window just behind the pulpit. It depicted Jesus Christ on the cross. One Sunday there was a guest minister who was much smaller than the regular pastor, a man who was well known for his eloquence and oratory prowess. A little girl listened to the guest for a time, then turned to her mother and asked, "Were is the man who usually stands there so we can't see Jesus?"

Some people are great speakers. They're eloquent & mighty in speech.

People listen & go away saying what a remarkable preacher they are.

Others are *not* so eloquent but exalt Christ in all they *do* say.

Listeners do not comment on their skill but on how much closer they've come to Jesus.

Paul determined he would not become just one more of the many orators in Corinth.

Compared to them his preaching sounded course, his message *shocking* to many.

But others heard it for what it was and came to faith.

That faith had been confirmed through a personal experience of the presence & power of God as he says in vs. 4&5.

⁴ And my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, ⁵ that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God. ⁵ that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

The word *demonstrate* means an *irrefutable proof*, an *unanswerable argument*.

The power of God at work in the gospel was *changed lives*.

A man who had been a horrible, fall down drunk was won to Christ.

His work mates preferred him as a drunk so they tried to shake him loose form his new found faith & said, "Surely a sensible man like you cannot believe in the miracles the bible tells about. You cannot, for instance, believe this Jesus of yours turned water into wine."

The man said, "I don't know about that, but in my *own* house I've seen him turn beer into furniture."

4. Spiritual vs. Carnal wisdom 2:6-16

Up to this point Paul's contrasted the wisdom of man & God, but looking at it more form the human perspective, so that the Gospel & the wisdom of God it contains looks foolish.

Now he turns things around & shows how God's ways really are *wise*.

The problem is, it's only the saved who understand this.

⁶ However, we speak wisdom among those who are mature, yet not the wisdom of this age, nor of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. ⁷ But we speak the wisdom

of God in a mystery, the hidden *wisdom* which God ordained before the ages for our glory, ⁸ which none of the rulers of this age knew; for had they known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. ⁹ But as it is written: “Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, Nor have entered into the heart of man The things which God has prepared for those who love Him.” ¹⁰ But God has revealed *them* to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God.

The word *mature* in v. 6 has to be understood by it’s usage in Corinth, where it referred not to age or experience, but to *understanding*.

To the Greeks, it was the intellectuals & philosophers who were mature, & so according to Plato’s great work *The Republic*, qualified to rule.

What had the rulers of that age done with Christ, God-incarnate?

Instead of honoring Him as the embodiment of wisdom, they’d killed Him.

It’s only the saved who recognize the identity of Jesus, so it is **THEY** who are *mature*, not the lost intellectuals who think they’re so smart.

If they were, they wouldn’t have crucified Jesus.

In v. 7 Paul says prior to the coming of Christ, the Gospel was a *mystery*.

In Scripture, a mystery is something hidden which *cannot* be figured out by human thought.

It has to be revealed by divine revelation.

Paul was careful to make sure the Corinthians understood that the Gospel was utterly unique & vastly superior to anything the philosophers ever came up with.

While human reason & ingenuity can come up with some pretty amazing stuff, it never, ever could have figured out or made up the Gospel.

It took nothing less than God Himself to reveal it.

And as the Corinthians continued to grow in grace, God was revealing more & more of it by His Spirit.

Look at v. 9 again -

⁹ But as it is written: “Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, Nor have entered into the heart of man The things which God has prepared for those who love Him.” ¹⁰ But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God.

This is often seen as referring to heaven. But that’s not what Paul means as v. 10 makes clear when he says the Spirit **HAS revealed** these things to us

V. 9 speaks about our life in Christ **NOW!**

You see, the whole goal of Greek philosophy was to produce a good life – a life worth living.

Philosophy means – the *love of wisdom* – and wisdom means – living successfully, skillfully.

So in all this talk about *wisdom* that’s occupied Paul for nearly 2 chapters, the bottom line is everything the world’s philosophy really aspired to can only be had through acceptance of what to Greek philosophy looked like the height of foolishness – the Gospel.

And while we sit here tonight, while we don’t think in the exact same ways as the ancient Corinthians, what Paul says here still applies.

Everything the world values & thinks is important can really be boiled down to one thing – the desire to succeed at life; to discover its meaning & achieve it’s purpose.

The Gospel is the answer. Jesus is the way, the truth & the life.

¹¹ For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God.

Let me explain this, this way: Do you hate it when people presume to know what you’re thinking & the fact is, they don’t have a clue?

Paul is simply saying that no one knows what inside us unless & until we tell them.

So no one had God & the Gospel all figured out before He Himself disclosed it.

12 Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God.

God's disclosed the Gospel & all it means by setting His own Spirit within us.

If it weren't for the inner presence of the Holy Spirit, we couldn't really know about spiritual things.

13 These things we also speak, not in words which man's wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual.

Not only does the Holy Spirit enable believers to know God, He makes it possible for us to share the truth with others.

So while 2 believers are able to carry on a conversation about spiritual things & relate to one another on a spiritual level, the unbeliever listening in will be lost. Look →

14 But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.

The natural man is not born again. He lives only in the physical realm of nature.

The world of the 5 senses is the only reality he knows.

Because he's spiritually dead, the spiritual realm is to him a fantasy, a fiction, something made up.

15 But he who is spiritual judges [better = discerns, understands] all things, yet he himself is rightly judged [same] by no one [looks back to the natural man of v. 14].

An illustration might help here – Peter exhorts husbands to make every effort at *understanding* their wives.

There's only one way to do that & that's by spending lots of time in communication, because, as we've just seen, the only way to know someone is if they reveal themselves.

The reason men are to pursue this with their wives is because 'woman' is a complex bundle of thoughts & emotions that's ever changing.

A man never will fully understand his wife, that's why Peter says he's to every make it his aim.

The only way he'd able to understand her is if he was a woman.

Same thing with unbelievers. understanding believers; they never will, even when believers try to explain themselves.

Because they can only explain spiritual things by the Spirit, & the unbeliever doesn't have the Spirit, it's not going to get through.

And this is the main reason why it's so unwise for Christians to become romantically involved with unbelievers.

Romance involves intimacy & how real can intimacy be when you can't share in the Spirit?

16 For "who has known the mind of the LORD that he may instruct Him?" But we have the mind of Christ.

Paul concludes this with a comparison of the natural & spiritual person

He quotes Isa. 40:13 **"Who has known the mind of the LORD that he may instruct Him?"**

What mere mortal could presume to act as God's counselor?

Yet many do

They reject the God of the Bible because He doesn't fit the mold of what they *think* God ought to be & do.

They scoff, "Why doesn't God . . . ?"

End to world hunger.

Stop bad things happening to good people.

Bring world peace.

What they choose to stay ignorant of is the fact that they can even pose the challenge proves their acceptance of the God they reject.

Hey, if there's not God, then there's no right or wrong and what are you so worked up about world hunger for?

There are no bad things happening to good people because there's no good or bad.

And who's to say peace is better than war?

They have to assume an eternally good God Who's all knowing & all-powerful to go on & deny Him.

You see, without God, all rational processes of thought become futile.

While the natural man is clueless about spiritual things, the believer is tapped in because of the Holy Spirit.

We have the mind of Christ.

That mind is fashioned in us as the Spirit works thru the Word.

At one time, most people believed the world was flat.

Sailors feared if they sailed too far, they could fall off the edge of the world into the abyss of space.

Their maps & navigation was all based on this belief.

In their minds, they lived on a flat, 2-dimensional earth

Then came along a few who after investigating came to the conclusion the earth was a sphere.

They began to launch out into deeper waters in search of something more.

They began to steer by new & different stars.

They were mocked & jeered by others but they were right & opened up whole new realms for humanity.

The natural man lives on a flat earth with nothing but the here & now realm of the 5-senses.

The Christian lives in a bigger reality; the realm of the spirit.

We steer by a different star.

We hear the jeers & taunts of the flat-earthers → but Christian - keep sailing.

There's a whole new dimension to discover & live in - the realm of the Spirit.