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Sermon Series: *Good News in Strange Places*, No. 5

Weakness

November 14, 2021

1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5 [NIV]

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. <sup>19</sup> For it is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate."

<sup>20</sup> Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? <sup>21</sup> For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. <sup>22</sup> Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, <sup>23</sup> but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, <sup>24</sup> but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. <sup>25</sup> For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

<sup>26</sup> Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. <sup>27</sup> But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. <sup>28</sup> God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things — and the things that are not — to nullify the things that are, <sup>29</sup> so that no one may boast before him. <sup>30</sup> It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God — that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. <sup>31</sup> Therefore, as it is written: "Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord."

**2** And so it was with me, brothers and sisters. When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. <sup>2</sup> For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. <sup>3</sup> I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling. <sup>4</sup> My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, <sup>5</sup> so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power.

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I invite you to turn back to our text there in your Bibles: 1 Corinthians, Chapter 1.

While it doesn't make for good grammar, you will notice that the passage here begins with the word, "for." It is "gar" in Greek, which means that this section of text that is coming up is tied to what came before it. What is coming up here is the *explanation* of the *assertion* that the Apostle Paul, the writer of this letter, has already made.

"You should be careful walking into the building, for the sidewalk is slippery since it rained."

The assertion is: be careful.

Why?

Because the walk is slippery — that's the explanation.

In his letter here, Paul's assertion is, "*Don't get carried away — don't become mesmerized by impressive-sounding words or impressive-seeming people.*"

That was a problem in the Corinthian church. Some of the people there were so impressed by the sophistication and eloquence — the personal charisma or star power — of some people that they were arguing with one another and even dividing themselves into camps within the church over these people — over spiritual leaders, of all people.

You see it back in verse 12, these different sub-groups.

Some liked the things Paul himself said.

Others followed this fellow, Apollos.

Still others preferred Cephas or Peter.

And then some dismissed the rest with a sniff and said, "Well, we follow Jesus."

As if they *all* weren't following Jesus.

These men were all teachers — all teaching the same, basic thing. Yet the people decided to make the situation into something between a personality contest and a rating of preferences.

It's like someone saying here today, "Well, I follow Ben — I'm a Riffellite."

Another might say, "Oh, I'm sorry to hear that — I'm an Oswaltian."

"That's unfortunate for both of you," someone else would say, "because I'm a Swaimoron."

And another: "Well, I'm a Kiersteadian."

"I'm a Couliettian."

"I'm a Brysonian."

"I'm a Winterian."

"I'm a Montoyan."

What was happening at Corinth wasn't about significant theological differences. It wasn't as if one of them was overwhelmingly right and the rest were heretics. This was primarily about personal taste and nuance. It was all art and color, not real substance.

Yet it was dividing the church — and that made Paul mad.

It made him mad that these believers, who should be relatively spiritually mature by now, were still acting like elementary children toward each other.

You can see what he writes on that in Chapter 3, but the core of the problem was that they were still letting the things that impress the unbelieving world impress them. They were thinking humanly, not spiritually — which was, itself, disappointing and bad enough.

But that it was, then: driving them to division made it all that much worse.

But to Paul, you see, that's the fruit of spiritual immaturity.

Spiritual babies, people who see and evaluate things from the world's perspective instead of from the Spirit's perspective, especially when they are long enough in Christ to know better: those people tend to cause problems in the church body.

So, again, the assertion: Paul says, *“Don’t get carried away, or become mesmerized, by impressive-sounding words and impressive-seeming people.”*

And then the explanation, *“For...”* or, *“Because...”*

Paul writes in verse 18, *“the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are apart from Christ. Yet to us who are being saved in Jesus, it is the power of God.”*

And then Paul quotes a key idea from Isaiah 29, *“For it is written: ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.’”*

What does all this mean?

Well, Paul is saying here, “Followers of Jesus, don’t buy into the world’s so-called ‘wisdom.’ Don’t let yourself be impressed by what impresses the world, like sharp-looking, sharp-sounding people and words, because God’s idea of importance and impressiveness is totally different than what’s important and impressive to the world.”

What’s impressive to the world is not impressive to God.

And, of course, what’s impressive to God is not going to be impressive to the world and the way the world thinks.

People who are apart from Jesus – unspiritual people who think and evaluate like the world – are never going to be impressed by the message of Jesus. To them – to the closed, unspiritual mind – the whole story of Jesus, in fact, sounds like insanity.

Tom Wright says, “Paul knew very well that when he entered a pagan, gentile city that prided itself on its intellectual and cultural life, and he stood up to speak about Jesus of Nazareth – this one who had been crucified by the Romans but was then raised up from the dead by God, and who was now the Lord of the world, inviting people to faithful obedience to God – Paul knew that when they heard all that, they would think, ‘This is the craziest message anyone could imagine.’ To them, this would not sound like some smart, new philosophy. It wasn’t an appeal to high culture. To them, this was surely sheer madness.”

Paul expected that response from the gentile world.

And the fact is, he came to expect no better response from the Jews.

The Jews of Paul’s day were looking for a messiah who was powerful and mighty, someone who would defeat their godless Roman captors. They had no interest at all in someone who would be, himself, executed by them!

If the whole Jesus account was madness to the gentiles, then it was double madness to the Jews – just as Paul says there in verse 23: the account of Jesus is *“foolishness to Gentiles and a stumbling block to the Jews.”* It is something that trips people up, because those Jews had no category for a crucified messiah.

This is why, when Paul spun out the gospel to the governor Festus and King Agrippa, Festus replied, *“You have lost your mind Paul – your great learning is driving you insane!”*<sup>1</sup>

The account of Jesus – the reality of Jesus – is something that’s received by faith. It’s not something that can be humanly hyped up or decently dressed so as to appeal to a worldly-based sophistication.

You can’t make Jesus attractive to the world on the world’s terms. It just can’t be done, which is why Paul says he didn’t even try to do it.

By his own admission, when Paul would preach Jesus, he’d just stand up in the synagogue or marketplace or wherever – and tell the story.

Now of course, he did try to connect with his listeners in certain ways to gain their hearing.

But Paul never bent the tale or used clever or nuanced words to try to trick people into believing what he was saying just because they enjoyed his style or connected with him personally.

He didn’t do that because he knew that would never work, because he knew very well that the whole story of Jesus really does sound crazy – *unless* there is some supernatural connection between God’s Spirit and the heart of the hearer. Paul knew there had to be a divine breakthrough that opens the door of faith to ever believe such a wild story.

In other words, the gospel message – the account of Jesus – has to do its own work in order to be heard.

People will never *really* come to follow Jesus because of the power of the preacher or the preacher’s style or illustrations or charisma or any glitz or glamour or light show or any other appeal made to mere worldly attractiveness and impressiveness.

From the Apostle Paul’s day right down to the here-and-now today, people will only believe in Jesus because of the presence of the power of God.

And so here lies the good news in the strange place of human weakness: no one need be a superstar in order to be effective and powerful for Jesus Christ. We don’t need to be great, by this world’s standards, to be great for Christ.

In fact, the weaker we are in worldly terms, the stronger our potential for power in Christ.

Now, this is not to say that we should exalt ignorance. This is not about some anti-training, or anti-education agenda. The fact is, the apostle Paul was one of the most educated men of his day.

And yet, in the end, it isn’t about education. How many stoics or epicurean philosophers have you met recently? How many Platonists? Sophists? Aristotelians?

In certain days and times, to belong to groups like those was like having a PhD from Harvard or Yale today. But so many of the things they taught seem utterly ridiculous, not just to us, but to the whole world, today.

Those schools of thought have all, effectively, closed their doors.

And yet Jesus survives, you see?

Paul asks them, there in verse 20, *“Hey, where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age?”*

Today, he might have said, “Where is the scientist? Where is the computer genius? Where is the actor – the Social Media influencer?”

<sup>1</sup> Acts 26:24

*“Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?”*

Now, again, this is no treatise against education or the development of skills. Paul is not saying we aren't responsible to hone the gifts God has given us. We certainly are.

But those are not the places where real, spiritual wisdom is found, and if we rely on them – if we think as the world thinks – we will never grow and mature in faith.

The world of the Corinthian Christians was much like our own world is today. Then, just like now:

- People loved to show off and gather followers and gain hearings.
- People were easily impressed by celebrity and status and rank.
- People listened to the loudest.
- They flocked to the flashiest.
- They presumed the rich were right and the poor were pathetic.
- They thought bigger was better and shinier was superior.

In short, people valued the package way more than the content, which really reveals the shallowness of the self-centered, unsanctified heart.

That's what the fall did to the way people think.

That's worldly wisdom, and at least some of the Corinthian believers were still well trapped in all of that.

They were thinking like the world, even about spiritual things, spiritual leaders, teachers – because they thought that was the way.

Paul's message here is that, in order to ever become the people Christ saved us to be, we have to see worldly wisdom for what it is: that it is utterly inferior to, and in most cases, the complete opposite of, the wisdom of God.

That's no exaggeration. In fact, so often you see God's wisdom taking worldly wisdom and turning it on its head.

Paul uses Jesus' cross as an example of that:

- To be executed on a Roman cross was, to the world, the very lowest depth of shame.

Yet Jesus' cross has become a symbol of grace.

- To die is seen by the world as the end.

But Jesus' death marked a new beginning for Him and all who'd follow Him.

- To be a Jew in the Roman world was itself a mark of disgrace.

Yet God used one, lone Jew to save the world.

You see, God takes that which the world declares flimsy and empty and weak, and He fills that emptiness with Himself and His strength.

This is very good news, especially for all of us regular, normal, common, weak people.

God's not just looking for those who are superstars in the world's eyes.

Oh, He'll use them if He can. On the rather rare occasion that the wise of the world agree to humble themselves before God, then sure, God will gladly receive them and transform them and use them – because He loves them just the same.

But you know, God will use even more effectively the plain, the common, the unspectacular, the flimsy – the ones the world dismisses as ordinary and passes by.

God uses those who are not full of themselves, you see?

God uses those who are empty enough for Him to fill – and to flow through.

That's what Paul wanted to see in Corinth: a rejection of the worldly pride that pervaded there.

He wanted to see an emptying of the conceit and the superiority that so filled those people:

- So that real wisdom might gain a foothold.
- So the church might grow up and be mature.
- So the believer might become truly powerful – with God's power.

That's what Paul wanted to see in Corinth – and you know, that's just what Jesus wants to see in His Church today.

Jesus is looking for people who are empty enough for His Spirit to fill – and so to become truly powerful forces for His purposes in His world.

And you see, it all starts with weakness – something that is as despised and ridiculed in our day as it was in Paul's.

It all starts with a willingness, not just to admit, but to embrace the fact that we just can't do much of anything, of any real account, apart from Christ.

It's agreeing with Isaiah where he writes, *“God gives power to the weak and strength to the powerless,”*<sup>2</sup> and with the prophet Habakkuk who proclaimed, *“The Sovereign Lord is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer – enabling me to tread on the heights.”*<sup>3</sup>

It's knowing the truth of the Psalmist where He sings, *“The Lord gives strength to his people.”*<sup>4</sup>

And it's embracing the approach of the Apostle Paul himself, where he writes, *“This is why – I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, and in difficulties: for when I am weak, then I am strong.”*<sup>5</sup>

So how are you feeling today?

Are you feeling strong and confident in yourself and your own personal power?

Or are you feeling just weak enough to embrace God's strength?

Are you feeling empty enough for God to fill?

If we are – that's good news. It means God doesn't have to break us before He can use us.

Yes – undoubtedly the world will find us wanting.

But Christ will find us faithful – and useful – if we'll give ourselves to Him and to His wisdom.

Will you do that?

Will you walk away – today – from what the world exalts – and will you begin looking for, and living according to, the wisdom of God?

In that place of worldly and personal weakness – that's where the real good news is.

<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 40:29

<sup>3</sup> Habakkuk 3:19

<sup>4</sup> Psalm 29:11

<sup>5</sup> 2 Corinthians 12:10

Prayer.

Closing Song: *More Love to Thee*

Benediction:

You see, all this about the difference between worldly wisdom and godly wisdom that Paul talks about: this is one reason we use the word “conversion” when people come to Christ.

In order for anyone to really get to where Christ wants us to be, a *conversion* in the way we think about what’s truly wise has to take place. Our conceptions and understandings have to move from *worldly* to *heavenly*—from *earthly* to *spiritual*.

We have to be transformed: become different from the way we were born, different from the way of this world.

Conversion requires a humility that this proud world around us very actively fights against.

To submit to the humility that embraces God’s wisdom: the world sees that as weakness.

The good news for us is that God sees it as maturity.

Even so, may the Lord make us the world’s sort of weak, so we might become God’s sort of wise, strong, mature and complete.