

THE WISDOM AND POWER OF GOD

SERIES: UNDER THE CROSS



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1 Corinthians 1:18-31
Second Message
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1 Corinthians 1:18-31

A few months ago, I was driving down El Camino Real when I noticed a car in my rearview mirror quickly approaching in the lane next to mine. I noticed the car first because of the racing stripes down the middle. It was a Corvette Stingray that looked just like this one here [Image: stingray]. Now, there are a lot of standout cars in the Bay Area, but something about this car caught my attention. It wasn't the bright red color. It wasn't the racing stripes down the middle. It wasn't even the obnoxiously loud noise it made when it accelerated. Rather, it was the license plate, which boldly read: DEMI GOD.

I was pretty excited as this car came up behind me because I thought I was about to see Thor—the demigod from Asgard with the magic hammer who controls thunder and lightning and stars in a bunch of Marvel movies. I thought for sure Thor was going to be driving this car. But as it drove up next to me, I was disappointed to see that Thor was not behind the wheel but just a regular guy.

I was a bit disappointed. But I was also intrigued. This license plate got me thinking. What is it that really makes a person powerful? Is it driving a fast car? Is it having enough money to buy that car or anything else you might want? Is it having enough self-confidence to drive that fast car around town with DEMI GOD on the license plate? What is it that really makes a person powerful? What does real power look like?

Today, we are going to think together about power. But not only power. We are also going to think about wisdom.

We might have some idea about what it looks like to gain power, but what does it look like to gain wisdom? Where is true wisdom found? You know, there are a lot of places that tout themselves as sources of wisdom. Where do we find true wisdom? And how do we know when we have found it?

If you are like an increasing number of people in the world today, you look to ChatGPT.

I went to ChatGPT earlier this week in search of wisdom for some hypothetical person (not me, I promise). Here is what I asked ChatGPT. [ChatGPT1] “Chat GPT, I need some wisdom. I feel a bit stuck in life. I am overworked, underpaid, and feel a general lack of purpose in my life. What should I do?” Like I said, it's not me—just some hypothetical person looking for wisdom.

And ChatGPT came through. Listen to this compassionate and wise counsel from everyone's favorite generative AI chatbot. [ChatGPT2] “Feeling stuck can be really tough, but it's also an opportunity to reassess and realign your path. Here are some steps that you might consider:”

And then it listed for me the following gold mine of suggestions:

- Reflect on your values
- Set Small Goals
- Explore New Interests
- Connect With Others
- Reevaluate Your Work Situation
- Practice Self Care
- Seek Professional Guidance

Life coaches, beware. AI is coming for you. Not bad, right?! That is pretty sound advice in a lot of ways. In fact, some of those points are points that I have made in recent sermons. Maybe AI is coming for my job, too—but that's a sermon for another day.

And yet, something is missing. Something is missing from this picture of wisdom that AI has generated for me, just like something is missing from the picture of power that drives around in a fast car with DEMI GOD plastered on the license plate.

What is it? What is missing from these pictures of wisdom and power that feature prominently in the imagination of our culture? That is what we are going to consider together this morning.

This week, we are in week two of our sermon series on 1 Corinthians, which we call “Under the Cross.” In Paul Taylor's sermon last week, he pointed out how the Corinthians church was a church in turmoil. It was full of issues—often the same issues we face today—issues like disunity and division, sexual confusion, unhealthy marriages, cultural conformity, and more. This church was facing a lot of challenges. As Paul speaks into these challenges, he continually draws them back to their center, which is Christ—Christ crucified. For Paul, the cross of Christ is the central feature that guides our lives as followers of Jesus.

In our passage for today, 1 Corinthians 1:18-31, Paul points to the cross as *the place* where we come to understand true wisdom and power. As we look at this passage, we will see that true power is not found in driving fast cars, having a lot of money, or holding a chief officer position. True wisdom is not found in mindfulness or habit stacking or optimizing your investment portfolio now that interest rates are finally dropping. No. True wisdom and power are found in Jesus Christ, who *is* the wisdom and power of God.

Lord, I pray that as we open your Word, you would speak to us by your Spirit. Give us eyes to see and ears to hear that which you would teach us today. Make our hearts soft to you. And help me to faithfully handle the Word of Word. As we listen, help us to respond with faith and obedience. Amen.

The word of the cross

Our text for this morning is 1 Corinthians 1:18-31. This passage is closely tied to the end of last week's passage, so I want to start reading for us in verse 17. In verses 17-18, the Apostle Paul says this:

1 Corinthians 1:17-18:

For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. ¹⁸ For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

Last week, we noted that Paul sought to defend his apostolic ministry to the Corinthian church. Under the influence of false teachers, some in the church had begun to believe that Paul could not be trusted (though he had planted the church), and they had instead decided to follow after other leaders. So, there was a division

brewing in the church. In the face of this, Paul brings them back to the original message that he preached to them—the gospel message. He doesn't define the message for us here, but he does tell us how he delivered it: not with words of eloquent wisdom. In other words, it wasn't Paul's skill as a rhetorician or public speaker that convinced people of the truth of the gospel, and intentionally so. We will look at this idea more next week, but Paul did not want to convince people through his skill as a speaker. Rather, he wanted the power of the cross of Christ to shine through.

Then he makes this statement: For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

A few years ago, I went through a phase—a low-carbohydrate phase. I cut all grains completely out of my diet, stopped eating processed sugar, and started blending grass-fed butter and MTC oil into my morning coffee. As the people around me watched me making these dietary changes, most of them thought I was crazy. The butter in the coffee was weird enough for most people, but cutting out all those grains and sugars—the rice, the bread, the pastries, the ice cream—was more than some people could imagine. But let me tell you, I have never felt physically better in all of my adult life. I had more energy. I had more endurance for running. I stopped getting sick. And I didn't even feel like I was missing out. (All of this was before my wife Linzy started making sourdough bread, and we had to fill our little army of growing boys full of carbs to satisfy their seemingly endless hunger.) But while it lasted, I was convinced it was the only way to go.

Some things in life look crazy from the outside and only make sense once you have experienced them.

And nowhere is this more true than with the cross of Christ.

In the year 4 BC, just a few short years before Jesus was born, there was an uprising in Galilee, the region where Jesus would grow up. At the time, the Jews were under the control of the Romans, and a man named Judas ben Hezekiah and his band of rebels had had enough. Judas ben Hezekiah led a revolt to overthrow the Romans, but he was unsuccessful. The Roman general in charge of the territory, a man named Varus, crushed the rebellion and crucified 2,000 Jews, lining the streets of Galilee with crosses and crucified men. Today, people who don't even follow Jesus get crosses tattooed on their arms and wear them on chains around their necks, but

in Jesus' day, the cross was a symbol so horrifying that you wouldn't dream of mentioning it at the dinner table.

And yet, in the years and decades and centuries after Jesus's death on a cross, this instrument of torture has become a sign of hope and life for billions of Christ-followers around the globe and throughout the centuries.

When people in our culture hear the message of the gospel—that in some mysterious way, when Jesus the Son of God died on the cross, he defeated the powers of evil and death and bore the punishment for our sins, and that when he rose from the dead three days later, he secured our spiritual resurrection to a new kind of life in which the transforming love of God can flow through us to the world around us, all in anticipation of our future, physical resurrection, after which we will enjoy the presence of God in the new creation for all of eternity—when people in our culture hear that Gospel message, they respond in several different ways. Some are horrified that a loving God would send his innocent Son to die. Some are disillusioned, thinking it's a nice fairy tale but could never be true. Others are ambivalent, failing to see how the death of an ancient Jewish rabbi could have anything to do with their life today.

These are different ways of saying the same thing: the cross is folly, foolishness. It just makes no sense.

But, for those of us who are being saved, for those who have placed our faith in Jesus, who have experienced the life-transforming power of the Spirit, the gospel is nothing else than the power of God.

The word of the cross is the kind of thing that looks like foolishness from the outside, but it has to be experienced from the inside in order for us to really understand it.

The example of the cross

Paul goes on to explain this in more detail as he continues.

1 Corinthians 1:19-25:

For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." ²⁰ Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹ For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know

God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. ²² For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

In the first-century Jewish mind, there were two different types of people in the world: Jews and Gentiles. Jews were the children of Abraham, the members of the covenant, and the people of God. Gentiles were those outside the covenant, the others, and everyone else.

The Apostle Paul was given a very specific commission by God. He was the apostle to the Gentiles. That is, he was tasked with bringing the good news of Jesus to all people—Jews, yes, but also Gentiles. And so Paul would go from city to city, town to town, following a predictable pattern. He would first go to the Jewish synagogue, where he would preach that Jesus was the Messiah. Then, he would move into Gentile spaces to preach the gospel to them. Along the way, Paul faced a lot of rejection. Here, he summarizes the reason behind much of that rejection: The idea of a crucified messiah was just too far-fetched for either Jews or Gentiles to accept, but for different reasons.

The Jews were looking for signs. They were looking for a messiah to come into *power!* This was understandable. The Hebrew people had lived for centuries as an oppressed people, always under the control of some foreign nation—the Egyptians, the Babylonians, the Romans—always crushed under the weight of the Empire.

Their Scriptures were full of promises that this would not always be the case. One day, one would come who would bring deliverance, true and lasting justice, and an everlasting kingdom of peace. And how was such a kingdom to come? They assumed what any reasonable person would assume—with *power!* With force. With military strength. And so they were looking for signs—who is the one who is going to come into power and finally bring peace and justice to our people??

For Gentiles, it was a different story. The Greeks loved philosophy—think Plato, Aristotle, and Socrates. The minds that shaped Western thinking from the beginning were Greeks and Gentiles. They loved wisdom

and thought the good life could be achieved through careful thinking, which gave birth to wise practice.

Then Paul comes along and begins to tell people, *Hey, I've got some really good news to share with you. The Messiah has come to bring freedom and life.*

And the ears of the Jews perked up. *Really?!*

This Messiah, Paul says, is wisdom incarnate. Wisdom embodied.

And the Gentiles are intrigued. *Really? Tell us more.*

Jesus is the Messiah. And he won your freedom by dying on a cross. And he came to lead you into the good life. And that life is available if you deny yourself, pick up your cross, and follow him.

And the Jews say, *Nah. We're looking for power. That sounds like weakness to us. We're out.*

And the Gentiles say, *Nah. We're looking for wisdom. That sounds like foolishness to us. We're out.*

And Paul says, *Wait, wait, wait. I get it. I know the cross looks like weakness. I know the cross looks like foolishness. I used to think the same thing. But let me tell you a story. I was walking along a road one day, literally on my way to kill followers of Jesus. And Jesus showed up. I experienced him. And it was unlike anything I had ever experienced before. My eyes were covered with scales — I couldn't see. But then God removed the scales. I saw with new eyes what I couldn't see before. I saw that true power is not found in wielding a sword. And true wisdom is not found not in advancing our own agenda. Rather, power is found in weakness, in self-sacrifice. And wisdom is found in laying down your life so that you might pick it up again. And if you entrust yourself to Jesus Christ, who is the wisdom and power of God, you will be saved.*

Two things are needed for us to follow after Jesus and walk in his way. First, we need the scales to fall off. We need our eyes to be opened to the truth of the gospel. For most people, the message of the cross is folly. It just doesn't make sense. A crucified savior looks like foolishness and weakness. For us to accept the truth of the gospel, we need God to remove the scales from our eyes so that we can clearly see the truth of the gospel.

Second, we need corrective lenses. We need gospel lenses that provide ongoing vision correction. The cross shows us that what looks like wisdom and power

in the eyes of the world is actually foolishness and weakness in the eyes of God. True wisdom and power are often mistaken for foolishness and weakness from the perspective of the world.

Here is another way to say it: our natural intuition about what is wise and what is foolish, what is powerful and what is weak, is often dead wrong. We might think that real power looks like driving a fast car or having a lot of money or working your way up the corporate ladder. We might think that wisdom looks like a degree from Stanford or the right approach to wellness or biohacking your way to maximum productivity.

But the cross flips all that on its head because no one would have dreamed up a crucified messiah. No one would have dreamed the victory of God would be won on a cross. No one, in their wildest imaginations, would have dreamed that God would send his own Son to die for the sins of the world. But that is what happened.

When it did, the whole paradigm of wisdom and power was flipped on its head. So, we need corrective lenses—gospel lenses—to help us see the world as God sees it and understand the true nature of wisdom and power.

The example of the Corinthians

For Paul, the cross is not the only way we know that wisdom and power have been inverted in the kingdom of God. He also looks to the lives of the Corinthian believers themselves.

1 Corinthians 1:26-31:

For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ 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, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, ²⁹ so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. ³⁰ And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, ³¹ so that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the LORD."

I wonder how the Corinthians responded when they first heard these words from Paul read aloud in their gathering. “Not many of you were wise according to worldly standards.” *Hmmm, Paul must be talking about Sally, not me.* “Not many of you were powerful, not many of you were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise.” *Oh, that’s definitely Sally.*

Maybe. But probably not. I think they knew. I think they knew they weren’t the best or the brightest. I think they knew that they were the most rich or powerful. Maybe, in fact, that is what led this particular group of Christians to be open to the gospel message in the first place. We don’t know.

But here is what we do know: Earthly wisdom and strength are not always assets in the kingdom of God. They are in your job. They are in your career. They are while you are working on your degree. But earthly wisdom and power are not always assets in the kingdom of God because these things can lead us to depend on our own wisdom and power instead of tapping into the infinite wisdom and power of God. Earthly wisdom and power are not bad things, but they are dangerous things because they can get in the way of us trusting in and relying on the wisdom and power of God.

Finding God’s strength in our weakness

It’s no secret that Silicon Valley is home to many of the best and brightest people in the world. Many of you here today have a considerable amount of earthly wisdom and power. Let me offer you this word of caution: don’t let your natural skills and abilities keep you from experiencing the supernatural power of God. Don’t let your natural skills and abilities keep you from experiencing the supernatural power of God.

Your greatest strengths—your intellect, your programming skills, your management skills, your people skills, your musical skills, your teaching skills; whatever your strengths may be—your greatest strengths are the biggest obstacle to truly experiencing the power of God because you will be tempted to settle for what you can achieve through your strengths instead of embracing your weakness so that God’s power can shine through.

So, I want you to ask yourself this question today: What am I doing that requires God’s power to be effective?

If your goals and dreams can be achieved through your power, then you aren’t dreaming big enough because God’s power is so much greater.

A few years ago, I talked with one of our college students, Pablo, about his capstone project for a course at Stanford. I’m sure I am getting the details wrong, but he was working on a project to better predict weather patterns for upcoming seasons so that rural farmers in Africa could plant the right crops for that season, thereby increasing our global food supply and helping to reduce global poverty. As a 22-year-old college student.

That is amazing. But that is something that can be accomplished through worldly wisdom and power.

But what are we doing that requires God’s power to be effective?

You might be sitting here today thinking, I know there are a lot of people in this room who are wise and smart and powerful and successful. But not me.

Praise God. True wisdom is not found in the strength of our mind and true power is not found in the letters after our name or the size of our bank account. True wisdom and power are found in a person: Jesus Christ. And the power and wisdom of Jesus are accessed not through our strength, but through our weakness, so that the power of God can shine through.

“Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

Amen.