

Wise Up: Unconventional Wisdom
1 Cor 1.18-25
March 5, 2017

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 it is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate." Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? 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. Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.

The minister of a large American church was visiting overseas, and was invited to speak to a small Christian group. In the course of his remarks, he boasted about the size of his church in America. "We have a church of two thousand members," he crowed. "We even have two hundred people in prayer meeting every week." When he finished, one of the local men stood up and said, "I suggest we have a prayer for our brother and his church. They have eighteen hundred members who do not go to prayer meeting."

It all depends on how we look at things, doesn't it? What seems like success to us may not seem like success to God. God measures success with a different yardstick. We are impressed by numbers. God is impressed by the measure of our faith. We are impressed by size. God is impressed by our trust. We are impressed by our big, beautiful church building. God is impressed by how much love we have for others. Our willingness to reach out to one person in need is just as important to God as the ability to sway the multitudes.

Americans worship success, and they define success in worldly terms. Prominent position. Large income. Social standing. Of course, in and of themselves, these are not bad – the world needs great and prominent leaders – but, as Jesus pointed out, these must never be our primary goals.

The cross sure wasn't seen as biggest success story of the first century. Measured in terms of worldly success, it was a dismal failure for an traveling preacher and his movement. But, measured in terms of God's plan, it is one of the two greatest success stories of all time; the other is the story of the resurrection. What the world considered a dismal failure was God's great success.

In his letter to the Corinthian church, Paul says the Jews are looking for signs and miracles. The Greeks want wisdom; they want everything to be explained in reasonable, human terms. We're going to take a close look at these two requests because they're still with us today.

Let's look at the Greeks first. The Greek culture prided itself on its wisdom. The elite of Greek society spent large amounts of time discussing new thoughts and ideas. The Greeks thought that with the proper amount of wisdom and philosophy, all questions could be answered. Their error was that they defined wisdom strictly as earthly wisdom. They didn't bother themselves with wisdom from God or wisdom about God.

However, the wisdom of the world fails in the most important area of existence – eternity. There is more to life than this world we live in. Mankind was created for eternity, not time. Even the most primitive societies understood that there is life after death. That's why so many cultures buried their dead with food, weapons, and sometimes even slaves.

The wisdom of the world fails to lead people to the one true God. The only gods that could ever be discovered by worldly wisdom are gods of our own creation. Think about the gods that people have, and still do, worship. These gods look like people or animals. They act like people and they think like people. They are also angry gods of laws and rules. Worldly wisdom will never lead to the God of the eternal, to the God of grace.

Worldly wisdom fails because it doesn't lead to a changed life. People are born sinful. Unless the Spirit of God changes people, they can know nothing but sinfulness. What good deeds are produced are done for the wrong reason because, without faith in God, those deeds are not performed to the glory of God. Those deeds might be good for society but they have no eternal value. Only the true God can change sinners to righteous children and their good deeds into righteous deeds.

Worldly wisdom fails because it never produces satisfaction or peace. The wisdom of this world doesn't teach being satisfied with what you have. Look around. What do you see? Do you see people leading peaceful lives of contentment or do you see people killing themselves and others in an unending effort to get more?

Because the wisdom of the world fails so miserably, that wisdom can only lead to death. The world's wisdom considers the message of the cross foolishness. Today, as in Paul's day, the world mocks Christianity. The television and movie industries typically portray Christians as ignorant bigots who foster hatred and unrest. The world's wisdom does its best to lead people away from God. It leads people to the ultimate death of eternal condemnation to hell.

The world, in all of its wisdom, will never find God because God exists outside of human wisdom. God isn't bound by our thoughts, our wants, our imaginations, or our laws of physics. God will never be found in worldly wisdom because that wisdom worships gods of science, philosophy, and the human race. It rejects a God it cannot understand.

According to Paul, the Jews wanted signs. Often during his ministry, the Jews approached Jesus asking for spectacular signs and wonders. They thought the best sign of the Messiah would be a sign of power and strength. The Jews believed that God sent abundance only on good people, and he sent punishment and setbacks only on

bad people.

The Jews saw the term “crucified Christ” as an oxymoron. How could God allow his Chosen One to suffer a death reserved only for slaves and the worst of criminals? The Jews of Jesus’ time had such a materialist world view that it blinded them to the suffering Savior who is so clearly described by the prophets of the Old Testament Scriptures. The Jews were sure that God would send their Savior on a white stallion, not a donkey colt. They were sure the Christ would come with an army, not a ragtag collection of fishermen, tax collectors, and other various sinners.

Is any of this sounding familiar? It should. The Jews of that day, the ones we shake our heads at and wonder how they could be so far off track, were just precursors of the modern American society. Think about the story I told at the beginning of the sermon. Was that pastor giving glory to God for the progress the church made or was he pointing to the wonderful job he and his staff had done?

Americans measure success by the size of the house, the amount in the IRA, the price of the SUV, by who has the corner office. Some churches measure their success by the number they claim in membership or by their financial stability. Some Christians are sure they must be among God’s most loved because everything in their lives is going along smooth as silk.

Satan has deluded these people into thinking that God’s grace can be measured in external earthly terms. But, if worldly success were the measure of God’s grace and love, Christ would have had it made here on earth. Did he? No. Jesus suffered more than any human has ever suffered because Jesus paid the price for all human sin.

If God’s grace and love aren’t to be found in wealth, power, prestige, or fame, where can they be found? God’s love and grace can only be found on the cross. It is only in the cross that we see God’s deepest love and his most abundant grace in action.

The Greeks wanted wisdom. Do you want wisdom? If you do, try the unconventional wisdom of God. Christ is the wisdom of God. Through the foolishness of Christ crucified, righteousness, holiness, and redemption are ours. This kind of wisdom isn’t acquired through human reason or strenuous intellectual exercises like the Greeks practiced. This kind of wisdom comes only through simple, trusting faith in Christ crucified.

The Jews wanted to see power. Do you want to see power? Look to Christ. Christ is the power of God for salvation. Jesus Christ is God incarnate, and as such he possesses all the power of God, even though he chose not to fully use his power during his earthly life of humiliation. This is the type of power Paul is speaking of in today’s reading – God’s power to save.

What the Greeks considered foolishness by their human standards is, in fact, wiser than all their philosophy and mythology, since it alone is able to make people wise to salvation. Furthermore, the crucified Christ, whom the Jews considered the epitome of

weakness since he didn't perform any powerful miracles for them, nor did he save himself from the cross, is really God's power of salvation.

Natural man expects to find God in visible displays of power and glory which appeal to human reason, but through this search man finds only an angry god of law. The paradox of God's wisdom and power is that both are only found in what the world considers the foolishness of the cross. The wisdom and power of God is Christ crucified.