

Where weakness and wisdom meet

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[0 : 0 0] Good afternoon and welcome to our lunchtime Bible talk. I'm Josh Johnston, a minister in training here at the Tron Church. And for this week, we're taking a short look at a passage in 1 Corinthians. So if you could have your Bibles open, we're going to read that now together. It's 1 Corinthians chapter 1, verses 17 through to 2.5. So if you're using one of the church Bibles, that's on page 952. Beginning at verse 17 then.

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. 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.

For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart. 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? 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. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles. But to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ, the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. 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.

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. God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness, and sanctification and redemption. Therefore, as it is written, let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord. 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 implausible 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. Please do keep your Bibles open, and I'll pray, and afterwards we'll turn to look at this passage. Let's pray. Gracious Father, we thank you that we can gather together as your people joined to you through Jesus. We thank you that as we humble ourselves to trust Jesus, that we receive everything we need, that we're enriched with all knowledge and speech, that we're joined together with saints from every place who share the same Lord. So, Father, as we break from work, as we break from our daily business, would you feed us again with your word that it would be our daily bread.

Open our hearts to hear and respond to your speaking from your word, that we might humble ourselves again today at the cross of the Lord Jesus, that we might boast only in what he has done. Give us great confidence in that, that we might be all the more useful in serving you and in making you known.

[4 : 30] For we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. We often come across separations that are made because of achievement or impressiveness.

The world loves to be impressive. People love to be impressive. In school, we're often separated out by who's the most intelligent, so they're in the top set. Sports teams are put into leagues depending on who are the best. I recall a player being knocked out of a cup competition by a team much lower than the league he was in, and his response was simply to point to the badge on his shirt in order to say, yes, but I'm in the Premier League. We love impressiveness. The university degrees from the top universities are more desirable, more impressive. People prefer to work for companies that are prestigious, more impressive, longer heritage, bigger name. Even the areas we live in can tell how impressive we are. But what happens if that impressiveness spreads to the church?

Who are the top Christians? Who are the most spiritual or the most wise or those with the most powerful ministries? Maybe you've heard these words before. Maybe you've said something like them in a subtler way.

I must be a spiritual Christian because I follow this teacher. I'm holy because I go to that church. I'm truly reformed because our church is run like this.

Or maybe it's looking down more directly on others. I'm spiritual because I clearly know that that teacher's wrong. I'm right because I'd never read a book like that.

[6 : 31] Paul was concerned that this dear church in Corinth would not have such a phenomenon take hold. Paul could see that where there were classes of Christians in a church, it was very bad news.

He could see that when a church started to think that there was such a thing as spiritual Christians and unspiritual Christians, that the gospel itself was being undermined.

For Paul, he's concerned to remind the Corinthians that all Christians are truly spiritual. There's no split in the playing field. We see in chapter 1 verse 2, Paul's writing to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord.

A Christian is a Christian. There's no dividing line running through the church to separate the impressive, the spiritual from those who are a little bit less so, a little bit less well read.

The Corinthians associate being spiritual with special knowledge or wisdom and with special speech. So Paul says in verses 4 to 5, I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ, that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge.

[7 : 54] Paul reminds this church of what is true, what has already happened to anyone and everyone who's a Christian. They have already been enriched, given all speech and all wisdom.

So what would it look like to be in a church that prizes beings more spiritual than others? It would look like division, verse 10. Or it would look like this in verse 12.

Churches divided as to who is the most wise, the most spiritual, dare we say the most Christian.

And Paul is horrified that any such notion would take hold. And so from our passage and for this first main section of the letter, Paul explains how this cannot be in a church that truly belongs to Jesus.

Paul tells us what true wisdom and power really are. He says, firstly, that true wisdom and power are found at the cross. Verses 17 to 24.

[9 : 08] True wisdom and power are found at the cross. Paul didn't want people to follow him merely because he was impressive in a worldly way. He didn't want people to follow him because he was eloquent or clever.

He wanted them to follow his message because it was true. Not because he was persuasive or impressive. We see that in verse 17. Paul wasn't interested in how many baptisms he performed as a badge of being a great teacher.

No, look at what he says. Christ didn't send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel. And not with words of eloquent wisdom. He's not doing it to impress people.

He didn't want to win people to his personality. His preaching wasn't the end. Paul preached because it was the speaking of the gospel. It was the message of Christ crucified that had real power.

Not Paul. Because as he says, if that's true, the cross is emptied of its power. An impressive orator who can engage a crowd with words has no power to do anything of any significance.

[10 : 21] Paul is saying that where someone is captivated by the delivery of the gospel rather than by the words God is speaking, then the cross is doing nothing for them. God has turned wisdom and strength upside down.

What the world knows as strength, as wisdom, are made weak and foolish by what Christ has done. The cross of Christ looks to all the world like foolishness.

How could an innocent man dying achieve anything? How can rescue come to anyone through a man dying? How can anyone be the king and die a criminal's death?

It's a pathetic looking message. But look at verse 18. It's a pathetic looking message, but it is the power of God to those who are being saved.

God's power in saving people is the word of the cross. We have another referendum upon us. Previously, Scotland was divided into no thanks or yesers.

[11 : 29] Now it's Brexiters or Bramanians. We hope that these divides won't carry on causing divisions after the results are in. Because they're not the great question.

They're not the great divide. We find in this passage the great divide that will last into eternity. It's the question of what will you do with the cross?

Is it foolishness that leads to perishing? Or is it true wisdom that leads to being saved? That's the great divide. And so in the church, Paul knows that classes of Christians runs contrary to that.

Paul's line of spiritual and unspiritual is the line between the church and everyone else. And he makes clear that any notion of being wise or spiritual in order to have something to boast in is not a possibility for the truly spiritual person.

In Isaiah's day, God was angry with those who paid mere lip service to him, but with hearts that were far from him. And so God declared, and we see it repeated in verse 19, that he would destroy the wisdom of the wise.

[12 : 44] Those who thought they were clever would be made foolish. Verse 22. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom. The world didn't want the cross.

They still don't. They want profound wisdom that elevates men. Or they want impressive signs that set apart men as special. That's what's appealing.

That's what people want. Where is the one who is wise? That's Paul's question. And then he says, has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?

Because God's way to save people removes any possibility of human pride. It looks weak. It looks like a beaten man finally dying. It looks weak because it says we can't offer anything to be saved.

God has displayed his power to save, but he has done so in a way that flattens human wisdom. It flattens human strength. Intellect will not lead you to the cross. The end of any academic discipline will not be buying down to worship the Lord Jesus.

[13 : 59] Verse 21. Because in God's wisdom, the world will not know him through its own wisdom. No matter how clever someone is, their own intellect will not lead them to the cross.

But rather, the power of God to save is through the foolishness of this message that Paul holds out. A silly looking message by a man who'd given up on sounding clever.

That was God's wisdom to reveal his grace to the church. It sounds nuts. But look at verse 24. For those who will believe, it is both the power and wisdom of God.

Taking pride in what we know and what we can do puts us in a very dangerous position. It puts us close to removing any power that the cross has. So for the church that takes great pride in its theological position, belittling others that don't share such a heritage, that's a church that risks removing the cross of its power.

And a person who looks at another Christian and thinks, oh, that poor believer over there, if only they knew what I knew. Or could speak about Jesus with the eloquence I can speak about Jesus.

[15 : 24] That person undermines the cross's power. True. There is not an upper and lower class of Christians because true wisdom and power are found only at the cross.

And the cross belongs to every Christian. Paul continues in verses 25 to 31. True wisdom and power leave us with no boost but Jesus.

True wisdom and power leave us with no boost but Jesus. Countess Huntingdon, an associate of the well-known Whitefield, used to say that she was saved by an M.

She was an impressive person of noble birth. She was impressive by worldly standards. So she was delighted to read verse 26. Because while she was impressed by worldly standards, God has designed that that is not the case for the church in general.

Verse 26, Paul says, For consider your calling, brothers, not many of you were wise according to worldly standards. Not many were powerful.

[16 : 31] Not many were of noble birth. The M that see of the countess is that Paul says, not many instead of not any. You see, Paul is showing us that the church is made up mainly of people who are ordinary.

It's not the creme de la creme. God's plan for the church is that it would be made up of the unimpressive, those who generally fail to stand out.

But it would also have some impressive people thrown in. God's design shows that there is no place for human pride in the church. Because it is made up of those who can't boast in their achievements.

Who can't say that they've contributed to their salvation. The church is full of the average with some exceptional people thrown in to show that God's grace extends to all.

But that no one contributes to it. It's open to the wise man who'll humble himself. And it's open to the wealthy man who'll have his money in an open hand.

[17 : 36] And so human wisdom is turned upside down for the foolishness of God, verse 25, is wiser than men. And his weakness is stronger than man's strength.

So verses 27 and 28. That wisdom is to use what looks weak and foolish to shame the wise and the strong, to leave them with nothing to boast in.

Because the only thing that is wise in the end, the only thing that has power in the end, is the cross of Christ. And it leaves the church with, verse 29, no boast.

Or rather, verse 31. Boasting that can only be in the Lord. For it is he who has rescued and redeemed every Christian. It is he who has the strength and wisdom of any church.

It is only in him, verse 30, that we have wisdom from God, or it's only in him that we are spiritual. True wisdom and power leave us with no boost but Jesus.

[18 : 46] And that is why Paul's pattern of ministry to the Corinthians was intentionally unimpressive. That's what we see in chapter 2, verses 1 to 5.

As Paul says, take care with what impresses you. Take care with what impresses you. In a church that's seemingly full of impressive leaders, Paul might have been tempted to throw his lot in with them, to persuade people of his message because it was true, but to persuade them by being impressed of himself.

Paul, no doubt, could have been engaging. He could have been an impressive speaker. He could have wooed them with big words. But that would not have done any good.

Paul has set out to win the Corinthians to his message, not to him. If he put his message across in a way that was impressive, in a way that was exciting and utterly captivating, then he has only served to help the divisions in Corinth.

He has only helped to get people to say, well, I follow Paul and he is great. So I must be superior to the followers of Apollos.

[20 : 02] I must be superior to the followers of Cephas. Because look at Paul. No. Because God's purpose was that human wisdom and strength be flattened.

Paul had to convince them of the truth on its own terms. So he says in 2.1, I didn't come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom.

Because he didn't want anyone to be able to boast in how wise they were for following Paul. Because he's obviously the most clever. So what was Paul's message?

It was simply the message of a crucified Savior. It was that weak looking. Verse 3. He was even with this church in weakness, in fear, and much trembling.

Not only did his message look weak, but he let them see that he was weak. Christians have a Savior who was mocked, beaten, and crucified. Their weapon against the world, the flesh, and the devil is simply to speak about Jesus.

[21 : 17] And the church is mainly made up of the average. The whole thing is a weak looking business. And by design, they have an apostle who was weak, who was afraid, and who trembled amongst them.

With a message that was simply Christ crucified. The whole thing seemingly plays into the hands of the Dawkins type. That love to say that Christians aren't thinkers.

That they're idiots. The whole thing seems to play into the hands of those who work with us. Who live beside us. And say we're silly for believing this. But look at what Paul says.

Verse 4. My speech and my message were not implausible words of wisdom. They were not impressive. But they came in demonstration of the Spirit and of power.

They may not have looked impressive. But Paul knew the simple message of Christ crucified carried the true power of God. The Spirit working to win people to Jesus does so through the simple message of Christ crucified.

[22 : 37] And verse 5. Paul's concern ultimately in all of this is that those who believe do so on a very real foundation. He says, So that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men.

Because that's been destroyed. But in the power of God. And the power of God is that people who would perish are being saved.

If you're made to feel weak and stupid for sticking with a crucified Savior, then you are a spiritual person. If your confidence is in what Jesus has done, then you're a truly wise person.

If your concern to win people to Jesus leads you to bringing them to hear a gospel talk, even in a crumbling old building, from someone who's not respected by the world, who's maybe even mocked by the world, someone who's been mocked in public, if your confidence is still in the message that they preach, even though it looks weak, even though the building's falling apart, then you truly know the power of God.

Paul wanted the Corinthians to boast in Jesus, not in how impressive they were. We mustn't fall into thinking that a swanky building with preachers educated at the best academic institutions and a church full of wealthy, clever people is more likely to win our friends and family to Jesus.

[24 : 19] We must not fall into thinking that our church is a real church because we only read a certain type of book and listen to a certain type of preacher. We must not let the idea that we're a superior class of Christian slip into our thinking because the only gospel that has power is the one that leaves people with nothing to boast in.

Paul warns us that if our confidence is based on things the world will be impressed by, that we have emptied the cross of all of its power. A church is wise when its people are together, united under the cross of Jesus, boasting in him, knowing that they have all wisdom already in him.

That's the wise church. That's the wise Christian. A church is powerful when its people rely on the great good news of the cross of Jesus to win people.

The word of the cross is the power of God. That's the powerful church and that's the powerful Christian's ministry. Nothing is spiritual that elevates us above other Christians.

The cross is the great leveler or rather the cross is the great elevator, but it elevates us all to true wisdom and true power.

[25 : 49] Amen.