

The Wisdom of God

Here I Stand: Foundations of the Faith

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

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If you are just joining us this morning, we are in our second week in our series on the Reformation. Last week Pastor Josh helped us to see how the Reformation began. It did not start with a calculated effort by Martin Luther to overthrow the pope and split the Roman Catholic Church. Luther did not wake up that day wanting to split the church, eventually be excommunicated, and have his life later threatened when he nailed the 95 Theses to the church door in 1517. His desire was to discuss the truth about God and his Word. He wanted a discussion with other theologians so that they all could come to an understanding that the selling of indulgences needed to be reformed. Luther's writing and teaching expanded and he wanted the Bible to be the supreme authority for believers. In his context this meant that the Traditions of the church were second to the authority of the Bible.

This morning we will continue to look at *Sola Scriptura*, or Scripture alone. We will be focusing on the interpretation of Scripture. There are many different ways to interpret Scripture but I believe, along with Martin Luther, that we need to interpret Scripture with the lens of the crucifixion of Jesus.

Before we get to discussing in detail how this came to be Luther's understanding, and the applications for our lives today, let's take a look at "where stands it written." As believers in the inerrant and authoritative word of God we want to base our teaching and preaching on the Word. This morning we will be in 1 Corinthians 1. In these verses we will see the truth of God's glorious wisdom as it relates to our interpretation of Scripture and the way we live our lives.

1 Corinthians 1:18-31¹

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.*

¹⁹*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.*

²⁶*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."*

¹ Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version[®] unless otherwise noted.

This is the Word of the Lord.

To divide our time this morning, we will begin by looking at verses 18-25 and see the difference between God's wisdom and human wisdom. Then we'll look at verses 26-31 and see the difference between God's work and man's work in salvation.

GOD'S WISDOM IS MORE POWERFUL THAN HUMAN WISDOM. (18-25)

Our first point comes from verses 18-25. This may seem very obvious as you think about the characteristics of God. He is all knowing, all powerful, and in all places. Of course he has more wisdom than humanity. But often we do not trust in the wisdom of God and begin to substitute the wisdom of man instead.

It has been awhile since the series in 1 Corinthians so I want to help us remember the context of the church in Corinth. Corinth was an important trade city in the Roman Empire when Paul was writing this letter. There were two major ports on each side of the city and the money was flowing. This attracted wealthy merchants and influential people of all sorts. The city was all about social advancement and increasing one's self in status, knowledge, and wealth. Another mark of the city was loose morals and values. The life of the city was characterized by sexual immorality and worshipping idols.

The values that we have in our world today are very similar to these. We live in an important country in the world today that has a lot of wealth and influence. Our society idolizes the successful, the "important," and the influential. We cannot go a day without seeing or hearing about sexual immorality on television, billboards, or in conversation. We also worship the idols of fame, money, and status. If we compared Corinth and Wichita on a Venn diagram, there would be a lot of overlap, more similarities than differences.

This is why the Word of God is relevant for today. The Bible is not some outdated, old book that is confusing and makes no sense to read. God's Word is relevant throughout time and does work in people's lives. Martin Luther believed that the preaching of God's authoritative Word was the way that the church would be reformed. God's Word does the work of God in the people of God.

But because we do not think this is sufficient or enough for salvation we begin to add to it. It is no longer by faith alone that we have been saved but instead it is faith plus works. Or we don't think that all of the teachings in the Bible are enough for us, or we don't like some of them. We decide to pick and choose or combine other religions with Christianity. It becomes an a-la-carte god that we follow rather than the true God who has revealed himself to us through his Word.

The wisdom of God and wisdom of the world came to a head in Martin Luther's life at the Heidelberg Disputation in 1518. You've probably never heard of the Heidelberg Disputation. I hadn't either until our denomination's theology conference last year. But it is really important for understanding Martin Luther's theology. The Heidelberg Disputation was a theological discussion that took place in Heidelberg, Germany, in 1518. During this debate, Luther put forward 28 theological statements that were written in a similar format to the 95 Theses the year before. They were statements that built on each other and culminated in the fact that we need to interpret all of the Bible through the cross and the crucified Christ.

I want us to see what Luther wrote in statements 19-21.

19. That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon the invisible things of God as though they were clearly perceptible in those things which have actually happened.

20. He deserves to be called a theologian, however, who comprehends the visible and manifest things of God seen through suffering and the cross.

21. A theology of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theology of the cross calls the thing what it actually is.

Because Scripture is authoritative, Luther wanted the people to understand who God is based on what has been written in Scripture. Statement 21 talks about the theology of glory and the theology of the cross. Luther thought we should reject a theology of glory and embrace a theology of the cross. Now Luther's phrase "theology of glory" is a little misleading. God's glory is good. But Luther's not talking about the glory of God when he rejects a theology of glory. He's rejecting a theology that puts an emphasis on man's glory! Along with Paul, he's rejecting a theology that stresses the wisdom of man instead of the wisdom of God. Or in the words of one theologian, "The mistake that the theologian of glory makes is to think that the way the world appears to be is actually an accurate account of who God is."²

For example, the world that we live in is based on reciprocity. If I were to do something nice for you then I should expect the same in return. The golden rule is founded on this principle. A theologian of glory would then take this truth that he or she sees in the world today and apply it to how God functions as well. If they do a kind act or serve God in a particular way, then God should also look on them with kindness and reward them. Simply put, the things that we do, or do not do, earn God's favor or takes it away.

The people of Corinth were following human wisdom and today we do the same. We can quickly become theologians of glory—not God's glory but our own glory. We can come to expect that the Christian life is all about being rewarded for our actions and linking spiritual success and God's blessing to what the world sees as successful—mainly money, status, and social credibility.

The problem with this theology is that it is totally wrong; there is no place for the cross and Jesus crucified. This is why Luther says that the theologians of glory call evil good and good evil. They are not clearly seeing God, and the only way to clearly see God is to keep the cross and Jesus crucified at the center of our theology. This is where the wisdom of God is shown and revealed to people. This is what Luther meant when he said "theology of the cross." The theologian of the cross is able to call something what it actually is, good is good and evil is evil.

Church historian Carl Trueman explains Luther's position well. He says, "Theologians of the cross know what God is really like because his or her thinking about God starts with God's revelation of himself and not with human expectations."³ Using the cross to interpret and understand who God is was one of Luther's most profound and dramatic insights. This is the game changer that shaped the theology of the Reformation moving forward. It is here that the gospel was rediscovered, seeing that the Old Testament points forward to the cross and the New Testament points back to cross.

² Trueman, Carl R. *Luther on the Christian Life: Cross and Freedom*. Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 2015, p.62.

³ Trueman, Carl R. *Reformation: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow*. Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2011. p 42.

The theologian of glory can only judge the cross based on human wisdom and when they see Jesus on the cross they can only assume that he was a criminal, guilty of some horrible offense. Jesus is shamed, crushed, and defeated. In all of this they don't see a king, or victory over sin, and no reason to rejoice and praise God. These are all ways that we would see it through human wisdom. Once again Carl Trueman put it this way:

The theologian of the cross, however, approaching the event with the eyes of faith and with criteria provided by God's revelation of himself, sees a very different picture: not a sinner, but the only sinless man; not defeat, but triumph, not wrath, but mercy. What we have on the cross is not the defeat of a criminal, but the triumph of the King of Glory; not the victory of the powers of evil, but the victory of good over evil; not the hopeless curse of God, but the blessing of God by which all may be saved.⁴

This is what Paul is saying in verses 20-21. "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." Paul wants us to embrace God's wisdom and see that God's wisdom calls for suffering, weakness, humility, and service. An amazing way that this happens is through repentance when we turn away from the world's wisdom and trust in God's wisdom. But we may think in order to be strong we must be right and never show that sin has crept into our lives. In order to be good leaders of our families and the church we have to look "put together" and holy before them; they can't know that we struggle with sin. But this is the wisdom of the world in our lives.

The power and wisdom of God is shown through our humility before others. It is shown when we tell them our sins and mistakes. It is shown when we let others and God into the darkness in our lives to bring in the light; when we allow others to hold us accountable to live holy and humble lives before God and man. So church, are you doing this? Are you actively living with humility and repentance in your life?

God's wisdom is also shown on the cross through the way that Jesus served us. He did not serve us so that he could get something in return. He actually did not get anything when he did this. He did it because of his love for us. He was not looking to be self-fulfilled in anyway, but gave all that he had for us. He died so that we might live.

How does your service towards others look? Are you serving with an attitude of what you can get out of it in the end, or hoping that others will see you doing it? Or do you never serve others because you are too concerned with fulfilling your own desires of self, such as career advancement and self-glory? Does this cause you to neglect the things that are important, such as family?

God has gifted me with the ability to serve others and I am incredibly thankful for that gift. I know that he has gifted many of you with this same passion and desire. But for me it is a battle of two desires, serving others for their sake and serving others for my sake—hoping to be noticed and praised. I was involved in a lot of good things this week, but my motivation for doing them was wrong. I did them so that others would take notice of me. When Josh asked me to preach this week I said yes because I wanted to serve him by giving him a break from the pulpit but also so that he would notice me. I was putting career and social advancement ahead of serving Christ and his

⁴ Trueman, *Reformation: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow*, pp. 43-44.

church. I was looking to further my self-glory and also hoping that God would also see some of these things that I am doing for him and in some way reward me.

All that I just said is the theology of glory; the theology of human glory in real life. But Jesus' humble and weak death on the cross saved me from that. He served me without looking for any selfish gain but because he loved me and took the punishment that I deserved. Jesus has done the same for all of you and I implore and encourage you to trust in the seemingly foolish wisdom of God because it is through this wisdom that you can have true life.

What are we supposed to do if we are to trust in the humble, weak, and service-driven wisdom of God for salvation? Do our good works matter and are we even able to choose God before we are saved? That leads me to my next point.

GOD'S CALL OF SALVATION IS NOT DEPENDENT ON A PERSON'S ACTIONS. (26-31)

Paul makes this very clear to the Corinthians when he asks them to consider their calling by God to salvation. In verse 26 he basically says, "Look at ya. None of you are wise and none of you are powerful. Even though you tried so hard to be these things, you have done nothing to merit God's love and salvation." God chooses the foolish, weak, low and despised in the world to show that we have done nothing to save ourselves. We are unable to boast in our actions for our salvation; we can only boast in the work that God has done for us. It is only because of God that we are able to know the wisdom of God, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption.

Passages like this led Luther to explore the topic of free will in depth. Does a person have the free ability to choose God? Depending on what I say, you will either shout out an "amen" or scoff and want to leave. Before we get to that, though, let's take a look at how this debate over free will played out with Martin Luther and the Reformation.

The debate on this particular topic happened between Martin Luther and a man named Erasmus. Erasmus was a Roman Catholic priest and a Renaissance man. He wanted to reform the church as well and is best known for his desire to go back to the original Greek manuscripts and the Greek New Testament that he put together in 1516. Luther and Erasmus had many things in common. They loved the word of God and both wanted to reform the church by the word of God. But they had one very sharp disagreement. This disagreement happened over the matter of a person's ability to choose God—free will.

Erasmus felt that people were able to choose God. He stressed the fact that people were good and because of that they would choose to do good things and also choose the goodness of God over sin. He wrote about this in the 1524 work, *Diatribes Concerning Free Will*. In 1525 Luther responded to this with his most famous work *The Bondage of the Will*. Luther did not speak with hushed tones when he wrote to Erasmus either. Here are a few quotes from *The Bondage of the Will*: "Are you ignorant of what it means to be ignorant?" "You speak and act only as an ungodly person does." "Perhaps you want me to die of unrelieved boredom while you keep on talking." "There is no man I hate more than him."

Luther's anger is proof that he was a very imperfect man and that God used an imperfect man to reform the church. But why was Luther so angry? In order to grasp why, we need to have a good biblical understanding of free will. It can be seen clearly in this chart I pulled from an R.C. Sproul

book.⁵ The chart was first developed by Augustine and is backed up in the book *Evangelical Convictions* which explains the EFCA's statement of faith. That is a lot of clout behind this 4x5 table!

Pre-Fall Man	Post-Fall Man	Reborn Man	Glorified Man
Able to sin	Able to sin	Able to sin	
Able to not sin		Able to not sin	Able to not sin
	Unable to not sin		
			Unable to sin

Before the fall, in Genesis 1-2, Adam and Eve had the ability to choose to sin or not to sin. We know that they were able to sin because of the fact that they did sin in Genesis 3 when they disobeyed God's Word. We also know that they were able to not sin because God clearly made everything good in creation.

After the fall this changed. People are still able to sin, but we have lost our ability to not sin. Simply put, we can only sin. We have inherited a sinful nature from Adam and Eve and are also sinners by our choices. Our will is bound to sin. This is the bondage of the will that Luther talks about. He says:

The term 'free will' is too grandiose and comprehensive. People think it means what the natural force of the phrase would require, namely, a power of freely turning in any direction, yielding to none and subject to none. If they knew that this was not so, and that the term signifies only a tiny spark of power, and that utterly ineffective in itself, since it is the devil's prisoner and slave...

So free will is not totally free, or rather not free at all, because we are slaves to sin. Romans 3 makes it very clear that no person is righteous before God and no person seeks after God. Even the good things that we do are done with the wrong motives and therefore sinful. Because of this slavery to sin we "are dead in our trespasses and sin" as Ephesians 2:1 says. A physically dead person cannot make choices. Once you are dead that's it, there is no changing it no matter how hard you or other people try. The verse in Ephesians is referring to spiritual death, but the same logic is true. A spiritually dead person cannot do anything on their own power to be brought to spiritual life. They are stuck in the state they are in and unable to get out of it. A dead person is unable to change on their own no matter how much their will desires it. R.C. Sproul says:

Fallen man has lost his ability to make choices. The sinner still is able to choose what he wants; he can still act according to his desires. Yet, because his desires are corrupt he does not have the royal liberty of those set free unto righteousness. Fallen man is in a serious state of moral bondage.

The only way a person can be released from this moral bondage from their sinful will is by a miracle of God. It is here that the wisdom of God sending his son to die on the cross for our sins comes in. We were able to sin and unable to not sin. Sin was our only option which is why God had to step in. Paul says that God called the Corinthians to himself in verses 24 and 26. God is the one who initiated the work in our salvation by revealing himself to us through Jesus and his spoken Word.

⁵ Sproul, R.C. *Chosen by God*. Carol Stream, Ill: Tyndale, 1986, p.49.

The work of the Holy Spirit allows us to be brought from death to life. This is the miracle that God performs when each and every person comes to salvation.

I have been around many people who compare when they believed the gospel to when other's believed it. They were thinking that the other person's belief and story was more powerful than theirs. Do not feel bad because you don't think that your testimony of what God has done is as powerful as what has happened in other people's lives. The repentance and belief of a ten-year-old who grew up in a Christian home and hasn't ever had anything bad happen to him is just as miraculous as a fifty-year-old who lived his whole life for sinful gain and scorned God until he repented and believed. Both of these people were headed to the same place and they were both dead in their sins with only the ability to sin, until God called them.

It is only after a person has been brought from death to life, through the power of God, that they can now go back to their original abilities before the fall. They are now able to sin *and* able to not sin. It is here that 'free will' in the sense of choosing God is restored to people. Because it is only here that a person has been released from their bondage to sin. Finally, the chart is concluded when a reborn person dies and is brought to glory in heaven. Here they are able to not sin and indeed unable to sin.

If a person is able to freely choose God, then this would be an act of salvation based on their own merit and works. They would be able to boast in the fact that they chose God, which then allowed God's saving grace to take effect in their life. This is bringing reciprocity into our relationship with God and is a theology of glory. But because we have done nothing to deserve the calling of God, in the same way that the Corinthians did not deserve it, we should respond how Paul calls them to respond—with boasting in the Lord. We should praise God for what he has done in our life, reflecting on how he has called us to himself and saved us through the cross of Christ.

We should also ask God to call more people to himself and release them from the bondage to sin. Prayer is powerful and because of that, we should ask God to work in the lives of people who do not believe; asking God to help them see the foolishness of the wisdom of this world and to humble themselves before God. Asking that God would help them to see the authority and importance of the Bible and asking that they would know that they can only be saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Because of this God alone will get the glory!

If you have never trusted in Jesus as your Lord and Savior, I would ask that you spend some time evaluating your life. Do you believe that your will is actually bound to sin and that there is nothing that you can do to stop it? Think through your actions and life choices. Are your good actions also motivated by good motives? Do you often have the desire to serve yourself rather than others? Are you stuck in this state?

There is good news, though, because you can be set free from this moral bondage, if you respond to God with humility and repentance. You will then be saved by the grace of God through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.