

Study 3. 1Cor 1:26-2:5

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The upside-down nature of the cross – what is considered wise is actually foolish, and what is considered powerful is actually weak, and vice versa - is demonstrated in both the church members' experiences and Paul's ministry amongst them.

This passage contrasts two views of wisdom and power, and foolishness and weakness. To help you get into these themes, consider the cultural context of Corinth. It had been a wealthy and significant city in Greece, and a centre of philosophy. You can imagine then, that the citizens would have valued power and the intellect. The majority of the Christians in the church in Corinth would have come from pagan backgrounds, being shaped by these values. At the same time, however, according to Paul in this section most of them were 'ordinary' - perhaps tradespeople and workers - rather than rich and powerful. In this context, it appears that there were others in the church who exploited their relative power, and those who dismissed the gospel message as 'foolishness' and 'weakness', preaching instead a more sophisticated-sounding message. How were these Christians to understand their position before God, when what they believed seemed ridiculous to those outside and even within their church?

Observation and interpretation

Read vv26-31.

According to Paul, where would the Christians in the Corinthian church have sat in a social hierarchy?

Why do you think Paul is reminding them of this?

- See the passage immediately preceding, especially v. 25.

In verses 27 - 29 Paul says 'God chose' three times.

Why do you think he is emphasising God's choice? (What did God choose, and why?)

What kind of weakness and foolishness is Paul talking about here?

What kind of wisdom and power is Paul talking about?

- What exactly is Paul contrasting here?
- See vv. 21-25 if you need a refresher.

In what way could 'weak' and 'foolish' things 'shame' the 'wise' and the 'strong'? (v. 27)

What does real wisdom from God look like?

How do you become wise, according to Paul? (v. 30)

In what way does being 'in Jesus' transform a believer?

What kind of boasting does Paul say is prohibited by this new wisdom?

What kind of boasting does Paul indicate that God wants instead? (vv. 29-31)

Boasting is another way of talking about what we think gives us status - with God, and with others. What we 'boast' about indicates what we think qualifies us what we think justifies us and what we think gives us our standing.

Read 2:1-5

In what way does Paul model this understanding of real wisdom in his own ministry and preaching?

What would have been lost if Paul had chosen to focus on impressing the Corinthians with sophisticated language and showy performances?

Application / Implications

In what ways do you relate to the people Paul is writing to? Do you feel weak and foolish, or do you feel powerful and wise?

What do the people in your university, College, workplace regard as impressive and intelligent? What do they dismiss and disregard?

In what ways are you tempted to have your view of yourself be shaped by their standards?

In what ways are you tempted to have your view of Jesus' life, death and resurrection be shaped by those standards?

In what ways do you sense Paul's challenging that?

In what ways are you tempted to 'boast' before God (relying on your own intelligence, efforts or goodness)?

What freedom is offered to you by what Paul is saying?

In what ways in your own ministry can you encourage people to rely on God's power and wisdom, rather than your own?

Prayer ideas

Praise God that we receive righteousness, holiness and redemption from him, because of Jesus.

Pray that you will be like Paul in valuing the message of the cross highly.

Pray that you will see the message of the cross as wise and powerful, and that through your ministry, others will also.