

Folly Followers

1 Corinthians 1:18–31 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.”

What I see:

When I read this, I always think about the “outsiders” and how they viewed the “insiders.” You immediately think of scoffing. There was a lot of scoffing in Paul’s day. A lot of mocking aimed at Christians. When Paul asks, “Where is the wise, scribe, and debater of this age,” he wasn’t saying they didn’t exist. He’ll make the point they pale in comparison to God. But make no mistake about it: they were around. Christians faced Jewish criticism and Greek philosophy. The cross was a stumbling block to Jews, because it was a shameful punishment for sinners. Cursed is anyone who hangs on a tree, right? And they’re supposed to believe that was their Messiah? “Prove it! Show us a sign!” The Romans would see it as a humiliating death for criminals. “That’s a King?” Greeks would have laughed it off. “No true god would allow Himself to be shamed and executed by humans.”

Yes, they faced ridicule and intimidation. Consider these major Greek philosophical traditions that permeated the Greco-Roman world:

- **Plato:** Taught that the physical world is only a show of eternal, perfect realities. Emphasized reason, the immortality of the soul, and the pursuit of truth through philosophy. One of the dominant philosophies throughout the Roman Empire.
- **Aristotle:** Emphasized observation, logic, ethics, and the study of nature. His writings shaped education, science, and rhetoric. His methods of logical argument were widely taught. His writings influenced public speakers and teachers.
- **Epicurus:** If the gods existed, they did not interfere with human affairs. Happiness comes through freedom from fear and unnecessary desire. Death should not be feared because consciousness ends.
- **Zeno of Citium** (founded Stoicism): Taught that you should live according to reason and nature. Virtue is the highest good. Accepts suffering without complaint. Self-control and duty are essential. Probably the most influential philosophy among Romans at that time.

- **Socrates:** Philosopher who pursued wisdom through questioning and dialogue. His influence continued through Plato's writings.
- **Cynics:** Rejected wealth and social conventions, advocating simple living.
- **Skeptics:** Questioned whether certainty was possible.
- **Middle Platonists:** Adapted Plato's ideas for the Roman era.

It's not like they got everything wrong, either. Paul was familiar with and even quoted Greek philosophers and authors. He found bits of truth in several of them, though he found them lacking regarding the deepest truth and who was behind them. There is only one God. Salvation was through Jesus. Man cannot save himself!

But this would be a challenge for the church. It's tempting to follow your peers and those who are honored in your culture. You want to have the "smart guys" on your side, and you certainly don't want to go head-to-head! You don't want to fight against the popular and powerful! Paul knew, generally speaking, that the church wasn't made up of such individuals. Again, he wrote, "not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth." That was also a hard pill to swallow. While doing research, I learned: *"In most first-century AD Graeco-Roman religions, only people of noble birth or great wealth were called for salvation; these people primarily became rulers and priests."* (Faithlife Study Bible).

The church has always faced opposition, pressure, and intimidation from philosophers, intelligent, wealthy, and powerful members of society. This is why Billy spent a good portion of his class discussing philosophy a couple of years back: it affects the church if you're not careful.

This brings me to my next point: the church. Why did Paul bring this up? Was he giving the church a heads-up to what they'd face when sharing the gospel in their neighborhood? No. Paul found its application useful for their **present dilemma**. They were a divisive group. They were haughty. They were too smart for their own good. This wasn't primarily a doctrinal difference. Saying it was a "personality difference" is too soft. It was an issue of pride. They weren't acting like a new creation in Christ. They needed to be reminded of what "worldly wisdom" gets you. It doesn't end with Christ. It's prideful. It demands something greater than Jesus. It leaves its disciples thinking too highly of themselves. It creates division. It underestimates God. That was occurring at Corinth. It was a serious problem, and Paul's reproof actually continues through chapter 4.

Whether they were identifying it or not, they were still thinking and acting like outsiders. Something outside Christ's mindset was leading them. This resulted in:

- An "I follow Paul" and "I follow Apollos" mentality.
- Putting up with adultery.
- Suing one another.
- Cult prostitution.
- Putting stumbling blocks before brethren.
- Questioning Paul's position and rights.
- Idolatry.
- Disorderly and divisive worship.
- Haughty mindsets concerning spiritual gifts.

- Misunderstanding the resurrection!

What an absolute mess! Is this the body of Christ? I don't think it's a coincidence that when Paul quotes Isaiah 29 and Jeremiah 9, it's taken from contexts rebuking Judah for living as evil, uncircumcised people. The first quotation is towards the beginning in vs. 19 and taken from Isaiah 29:

- **Isaiah 29:13–16 (ESV) — 13** And the Lord said: "Because this people draw near with their mouth and honor Me with their lips, while their hearts are far from Me, and their fear of Me is a commandment taught by men, **14** therefore, behold, I will again do wonderful things with this people, with wonder upon wonder; and the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the discernment of their discerning men shall be hidden." **15** Ah, you who hide deep from the Lord your counsel, whose deeds are in the dark, and who say, "Who sees us? Who knows us?" **16** You turn things upside down! Shall the potter be regarded as the clay, that the thing made should say of its maker, "He did not make me"; or the thing formed say of him who formed it, "He has no understanding"?

- Context: God is going to siege Jerusalem for their sin!

The second is at the end in vs. 31 and taken from Jeremiah 9:

- **Jeremiah 9:23–26 (ESV) — 23** Thus says the Lord: "Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, **24** but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the Lord." **25** "Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will punish all those who are circumcised merely in the flesh— **26** Egypt, Judah, Edom, the sons of Ammon, Moab, and all who dwell in the desert who cut the corners of their hair, for all these nations are uncircumcised, and all the house of Israel are uncircumcised in heart."

- Context: Jeremiah weeps over the sin of rebellion among Israel. God will punish them for their evil and pride. A call is made for a song of mourning over Israel. There will be dead bodies! Then we have this passage.

We need to remember that we're impressed by worldly wisdom if we're being honest. Israel asked for a King because they wanted to look like other nations, and we're not always that different. Our message is simple and foolish to the world, but it's actually God's power and wisdom. Worldly wisdom could look like:

- Trading wisdom for the latest psychology trend.
- Trading sincere teaching for dynamic speakers.
- Trading truth for cultural acceptance.
- Trading biblical patterns for business models.
- Trading hearts for they wealthy, powerful, and stylish.
- Trading simplicity for complicated interpretations.
- Trading your own desires over the needs of others.
- Trading Jesus. Yet, He became wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption.

Folly, but true. We follow the message: Christ crucified. Christ resurrected. Christ saves. Christ unites.