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HCC Sermon
1 Cor 1:18-31

A Wise God

INTRODUCTION

1. Image: Dr. Daniel Kahneman commented in an interview in Time magazine that people don't think very well.
2. Need: An overreliance on human wisdom causes division within a church.
3. Subject: What is God's wisdom that unifies the church?
4. Text: 1 Corinthians 1:18-31
5. Subject: God displays his wisdom in two ways

BODY

- I. God displays his wisdom through a foolish message (1:18-25)
 - A. Paul describes how God in his wisdom saved the Corinthians through a foolish message.
 1. Your spiritual state determines how you view the message of the cross (1:18-19)
 - a. The word of the cross refers to all that Christ accomplished on the cross
 - b. The spiritually dead view the message of the cross as foolishness (1:18)
 - c. The spiritually alive view the message of the cross as God's power (1:18)
 - d. The message of the cross fulfills the message of Isaiah (1:19).
 2. God makes foolish the wisdom of the world while using the foolishness of preaching to save the lost (1:20-21)
 - a. No one ever expected that God would save people through the cross (1:20)
 - b. Human wisdom cannot save the lost (1:21a)
 - c. Only the content of the gospel can save the lost (1:21b)
 3. Preaching the cross is foolish because it makes no sense to anyone (1:22-25)
 - a. People looked to different things for salvation (1:22)
 - i. The Jews looked for signs
 - ii. The Gentiles looked for wisdom
 - b. The crucified Christ is scandalous to everyone (1:23)
 - c. But to believers the message of the cross displays the power and wisdom of God (1:24)
 - d. The foolishness of God and the weakness of God is greater than the wisdom of man and the strength of man (1:25)
 - B. Remember the foolish message that unites us when the temptation to divide arises.

- II. God displays his wisdom by saving an unlikely people (1:26-31)
 - A. Paul describes how God saves unlikely Corinthians to display his wisdom (1:26-31)
 - 1. Paul reminds the Corinthians that their former state is nothing to brag about because God uses the weak to shame the wise and strong (1:26-28)
 - 2. Paul reminds the Corinthians to boast of the benefits that they have in the Lord (1:30-31)
 - B. Remember the unlikeliness of your salvation when the temptation to divide arises.

CONCLUSION

- 1. Summary: God displays his wisdom through a foolish message. God displays his wisdom by saving an unlikely people. Remember the wisdom of God when you feel tempted to divide.
- 2. Closing Image: A wooden cross supported the US flag at Fort McHenry that inspire the national anthem: "The Star-Spangled Banner".

MANUSCRIPT

A person who has studied human intelligence says that human beings don't think very well. Who is this guy? His name is Daniel Kahneman. He's a psychologist and a Nobel-prize winning economist. He wrote a best-selling book: Thinking, Fast and Slow. In an interview with Time magazine, he comments that people don't think as well as they think they do. Let me read you what he said.

We are normally blind about our own blindness. We're generally overconfident in our opinion and our impressions and judgment. We exaggerate how knowable the world is... What psychology and behavioral economics have shown is that people don't think very carefully. They're influenced by all sorts of superficial things in their decision making, and they procrastinate and don't read the small print.

In other words, we should be aware of the shortcomings in our ability to think. If people don't think as well as we expect, then it should not surprise us that an overreliance on human wisdom within the church could potentially cause division within the church. It could prompt conflict. You may ask: what are examples of human wisdom operating within the church? Let me give you some hypotheticals. Human wisdom says: "This person serves on the management team of his company. He oversees million-dollar budgets. He directs various teams. Therefore, he is an ideal candidate to serve on the leadership of our church." But no one ever evaluated his character. He could be overbearing, demanding, and arrogant. If this person serves on the leadership of the church, then he could cause conflict and division from the leadership down. Let me give you another example of human wisdom. We desire to grow our church. This might prompt us to look online for church growth strategies. If you search Amazon

or a local Christian bookstore, then you'll find many books promoting strategies to grow your church. But many fail to realize that some of these strategies apply to contexts different than our own. When we try to adopt these strategies, it may cause conflict, division, and friction because our context is different. I could go on. But I hope that you get the picture. I'm not saying that leadership skills in the professional world are bad. I'm not saying that considering church growth strategies is something we should avoid. What I'm trying to say is that we should be cautious of relying on them too much. We should be critical of such thinking. Otherwise, an overreliance on human wisdom. An overreliance on human thinking could cause division within the church.

We don't want division in the church. So then... how do we pursue unity? How does a church including our own pursue oneness? Unity within the church requires God's wisdom. This then prompts then question. **What is God's wisdom that unifies the church?** How does a wise God bring together people with the church? What does a wise God do to join people together within the church? What is this wisdom?

To answer this question, we'll turn to a letter that Paul wrote to the Corinthian church. The city of Corinth resembled the metropolitan cities of today. New York. San Francisco. Shanghai. London. Hong Kong. Houston. A diverse population lived in Corinth. Jews. Greeks. Romans. The city was known for its intelligent citizens. They knew how to think. But the Corinthian church's overemphasis on human reason and logic over God's wisdom led to divisions with the church. This led Corinthians to pledge their allegiance to different teachers: Paul, Apollos, Cephas, or Christ. It sowed seeds of divisions. When news reached the ears of the apostle Paul, it prompted him to write the letter that we have in our Bibles – 1 Corinthians. If

you're not there already, please open your Bibles there to 1 Corinthians. Thank you, Brian, for reading this morning's passage. We'll be in 1 Corinthians, chapter 1.

In this morning's section of text, we'll see two ways that God displays his wisdom. God exhibits his wisdom through two methods. These two displays. These two exhibits show us God's wisdom and how it should unify the church.

Let's talk about the first display of God's wisdom. **God displays his wisdom through a foolish message.** God makes known his wisdom through a message that doesn't make sense to people. A message that seems preposterous. A message that some might call scandalous. Yet this message. This proclamation shows off God's wisdom because no one would have ever made up such a message. **God displays his wisdom through a foolish message.**

We see this in the first section of this morning's text. **Paul describes how God in his wisdom saved the Corinthians through a foolish message.** He confronts their pride in their thinking by saying: "Don't you remember the message that saved you?" It's a message that seems illogical. No rational person would have dreamt it up.

Who you are determines how you understand the message of God. As one might say: "A great many truths depends on one's point of view". **Paul understood that one's spiritual state determines how you view God's message.**

Let's look at what Paul writes in verse 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.*

First, I want us to think about the word of the cross. The NIV translates it as the message of the cross. A better way is to understand it as a proclamation. What does Jesus Christ dying on the cross proclaim?

The spiritually dead view the proclamation of the cross? When the perishing look at the cross, what do they see? What does an unbeliever see? Tragedy. A fine religious leader killed. A good moral teacher that the Roman authorities crucified. A blasphemer, who claimed to be God, deserving death.

But what do the spiritually alive see? The spiritually alive view the proclamation of the cross as God's power. They see God using human wickedness to accomplish salvation for our sin. When a believer looks at the cross, they see their savior. They see their substitute. The one who died for my sins, so that I could be restored to God. They see the son of God.

What do you see? How you perceive the proclamation of the cross? What you see reveals your spiritual state?

Paul recognizes that the proclamation of the cross fulfills what God promised long ago through the pen of Isaiah. God would destroy human wisdom. Look at verse 19. *For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart."* Isaiah wrote these words long ago to warn the leaders of Judah that God would thwart their "wise" plan to ally themselves with the Egyptians to ward off the Assyrians. But their decision to ally with the Egyptians prompted the Assyrian invasion. But Paul sees these words also being fulfilled through Christ's work on the cross. No one expected God would use such a painful form of torture to save people from spiritual torment.

Through the cross, God makes foolish the wisdom of the world. But he uses the foolishness of preaching to save the lost. God makes foolish the wisdom of the world while using the foolishness of preaching to save the lost.

What makes the cross foolish? Not only was it scandalous, but no one ever expected it.

No one expected that God would save people through Jesus dying on a cross. Look at the three rhetorical questions that Paul asks in verse 20. *Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age?* Note the three classes of people mentioned here. The wise referring to the sage or the philosophers of the age would not have predicted the cross. The scribe referring to Jewish religious teachers expected a messiah. But they anticipated a conquering messiah not a suffering messiah. The debater is one skilled in rhetoric. A trained speaker. They would never have thought of using a symbol of death to persuade listeners to believe in God. All these professional experts would never have imagined God saving sinners through Christ's work on the cross. It should not surprise when philosophers, thinkers, theologians, or influencers of our day can't make sense of the cross either. This prompts the last question in verse 20. *Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?*

Why does Paul emphasize the wisdom of God in contrast to the wisdom of the world? The wisdom of the world cannot save people. Human wisdom cannot save the lost. Before I continue, I want to make a point of clarification. Some of you might think: Does that mean we should not pursue wisdom? After all, the Bible has a genre: wisdom literature. Proverbs. Psalms. Job. Ecclesiastes. Does that mean we should avoid the content of these books? That's not what Paul is saying. Paul is making the argument that wisdom that finds its foundation in human reasoning void of God has no benefit. The wisdom found in the Bible is wisdom that accords with God designs. Therefore, Paul qualifies wisdom in verse 20 as "wisdom of the world". Wisdom that finds its source in the world.

Let's circle back and talk about why this humanly wisdom cannot save. Look at the first half of verse 21. *For since, in the wisdom of God the world did not know God through wisdom.* God designed the world so that humanity cannot discover a relationship with God apart from his intervention. Yes... God may have put hints of himself in all creation. One might look up at the stars and think: What kind of being could have created the cosmos? One might think about the complexities of creation and ask: "How can all these variables be so finely tuned so that life could exist in the earth?" While the answer to these questions would be there is probably a divine being out there, you cannot derive through thought experiments who this being is. You cannot through trial and error discover there is a wise God who loves you so that he sent his son to die for your sins and give you eternal life.

This requires divine revelation. God needs to reveal himself to us and his plan of salvation. This is divine wisdom. Divine wisdom can save lost people. Look at the last half of verse 21. *It pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.* Look at the phrase: "*what we preach*". Paul highlights the content of the proclamation not the delivery. It's more important about what you say rather than how you say it. What is the content of our proclamation? It's what God has revealed. A sinful humanity rebelled against the rule of God. It deserved to experience eternal separation from God in the form or conscious eternal torment. But by the grace of God, he sent his son to die on the cross for our sins. If that's not enough, the perfect life that Jesus lived is now our life. And we know this to be true because Jesus rose from the dead. This message saved us. For those of us who struggle with anxiety, the gospel says God will take care of you. If he could take care of your greatest need – your sin, then he will take care of your other needs. If you struggle with anger because things don't go your way, then you

know that when things didn't go Jesus's way he deferred to the will of the father and procured salvation for you. Should you still feel angry? This foolish message of a savior dying on the cross saves us from the woes of this world.

But it doesn't make sense to people. **Preaching the cross is foolish because it makes sense to no sense to the perishing.** Paul explains now why. Why do unbelievers have a hard time believing in the proclamation of the cross?

People in the first century looked to different things for salvation. Paul separated the world into two categories. Jews. Non-Jews also known as Gentiles. Each looked for different things. Look at verse 22. *For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom.* **The Jews looked for signs.** They expected a messiah. They anticipated that he would perform great signs such as calling down hail to destroy the Romans. They expected maybe fire coming down to consume the altar. But every time Jesus performed a miracle or sign, it failed to convince the religious leaders. **The Greeks looked for wisdom.** They wanted someone who be able to explain to them with compelling logic and reason the way to salvation. But Jesus talked about being from heaven, eating his flesh, or drinking his blood made no sense to them.

Not only did Jesus not make sense to them, but the cross was scandalous. **The crucified Christ is scandalous to everyone.** Look at verse 23. *But we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles.* For the Jews, it didn't make sense for their messiah to be hung on a cross. The OT says that anyone who is hung on a tree is cursed. The crucifixion of Christ didn't make sense to the Gentiles. The authorities reserved crucifixion for the most serious crimes. It's reserved for state criminals. How could a terrorist save people from sin?

The cross fails to make sense. It does not compute. It bewilders. It surprises. It befuddles. But to believers the message of the cross displays the power and wisdom of God. Look at verse 24. *But to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.*

Let's think about these two phrases: power of God and wisdom of God. First. The power of God. When we think about power, we think of force. Our cars have horsepower that propels them forward. Generators provide power so that we can flip on the lights at home. But the word: power here doesn't refer to force. It refers to competency. Think of this. The president can deploy the military against our adversaries. A programmer has the power to write code that enable us to monitor a person's glucose levels. A teacher has the power to issue detention to an unruly student. If that's the case, then only God can utilize something as ugly as the cross to save people.

Next, let's think about also the wisdom of God. Wisdom refers to a skill. Only God has the skill to manipulate all the events of history such as preserving the line of Abraham in the book of Genesis so that the seed would come through him to save the world. God would rescue the Israelites from Egypt to establish a nation. He would preserve the seed of David through conflicts until the day that Jesus could be born to accomplish his salvific work.

Believers see that God is far more able and skillful than anyone we know. That's why the foolishness of God and the weakness of God is greater than the wisdom of man and the strength of man. Look at verse 25. *For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than man.* Anything man can do; God can do better. God outsmarted everyone.

What is the implication for unity? How does that help us? **Remember the foolish message that unites us when the wisdom of the world tempts us.** Recall what is fundamental. Focus on the message of the cross. The wisdom of the world says to you: “I worked hard to earn my salary. Now I can use it however I want.” But the message of the cross says God has been generous toward you through the cross, so you should be generous toward others. The wisdom of the world says to us: “We need to help people see how the Bible helps us to have better friendships, higher self-esteem, and peace while avoiding the uncomfortable topic of sin”. But the foolish message of the cross our sin required Jesus to die. The wisdom of the world says: “We need to look out for ourselves” But the message of the cross that God served us by saving us, so we should go serve others. Remember the message the foolish message of the cross when you feel tempted to follow the wisdom of the world. The foolish message of the cross is God’s wisdom.

Let’s move onto the second way that God displays his wisdom. **God displays his wisdom by saving an unlikely people.** He saved a people no one expected. He rescued a community of outcasts. He redeems a people others found unredeemable. **God displays his wisdom by saving an unlikely people.**

Paul describes how God saves unlikely Corinthians to display his wisdom. Paul takes the Corinthians down memory lane. He recalls their stories. And it’s nothing to brag about. It’s nothing you would post on Instagram or Tic Toc. They were no one special. Why does Paul do this?

Paul reminds the Corinthians that their former state is nothing to brag about because God uses the weak to shame the wise and the strong. Look at verse 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. Paul notes three qualities of the Corinthians. They were not wise. That means they had an intelligence no one would brag about. They were not powerful. They didn't have much power. They were also not of noble birth. This means that they were not born into a rich inheritance. Now for those of you who have read through Jeremiah or attend the Sunday school class. This should sound familiar. It should remind you of Jeremiah, chapter 9, verse 23. *Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the might man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches.* Paul probably had Jeremiah in mind as he thought about the background of the Corinthians.

Paul continues in verse 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. God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are.*

Note that the word: chose is repeated three times. It occurs twice in verse 27. It occurs once in verse 28. God selected these Corinthians specifically to be his people despite their shortcomings. He intentionally chose them.

These verses show that the members of the Corinthian church were not homogenous. They can from all types of socio-economic backgrounds. Hear the words of a person named Celsus describe the church:

Their injunctions are like this. "Let no one educated, no one wise, no one sensible draw near. For these abilities are thought by us to be evils. But as for anyone ignorant, anyone stupid, anyone uneducated, anyone who is a child, let him come boldly." By the fact that they themselves admit that these people are worthy of their God, they show that they want and are

able to convince only the foolish, dishonourable and stupid, and only slaves, women, and children¹

This applies to our church as well. We a diverse group of people with different backgrounds. Some of you were born in the United States. Some of you were born in other countries. Some of you grew up in Texas. Others of you grew up in other states. Some of you have been here for 3 months. Others of you have been here for 30 plus years. We are in different life stages. There are kids. Youth. College students. Young adults. Young married. Parents of young children. Parents of teenagers. Empty nesters. In light of the gospel, there is nothing in our backgrounds to brag about. We don't boast in our education. We don't boast in our family of origin. We don't boast in the positions we hold. For us to be believers we recognize that we are weak. We were lost. We struggle with selfish desires that have destructive consequences. No education or job could ever save our souls. We all as Christians recognize that only Christ can save us. We place our hope in him. We are united by faith.

While we have nothing in our backgrounds to boast in, there is one thing that we can brag about. We can boast in the benefits that we have in Christ. **Paul reminds the Corinthians to boast of the benefits that they have in the Lord.** The reason why God chose the Corinthians is so that acknowledge all they have is due to the Lord. Look at verse 29. *So that no human being might boast in the presence of God. And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption, so that it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."*

¹ Gordon D. Fee, [*The First Epistle to the Corinthians*](#), ed. Ned B. Stonehouse et al., Revised Edition., The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 85.

What are the benefits that the Corinthians have? There are three benefits that they and we have received from Christ, the wisdom of God. Righteousness. Sanctification. Redemption.

Righteousness refers to our right standing before God. It's a legal term. God sees us because of Christ's work on the cross as perfect.

Sanctification refers to the idea of being set apart. God does a work in us through the Holy Spirit to make us holy. He supplies us the resources and ability to live a life pleasing to him.

Lastly, redemption comes from the idea of being purchased. It would be used in the context of slavery in the first century. A master would redeem a slave aka purchase one. But in this context, God has purchased or redeemed believers. We are no longer under the mastery of sin. We are under the mastery God.

Since we have received all these things because of what the Lord has done, we should boast in him. Again, the reference in verse 31: *"Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord"* comes from Jeremiah, chapter 9, verse 24. Paul changes the wording slightly, but the meaning is the same. If brag about anything, then we should brag in what God has secured for us through the cross.

What is then the implication? How do we respond? **Remember the unlikeliness of your salvation when the temptation to divide arises.** It should prompt us to think back to the events leading to our salvation. Prior to Christ, we all lived according to our own ways. We lived however we wanted. We pursued romantic relationships in ways that would fulfil emotional, relational, and physical desires. We found our significance in our studies. We reveled in our network of our friends. We rationalized that God couldn't exist because if he did then there would be consequences for our decisions. Despite the façade, we knew inside that these things

left a longing inside of us that we couldn't explain. It wasn't until someone explained the gospel to us and God helped us to understand it that we realized what we were meant to live for.

If none of us contributed to our salvation, then we are saved by sheer grace. We didn't deserve salvation. We deserved death and worse. Yet despite our lostness, God saved us. And he saved our brother and sister in Christ as well. If that's the case, then we should seek to reconcile with them rather than seek to break up our relationships with them. A moment of anger or disagreement should not break up a relationship with a believer, whom God redeemed. It reminds me of something that the Lord taught me years ago. I'm going to be spending eternity with these people might as well get along with them now.

God's wisdom unites the church. He displays his wisdom through a foolish message.

God displays his wisdom by saving an unlikely people. Remember God's wisdom.

Many of us heard of the national anthem: "The Star-Spangled Banner". But many of us may not know of the story about the flag that inspired Francis Scott Key to write this song. The original flag that flew over Fort McHenry measured 42 by 30 ft. This immense size allowed Key to see it from his position 10 miles out to sea, following a night of gunfire.

But how could such a large flag fly on a pole 189 feet in the air? In the barrack's there were two oak timbers, 8 foot by 8 foot joined as a cross. This cross enabled the large flag to fly in stormy weather without snapping the pole. It provided a firm foundation for the symbol our national freedom.

In a similar way, God's wisdom through the cross of Christ provides the foundation for our faith and unity as a church. May we always remember it.