



# FIRST CORINTHIANS

1 CORINTHIANS 1:18–2:16

 **LIVING WAY**  
BIBLE STUDY

1 CORINTHIANS 2:1–5	14
1 CORINTHIANS 2:6–16	14
PERSONAL APPLICATION – 1 CORINTHIANS 3:1–23	16

● ● ● ● ● ●

*“But we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.”*

1 CORINTHIANS 1:23–24

● ● ● ● ● ●

## 1 CORINTHIANS 1:18–31

### THE FOOLISHNESS OF THE GOSPEL

There is nothing more foolish to some than the belief that the God of our universe became a human being, died on the cross for something called “sin,” then rose again to give mortals immortality. Even today there are those who call themselves “Christian” and yet deny the possibility of God becoming man and dying for sin. They view the biblical account of Jesus’ ministry as a morally uplifting fable. But, like everything else in our world, this is nothing particularly new. In Paul’s day, there were both Jew and Gentile who viewed the Gospel account as utterly absurd.

In this section of 1 Corinthians, Paul is reminding his readers of our Lord’s *modus operandi* (His method of operation). Time after time, God takes what is common and lowly and exalts it to blessedness. He chose simple men to be His prophets and apostles. He chose a common young woman to give Jesus birth. He selected an insignificant town named Bethlehem to be the place of His Son’s birth, and He appointed lowly shepherds to be the first recipients of the Gospel. He prefers to use unsophisticated means, like the water of baptism, the bread and wine of Holy Communion, and the simple words of Scripture to create the miracle of “faith” in people’s hearts. How basic and elementary! Why should the Lord select the undistinguished rather than the rich and famous? Why wasn’t the Lord born in Caesar’s palace? Why wasn’t He of noble parentage? In every way, the Lord chooses what the world views as relatively worthless in order to embarrass those of high repute. That is why we call Him a God of grace.

Paul reminds us that the Lord is not impressed by “wise” men or scholars. Their knowledge and sophistication is laughable when weighed against our Lord’s infinite wisdom and power. The man of faith, therefore, need not be a man of intellect or talent. As a matter of fact, reason can interfere with the gift of faith when it is used to discount the authenticity of God’s transcendent mystery and power. A “reasonable” man asks, “Why would a Creator become a simple man?” “How can a man rise from the dead?” “How can anyone believe in an afterlife since all empirical evidence points to the finality of death?”

“But we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Corinthians 1:23–24). When the message of the Gospel reached their ears, most Jews scoffed. They felt the promised “Messiah” would be a great political and military leader, not a transient preacher. They believed the Christ would be a man of vision and grandeur. How could they seriously consider this common man, the son of a carpenter, from some little town called Nazareth, to be the Savior? After all, He didn’t follow their man-made laws when He healed on the Sabbath. He didn’t live up to their temporal expectations of how the Messiah should appear and what He should do. And so, for the Jews, Jesus’ message became a “stumbling block.”

For the Greeks, on the other hand, who worshipped man’s “wisdom” in literature, science, and architecture, the idea that God became man and died for the “sins” of the world was complete idiocy. To the Greeks who reveled in philosophical conversations about the mysteries of the universe, the Christian message

was merely one more note in the riotous music of their speculations. So, for the Greeks, the message of the Gospel was mere “foolishness.”

Paul reminds the Corinthian Christians that their backgrounds are not very impressive by human standards. “Think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth.” The Corinthian Christians were common ordinary people. The Lord isn’t only calling movie stars and heads of state. He is seeking all people — people like you and me. Thanks be to God!

And the remarkable thing is that our Lord chooses the ordinary as an example to the world’s elite. He tells us that those very individuals who pride themselves on being the best and brightest are in fact the most deluded. “God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things [beings] of the world to shame the strong” (v. 27). Remember, it is His *modus operandi* to exalt what the world scorns.

In our day, so called “theologians” and “scholars” are paraded by Time, Newsweek, and U. S. News debating Jesus’ authenticity. They are on a crusade to discover the true identity of the mythical figure named “Jesus.” There are scholars who gather to vote on which of Jesus’ words are genuine and which were added by the early church. In every way, the wise of our world seek to discount the biblical Jesus. But as Psalm 2:4–5 says, “The One enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord scoffs at them. Then he rebukes them in his anger and terrifies them in his wrath...”

And, Paul says, there is one reason for the Lord’s *modus operandi*. He chooses the lowly so that no one may boast in his or her faith and salvation.

“Therefore, as it is written: ‘Let him who boasts boast in the Lord’” (v. 31). We have no reason to feel our election to God’s kingdom is because of our intrinsic worth. We have been given saving faith simply by God’s mercy and grace. And every time we see the Lord using something lowly, like water or bread and wine, or the words of forgiveness, we are reminded of that mysterious grace.

### *1 CORINTHIANS 2:1–5*

In Paul’s view, perhaps the best example of God’s mysterious grace is His selection of Paul to be an apostle. We are touched by Paul’s humility when he reminds the Corinthians of his appearance among them. He was not eloquent or trained in human wisdom. He came to the Corinthians feeling weak and fearful, so frightened he was actually trembling (much like a young pastor as he preaches his first sermon). He wasn’t particularly articulate. He simply preached the words of Christ and made Jesus the only topic of his preaching and teaching.

In this day when congregations are tempted to call a pastor on the basis of his “dynamic personality” or “eloquent sermons,” perhaps Paul’s description of his limited talents should inspire us to seek those who are committed to the preaching of God’s Word rather than those whose personalities are most magnetic. The fact is people are converted to Christ not because of persuasive words, but because of the work of the Holy Spirit working through the means of God’s Word. When the Word is accurate, conversion is possible. When it’s merely man’s attractive words, the power of the Holy Spirit may be confined.

### *1 CORINTHIANS 2:6–16*

After having denounced human wisdom, Paul reminds the Corinthians that there exists

a divine wisdom which is true and reliable. This divine wisdom can be known by the mature Christian, to one who has grown in an understanding of God’s Word and blossomed in the strength of faith. Spiritual wisdom is not like the common wisdom held by the world, nor the erudite wisdom professed by the world’s elite. It encompasses an understanding of God’s mysterious will for His people.

Now an interesting thing about God’s wisdom is that it remained hidden for many years. Although God’s plan of salvation existed from the dawn of time, He did not fully reveal that plan until the coming of the Lord Jesus. To some extent, the promise of a Messiah was evident to Adam and Eve at the “fall” when God promised the serpent that there would be enmity between Eve’s descendant and the devil, and that her descendant would crush the head of the serpent. But the details of God’s plan remained hidden, so much so that when Eve gave birth to her son, Cain, she may have believed he was the Messiah. When Eve said, “With the help of the Lord I have brought forth a man,” the Hebrew is unclear enough that it might be translated, as Luther believed, “I have the man, the Lord!” While Eve was unable to comprehend fully God’s plan of salvation, nevertheless, she and Adam trusted in God’s promise of redemption.

Throughout the Old Testament, the prophets of God received visions, dreams and prophecies about the coming of the Messiah, but perhaps they never clearly understood the details of God’s salutary plans. Daniel and Ezekiel had foreknowledge of God’s plan to resurrect His people. Isaiah could foresee the Messiah as a Suffering Servant. Zechariah predicted the Christ would ride victoriously before God’s people on a donkey, and Micah even predicted where God’s Promised One would be born. But not one of them could envision

the whole plan of redemption in its entirety.

It remained largely God's secret. That is why the prophet Isaiah could write the words quoted by Paul: "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him."

Paul asserted that the world's nobility were unable to recognize this secret plan of redemption. If the rulers at Jerusalem had known Jesus was the true Messiah, they never would have allowed Him to die on the cross. But they lived in spiritual blindness and proceeded with the execution despite the presence of God's Son among them. Even the devil was unaware of God's mysterious plan. Had he known that the crucifixion was necessary to redeem mankind of their sins, he never would have instigated Judas' betrayal nor induced murderous urges in the hearts of Herod, Caiaphas, and the people of Jerusalem. God's plan remained a mystery until Easter morning when the world discovered that the Lord had delivered His faithful through the resurrection of His Son.

Even today people are unaware of God's plan of salvation because our belief and trust in The Plan is solely the result of the Holy Spirit working in our hearts. It is the Spirit of God, Paul says, who reveals God's redemption to us.

To demonstrate the method of the Spirit's action, Paul reminds us that no one can know our thoughts except our own spirit. A man can smile at us while thinking, "What a ridiculous fool," and we have no inkling of his true attitude towards us. Even as the individual is the only one with a full understanding of his own thoughts and feelings, so only the Spirit of God understands and knows God's thoughts and plans. Thus, when the Spirit of

God dwells in us, it is as if the very thoughts and plans of God have been given us. When we preach God's Word, Paul says it isn't our own thoughts and ideas, but the thoughts and feelings of our God.

As a result, only those possessing the Spirit can understand God's plan of salvation. No matter how wise we are, no matter how intelligent, no matter how creative or charming, we cannot understand and believe God's mysterious plan of salvation unless the Spirit gives us the power to do so. For Christians, the plan of salvation is simple and beautiful. God sent His perfect Son to live the perfect life we were intended to live. Then He died the death we deserved for our sins. As a result of Jesus' sacrifice, we receive His perfection in God's eyes while He suffered the death and damnation we deserved. For us, it was a glorious substitution.

But to the minds of those who have driven out the Lord's Spirit, this beautiful and simple Gospel message appears completely absurd. Only the person with the Spirit can accept God's thoughts and plans. Those who have refused to receive the Spirit cannot fathom the Lord's presence and intent for His people. Knowing this can be of some comfort for our evangelism. The Lord calls us to spread His Gospel message, but it is not our responsibility to make others believe it. Only those with the Spirit of the Lord will hear, receive, and understand God's plan.

It has been the dream of people down through the annals of science fiction to be able to read the thoughts of others. Paul says that through the Spirit, we can indeed read the thoughts of God. We are given those thoughts in God's Word. In this sense, it is no exaggeration for Paul to conclude, "But we have the mind of Christ."

**PERSONAL APPLICATION***1 CORINTHIANS 3:1–23*

*Lord of Salvation and Life, we pray You would guide our study of Your Word. Help us to defend Your way and will when the world tempts us to stray. Help us to view the fellowship of believers as God's sacred Temple which we would build up rather than tear down. And keep us mindful that our faith and love for You is solely the result of Your grace. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.*

1. How does Paul differentiate between those who are “worldly” and those who are “spiritual”? (1 Corinthians 3:1–3, 2:14–15; Romans 8:5–11; Galatians 5:16–26)

---

What do you think Paul means when he says Christians should no longer act like “mere men”? (3:3)

2. In his humble way, how does Paul want the Corinthians to view him? (3:5)

---

How does Paul stress this same role in:  
1 Corinthians 15:9–11

---

Ephesians 3:7–8

---

Colossians 1:25

---

1 Timothy 1:15–16

3. What “role” did the Lord give Paul in terms of the Corinthian church? (1 Corinthians 3:6, 4:15, 9:1, 15:1; Acts 18:1, 11)

---

What “role” was given Apollos? (3:6; Acts 18:24–28)

---

How would you define the “role” each pastor, whose ministry you have experienced, is playing in the history of the church he serves?

- 
4. Whether a congregation grows numerically, spiritually, or emotionally, who is causing the growing? (3:7; Ephesians 2:8–9)

---

Why should this realization keep every spiritual leader humble?

---

What phrase does Paul always use to indicate the source of his accomplishments? (3:10; Romans 12:3, 15:5; Galatians 2:9; Ephesians 3:7)

- 
5. In what kind of ministry did Paul feel “called”? (Romans 15:20)

---

What “foundation” did Paul use to construct the Corinthian church? (3:11; Ephesians 2:20)

---

What do you think Paul is saying by encouraging church builders to use materials made of gold, silver, and costly stones rather than hay, straw, or wood? (3:12–15; Matthew 7:24–27, 16:18; 1 Peter 2:4–8)

- 
6. What does the Lord promise about His presence in the Temple built by King Solomon? (1 Kings 8:29, 9:3; 2 Kings 21:4–7)

---

So, if God’s Spirit is present with His people, why is it appropriate to think of ourselves as the Temple of the Lord? (3:16–17; 2 Corinthians 6:16; Hebrews 3:6)

---

What does Paul say about those who hurt the “community of believers” (God’s Temple) by their divisiveness? (3:17)

- 
7. In your opinion, what are some ways in which “the standards of our age” conflict with God’s will and Word? (3:18)
-

If we oppose the world's standards in favor of the Lord's will, how might this make us appear "foolish"?

---

But, how does the Lord view the "standards of the world"? (3:19; Romans 1:21–22)

- 
8. In your own words, how do the following become "ours" through Jesus Christ? (3:21–22; Romans 8:38–39)

---

The World (Matthew 5:5)

---

Life (John 3:16)

---

Death (1 Corinthians 15:54–56)

---

The Present (Luke 12:27–31)

---

The Future (Luke 12:32–34)

---