

### Lesson 3 1 Corinthians 1:13-31

#### Verses 11-12

For it hath been declared unto me of you, my brethren, by them *which are of the house of Chloe*, that there are contentions among you. <sup>12</sup> Now this I say, that every one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ.

As we saw last week, divisions were emerging within the church at Corinth. Paul specifically mentions four groups: The Paul Party, the Apollos Party, the Cephas (or Peter) Party, and the Christ Party.

As we discussed, the Paul Party likely represented the early converts and may have been primarily composed of Gentiles (although we know that some of the earliest converts were Jews). The Apollos Party was likely composed of those who saw themselves as the Super Intellectual Elites, and the Peter Party was likely composed of Jews who wanted to bind the Old Testament law on the church.

We also looked last week at the Christ Party. If the Apollos Party considered themselves the Super Intellectual Elite, the Christ Party most likely considered themselves the Super Spiritual Elite. This group possibly contributed to the rise of Gnosticism in the church at Corinth. It is even possible that the Christ Party was a spill-over from the mystery religions of Corinth.

Clement of Rome (writing about AD 95) talks about these same divisions in the Corinthian church, though he does not mention the "Christ party." Perhaps by that time, the Christ Party had drifted so far away that they were no longer considered part of the church. Perhaps they left and formed their own "church" because they did not consider the others to be as spiritual as they were.

One final theory about the Christ party that fits well with Paul's comments in the following verses is that this Christ party wanted Christ but did not want the cross of Christ. Paul in verse 18 will remind them that "the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." We cannot separate Christ from the cross, and we must not separate ourselves from the cross. Luke 9:23 ("Then He said to them all, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me.") The cross is the power of God.

The result of these cliques was that they had caused everyone involved to take their eyes off Jesus Christ -- and it is to that one true focus that Paul returns their attention in verse 13.

## **Verse 13**

Is Christ divided? was Paul crucified for you? or were ye baptized in the name of Paul?

Paul made a very strong appeal for unity in verse 10, and he makes three very powerful arguments against disunity here in verse 13.

### **The Wholeness of Christ**

Paul first asks if Christ is divided. Literally, he asks if Christ had been parceled out. The church is the body of Christ. If we think that the church can be divided, then we must believe that the body of Christ can be parceled out to the various groups.

If you have Christ then you have all of him. He cannot be divided. His church cannot be divided.

### **The Cross of Christ**

Paul's next question is even more vivid -- he asks if Paul had been crucified for them. The cross of Christ was the focus of Paul's message when he first preached to them (1 Corinthians 2:2 For I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified.) and Paul now calls them back to that focus. It was Jesus who suffered and died to free them from their sins -- not Paul, not Apollos, and not Peter.

This question also explains why the Lord's Supper is so important to our unity. Paul will make this very point in 1 Corinthians 10:17. ("For we being many are one bread, and one body: for we are all partakers of that one bread.") The cross of Christ reminds us of who we are and to whom we belong. Division occurs when we forget that.

I am not your brother because I am as good as you are. I am not your brother because I know as much as you do. I am your brother because of what Jesus has done for both of us. The cross of Christ is the foundation of our unity.

For Paul, baptism and the cross were inseparable, and so he next turns his attention to baptism.

### **Our Baptism Into Christ**

Finally, Paul asks if they had been baptized in the name of Paul. To be baptized in (literally, into) the name of someone was to have one's life signed over to that person and to come under the authority of that person. We become members of Christ's blood bought church when we are baptized. As Paul will remind us in chapter 6, we are not our own -- we have been bought with a price.

Paul points to baptism as a linchpin of our unity. It is at our baptism that we are born again into the household of God. How can we call someone our brother or our sister if they are not part of the household of God? We are brothers and sisters in Christ because we have all been born again into one family. Baptism is of foundational significance to our unity because it is at our baptism that the unity begins.

We are about to look at some verses that some have used to belittle the role of baptism in God's plan. But before we look at those verses, let's note one very important thing about verse 13 -- Paul takes for granted that all of these Corinthian Christians had been immersed into the name of Christ! There were no non-baptized Christians in the first century, and there are none today.

### **Verses 14-17**

I thank God that I baptized none of you, but Crispus and Gaius; <sup>15</sup> Lest any should say that I had baptized in mine own name. <sup>16</sup> And I baptized also the household of Stephanas: besides, I know not whether I baptized any other. <sup>17</sup> For Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel: not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect.

Why does Paul now turn his attention to baptism? The commentators almost all agree that a driving force behind the factions must have been the identity of the person who baptized them. Those baptized by Paul no doubt were filled with great pride, and it likely deflated them somewhat to discover that Paul had no recollection of the event! There must have been other additional sources of the division, but this must have been a major factor.

For Christ sent me not to baptize. We must read that verse in context. The issue here is not whether one must be baptized -- indeed, Paul is operating under the assumption that they ALL had been baptized. The issue is whether it is important WHO baptized you. Do I have a greater status in the church because I was baptized by Brother So and So? The answer is, of course, no -- and that is the point Paul is making here.

Christ did not send him to physically walk into the water and perform the physical act of baptism -- but that does not mean that Christ did not send him to preach baptism because we know in fact that Christ did that very thing. Matthew 28:19 ("Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.")

Paul cannot possibly be contrasting baptism with preaching the gospel because it is not possible to preach the gospel without also preaching baptism. Philip, for example, preached Jesus to the Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts 8:35, and in the very next verse the Eunuch wanted to be baptized. The very first gospel sermon in

Acts 2 ended with Peter telling his listeners to be baptized for the remission of their sins. Paul's very own sins had been washed away at his baptism. (Acts 22:16)

Barclay: "It is not to be thought that Paul is belittling baptism. ... The point is this-baptism was into the name of Jesus. That phrase in Greek implies the closest possible connection. To give money into a man's name was to pay it into his account. To sell a slave into a man's name was to give that slave into his undisputed possession. A soldier swore loyalty into the name of Caesar; he belonged absolutely to the Emperor. Into the name of implied utter possession. ... All that Paul is saying is, "I am glad that I was so busy preaching, because if I had baptized it would have given some of you the excuse to say that you were baptized into my possession instead of into Christ's." He is not making little of baptism; he is simply glad that no act of his could be misconstrued as annexing men for himself and not for Christ."

Paul's memory lapse in verse 16 has been used by some to cast doubt on the inspiration of the Bible. Such an argument shows a basic misunderstanding about inspiration. God's word was transferred to us without error by human authors. Each word including each verb tense and the singular or plural word forms were all God-breathed. But God used men as his writing instruments, and each man had varying abilities and limitations. Some, for example, were more educated than others. If Luke was a fountain pen, then Mark was a magic marker -- but God used each to write his word, and that word was without error. God did not give them a vocabulary and grammatical skills they did not already possess, and neither did he make them omniscient.

Paul did not remember whether he baptized anyone else, and rather than have the Holy Spirit remind him, God had him write that truth about his memory -- and in fact his inability to remember who he had baptized reinforced his point that the name of the person who baptized you is not important. If he had given a complete list it would hardly have helped his point that it is not really important who baptizes you.

Paul ends by affirming his mission to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ -- and to do so in a way that does not detract from the cross of Christ. It is very easy to do the latter when we pander to the wisdom of this world. And that leads us into Paul's first main theme -- true and false wisdom. The root word for wisdom (sophos) occurs twenty times in the next section, and some commentators think that Paul may have been responding to some other slogan of these divided parties in the church.

### **Verse 18**

<sup>18</sup> For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God.

The Corinthians had embraced a message of redemption through a crucified savior. And what did the world think about that? The world thought it was the craziest idea it had ever heard. And this seems to have given the Corinthian church an inferiority complex. They wanted to impress the world, but the world was laughing at them.

The world is still laughing. In 1990, Ted Turner was named Humanist of the Year by the American Humanist Association. In his acceptance speech, Turner said:

If you really accept the Bible for what it says—the New Testament at any rate, the way it is generally interpreted by most people who believe it – then everybody is going to hell...This life doesn't count for much of anything. It's just a transitory testing ground to see if you're going to measure up to make it to heaven...He had to come down here and suffer and die on the cross, so with His blood our sins could be washed away...weird, man, I'm telling you.

The first time I heard that, I thought to myself, “For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness.” In a 1989 interview, Turner described Christianity as a religion for losers.

Ted is not alone. The media delights in belittling believers. How many more stories will we have to hear about tortilla chips that look like the Virgin Mary? The scientific establishment refutes intelligent design, not with argument, but with ridicule. The camera had a designer, but the eye that looks through the camera did not – and that is called wisdom.

Paul is wondering who we are trying to impress. The drowning man who despises the lifeboat? The blind man who ridicules the light? The starving man who scorns bread? The perishing man who laughs at the cross? Do we love the praise of men more than the praise of God?

To a child of God, the cross is not foolishness – it is the power of God. What is really foolish is any attempt to establish salvation on any foundation other than the cross of Jesus Christ. Will science save us? Will medicine save us? Will genetics save us? Will Islam save us? Will Buddhism save us? What foolishness! “For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ.” (1 Corinthians 3:11)

### **Verses 19-21**

<sup>19</sup> For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent.

<sup>20</sup> Where is the wise? where is the scribe? where is the disputer of this world? hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? <sup>21</sup> For after that in the wisdom of

God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe.

Verse 19 introduces us to Isaiah 29:14. In Isaiah's day (as today) there were blind people being led by blind guides who knew nothing about God and his word. The political advisers were urging Israel to make an alliance with Assyria, and then make a secret alliance with Egypt in case the Assyrian alliance didn't work out. They thought they had everything worked out. They were brilliant; they didn't need God at all. In their cleverness they were relying on purely human ingenuity and resourcefulness.

And what happened? When Assyria found out about the Egyptian alliance, it became so alarmed that it invaded – the very thing that Israel had sought to avoid.

And what about the wise? What about the scribe? What about the disputer of this world? What about these leaders who think they have everything worked out apart from any need for God? God will show them just how foolish they are. The elaborate plan with Egypt and Assyria fell apart. Our plans will fall apart just as fast if we rely on the wisdom of this world.

We should note the context of these verses. It is not the world's false boasting in its wisdom that caused Paul to write this section, but it was this same false boasting in the church. Christians at Corinth were glorying in men and were dividing up along man-made lines. They appear to have absorbed uncritically the ideals and values of the pagan world that surrounded them. The false wisdom of the world had invaded the church, and that is a problem that we too must guard against. We need to consider ourselves and appreciate the ways that our own thinking might be influenced by the wisdom and secularism of this age.

The Psalmist tells us that "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom." (Ps. 111:10) And the world? The world tells us (and our children!) that the denial of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. "Know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God." (James 4:4) Verse 17 of this chapter tells us the essential characteristic of this worldly wisdom – it can empty the word of the cross of its power.

And what advantage did these people get from the wisdom of the world on which they placed so much reliance? Verse 21 tells us – they gained nothing from it, because at the end of the day they knew not God. All they ultimately obtained was a demonstration of their foolishness. Worldly wisdom could not save them.

T.S. Eliot wrote: "All our knowledge brings us nearer to our ignorance, All our ignorance brings us nearer to death, But nearness to death, no nearer to God."

And what was God's reaction? He offered salvation to all – not on man's terms – but on His terms, through the preaching of the cross, which the world saw as complete foolishness. And note that it pleased God to save people this way. God delights in saving people!

### **Verses 22-25**

<sup>22</sup> For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom: <sup>23</sup> But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness; <sup>24</sup> But unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God. <sup>25</sup> Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

The Jews wanted a sign and the Greeks wanted wisdom, but neither would find God apart from Jesus Christ no matter how hard or how long they looked.

The Jews saw a crucified Christ as a stumblingblock or a scandal because the Law of Moses said “cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree.” (Deut. 21:23 and Gal. 3:13-14) How could the all-conquering Messiah end his days hanging on a tree? That simply means he cannot be the Messiah. Jesus was rejected by the very people he came to save, he was deserted and betrayed by his own followers, he was executed as a criminal by the governing authorities, and he was apparently powerless to save even himself. How could he be the Messiah? To the Jews, a crucified Messiah was an oxymoron.

The Greeks saw a crucified Christ as foolishness. The Greeks wanted to speculate their way to God through reasoning and argument. The Greeks thought their wisdom would save them. A popular proverb of the day was “To the wise man all things belong.” To the Greeks, the first characteristic of God was apatheia – the total inability to feel. A God who suffered was a contradiction in terms. God was utterly detached and remote. The Greeks saw the cross as incomprehensible and ridiculous. To proclaim a crucified Jew from some backwater town as the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords must have been thought by any educated Greek to be utter madness.

And how did Paul respond to these objections? Did he water down the message to lure them in? Did he change the message to make it more palatable? Did he begin to preach just the resurrected Christ or just the returning Christ? Did he skip quickly over the story of the crucifixion with embarrassment. No. Paul preached the crucified Christ. Paul did not change the gospel for men; he preached the gospel and told men that they were the ones who had to change. The gospel message presents the very opposite of what people want and expect, but that very fact often persuades them to accept it in the end.

Those who are called in verse 24 are those who have heard and responded to the call of God. God calls everyone to obey him, but only those who respond to

that call become part of the called out, part of the church. As Hebrews 3:1 tells us, the “holy brethren” are not those that merely hear the heavenly call, but instead are those that partake of the heavenly call.

Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God. The Greek word for power used there is the same word from which we get “dynamite.” Christ is the dynamite of God, and God shows his power by bringing to nothing the powers of this world through a crucified savior. What would the Roman emperor have said had you told him that a crucified Jew would one day judge him and find him wanting? We all know that Isaiah 53 portrays the suffering of Christ, but we should note carefully the last verse of chapter 52: “So shall he sprinkle many nations; the kings shall shut their mouths at him; for that which had not been told them shall they see; and that which they had not heard shall they consider.” (I love that verse!)

We should note in these verses Paul’s repeated emphasis on preaching. “However much he denounces and renounces the wordiness of human wisdom, he passionately believes in the rational nature of God’s revealed wisdom.” In the next chapter, Paul will tell us that he imparts wisdom with words, but words from the Holy Spirit rather than words from the wisdom of man. Paul in no way denigrated the faculty of reason or contrasted faith with reason. Faith is never contrasted with reason in the Bible; instead, faith is contrasted with sight.

Although it has been said that truth is scarce, the supply has always exceeded the demand. Men search for truth, but men refract that search through the lens of human wisdom. They greet with skepticism anything that does not match their own prejudgment of what truth is. The truth of the gospel fails to meet the intellectual elite’s criteria and so they reject it. In the cross, God puts all mankind on the same level and this truth is one that the so-called intellectual elite cannot accept.

### **Verses 26-31**

<sup>26</sup> For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called: <sup>27</sup> But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; <sup>28</sup> And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: <sup>29</sup> That no flesh should glory in his presence. <sup>30</sup> But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption: <sup>31</sup> That, according as it is written, He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord.



In these verses Paul offers empirical evidence of the “foolishness” of God from the Corinthians’ own experience. If they looked around, they would have to admit that most of the members of the Corinthian church did not come from cream of society. And for the few that did, becoming a Christian had done nothing to enhance their social status.

And what about the mighty, the noble, and the wise? Paul says not many are called. He cannot mean that they were not called to obey the gospel. We know that the gospel was proclaimed to the whole world, and that God would have all men to be saved. In fact, we know that some mighty people obeyed the gospel. Paul has named some in this chapter, and even here he says “not many” rather than “none” are called. These mighty men are called; they just don’t answer that call. They do not become partakers of the heavenly calling. They reject a message that would pour contempt on all their pride.

Throughout the Bible, God consistently chooses the most unlikely figures to act on his behalf, and Paul maintains that God has continued this pattern in adding people to the church in Corinth. And why did God work this way? Verse 29 tells us – so that no man would ever glory in his presence.

The problem with man is not that he feels too weak. The problem with man is that he feels too strong; he thinks that he is God. Since the days of Adam and Eve, man has been man’s obedient servant, and has worshipped the creature rather than the creator.

The arrogance of man is incredible. With nothing more than education, man will destroy poverty, disease, and death itself, and we will all live in an eternal utopia with no need for God. Or so we are told. The secular humanist movement (or more properly, the secular humanist religion) is a rebellion against God and an exaltation of another god, man – and it permeates our culture like no other religion. We are told there is a separation between church and state, but our state has fully embraced the religion of secular humanism.

At the beginning of the twentieth century we were told by post-millennialists that we were entering a thousand year period of peace that would culminate in the return of Christ. But of course that period of peace started off with two world wars and a century of horror and butchery on an unsurpassed scale. We don’t hear much about post-millennialism these days.

Verse 29 is a theme that is carried throughout Scripture. God opposes the proud. In fact, God is so intent on breaking down all human pride that he acts in a way that reveals its emptiness. That is what he did in Corinth. He chose the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; he chose the weak things of the world to confound the mighty things. He chose the base and despised things of the world and things that are not to bring to nothing the things that are.

Although there were some notable exceptions that we have already discussed, Christianity spread most rapidly among the lower classes of Mediterranean society, and this single fact (in class-conscious Greek and Roman society) was one reason that Christianity was found to be so offensive. The riff-raff were being converted. God was calling the lowliest people on earth and was making them kings and priests in his kingdom. As Jesus said when he started his earthly ministry, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor." (Luke 4:18)

But by using such methods, God was overthrowing one of the false standards of this world – the notion that those who matter most are the wise, the well-bred, the articulate, the gifted, the wealthy, the wielders of power and influence. Such standards die very hard – even in the church. Listen to what James said:

(James 2:1-5) My brethren, have not the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with respect of persons. 2 For if there come unto your assembly a man with a gold ring, in goodly apparel, and there come in also a poor man in vile raiment; 3 And ye have respect to him that weareth the gay clothing, and say unto him, Sit thou here in a good place; and say to the poor, Stand thou there, or sit here under my footstool: 4 Are ye not then partial in yourselves, and are become judges of evil thoughts? 5 Hearken, my beloved brethren, Hath not God chosen the poor of this world rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which he hath promised to them that love him?

Rome was a highly stratified society that was characterized by elaborate systems for defining and signifying status. Money and Status were even worshipped as gods. Arrogance and contempt for lower classes was the rule, and that rule seems to have secured a place in the Corinthian church. The passage from James tells us it was a problem elsewhere, and I fear the problem remains even to the present day. The church must reject society's classifications of worth – all people are equally valued and valuable in the church.

Look at verse 30. Do you want wisdom? It is found in Christ Jesus. Do you want righteousness? It is found in Christ Jesus. Do you want sanctification? It is found in Christ Jesus. Do you want redemption? It is found in Christ Jesus. None of these things can be found outside of Christ Jesus. There are no wise people outside of Christ. There are no righteous people outside of Christ. There are no sanctified people outside of Christ. There are no redeemed people outside of Christ.

It would be easy for us today to be carried away by the wisdom of this world. But for those who have tasted of the heavenly gift and become partakers of the heavenly calling, the wisdom of this world has nothing to offer. It offers no temptation, because we know whom we have believed. We have experienced

and partaken of the heavenly calling. Chesterton expresses this idea beautifully in the closing stanza of his poem, *The Convert*:

THE CONVERT  
G.K. Chesterton

After one moment when I bowed my head  
And the whole world turned over and came upright,  
And I came out where the old road shone white,  
I walked the ways and heard what all men said,  
Forests of tongues, like autumn leaves unshed,  
Being not unlovable but strange and light;  
Old riddles and new creeds, not in despite  
But softly, as men smile about the dead.

The sages have a hundred maps to give  
That trace their crawling cosmos like a tree,  
They rattle reason out through many a sieve  
That stores the sand and lets the gold go free:  
And all these things are less than dust to me  
Because my name is Lazarus and I live.

When you read that poem closely, you discover that Chesterton is not really talking just about Lazarus, but he is talking about every convert. Like Lazarus, we have all been called out of the tomb by Jesus Christ. And like Lazarus, we should give that same response to the wisdom of this world – All of those things are less than dust to me, because my name is Lazarus, and I live.

(Jeremiah 9:23-24) Thus saith the LORD, Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches: 24 But let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me, that I am the LORD which exercise lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness, in the earth: for in these things I delight, saith the LORD.

(Isaiah 55:6-9) Seek ye the LORD while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near: 7 Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the LORD, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. 8 For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the LORD. 9 For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.