

# The Wisdom of Men and the Power of God

by John Piper

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*John Piper emphasizes the importance of grounding faith in the power of God rather than the wisdom of men, highlighting the significance of the cross in ministry.*

**Duration:** 30:12

**Scripture:** 1 Corinthians 2:1

**Topics:** "Divine Power", "Human Frailty"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the frailty of human beings and the need to recognize our dependence on God. He uses the analogy of having a treasure in earthen vessels, referring to the gospel message within our weak bodies. The speaker warns against relying on our physical strength and youth, as we can still face illness and accidents. He emphasizes the authority of the written word of God and the duty of pastors to communicate what has already been said or implied. The sermon concludes with a call to focus on the power of God rather than the wisdom of man.

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## Transcript

In coming to you, brothers and sisters, I come proclaiming the testimony of God, not according to excellent words of wisdom or persuasive words of wisdom, for I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. I come in weakness and in much fear and trembling, and my proclamation and my word are not in persuasive words of wisdom in order that your faith, because they come, my words come with the Spirit and power, might be in the power of God and not the wisdom of man. Those are the words of Paul to the church at Corinth and my words to you.

I would consider my life well spent if I could preach and live and die the way the Apostle Paul did, who wrote those words 1,900 years ago. Would you open your Bibles with me to 1 Corinthians 2, verses 1 to 5? And I'd like to look at part of the text that Pastor Carlson read, verses 1 to 5 of chapter 2. Two things I want us to focus on in this text. One is the aim of Paul in his ministry and the other is the way that he thought he, and I think we, can go about hitting the target that he aims at.

W. A. Criswell is the pastor, you may know, of that giant Baptist church in Dallas, Texas, 10,000 members. He was approached by a man who had a business across the street from that church and he was asked, I thought you were a Baptist pastor, how come all of your people carry the prayer book to church on Sunday? And Criswell smiled and said, we are a Baptist church and those are Bibles, not prayer books. Baptists the world over have a reputation for encouraging every man and woman who can read to read the

Bible for themselves.

And I want to encourage that tradition. If I could choose a symbolic sound that this church would come to be known for, you know what it would be? It would be the swish of the pages of 500 Bibles on Sunday morning and Sunday evening opened to the announced text. Would you help me bring that about? Here's the reason that would be my choice.

My source of authority lies in no wisdom that I have nor in any private revelation that God might choose to give me apart from the written word. I have authority only in so far as I communicate what stands written in the word. I have authority only in so far as I stand under authority.

And the corporate symbol of that fact is your turning to the text when I announce it. I have a profound conviction about the nature of preaching. One of the elements of that conviction is this.

It's the duty of every pastor to show his listeners that what he is saying has already been said or implied. And if he can't show it, he has no special authority for what he's saying. And if that's true, it's imperative that you join with me in looking at the pages of Scripture.

My heart aches for the pastor who adds to his burden the burden of having to come up with new ideas for the people. I don't have any eternally significant ideas for you. But God has many.

And I pray that I never tire of speaking those ideas. One more word from Criswell. When I read this essay from which I found that first illustration from, I felt a strong resonance in my heart when I read this.

See if it doesn't strike a chord in you. He says, When a man goes to church, he often hears a preacher in the pulpit rehash everything he's read in the editorials, the newspapers, the magazines. On the TV commentaries, he hears that same stuff over again, yawns and goes out and plays golf on Sunday.

When a man comes to church, actually what he is saying to you is this. Talking to me. Preacher, I know what the TV commentator has to say.

I hear him every day. I know what the editorial writer has to say. I read it every day.

I know what the magazines have to say. I read them every week. Preacher, what I want to know is, does God have anything to say? And if he does, tell us what it is.

Oh, that really rings true for me. And that's my goal. That's what I hungered for when I sat in the pew for 34 years.

And it's what I hungered to do for the rest of my life from this side of the pulpit. So let's look at 1 Corinthians 2, verses 1 to 5. Paul had spent about 18 months in Corinth founding that church. Now he's away, and he's writing his first letter back, and he's warning them that they not base their faith on the wrong thing.

In this case, it happens to be the wisdom of men instead of the power of God. And the way he goes about doing this here in chapter 2 is by drawing their attention to his aim when he first came to them, and secondly, the way that he tried to achieve that aim. We're going to talk about those two things.

First, the aim of Paul's ministry, verse 5. He came and his purpose was that your faith might not be in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God. Now, Paul stated that aim again and again in his preaching

ministry. For example, in Romans chapter 1, verse 5, he said, I was given the grace of apostleship so that I might bring about the obedience of faith to the glory of His name among the nations.

That's my aim in preaching too. That's really my only aim. Everything else will follow from that.

And I think it ought to be the name of all the staff, and every seminary intern, and every Sunday school teacher, and all of the rest of you who must count yourselves ministers in the church when you talk to other people. The aim is to beget and to build faith. But it was possible in Paul's day, and I believe it's rampant in our day, on television and radio and in churches, to go about building faith by calling attention to the wrong things.

And it's devastating for the mission of Christ and for the church. And I think we can see why as we look at verse 5 more closely. Why is it so crucial that our faith not rest on the wisdom of men, but rather rest on the power of God? Does it really matter what your faith is based on, provided you have faith in the right object? I mean, who cares if it's based on the wisdom of men or the power of God, provided it's faith in Jesus, right? No, wrong, according to Paul.

It mattered a great deal for Paul, made a great difference whether a preacher offers the wisdom of men as the basis for faith, as opposed to the power of God. Why is this so? The answer is given in chapter 1 in the text that was read from verse 18 on, and we'll look at that in some detail in a moment, but let me try to sum up the answer to this first question like this. If you try to base saving faith on the wisdom of men, it ceases to be saving faith, because the content of saving faith is regarded as foolishness by the wisdom of men.

The genuineness of faith is at stake not only in what you believe in, but what your faith is based on. There is a basis for faith that will ruin faith. There is a foundation which will destroy the superstructure of faith, and that's why it's crucial, absolutely crucial, that we not base faith on the wisdom of men, but rather on the power of God, because faith that is based on the wisdom of men is a mirage.

It's a bogus faith, and it will lead no one to eternal life. Why? What is it about the wisdom of men which makes it destructive to faith? Verses 1 and 2 of 1 Corinthians 2 say, When I came to you, brethren, I did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God in lofty words of wisdom. That's what he didn't do.

Now, here's what he did do. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. Now, there's a contrast here, isn't there? Between an effort to win faith by calling attention to wisdom and preaching Christ crucified.

And I infer from that contrast that the wisdom of men must at least mean the use of the human mind to come up with ideas that are contrary to the meaning of the death of Christ. Or to put it another way, if we follow the dictates of merely human wisdom, we will regard the claims of the cross as folly. Now, to confirm this, turn back to verse 18 of chapter 1. Now remember, here's the question we're trying to answer.

What is it about the nature of human wisdom that makes it so destructive to faith when it's the basis of faith? Verse 18, following. The word of the cross is folly or foolishness to those who are perishing. But to us who are being saved, it is the power of God.

For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the cleverness of the clever I will thwart. Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? The way God has made foolish the wisdom of the world is by devising a plan of

salvation which is an offense to the wisdom of the world. Namely, salvation through the ignominious execution of a lowly Jewish carpenter's son turned preacher who just happened to be the son of God.

The word of the cross is foolishness. It's folly to the wisdom of this world. And that's why the wisdom of men is destructive to faith, because faith has that cross as its central object.

And that's why we must work like crazy not to put men's attention on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God. So, the wisdom of men is destructive to faith because it regards the word of the cross as foolishness. But now here's my next question.

Why does it? Why is it that the wisdom of men regards the word of the cross as folly? What is there about human wisdom that makes it regard the word of the cross or Christ crucified as folly? Again, chapter 1, I think, gives the answer. Look at verses 26 following of chapter 1. Consider your call, brothers. Not many of you were wise according to the flesh, that is, according to worldly standards.

Not many were powerful. Not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise.

And now drop down to verse 29 where the reason, the purpose is given. So that no human being might boast in the presence of God. God has set himself against the wisdom of the world so that nobody can boast before God.

Evidently then, at the core and the heart of human wisdom is pride. So I deduce this definition, see if you agree with this, of the wisdom of the world, as he calls it, which is the same as the wisdom of men in chapter 2, verse 5. The wisdom of the world is the use of the human mind to achieve and to maintain a ground for boasting before God and before men. The wisdom of men, as Paul understands it, is the use of the human mind in all of its vast ingenuity to achieve and maintain a ground for boasting before God and before man.

And now it begins to come clear, doesn't it, why the wisdom of men must always regard Christ crucified as foolishness. The reason is that the death of Christ on the cross is the most radical indictment of our hideous sinfulness that ever was. And if the wisdom of men is to maintain its ground for boasting against that indictment, it must mount its biggest guns to destroy the cross, and the way it destroys it is by regarding it as foolishness.

There are two possible approaches you can take to the cross of Christ, two responses you can make. You can look at Christ crucified and say, foolishness, and thereby maintain your ground of pride and boasting before God and man. Or you can look at the cross and say, therein is the power and the wisdom of God, and die with Christ.

And only one of those ways leads to life. Here's the way Paul put it in Galatians 6.14, Far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. If we put our trust in the crucified Christ for salvation, we die to the world, which simply means we die to every claim to a ground of boasting that the world has to offer, including what our own minds have to offer.

But since the wisdom of this world is devoted 100% to maintaining a ground of boasting before God, it will always reject Christ crucified and attempt to diffuse it of power by calling it folly, foolishness. So here's what we've seen so far. The aim of Paul in verses 1 to 5 of 1 Corinthians is to strengthen faith.

Secondly, it's possible to try to build faith by appealing to the wrong things, in this case, the wisdom of men instead of the power of God. And that can destroy faith. Why? Thirdly, because the wisdom of men always regards the cross as foolishness.

And you can't believe in something you regard as foolish. And fourth, why does it regard the cross as foolish? Because the cross is the most radical indictment of human sinfulness that is, and the wisdom of men cannot maintain its ground for boasting unless it diffuses the cross of its power by calling it stupid and foolish. So it's reasonable, very reasonable and urgent that all of our efforts to win faith, the efforts that aim to draw people's attention to the power of God and not to the wisdom of men.

Now what is this power of God? That's the question remaining on this first point. What is the power of God? We've already seen it. Let's just look back again.

Verse 18 of chapter 1. The word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God. Look at verse 23 and 24 of chapter 1. We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews, folly to the Gentiles, but to those who are called both Jews and Greeks, Christ, the power of God and the wisdom of God. So, the power of God in verse 5 of chapter 2 is the power that was unleashed when Jesus died on the cross.

It was the power that was manifested when Jesus was at his weakest. When Jesus was at his weakest on the cross, God's power was at its strongest, lifting the infinite burden of condemnation and sin off the backs of all those who would trust in him. Paul said in Romans 8.32, He who did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all, will he not then freely with him, and we could add, by his infinite power, freely give us all things.

The power of God in which our faith rests is the power of God manifested in the weakness of Christ. But now listen to this carefully. Don't make a mistake about the nature of God's power and its ground for faith.

Just like the world regards the foolishness of Christ or the wisdom of God as foolishness, so the world regards the power of Christ as weakness, and God intended it that way. Look at verse 27 of chapter 1. God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. He meant for it to look weak.

The divine power in which our faith rests is not the power of Mayday in Red Square, or big business, or block voting, or personal savvy, or self-assertion. The power in which faith rests is this. It's the power of divine grace radiating out through weakness.

The power which sustains the lowly, loving heart of Christ in his weakness. That's the inimitable power that we see in Christ as he meekly and lovingly mounts the cross for our sins. The power of grace sustaining the humble, loving, lowly Christ through his weakness, and radiating out to us in the gospel through his weakness.

That's the demonstration of the spirit and power referred to in verse 4. So I want to commit myself as your pastor and call you to commit yourself with me to so act and speak that we lead people's attention to the wisdom of God, or the power of God and not the wisdom of man. That's our goal together. And now in the last minutes, let's shift our attention to something very practical and very crucial.

Away from the question, what's the aim of God or of Paul in his ministry, over to the question, how shall that aim be attained? Remember I said there was in Paul's day, and I think there are in ours, peddlers of the gospel who have forgotten that at the heart of our faith is the old rugged cross, an emblem of suffering

and shame. They've forgotten, it seems to me, that to trust the crucified Christ means to identify with him in the humiliation of his suffering and death. And that only in the age to come will we be glorified.

And while this age of misery and sin lasts, we walk the road of calvary and not the road of glory. Oh, to be sure, we walk with joy, as Peter said, joy indescribable and full of glory. But always joy in the midst of weakness and calamities and insults and persecutions and hardships.

Watch out for the slick preacher who never mentions these things, for whom the cross is just a token symbol, who used power and wisdom and fame and luxury to beckon the self-centered middle-class American to consider himself Christian at no cost to his pride or his self-sufficiency. Contrast the apostle Paul, look at verse 3 of our text in chapter 2. I was with you in weakness and in much fear and trembling. Paul never would have made it on the major networks, never.

You remember what his enemies said about him in 2 Corinthians 10, verse 10? They said this, they say his letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak and his speech is of no account. There's a brand of Christianity today that would have asked Paul, what good can he do for Christ? He'll just turn everybody off to Jesus. What Christ needs is shiny people, people with education and power and status and flair.

How else are you going to sell Jesus to the public and Christianize America? Paul's question was not so much, what good can I do for Christ? But rather, what good can Christ do for the world through unworthy me? It was not so much, how much power can I muster for Jesus? But rather, how much power can Jesus show through my weakness? Remember 2 Corinthians 12, verse 8, very familiar text, where Paul says about that infirmity that he had, I asked the Lord three times about this, that it should leave me, but he said to me, my grace is sufficient for you, my power is made perfect in your weakness. I will all the more gladly then boast in my weaknesses in order that the power of Christ might rest upon me. Paul knew that if he was to be an agent of the crucified Christ to win faith in him, he had to follow the road of Calvary.

That is, he had to draw people's attention not to his own power and wisdom and status and flair, but to the power of God made perfect in weakness. He knew that if human power and human education and intelligence and class and flair got center stage, whatever conversions there would be, and oh, there are conversions, they would not be conversions to the crucified Christ, but to Antichrist. If it is the power of God manifest in the weakness of death, the death of Christ, that kindles and sustains saving faith, then the way to reflect that power in our lives for the sake of others is to carry the death of Christ in our bodies.

Here's the way Paul said it in 2 Corinthians 4, verses 7-11. And with this, I close. We have this treasure, the treasure of the gospel, in earthen vessels, that is, our weak bodies.

Let me pause here to mention that when you're healthy and strong and young, that text might sound inapplicable to you. Don't bank on it too long. I have seen too many young, strong, athletic types wither away with debilitating diseases and die, get into accidents and become vegetables.

We are miserably frail creatures, no matter what you can achieve with your healthy body right now. We have this treasure in earthen vessels, that's okay, so that the transcendent power might be seen as belonging to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed, perplexed, but not driven to despair, persecuted, but not forsaken, struck down, but not destroyed, always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may be also manifested in our bodies.

For while we live, we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus might be manifested in our mortal flesh. So I hope you'll understand when I say that I come to you as your pastor today with weaknesses. You don't have to have those listed, you'll find them out soon enough, and with much fear and trembling.

Not that I distrust the promise of God, but that I distrust myself so much, and not so much that I might fail as the world counts failure, but rather that, worse, I might succeed by my own strength and wisdom and fail by the way God counts failure. There's a paradox here. Jesus said, Piper, don't be anxious, don't be anxious for anything.

Isaiah, fear not, for I am with you. Be not dismayed, I'm your God, I'll strengthen you, I'll help you, I'll hold you up with my victorious right hand. And here comes Paul into Corinth trembling like a leaf.

Why? It's an awesome responsibility to undertake to preach the gospel. Is it lack of faith that Paul shakes for and I tremble about? Yes. I believe, Lord, help my unbelief.

But there's another reason, a very, very important reason, that applies not only to me but to you, I think, why the minister of the gospel ought to tremble when he undertakes to preach. During this age in which human sinfulness remains in my heart and in your heart, even though we are being redeemed, and in which the temptation to self-reliance is relentless, especially after the leaders in the church. In this age, while those two things remain, God has appointed mercifully for his servants to tremble with a profound sense of insufficiency in order that we, you and I, might not forget that it is God's power and not man's wisdom that creates and sustains faith.

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