

4

WHAT WISDOM IS THE CROSS! (1:18-2:16)

Background From The Author

Paul wastes no time getting to the heart of the gospel, which is the “word of the cross,” and any group studying this portion of Paul’s epistle should not delay facing the gospel’s core, either. Jesus died on a cross for us! What that means for Paul, of course, will take some time for you and your group to unpack. Indeed, there is more to the meaning of Jesus’ death on the cross than any group can process in a single class or even many classes. As the group leader, then, it will be important from the beginning of this session to help the group recognize their limitations and those of this study in probing the deep meaning of God’s Son dying on a cross for us. Paul himself will spend the remainder of his correspondence to the Corinthians fleshing out some of the ramifications of Jesus’ death for their lives and relationships, so we should not feel compelled to resolve the significance of Jesus’ death here either, as if we could.

The purpose of this session is not to satisfy every question about the meaning of Christ’s death for our salvation (*soteriology*), as central as Jesus’ death on the cross may be to Paul’s argument at this point and to the Christian faith. Rather, here Paul is calling attention to the manner in which Jesus’ death on the cross overturns the world’s judgments of strength and wisdom as well as how it topples idolatry of the Jewish Law and one’s self. Put another way, Paul views the word of the cross as God’s chief means for humbling the proud and breaking the shackles of self-importance, whether the arrogant sinner be Gentile or Jew. The sinful human, with a propensity for conceit and haughtiness, is checked by the death of Jesus on the cross. It will be helpful, then, for members of your group to consider together how the “word of the cross” exposes arrogance—both religious

and secular—and fosters humility that leads to salvation. What does it mean that God's own Son was rejected and killed on a cross?

During your group's discussion of Jesus' death on the cross, you may want to be prepared for someone to express the view that crucifixion is the most terrible way that a person can die or that Jesus' death was the most torturous death in history. To be sure, crucifixion was a horrible form of execution and Jesus' death was gruesome, but the word of the cross is not that Jesus died the worst death imaginable. It is far more than a message of human cruelty and innocent suffering. Rather, it is a proclamation of God doing for humans what they cannot do for themselves—deliver themselves from the tyranny of sinful self-interest. In Jesus' death on the cross, God makes possible for humans their “righteousness and sanctification and redemption” (1:30). How? Through their utter reliance on God's grace—trust in Jesus Christ, faith. The faithfulness of Jesus is what God intended from the beginning of creation for human beings made in God's image. The group may find it helpful, then, to consider such questions also as, “How does Jesus reveal at the cross God's way of being human?” and “What is the significance of Jesus' faithfulness?” How is Jesus “our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption”?

What God accomplishes on the cross through his faithful Son Jesus has power to save individuals and communities. Contrary to much popular belief, salvation of either does not come through the human capacity for reasoned thought or good works, as great as such thoughts and works may be. Rather, it comes only through trust in God through faith in Jesus Christ and by the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. Our capacity for faithfulness comes through God's Spirit at work within us. As Paul sees it, faith is not just another work that we can do; it is a gift from God, which means that everything that stems from faith, including the recognition of our gifts and their proper use, has its origin in God. Humility and thankfulness, then, fill the heart of everyone who is being saved by the power of God through the word of the cross. Such traits also fill the life of Christian communities where Jesus is honored as Lord. As Paul sees it, unity in the church can only come through devotion to the crucified Christ. This is the wisdom of the cross, and wise are they who embrace it.

SESSION PLANS

Learning Objectives

This session is intended to enable participants to:

1. Begin an exploration of the meaning of the cross

2. Compare the values of the world with the values of life lived in response to God's grace and love
3. Differentiate, according to Paul, between the "wisdom of the world" and God's wisdom
4. Explain why the gospel of Jesus Christ crucified is "a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles" (v. 23)
5. Begin to describe the message (kerygma) of Jesus Christ crucified
6. Define righteousness, sanctification, and redemption
7. Give several examples of how central to our being "self" is
8. Summarize what Paul is saying in this particular passage (1:18-2:16)
9. Creatively express your understanding of God's love as described by Paul

Resources You May Need for this Session

- See page 18 for "Resources You May Need for Every Session"
- "A Word from the Author" DVD, Chapter 4
- On newsprint, your summary of the learning objectives for the session or an outline of the topics and issues you will be introducing
- 4 copies of Bible dictionaries and/or dictionaries of theological terms
- Copies of reproductions of paintings of the crucifixion of Jesus
- Blank half sheets of paper
- The description of a cinquain (see #2 under "Closing") written on newsprint, chalkboard, or projecting the slide
- Copies of Resource 4A
- On newsprint, your "For Next Time" list

Leadership Strategy

SETTING THE STAGE

■ Project the title slide to signal that the session is starting.

1. **Welcome and Prayer.** Welcome everyone and open with a prayer.

■ Project the opening prayer or provide copies of Resource 4A.

- 2. A Look at Values.** On a newsprint sheet draw a vertical line down the middle of the sheet. On the left side, at the top, write "World values." Ask the group to think about what our culture/society/world values. What's important in our world? As they call out items, write them on the left side. Then, on the top of the right side of the sheet, write "God values." Ask the group to list what they think God values. What words describe a life lived in response to God's grace and love?

Now ask the group on which side they would put each of these: wisdom, power, and strength. Have them comment on why they chose the particular side.

and

Invite the group to look at the two lists. Ask:

What strikes you as you compare the two lists? What do you observe about the kinds of items listed on each list?

Share that in the Resource Book on page 33, Dr. Bryant says, "Human assessments of power, status, wisdom, authority, and security are all overthrown by the Messiah's death." Have the group look at the left side of the values list. Ask:

What connections can you make between Dr. Bryant's statement and the items listed on the left side?

Dr. Bryant continues on page 33 "Yet from Jesus' death arises a new order of living in relationships with God and neighbor, even creation itself." Now have the group observe the right side of the values list. Ask:


What connections can be made here with Dr. Bryant's statement?

Save this values list for use in Session 10.

- 3. Introduce this Session** of the Resource Book by suggesting that there is more than one meaning of "wisdom" in this section of 1 Corinthians. Our intent is to discover what wisdom meant to those living in Corinth and what it meant to Paul.

and

Ask the group to comment on their preparation for this session. Did they find the text confusing? What questions arose? Make note of questions (add to your list from previous sessions).

 View the video, "A Word from the Author: Session Four" – 5 minutes

and

Present your summary of the learning objectives for the session or an outline of the topics and issues you will be introducing.

and

Tell the group that at this session they will begin an exploration—an exploration that actually will take more than a lifetime to understand—of the meaning of the cross. Explain that throughout the study of 1 Corinthians they will see glimpses of the deep meaning of God's Son dying on a cross, but we human beings are limited in our understanding. As central as Jesus' death on the cross may be to Paul's argument and to the Christian faith, there is no way that we will have all our questions answered about Jesus' dying for us. What we likely will learn is a lot about ourselves.

EXPLORING THE SCRIPTURE

1. **Wisdom and Foolishness.** Divide the group into teams of three or four. Have them read 1 Corinthians 1:18-24 and share their responses to the following questions:

What "jumped out" or particularly drew your attention in this passage?

What puzzled you?

What do you think it means in verse 20 that God made foolish the wisdom of the world?

Why is proclaiming Christ crucified a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles?

- Project the above questions. Encourage them to include insights gained from their preparatory reading of the Resource Book.

After eight to ten minutes have everyone come back together. Invite a few to share their answers to the first two questions. Then discuss the last two questions. Ask:

What have you learned so far about Jews and Greeks that aids in the understanding of the last question?

Why would the cross be offensive to Jews and Greeks?

or

- Project the four slides of the crucifixion provided, or have several reproductions of paintings or other forms of art displayed in the room.

Ask the group:

Why is proclaiming Christ crucified a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles?

What have you learned so far about Jews and Greeks that aids in the understanding of why the cross would be offensive to both groups?

What in the artists' renderings confirms the offensiveness of the cross?

and

Invite participants to discuss the meaning of wisdom in that day.

What clues tell you that wisdom was important in Corinth?

What does Paul mean in verse 25, "For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength"?

What is the difference between the wisdom of the world and the wisdom of God?

2. **The Heart of the Gospel, the Word of the Cross.** Invite participants to pair up. Ask the pairs to take five minutes to consider this question:

If you were describing the heart of the gospel to someone, what would you say?

What would you include?

- Project these questions. Suggest they make notes so that they can report to the group. Remind them to include in their discussion what they've learned from their reading of Session 4 in the Resource Book and from 1 Corinthians.

After a few minutes invite several pairs to share what they would say. Ask if anyone has something different to add to what's been said. List answers on newsprint and **save for use in later sessions (Sessions 7 and 13).**

or

Invite participants to consider how they would respond if someone asked them, "How do you 'get' saved?" List answers on newsprint. Then, have everyone look at the answers. Of those listed, ask the group which ones (and put a check by these) focus on self, on what the individual person must do? Which answers focus on what God and Jesus do? Include in that list what Paul says is the heart of the gospel. **Keep newsprint for use in later sessions (Sessions 7 and 13).**

and

Discuss the tendency for Christians to explain the gospel in terms of what people need to do, instead of focusing on what God has done and does.

3. **Slam on Arrogance, the Importance of "Me."** Share with the participants that a main theme of Paul in the letter to the Corinthians is to attack the arrogance that is apparent in the church at Corinth. Both by living in a Greek culture and by aligning themselves with Apollos or Cephas or Paul or Christ, members have been claiming a special wisdom. Paul berates this wisdom by saying that God has made foolish the wisdom of the world. God "chose what is low and despised...so that no one might boast in the presence of God." (1:28-29).

Have participants look at 1:30 in their Bibles. Paul says "He (God) is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.'"

If, at the last session, you assigned the four words – wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption – to individuals, have them report on the meaning of these words.

or

Ask four volunteers to look up one of the four words – wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption – in a Bible dictionary. Have them report. Discuss if there are questions or a need for clarification.

and

Discuss the meaning of verse 30.

How is Jesus "our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption"?

Share with the group that Dr. Bryant, in the Leaders Guide, stresses that it is what God has done on the cross "through his faithful Son Jesus" that has the power to save individuals and communities. He says, "Contrary to much popular belief, salvation of either does not come through the human capacity for reasoned thought or good works... Rather, it comes only through trust in God through faith in Jesus Christ and by the faithfulness of Jesus Christ."

Looking back at the list of "what we would include in describing the gospel or talking about being saved" (under #2), we checked those that emphasize what we do. Paul would say we are missing the point. It's not about our faithfulness. It's about Jesus' faithfulness. Spend a few minutes discussing this, as it may be a new concept to many. Ask:

How might this concept change the way we talk about the gospel?

and

Ask the group to give examples as they discuss the following question:

Just how central to our living, to our whole being, is "self"?

4. **Love.** Divide the group into four sections. Have two sections read 1 Corinthians 2:6-16, looking for what Paul is saying about love. Have the other two sections read/review pages 35-36 in the Resource Book, looking for what Dr. Bryant says Paul is saying about love.

Regroup and discuss what Paul is saying about love.

or

Invite someone to read aloud 1 Corinthians 2:6-16. Ask participants to follow along in their Bibles and to be listening for what Paul is saying about love.

Ask the group what they hear Paul saying about love. Also, have them browse pages 35-36 in the Resource Book as they discuss.

and

If there are questions, be sure to add them to the list of questions that you are keeping throughout this study.

CLOSING

1. **Summarize.** Invite someone to summarize what Paul is saying in this passage. Ask the group for any additions to the summary.
2. **Cinquain.** Explain that a cinquain is a poem consisting of five lines expressing a single idea using the following format:

Line 1 – A single concept word

Line 2 – Two words descriptive of the concept

Line 3 – Three action words telling about the concept

Line 4 – Four words expressing feelings for the concept

Line 5 – One word restating the concept

For example:

Love

Freely given

Unconditional, sacrificial, unending

God's gift to us

Cross

- Project the Cinquain slides (2) or provide participants with a description of the format. Distribute a half-sheet of blank paper to each person. Invite the group, as individuals or in teams of two, to write cinquain poems that relate to “gospel,” “wisdom,” or “love.”

When everyone has finished, invite those who are willing to share their poems.

3. **Close with Reading of Psalm 33.** Ask four volunteers to read Psalm 33. Have them position themselves in four corners of the room. In turn each would read a section of Psalm 33, as follows:

Reader 1 – v. 1-3	Reader 1 – v. 10-12
Reader 2 – v. 4-5	Reader 2 – v. 13-17
Reader 3 – v. 6-7	Reader 3 – v. 18-19
Reader 4 – v. 8-9	Reader 4 – v. 20-22

4. **Close with hymn and prayer.** Sing “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross.”

and/or

Close in prayer.

Looking Ahead

1. For the next session, “Sharing the Mind of Christ,” encourage participants, in addition to reading Session 5, to look up the four Basic and Supplementary Bible References and to reflect on the question: *What would it be like to have the mind of Christ?* Suggest they pay particular attention to the questions for reflection at the end of Session 5. Researching the terms “mind of Christ” and “garden” in a concordance will also be helpful.
2. Suggest that during the week, as a spiritual practice, they repeat frequently 1 Corinthians 3:16: “Do you not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?” (Memory Bank, Session 5) This is a powerful affirmation that may be hard for many to actually believe.
3. Prepare the “For Next Time” list for Session 5.

Unison Prayer*

*The prayer that remains constant,
on our lips at dawn and at dusk,
is simply: Please be here.*

Please be here.

Here, with us.

Here, wherever there is crying.

Here, in the halls of power.

Here, in places of drought.

Here, with our loved ones.

Here where a child's eyes are filled with terror.

Here, where the great blue heron is wading.

Here.

Here.

Please be here.

Amen.

* Prayer written by Rev. Rachel Hackenberg, Pastor, Grace United Church of Christ, Eden (Lancaster), PA.