Your Wisdom is Dumb (Because of the Gospel)

SPEAKER	Wes Neely
DATE	Sunday, January 29, 2023
PASSAGES	1 Corinthians 1; 1 Corinthians 2; 1 Peter 3; Luke 16
MESSAGE	Begins at 1:08:05 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

The cross reads as foolishness to the world — but not because God engineered it that way to keep people out. It reads as foolishness because prideful hearts cannot accept a rescue they did not earn. Which means the power of the gospel has never rested on how persuasively you can argue for it.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Paul deliberately declined to dazzle the Corinthians with eloquence, because a message carried by a great speaker produces followers of the speaker.
- God repeatedly picks the unexpected — a shepherd boy over the tallest man in Israel, the younger brother over the elder, fishermen over rulers. The pattern is consistent enough to be a method.
- The cross is not folly by God's design. It is folly to hearts that will not admit they need saving.
- Pride is not having a high opinion of yourself; it is having an opinion of yourself higher than the truth warrants. That is the sin behind the first rebellion and every one since.
- Apologetics is mostly for the church, not the skeptic — it is comforting to know good answers exist, even when you personally do not have them.
- "I don't know, I'll find out" is a legitimate answer to a hard question. Proclaim what you do know.
- The pressure to let the culture edit the faith is real in both directions, and the honest test is whether you object to a passage on its merits or because obeying it would cost you.

- If Paul's line about "not many of you were wise by worldly standards" stung, you are in the best position to give God the credit.

▶ 1:08:05

Wes came to the mic, realized the slide behind him wanted a sermon title he had never submitted, and made one up on the spot from the last sentence of his notes: *your wisdom is dumb*. Then he started his stopwatch, took a drink of water, and opened to 1 Corinthians 1.

A second-century problem with a first-century answer

▶ 1:09:19

Before Corinth, Wes went to Irenaeus — one generation removed from the apostles, his own teacher having known some of them personally, and facing gnosticism. The gnostics married Greek philosophy to Christian language: thought and knowledge are the highest things, and the physical body we happen to inhabit is gross and evil. The load-bearing consequence was a denial of the real humanity of Christ, since perfect God-in-flesh was unthinkable if flesh itself is contemptible. Irenaeus answered with *Against Heresies*, which Wes described with some affection as a slog — "it's got some good pieces, but most of the time you're gonna be like, what is this guy talking about."

What made gnosticism dangerous is what makes it recognizable. It arose when the surrounding culture saw something true in Christianity, liked what it already believed, and tried to blend the two. Irenaeus had a head start, because Paul had addressed the same instinct fifty or sixty years earlier.

The one thing Paul refused to do

▶ 1:11:52

> "For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. 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."
>
> 1 CORINTHIANS 1:17–18 ↗

Paul showed up without the five-syllable words. Corinth already had a factional problem — *I follow Paul, I follow Apollos, I follow Christ* — precisely because a congregation that latches onto powerful personalities will keep doing it. Wes read Paul as willing to go further still: "if I could have said it even

simpler, to where you didn't respect me even more, to where you had to focus on Christ and not me, I'm sure Paul would have made that trade."

Two questions came out of the text and framed the rest of the message. Why is the cross folly to the perishing — wouldn't it have been better if God had made it obviously wise, so that thoughtful people reasoned their way to Christ? And the modern version: why send Jesus then, instead of now, with phones and journalism and an audience of billions rather than a crowd of a thousand? Wes did not wave these off. "These are questions that people will ask, and they're good questions."

God flips the script, on purpose

▶ 1:15:51

> "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, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God."
>
> 1 CORINTHIANS 1:27–29 ↗

Jesus did not go hunting for Pharisees; the Pharisees came looking for him. He sought out the weak and the poor. And Paul, arriving in a new city, was not heading for the amphitheater where the enlightened sat around having meaningful conversations — he went where the message would land.

▶ 1:19:36

Here Wes turned the passage on the room, and he was careful about it. Nobody walks into Hope Chapel and sees a congregation of ragtag good-for-nothings; by worldly standards this is a respectable crowd. That is not a compliment to rest on, because the gospel has more traction with people who have not already decided they have it figured out — the low in spirit as much as the low in standing.

The pattern runs the length of the Bible. Israel gets Saul, the tallest and most handsome man in the country, the perfect king by every visible measure — and then God gives them a shepherd boy barely out of adolescence. Jacob should have served Esau; God reversed it. This was not a family quirk. It was a public violation of what everyone knew to be sensible.

> *"God just seems to take delight in taking what humans think is wisdom and just being like, no, we're gonna do the opposite of that."*

Which, Wes pointed out, is the best possible news for us, because human wisdom does not spend itself saving enemies. Do that in ordinary life and people ask if you are safe.
The foolishness of God is wiser than men, and this is what it looks like.

Weakness, fear, and much trembling

▶ 1:23:00

> "And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God."
>
> 1 CORINTHIANS 2:1–5 ↗

Wes's picture for the opposite of this was the college freshman home after one semester of intro philosophy, every sentence loaded with words nobody can define without a dictionary open. Most of them grow out of it. Paul never went in for it in the first place.

▶ 1:25:07

He said this as someone who loves the alternative. He likes apologetics — the Greek behind a word, how one passage bears on another, the arguments for Christ. He used to believe he needed the full arsenal before opening his mouth: anticipate the objection, research the specialty, be immaculate, hand over the two-hundred-page book. He has never once seen a person hand over a list of fifty objections, receive fifty answers, and convert.

So the advice is narrower than it sounds. When a question comes that you cannot answer, say *I don't know, I'll try to find out, let's keep talking* — rather than improvising something half-remembered on the spot, which was his own habit. Proclaim what you do know: that Christ lived, died, and rose for the salvation of those who believe. That is the part with power in it.

▶ 1:30:17

His actual claim about apologetics is that it is aimed at the wrong audience. "Apologetics is not most helpful to the person you're talking to. Apologetics and these good arguments are most helpful for the church body." It is a comfort to know that whatever objection the world raises, good answers exist — even the ones you have not learned yet. Knowing facts about Christ serves knowing Christ; it is worth something insofar as it makes you bold.

He set two ministries side by side. One person spends fifty years memorizing the Bible and rehearsing arguments with friends, finally goes out at eighty, speaks to one person, and dies a week later. Another

comes to faith, decides this is worth telling people, and does that for sixty years to hundreds. The second did more, and did not wait to become an expert first. "Matt is not the only person at Hope Chapel that is allowed to go talk to other people to try to win them for Christ."

He did not want that mistaken for a case against study, and anchored the balance in Peter:

> "But in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect."
>
> 1 PETER 3:15 ↗

Gentleness gets easier with age, he admitted — it is hard to be gentle and respectful when you are young, zealous, and certain someone is wrong. Make the best defense you can, keep improving it, and do not let its imperfection stop the work.

Answering the question, by refusing it

▶ 1:35:59

Back to the opening question — and Wes's answer was that it is the wrong question. God did not sit in eternity deciding to make the cross as confusing as possible so that as few people as possible would understand. Paul says there is wisdom here, taught by the Spirit, and that the person who has the Spirit finds the cross coherent — not a logical embarrassment to be swallowed on trust. It is unintelligible to those without the Spirit because of what their hearts have done, not what God has done.

▶ 1:38:24

The root of it is pride, and Wes defined pride precisely: not thinking well of yourself, but thinking more of yourself than is true. When the world's top-ranked tennis player says he is the best in the world, that is a fact, not a boast. Satan's rebellion was the guardian of God's glory concluding the glory was his. The temptation in the garden was to be like God, knowing good and evil. Humanity's version now is the confidence that we do not need saving, or that we can manage it ourselves with the right governments and the right incentives, and build a utopia because we are smart.

▶ 1:40:39

That is also the answer to the second question. The people specifically instructed to watch for the Messiah saw him in the flesh and said *not ours* — they had built a Messiah they preferred. If Jesus came today the miracles would be dismissed as CGI and the sayings as deepfakes; people who watched him break the laws of nature in person concluded he was working with the devil. Wes thought it took real

arrogance to assume we would do better. Then the rich man in Luke 16, begging for someone to be sent back to warn his family, and told: they have Moses and the Prophets — if they will not hear them, they will not be convinced if someone rises from the dead.

> *"The cross isn't foolishness because God made it that way. The cross is foolishness because we in our sinful hearts can't accept it without the power of God."*

Wes drew the pastoral consequence immediately. If none of us got here on merit, then the response to a person living a life we would not choose is not *look at those sinful people*. It is: God can save them too, because he saved me.

Which way is the pressure running?

▶ 1:45:11

Back to Irenaeus one last time. Nothing would have been easier than keeping the peace — the gnostics are Christians too, more or less, there is some wisdom there, hand the visiting teacher the podium. Wes was quick to say that peacekeeping is often right: the church is far too good at finding one point of difference and founding a denomination over it.

But there is a line, and he named the test rather than the issues. Sexual ethics is the easy example, and he deliberately passed over it. The harder ones are the sins we have quietly stopped counting — how we treat our elders, gluttony, extravagance, what we tell ourselves about wealth. So when you read something in scripture and think *that was just cultural*, stop and ask which it is: do you actually believe the text is making a cultural comment, or would obeying it change how you live in a way you would rather avoid? He was candid that the error runs both ways — nobody in the room is arguing for the shellfish laws — but the traffic in his generation runs mostly one direction, with the culture editing Christ instead of Christ addressing the culture. As he put it, Jesus in America would have said exactly the same things; he would just have talked about Lamborghinis instead of donkeys.

So be bold

▶ 1:50:18

The close was an encouragement, and it circled back to Paul in weakness and trembling. You do not need to be smart. You do not need the right answers. In some cases a fumbled, half-formed argument is the better instrument, because when the person comes to Christ anyway nobody is confused about whose power did it — Wes said part of him had wanted to preach badly on purpose for exactly that reason.

And to anyone who heard Paul's "not many of you were wise" and thought *that is me, everyone here has it together and I don't*: far more people in the room are thinking that than you imagine, and Paul says that position is an advantage. The person who believes he is the least likely candidate does not respond to a fruitful day by concluding God is lucky to have him. He says God worked through me in spite of me.

If it did not resonate — if you have a healthy sense of your own worth and Paul's line slid past — Wes suggested it should land anyway. Measured against Christ, we are not on the same scale; there is no unit that makes the comparison work. All of us are low. He ended by praying over a congregation he called "this group of misfits, this group of lowly people who are empowered by the truth and the grace that you have given us," and asking that for anyone looking for a way to be useful, God would make it plain and simple enough that there was no confusion about where to start.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE

- 1 Corinthians 1
- 1 Corinthians 1:17–18
- 1 Corinthians 1:27–29
- 1 Corinthians 1:25
- 1 Corinthians 2:1–5
- 1 Peter 3:15
- 1 Corinthians 2:6–16
- Genesis 3:5
- Luke 16:19–31

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. Wes said the gospel has more traction with people who have not already decided they have it figured out. Where have you quietly decided you have something figured out?
2. Pride, in his definition, is thinking more of yourself than is true. Where is your self-estimate running ahead of the facts — and where might it be running behind them?
3. What question about the faith have you been afraid someone would ask you? What would it cost you to answer it with "I don't know, let me find out"?
4. Take his test on a passage you tend to file under "that was cultural." Do you object to it on its merits, or because obeying it would change how you live?
5. Who is one person you have not spoken to about Christ because you assumed you would not do a good enough job — and what is the first sentence you could say to them this week?

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Wes Neely teaches at Hope Chapel and works with the church's middle schoolers, who were studying the reign of Saul the same week as this message. He has a stated love of apologetics — Greek word study, cross-referencing, the arguments for Christ — and preaches from the ESV, timing himself with a stopwatch. He also helps organize the men's service days, and preached this message while recovering from illness and Austin's cedar season.

Watch the full message:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Tn0YgzFbr8&t=4085s

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader's aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.