

1 Corinthians Lesson 7

1 Corinthians 1:17-18

INTRODUCTION AND CONTEXTUAL REVIEW

Through 1:16, the letter has exposed the divisions at Corinth and dismantled them. Believers were rallying under rival banners (“I am of Paul,” “I am of Apollos,” “I am of Cephas”), and the three rhetorical questions of verse 13 stripped the logic of the factions bare: Christ is not divided, Paul was not crucified for them, and they were not baptized into Paul’s name. Baptism was then set in its proper place (14-16), so that it would not be used inappropriately.

Verse 17 reaches past the symptom to the disease. The factions were the surface tear; underneath lay something the Corinthians had carried in from the surrounding culture. The problem runs on two levels. On the surface, they esteemed eloquence and ranked their teachers by rhetorical polish and the status that came with it. Beneath that, they had absorbed the culture’s actual values, its very definition of what counts as wise, strong, and worthy. The first is a matter of form; the second is a matter of content, and the content is the deeper infection.

The Corinthian mind had a framework for making sense of reality, a σύνεσις sunesis (verse 19), a way of fitting the world together into something coherent and impressive. Measured against that framework, a crucified Savior did not compute. It is this whole system of evaluation, not merely a preference for polished speakers, that God overturns in the verses that follow. The eloquence culture is the surface; the value system is what goes all the way down.

What follows in 1:17-25 is God, through Paul, exposing and setting aside that entire framework. This lesson takes up verses 17-18 and lands on verses 19-20, where the challenge rings out over the wisdom of the world.

1 CORINTHIANS 1:17-20

For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not in cleverness of speech, so that the cross of Christ would not be made void. For 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. For it is written, "I WILL DESTROY THE WISDOM OF THE WISE, AND THE CLEVERNESS OF THE CLEVER I WILL SET ASIDE." 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?

EXPOSITION

Verse 17: “not in cleverness of speech”

The verse hinges on a word study. The term rendered “cleverness” is σοφία sophia, wisdom. The full phrase is σοφία λόγος sophia logos, “wisdom of word,” or wisdom of speech. This is worth pausing on, because the NASB’s “cleverness of speech,” while understandable, flattens the concept. The reader loses that this is a wisdom word, the same root that dominates the entire section. Compounding the difficulty, the same English word “cleverness” resurfaces in verse 19 for

1 Corinthians Lesson 7

1 Corinthians 1:17-18

a different Greek term altogether. Keeping the wisdom sense visible here is essential to seeing what the passage is actually contrasting.

Wisdom, σοφία sophia, is not mere intelligence or verbal quickness. It is skill in ordering life, the framework by which a person interprets reality and navigates it. So σοφία λόγος sophia logos names precisely what Corinth prized in its teachers: wisdom relocated into performance, the polished delivery that drew a crowd and conferred status on the speaker. This is not a condemnation of eloquence as such. The point falls on what happens when the packaging becomes the draw.

The purpose clause states the danger: “so that the cross of Christ would not be made void.” *Made void* is κενόω kenoō, to empty or drain of effect, the same verb family behind Christ emptying Himself in Philippians 2:7. When the messenger’s brilliance becomes the point, the hearer’s confidence comes to rest on the speaker’s skill rather than on the message itself, and the cross is emptied of its own operative power. This is exactly the danger named again in 2:5, that faith would rest “on the wisdom of men” rather than “on the power of God.” There is a deliberate wordplay across verses 17 and 18: the gospel is not delivered with the σοφία sophia of λόγος logos, because the λόγος logos of the cross needs no such dressing. The message carries its own weight.

Verse 18: “the word of the cross”

“The word of the cross” is λόγος σταυρός logos stauros, the message, the account, the proclaimed content of Christ crucified. The noun λόγος logos is chosen deliberately and set against the σοφία λόγος sophia logos of verse 17. The cross has its own word; it does not borrow the wisdom of the orator. Defining this term precisely matters: the “word of the cross” is not a mood or an experience but the actual content of the message, what is announced about the crucified Christ.

That content receives two opposite verdicts, and the grammar sets them side by side through a μέν men... δέ de construction (on the one hand, on the other hand). On the one hand, the word of the cross is “foolishness to those who are perishing.” *Foolishness* is μωρία mōria, the root behind our word “moron.” To the perishing it is not merely mistaken but imbecilic, beneath serious consideration, the natural verdict of a mind trained to measure everything by the culture’s standard of what is coherent and impressive.

Both parties are named by articular participles: “those who are perishing” (ἀπόλλυμι apollumi) and “to us who are being saved” (σώζω sōzō). Both are present, both passive, both bound together by the μέν men... δέ de. Because they stand in strict parallel, whatever force is assigned to one must be assigned to the other. This settles a common misreading. Some treat “being saved” as a description of the sanctification process, believers in the middle of being progressively saved. But if that is the sense, then honesty requires the same of its counterpart: those who are perishing would have to be in the middle of gradually perishing, degrading by degrees. No one reads it that way,

1 Corinthians Lesson 7

1 Corinthians 1:17-18

and rightly so. Those perishing are simply the identified class of the lost. By the parallel, the being-saved are the identified class of the redeemed. This is category language, identity, not process. The article helps us make this clear and the passive voice reinforces it: neither group is the actor. They have been acted upon by the content of their worldview and now bear the resulting identity.

This does not deny that σώζω *sōzō* can carry a future, not-yet edge in other contexts. Here, though, the controlling factor is the contrast itself. Set against “perishing,” the participle functions to identify, not to a progressive process. This is the same truth established in the opening of the letter and traced through the previous lessons: a believer’s standing is grounded in identity, not in behavior. The word of the cross draws a line through the whole human race and sorts it into two settled camps, and a person’s verdict on the cross (foolishness or power) reveals which side of that line he already stands on.

On the other hand, to the being-saved the word of the cross “is the power of God.” Note carefully what it is set against. The contrast is not foolishness versus wisdom but foolishness versus power, and *power* is δύναμις *dunamis*, meaning ability or capacity. This distinction governs how the whole phrase is understood, and it deserves a doctrinal overview of its own.

THE WISDOM OF GOD, THE WORD OF THE CROSS, AND THE POWER OF GOD

The phrase “the power of God” is easily misread. The common assumption treats it as a mystical or supernatural force, either an outward display of miracles or an inward charge of ability infused into the believer, as though the Christian now possesses a private wisdom superior to the world’s. Scripture does not locate the power there. “δύναμις *dunamis*” is ability; the ability belongs to God; and God has invested that ability in His word. The sharpest expression of that word is the message of the cross. The believer does not generate power; he takes up a word that already carries it.

The Testimony Within 1 Corinthians

The letter builds the doctrine before we look elsewhere, and it binds all three terms together. In 1:18 the word of the cross is the power of God. In 1:24 Christ crucified is declared “the power of God and the wisdom of God,” and the two are joined in the crucified Christ Himself. In 2:4-5 the preaching came “not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power,” so that “your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God.” In 4:20, “the kingdom of God does not consist in words but in power.” Throughout, power is the effective thing that human eloquence is not, set in deliberate contrast to the wisdom of speech the Corinthians esteemed.

The Gospel as the Power of God

Romans 1:16 is the hinge: “the gospel... is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.” The text does not say the gospel points to the power or unlocks it. The gospel is the

1 Corinthians Lesson 7

1 Corinthians 1:17-18

power, the same word, δύναμις *dunamis*. The message itself is the operative ability of God unto salvation. This is the clearest confirmation of what 1:18 declares: the content carries the ability.

The Word of God as an Active, Working Thing

Scripture repeatedly credits the work of salvation to the word doing the working. The word of God “performs its work in you who believe” (1 Thessalonians 2:13), the verb behind our “energize.” Believers are “born again... through the living and abiding word of God” (1 Peter 1:23). God “brought us forth by the word of truth” (James 1:18), and “the implanted word... is able to save your souls” (James 1:21). New birth, salvation, and ongoing work are all attributed to the word at work, not to any capacity resident in the hearer.

The Word That Created and Sustains

The reason the word carries this ability reaches back to creation. “By the word of the Lord the heavens were made... He spoke, and it was done” (Psalm 33:6, 9). He “upholds all things by the word of His power” (Hebrews 1:3). The same God who spoke the cosmos into being and holds it together by His word now saves and sustains by that word. The ability was never in the hearer; it was always in the utterance of God.

The Word That Accomplishes Its Errand

Isaiah 55:11 completes the picture: “My word... will not return to Me empty, without accomplishing what I desire, and without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it.” The word is guaranteed to do its work. This is the ground beneath verse 18. When the wisdom of the wise is destroyed and the cleverness of the clever is set aside (v. 19), God Himself is doing it, and the means He uses is His own word. We do not overcome the wise man out of some God-given brilliance in our own minds; we take up the word of God, the actual content of the message of the cross, and that word has the ability to set the wise man and the scribe aside.

Summary Through-Line

Power is ability; ability belongs to God; God has invested that ability in His word, and the sharpest expression of that word is the message of the cross. The believer’s role is not to generate power but to take up the sword that already carries it: “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Ephesians 6:17).

TYING IT TOGETHER: HOW WE THINK AND USE THE WORD

Two corrections follow for the way we think. First, the word of the cross is not weak because it strikes the natural mind as foolish; its apparent foolishness to the perishing is precisely the mark that it is being heard by those who are currently damned. To the redeemed, that same word is the

1 Corinthians Lesson 7

1 Corinthians 1:17-18

effective power of God. We are not embarrassed by a message the world files under nonsense, and we do not improve it by dressing it in the very theatrics God set aside.

Second, and more pointedly, we must correct how we conceive the power of God. It is not a feeling to be summoned, nor an innate brilliance deposited in the believer that makes him cleverer than the world. The power resides in the message we take up. When the wise man is set aside, it is not our reasoning that accomplishes it; it is the word of God, which He has promised will not return empty. This reshapes how we handle Scripture: we come to it not to sharpen our own arguments but to wield the one instrument that actually carries the ability of God.