

“The Spirit of God”

The Fifth in a Series of Sermons on Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians

Texts: 1 Corinthians 2:6-16; Isaiah 64:1-7

If people are dead in sin, and the message of Christ crucified comes to them as either foolishness or a stumbling block, why is it then that the Apostle Paul insists so strongly on the proclamation of the cross? The reason is simple. Paul knows that it is through the preaching of Christ and him crucified that God the Holy Spirit calls those whom God has chosen (whether they be Jew or Greek), creates faith in their hearts and then unites them to Christ. Although this message confounds Jews and stumbles Greeks, it is through the preaching of Christ crucified that we see the demonstration of the wisdom of God and the power of the Holy Spirit.

As we continue our series on Paul’s first letter to the Corinthian church we are wrapping up chapter two and Paul’s discussion of human (or “worldly”) wisdom, in which the Apostle contrasts with God’s wisdom as revealed in the gospel. As we have seen in previous sermons, Paul insists that the gospel is not based upon human wisdom or power. The great paradox laid out by Paul is that what the world regards as wisdom, God regards as foolishness. And what the world regards as foolishness is the same message through which God reveals his wisdom and power!

This is why a huge gap exists between Christian and non-Christian thinking, and helps us understand why it is that God must grant us understanding of spiritual things. If not, the cross will remain foolishness to us. This is why a true understanding of the gospel must be revealed by God, since the gospel can never be discovered by human wisdom. And, as Paul reminds us, if the Corinthians fail to see this, the church in Corinth will continue to struggle with kind of issues now facing them: schism and division, sexual immorality, lawsuits, improper conduct in worship, etc.

We now come to the key issue raised by Paul in the closing verses of 1 Corinthians 2. If true wisdom comes from God, and yet is seen by Greeks as foolishness, how is it that people come to faith in Jesus Christ? This, Paul says, is the work of the Holy Spirit.

In verses 6 and 7 Paul writes, “*Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory.*” Paul is making a contrast between the wisdom of men, and true wisdom, i.e., that which comes from God. When Paul speaks in verse 6 of the wisdom of this age (true worldliness), he ties it to the rulers of this age. What does Paul mean?

The mention of rulers (*archontes*) may be a reference to principalities and powers—demonic influences—as mentioned in 2 Corinthians 4:4; Romans 8:38-39 and Colossians 1:15. Since Paul has not mentioned demonic influences earlier in this epistle, but has repeatedly referred to human wisdom, it is more than likely this refers to Jewish and Roman leaders—such as Pilate and Caiaphas—who, in the wisdom of this age, put God’s wisdom incarnate (Jesus) to death (cf. 2:8 below).¹ These rulers may exercise temporal power, but like everything else associated with this present evil age, their rule is destined to perish and will come to nothing. The irony is that one day they will bow the knee before the

¹ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 53-54.

same Savior they have crucified.

Christians speak forth true wisdom among the mature (*teleioi*), which refers to those who have reached their aim or goal. The irony is that those who are not wise, not powerful, not of noble birth, but who trust in Christ, actually reach their goal, which is the discovery of true wisdom. They have been called to faith through the preaching of the gospel, in which the wisdom of Christ is revealed. But none of “wise” sages, compelling orators or brilliant philosophers of this age will ever find this wisdom or discover it on their own. The irony is that the worldly-wise never do find the true wisdom they claim to be seeking.²

Paul describes true wisdom as “secret wisdom from God,” i.e., that which had previously been hidden, but which God had destined for our glory before time began. God’s wisdom is not like the wisdom of this age. God’s wisdom has been a mystery, not a “secret” as the ESV renders it. Until the coming of Christ, God’s wisdom was hidden in type and shadow in the Old Testament, rather than kept from God’s people as the word “secret” seems to imply. As Paul puts it elsewhere, when the fullness of time came, God sent forth his son (cf. Galatians 4:4).

For Paul, God’s wisdom is hidden from the world until it is revealed in the person of Jesus Christ. One of the keys to understanding Paul’s theology is that with the coming of Jesus Christ a new eschatological age has dawned (the “age to come”). That which was hidden in the Old Testament (the wisdom and power of God, now manifest in the true righteousness, holiness and redemption that is in Christ) is now revealed, or brought out into the open. With the coming of Christ, the wisdom of the age to come (the eternal) now stands in contrast to the wisdom of this age (the temporal). The connection between the coming of Christ and the revelation of what had previously been hidden, means that Christ’s person and work, along with Christ’s relationship to the end times, lie at the very heart of Paul’s theology.³ This explains why Paul speaks of the fact that what was revealed was foreordained by God for our well-being.⁴ God did this to bring his people to glory—the final state of maturity.

This also explains the rather stark declaration about human wisdom we find in verse 8. “*None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.*” God’s wisdom can only be known and understood through divine revelation. The rulers of this age (i.e., Pilate and Caiaphus) did not and could not understand God’s wisdom, therefore, they crucified Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. Recall that at the time of his crucifixion, Jesus said: “*Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do*” (Luke 23:34). The fact that the rulers of this age crucified wisdom incarnate is further proof that these leaders have no clue as to what true wisdom actually entails.

Let us not miss the obvious. Either these rulers didn’t understand the gospel because it centered in the cross (a scandalous message), or because they couldn’t conceive of God in human flesh (how can God who is pure spirit, take to himself a human body?).⁵ They simply could not understand why God would save sinful people. Non-Christians very often operate on the assumption that good people will be

² Morris, 1 Corinthians, 53.

³ Ridderbos, Paul: An Outline of His Theology (Eerdmans, 1975), 44-57.

⁴ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 55.

⁵ Barrett, First Epistle to the Corinthians, 70.

rewarded and bad people will be punished. This is the fundamental religious principle of modern America, just as it was in ancient Greece. But this is where human wisdom leaves us. The irony is that through the gospel, God saves people like tax-collectors and prostitutes, sinners to whom God reveals his son as wisdom incarnate, while condemning the prophet, the sage, the wise-man to whom these things remain hidden. A crucified Savior is a contradiction to someone who thinks that they are basically a good person. Recall, it was the self-righteous religious people who hated Jesus the most. But for someone who knows themselves to be a sinner a crucified Savior is our only hope.

The “*Lord of glory*,” is one of the most exalted titles applied to Christ in the whole of the New Testament. Throughout the Scriptures, glory is closely connected to God the Father (cf. Acts 7:2; Ephesians 1:17). This means that Paul sees Christ as sharing in that glory, by assigning to Christ a glory equal to that of YHWH.⁶ To call Jesus the “lord of Glory” is but another way of identifying Jesus as God in human flesh. If the Jews and Romans had even remotely grasped Christ’s true identity, Caiaphus and Pilate would have never put him to death!

The contrast between how the rulers of this age and those to whom God’s wisdom is revealed, could not be any greater. Paul sets this out in verse 9. “*But, as it is written, ‘What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him.’*” The formula “*it is written*,” is usually used to indicate a direct citation from the Old Testament, but what follows here is not a direct citation of a single verse, but is likely a paraphrase of Isaiah 64:4 (part of our Old Testament lesson), with allusions to Psalm 31:20, or Isaiah 52:15 and 65:17.

Regardless of the source of the quotation, its meaning is clear. In Isaiah 64, the prophet is describing the uniqueness of YHWH. He is not known by those who do not trust in him. God’s way of salvation was hidden from unbelievers, but God has prepared this plan of salvation from before the foundation of the world for those whom he loves.⁷ The human eye cannot conceive of it, the ear cannot hear it, the heart cannot understand God’s plan. Paul’s use of heart (*kardia*) here is interesting. For a Greek, the heart was not just the seat of emotions, but was the whole of the inner life.⁸ God’s plan of salvation cannot be grasped by human thinking, human emotions, or human willing. But God is working out his plan, and the cross is not an accident. The incarnation of Jesus and his death on the cross was God’s purpose from the very beginning, something God reveals to those who trust in him. Unbelievers will never understand.

In the next few verses (10-13), Paul makes one point—that which cannot be discovered by human wisdom, and which was hidden, namely, that God will save sinners through the cross of Jesus Christ, can only be revealed by the Holy Spirit.⁹ “*These things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For who knows a person’s thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by*

⁶ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 55.

⁷ Hays, First Corinthians, 45.

⁸ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 56.

⁹ Hays, First Corinthians, 45.

the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.” This point demonstrates the huge gulf which exists between Christian and non-Christian ways of thinking. God’s wisdom cannot be discovered by philosophers and sages. It must be revealed by God. And since it must be revealed by God, it can only be truly comprehended by faith, and this is the role of the Holy Spirit, illuminating our minds to understand what God says, and to accept what God says as truth.

In verse 10, Paul makes another sharp contrast between God’s and human wisdom. The philosophers and sages didn’t discover these truths, but God revealed it to those of “us” whom the world regards as foolish. The agent of this revelation is the Holy Spirit. Paul’s stress clearly falls upon the fact that God “reveals” his wisdom through the gospel. This emphasis can be seen in the fact that Paul mentions the Holy Spirit some six times in verses 10-14. The Spirit not only reveals these things to us, but the Spirit searches the deep things of God, because no human is capable of fathoming the innermost depths of the divine being.¹⁰ Since the things we need to know to be saved must be revealed to us by the Spirit, this precludes the possibility of people coming to faith by any other means than the preaching of the gospel, not through human willing, nor human goodness. The Spirit must reveal these things to us. This fits with Paul’s doctrine of calling, in which God calls his elect to faith through the preaching of the gospel.

It is important to note that there are strong parallels here with Jesus’ discussion of the Holy Spirit in John 16:8-15, in which Jesus says that the Holy Spirit will teach the disciples certain truths about him which otherwise, they could never learn—namely that the Holy Spirit will convict the world of sin, teach God’s people about Christ’s righteousness, and then warn the world of judgment. We find God’s wisdom about how he will save sinners, revealed in the Scriptures and nowhere else. While much can be learned through general revelation, such as God’s invisible attributes and divine nature, (cf. Romans 1:20); as well as natural law, (cf. Romans 2:14-15), the gospel cannot. We do not learn the gospel from nature.

Part of the problem in Corinth is a proto-gnosticism in which sages, philosophers and false religions all claim to have discovered “wisdom,” which they, in turn, are willing to reveal. There is no secret wisdom, apart from the Spirit’s revelation of the mind of God. God reveals his wisdom whenever Paul or someone else preaches the word of the cross.¹¹ The gospel is public (cf. Galatians 3:1 ff), not private, or secret. God announces to everyone how he will save them. This is why the gospel is “good news” which must be announced to people through preaching or through evangelism.

Paul further explains this point by using an analogy in verse 11. As we know our own minds (self-consciousness), so the Holy Spirit knows the will of God. No philosopher, no sage, no wise man, in fact, no one, knows the mind of God. But the Holy Spirit, who is God, certainly knows the mind of God! And unless this is revealed to us, we cannot understand it! Unless God reveals himself and his purposes to us through the Holy Spirit in his word, we have nothing but the “spirit of the world,” or, as Paul put it earlier, the “wisdom of this age.” And if all we have is “the spirit of the world,” then all we have is folly.

In verse 12, the contrast between Christians (the foolish) and unbelievers (who think themselves wise) continues. Unlike the rulers of this age and those who are influenced by them, who have the spirit of the world and who think like non-Christians, we have God’s Spirit, who reveals these things to us freely. Some take Paul to mean that the spirit of the world is connected to Satan or the demonic (cf. Ephesians

¹⁰ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 56-57.

¹¹ Barrett, Epistle to the Corinthians, 74.

2:2 where Paul says “*in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience*”; or in a passage such as John 12:31—“*Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out*”).

While this interpretation is possible (and supported by other Pauline texts), since Paul is opposing human wisdom (the so-called “*wisdom of this age*” in v. 6), not a satanic or occultic form of wisdom, I think it better to understand Paul to be speaking of human wisdom in contrast to the wisdom of God. God’s wisdom comes without cost (we need not pay a sage, a wizard, or a consultant), because God’s wisdom is freely given in the gospel. From this perspective, worldliness is thinking like a pagan—good people go to heaven, bad people go to hell, the purpose of life is to gain pleasure and the avoidance of pain, and so on.

Christians, who are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, think in a certain way and use a certain set of categories to interpret the world. Calvin speaks of the word of God supplying the spectacles through which the Holy Spirit brings things into focus. Non-Christians, on the other hand, think in a worldly-wise manner because all they know is the spirit of the world. This is not a question of intelligence or education. But Paul does teach us in Ephesians 4:17-19 that sin clouds human thinking about eternal matters. The gulf cannot be bridged by human wisdom, but only by divine revelation and illumination. And God the Holy Spirit is the only one who can bridge this gap.

Obviously, this has profound ramifications for Christian evangelism and apologetics, theology and ethics. We cannot argue someone into saving faith (although we can show them that their unbelief is irrational and that there are good reasons to embrace the gospel). We cannot expect non-Christians to fully understand Christian theology (the facts maybe, but not the substance). Nor can we expect non-Christians to lives of gratitude before God and perform genuine good works, although, through general revelation (natural law), non-Christians can and certainly do live outwardly moral lives. But non-Christians cannot understand the wisdom of God, made manifest in the cross, which is freely given to God’s people through the work of the Holy Spirit.

Paul’s preaching of the cross, which may not have been as motivational, as exciting, or as entertaining as that of other preachers familiar to the Corinthians (criteria based upon worldly-wisdom), nevertheless, is that which God has revealed in Christ. Thus in verse 13, Paul can say about the gospel he preaches, “*And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.*” Those truths revealed by God in his word are to be proclaimed and taught to others. Human words entertain, motivate and excite. They contain worldly wisdom. But God’s word’s reveals his wisdom as to how a holy God can justify the wicked. The cross is therefore a spiritual word, which must be spiritually discerned. Since the wisdom of God is seen in the cross, the true meaning of which must be given by the Spirit, to preach the cross is to preach “spiritual words,” not secret words, “good news” which non-Christians cannot accept unless the Spirit enables them to do so.

The contrast between believer (the spiritual man) and unbeliever (the natural man) comes to full relief in verses 14-16. It is the work of the Holy Spirit which determines whether someone is an unbeliever or not. This has nothing whatsoever to do with human wisdom, intelligence or ability. This, of course, presents great problems for all forms of Arminian, semi-pelagian and decisional regeneration in which it is argued that sinners have it within themselves the ability to take that first step toward God. Paul says something quite different “*The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one. ‘For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?’ But we have the mind of Christ.*”

In verse 14, Paul makes his point with great clarity. That person who does not have the Holy Spirit (the *psychikos* man) does not “accept” the things (the wisdom) that comes from God, through the Holy Spirit (the Greek word *dechomai* means something like “welcome”).¹² The cross remains “foolishness” to an unbeliever because they are not able to determine the cross’ saving efficacy apart from the work of the Spirit. And this idea, as we have been saying, has profound ramifications for our doctrines of salvation and ethics, and should inform all attempts to interact with non-Christians in an evangelistic and apologetics context. Our confidence is not in our personal testimony or in our power to persuade. Our confidence is in the wisdom of God and the power of the Holy Spirit revealed in the gospel.

Non-Christians do not understand the gospel, because the meaning of the cross, is spiritually discerned. To them, God saving wicked people while rejecting “good” people is an injustice. God saves whom he will through the death of his Son. The self-righteous cannot see this. But the Christian (the *pneumatikos* man) makes judgments upon all things, because through the work of the Holy Spirit, he or she sees things through the lens of Holy Scripture.

A Christian sees things in light of God’s wisdom, and not in the dim light of the wisdom of this age. A Christian is no longer subject to the foolish judgments of the sages and philosophers, who call God’s wisdom foolishness, all the while God mocks their wisdom as foolishness. As Christians, we have the mind of Christ (illumination), because we are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, who knows the mind of God, and who has revealed to us God’s wisdom in the cross. Paul does not mean we know all things, or even that we know all spiritual things infallibly, but that since we are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, we view things from the perspective of Christ crucified. In other words, we have a Christian world-view, which the apostle now speaks of in terms of having the mind of Christ. As Christians, we see things in light of biblical categories, not in the light of pagan wisdom. We think like Christians, not like pagans, because the Holy Spirit has given to us the mind of Christ.

What, then, do we say by application?

It all comes down to the simple fact that God’s ways are not our ways and that his thoughts are not our thoughts. Non-Christians therefore look for God in all the wrong places, and they reject that very message (the cross) wherein everything they need to know to find true wisdom is revealed.

We have seen an example of the contrast between God’s wisdom and human wisdom this very day. We witnessed a baptism as Christian parents presented their child here at the font because they believed God’s covenant oath “I will be your God and you will be my people.” They sought to ratify that oath through the baptism of their son. But the non-Christian will say, “this doesn’t make any sense.” “The child is not old enough to decide for themselves.” “Why should the parents force their religion on their child—shouldn’t the child be free to choose for himself?” These Christian parents did this because God once said to Abraham “*As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised.*”

Here’s the point—baptism (which has replaced circumcision under the new covenant) isn’t about the child deciding anything. It is about God promising something—to keep his covenant. And if this is the case, then we see God’s wisdom in requiring the baptism of children of believers, precisely because infant

¹² Morris, 1 Corinthians, 58.

children of believers cannot yet do anything in relation to God. Baptism is about Christians parents believing God's promise. But this is the very thing lost to those who think in worldly categories. God's wisdom and power are manifest in the presence of human weakness and sin. A child is not wise, noble or powerful. His parents are not worldly-wise, noble or powerful. We are not wise (on pagan terms), noble or powerful. That is the whole point.

But we are indwelt by the Spirit of God. Therefore, we have the mind of Christ. We look for the wisdom of God and a demonstration of the Spirit's power precisely in those places where we are weakest. And this is why Christianity will always remain foolishness to a Greek and a stumbling block to Jews. For God reveals his wisdom and power in the cross, that message through which the Spirit of God demonstrates his power. **Amen**