

Wisdom and the Word *I Corinthians 2:6-16*

As we get back into Paul's letter to the Corinthians this morning, I want us to take a step back and get the big picture of this section. Beginning at chapter one, verse ten, all the way through chapter four, verse twenty-one, Paul is dealing with the issue of disunity. This problem lay at the root of so many of the other issues that Paul addresses in this letter to the church he had established some two years before.

Open your Bible to the book of First Corinthians, chapter one.

Paul tells the Corinthians that he has heard a report about the divisions and fighting among themselves. Verses 10-17 outline the problem. People had chosen sides, if you will, and aligned themselves with various personalities: Paul, Apollos, Peter, etc.

After his appeal that they stop that and become united in mind and judgment, Paul reminds them that his primary focus when he was with them was the preaching of the gospel and that his preaching was not based upon human wisdom.

In verses 18-25, he explains that God's wisdom and his power are demonstrated through the cross – what to the Jews was a stumbling block and to the Gentiles foolishness.

Paul keeps on his point in verses 26-31 by stating that God chooses what is weak in the world to shame the wise. The reason is so that no one can boast of their standing before God based on human wisdom or human power.

He continues on the theme of the focus of his preaching in chapter two. Look at **2:3-5**.

Paul has been telling the Corinthians that their human wisdom has simply produced divisions and boasting, things not of God.

Now, Paul makes a turn in his teaching that brings in the other side of God's wisdom. Let me read this passage and then we will go back and draw out some things that are important to understand not only about those first century Christians but also important for us as 21st century Christians.

I Corinthians 2:6-16

Paul said earlier that God's foolishness was wiser than the wisdom of men. Now he goes further to explain that there really is a wisdom of God that is beyond anything they might know of themselves. Look what Paul writes in Romans, chapter 11:

Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! – *Romans 11:33*

You pride yourself in your wisdom, Paul says, but you don't know the half of it. You cannot begin to conceive of the depth of God's wisdom.

God reveals deep wisdom to those who can handle the truth, to those who are mature spiritually. Paul calls this wisdom "a secret and hidden wisdom." By that he doesn't mean it is like one of the mystery religions whose secrets are only available to the initiated, to the members of the "in" crowd. He is talking about a wisdom that is knowable only because God has chosen to reveal it.

It isn't a new discovery either. In fact, it is a wisdom which God decreed before the ages. God is a God of revelation; he has chosen to reveal truth about himself to those he created. We see it in his self-revelation to Adam and Eve, to Noah, to Abraham, to Moses, to the prophets. We see it preeminently in the revelation of himself through his Son, Jesus.

This is the point of the opening words of the author of the New Testament book of Hebrews:

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high... – *Hebrews 1:1-3*

That people did not understand nor receive this revelation is evidenced by the fact that they rejected Jesus and crucified him. What greater indictment against human wisdom could there ever be! They did not see it; they did not understand it. Think of Jesus' words on the cross when he said, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

Later, Peter, speaking to a crowd in Jerusalem about the suffering of Jesus, says, "And now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did also your rulers."

They failed to understand the wisdom of God displayed in the cross which appeared to them as foolishness and weakness. This is the shortcoming of human wisdom, the failure of human wisdom to know and understand the divine wisdom of God.

Listen, people have never been able to reason their way to God. Through human eyes, you just will not see Jesus' sacrifice on the cross as wisdom and strength.

But there are things that God desires to reveal to us. Paul refers to this in verse 9:

I Corinthians 2:9

This verse is sometimes quoted in funeral services pointing to those things God is revealing to believers who have passed into his presence. That's a nice thought, but I don't think that is what Paul has in mind here.

God delights in revealing divine truth, divine wisdom, to those who love him. Now, Paul is going to explain the means by which God does this.

Let's do a little exercise here. Look at your program. Can anyone figure out the message title listed there?

You need a deciphering code, don't you? I am going to put it up on the screen so that you can understand what is written in the program. Chris will be my judge here. As soon as you have figured it out, stand up. First one up wins the prize.

Code on screen

Wisdom and the Word – winner gets a gift card to Starbucks.

If we are to understand the things of God, things that he has decreed before the ages for our glory, things that he has prepared for those who love him, we need someone to decode the message – to make it understandable. The key to understanding is the Spirit of God.

Up to this point in the letter, Paul has mentioned the Spirit only once. Now, in verses 10-14, he will be mentioned six times! Here's what we learn about the Spirit's work:

- He reveals the things of God
- He searches the depths of God
- He comprehends the thoughts of God
- He teaches us the things of God

Let's go back and take a look what Paul says. The Spirit is the agency or channel through which God reveals his truth to us. Jesus told his disciples this is how it would be done. In the Upper Room, he said to them:

These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. – *John 14:25-26*

Again, in chapter 16:

When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. – *John 16:13*

People don't just sit down one day and say, "I think I'll discover spiritual truth today." Not going to happen! Unless the Spirit of God illuminates our understanding we will remain in ignorance, incapable of understanding spiritual truth.

Now, here's why we need the Spirit to reveal God's truth. Look again at verses 10 and 11:

I Corinthians 2:10-11

The Spirit searches the depths of God. You and I can't even begin to know or understand God. God is unknowable unless he reveals himself. The Spirit who knows God and penetrates deep into the divine reveals spiritual truth.

Paul lays out a parallel for us to understand this fact. You don't know the thoughts within me; only I do. And unless I choose to reveal those thoughts to you, you cannot know them. In the same way, only the Spirit who knows and comprehends the thoughts of God can reveal them to us.

Can you see the limitations of human wisdom – limitations that Paul has been trying to point out to the Corinthians? That is why you have speculation when it comes to trying to figure out God.

Paul goes on to remind these believers that they have received the Spirit. He will drive this point home throughout the letter. We understand from his writing the fact that the Holy Spirit indwells every believer in Christ. At the moment of your salvation, the Holy Spirit comes and takes up his residence in your life. It is God's presence living in you.

One of the results is that the Spirit then gives us understanding of spiritual truth. Before you came to know Christ, did you really understand the Bible? Or did it just not make sense? And then you placed your faith in Christ and accepted God's gift of salvation. And when you read your Bible, it makes sense! God speaks to you through his Word. How amazing!

The difference is the presence of the Holy Spirit in your life. He opens up your mind so that you can comprehend God's truth.

Notice how generous God is – Verse 12 – “the things freely given us by God.” God wants you to know him, to understand him – at least as much as a finite person can understand the infinite. That's one of the reasons he gives you the Holy Spirit.

And look at the way we receive this understanding and the way we communicate that understanding to others. Paul says that it is by spiritual thoughts and spiritual words. This is important in our understanding of the doctrine of inspiration. Paul didn't just make this stuff up! Robert Gromacki, writing about the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the book *Understanding Christian Theology*, says:

Words convey thoughts. The Spirit revealed truth-thoughts and used human words that would correctly express those truths. Spirit-taught words were used to declare Spirit-given truth.

That's why Paul says earlier in this chapter: “I didn't come with lofty speech or human wisdom, but I came in demonstration of the Spirit and of power.” Paul used words, but they were not words of human wisdom; they were of Spirit-revealed words combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words.

Now, at the end of this passage, Paul outlines two groups of people and how they respectively relate to the spiritual things revealed by the Spirit of God.

The first group is personified as a natural person. This is the man or woman who operates only on the physical plane. There is no spiritual life in them; there is no spiritual understanding or even interest in spiritual things. You know people who are like that. In fact, that describes you before you entered into a personal relationship with God through Christ.

Paul says they do not “accept” the things of the Spirit of God. The word *accept* has in it the idea of “welcome.” This person doesn't welcome the things of God. Instead there is refusal and rejection. He or she sees the things of God as folly and they are incapable of understanding them.

Why? Because they are spiritually discerned. This phrase indicates judicial investigation. It means “to scrutinize, to examine.” They are incapable of examining spiritual truths.

Now, here’s the other group described as a spiritual person – a person of the Spirit. This is the one who has believed the gospel, the good news of Christ, and who has placed his or her trust in Jesus and his work accomplished on the cross for them. This person lives in the realm, the sphere, of the Spirit.

Unlike the natural person, the spiritual person is able to judge, to examine, to evaluate, to discern spiritual truth. The reason is that the Spirit of God is guiding them into truth. In addition, the spiritual person cannot be judged by the natural person. There is no basis of understanding which allows for accurate evaluation.

Paul concludes his thoughts about the difference between the natural person and the spiritual person by quoting from the Old Testament prophet Isaiah. Isaiah asks several questions that point out the inability and limitedness of man in his wisdom to figure out God.

Verse 13 of chapter 40 in Isaiah reads in the Hebrew text: “Who has directed the Spirit of the Lord?”

In the Greek translation of the Old Testament – the Septuagint, the phrase reads: “the mind of the Lord.” Perhaps Paul is linking both texts with this thought that, as one writer puts it: “We have the Spirit of Christ and therefore we really know Christ.”

The answer expected of Isaiah’s question is that only God knows the things of God. Paul seems to be saying that the spiritual person, the one who knows Christ and has the Spirit of God living within them, has access to the mind of Christ and therefore has insight into the mind of God himself.

W.L. Willis thinks that Philippians 2:5 is a clue to understanding Paul’s thought here.

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus...

Paul goes on in Philippians two describing the humility that Christ showed in his setting aside his divine prerogatives and coming to earth as a servant to die for us. Willis writes:

Based upon other Pauline usage and the immediate context, then, the appeal “to have the mind of Christ” does not mean to think Christ’s thoughts after him, nor to have ecstatic experiences, nor to knowing proper dogma. The “mind of Christ” is not focused upon special wisdom or experiences, but on community life.

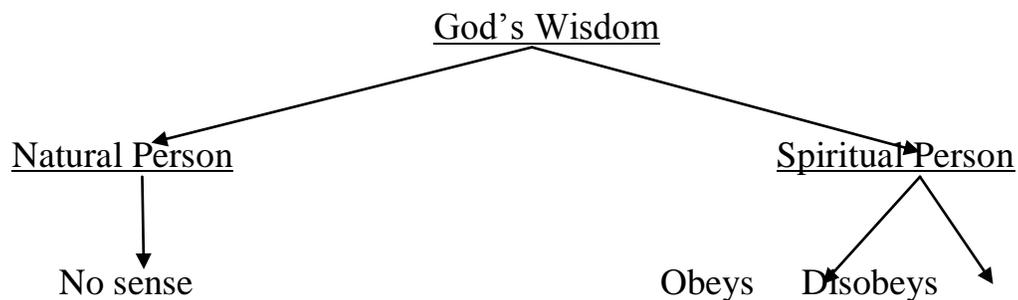
Paul’s statement in Philippians 2:5 (having the mind of Christ) is set in the context of how those in the church are to relate to each other. It is a passage that echoes what Paul is trying to say to the Corinthians. So to the Philippians he says:

Complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interest of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus.... – *Philippians 2:2-5*

Doesn’t that sound a lot like First Corinthians, chapter one? Paul’s comments in chapter two of his letter to the believers in Corinth are part of the greater subject addressing the problem of disunity. Since we have the mind of Christ, it should work its way out in our relationships with other believers in the church.

Let me try to summarize this section. The wisdom of God, known by the Spirit of God, are revealed in spiritual truths through spiritual words to those who are called by God. This leads us to a choice again.

If I diagram verses 14-16, here’s what I get:



Two questions:

- 1) Are you growing in your knowledge and understanding of God’s wisdom revealed in the Word of God by the Spirit of God?
- 2) Are you obedient to what you know and understand?

James, in his letter in the New Testament, writes: “Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves” (James 1:22).

As Christians we have the means to know God’s wisdom. Is it making a difference in our lives?