

UNDERSTANDING GOD'S WISDOM
1 Corinthians 2:6-16
September 18, 2005 (AM) – Grace Covenant Baptist Church

God's wisdom has been defined by various scholars as follows:

God's wisdom is the truth about Him and His message. [MacArthur, *1 Corinthians*, p. 60]

God's wise plan of redeeming the world through a crucified Messiah. [Vaughan, *1 Corinthians*, p. 35]

God's wisdom is the wise acts of God in the salvation of man. [Guthrie, *New Testament Theology*, [p. 95]

God's wisdom is the work of Christ in His crucifixion, as God's secret plan of redemption and the exalted Christ who presently mediates God's hidden wisdom to His people. [E.E. Ellis, "'Wisdom' and 'Knowledge' in 1 Corinthians," *Tyndale Bulletin* 25 [1974]: p.95]

God's wisdom has a crucified Messiah as its content. [Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, p. 102]

Paul himself defined the content of God's wisdom as "the word of the cross" (1:18), "Christ crucified" (1:23). So we see that all that God has set in motion concerning man's salvation is wrapped up in God's wisdom of the crucified Christ. God's wisdom is His comprehensive plan of salvation provided through the person and work of Christ alone. It is this wisdom, God's wisdom, in opposition to the world's wisdom, that Paul professed in his letter (1:18-31) and proclaimed in his preaching (2:1-5). In 1:18-25 Paul plainly sets forth the truth that God's wisdom is not only far superior to the vain and empty philosophies of this world but that it is not even on the same scale. There simply is no comparison between human wisdom and God's wisdom. Then in 1:26-31 he reminds the believers at Corinth that they are examples of God's marvelous power and wisdom in that they themselves are "in Christ Jesus" (v. 30). Then in 2:1-5 Paul holds himself up as an example of one who practiced what he preached. He had experienced this saving wisdom of God in his life on the road to Damascus and he now lived a life that proclaimed the same wisdom, in both word and deed, so that the faith of others might be more firmly established. And the message that Paul preached was not with the persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and power (2:4).

In our text this morning, Paul further expands on God's wisdom, not in reference to its content but in its application. How is it that some know savingly and faithfully the gospel of God's wisdom in Christ Jesus and yet others, who hear the same gospel message, reject it? Paul answers that for us in this text. Just as the message of the gospel *proclaimed* must be in the power of the Spirit, as we saw in the beginning of this chapter, so the message of the gospel *received* must also be in the power of the Spirit. *Only those who are born of the Spirit of God can hear and obey the saving truths of the gospel.* There are three distinct contrasts that Paul makes in this text: (1) a contrast in maturities, (2) a contrast of spirits, and (3) a contrast of persons.

I. A Contrast in Maturities (vv. 6-10a)

There is debate on who “**the mature**” are that Paul refers to here. Some would say that Paul is addressing mature and immature believers and that it is to “**the mature**” that he brings the deeper theological truths about the gospel. However, this does not fit the context of Paul’s discussion. This entire passage sets up this series of three contrasts between those who have believed and those who have not believed the message of the gospel. Each of these three contrasts the believer with the unbeliever. That is why the rendering of some versions is “**perfect**” rather than “**mature.**” Paul is not suggesting that “**the mature**” have reached perfection in this life. To do so would be to contradict his own testimony that “He himself had not fully arrived.” He himself “still looked through a glass rather dimly.” But Paul is saying that when it comes to the gospel, these that are “**the mature**” are complete, lacking nothing because Christ’s work on the cross on their behalf has fully satisfied God’s wrath towards them.

All Christians are “mature” in the sense that that they have come to terms with the message of the cross, while all others, by definition, have not. The message of Christ crucified is the only fundamental dividing line in the human race. [Carson, *The Cross and Christian Ministry*, p. 47]

And so we see in Paul’s first contrast the “**mature,**” the believer, with the immature, or the unbeliever. He writes, “**Yet we do speak wisdom to those who are mature...**” “**Yet**” here relates this passage back to the argument Paul establishes in 1:18-25. In 1:25 Paul concluded, “Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.” In that context, Paul set out to show the folly of human wisdom as it relates to the wisdom of God. But again, Paul does not want the Corinthians to think that all wisdom is negative. And so he reminds them that he in fact does “**speak wisdom.**” And he clarifies the wisdom that he proclaims to be *the* wisdom, “**God’s wisdom,**” not “*a* wisdom,” one of any number of the human wisdoms that are empty. In fact, Paul had already warned in this letter that those who espoused these ideas contrary to the truth of the gospel (those considered *wise*, and *mighty*, and *noble*, 1:26) would all come to nothing. And in v. 6 of our text he again warns that those who hold to a worldview contrary to the gospel and those who are popular in espousing a wisdom that is against the wisdom of God are all passing away. Both the empty worldview and those that hold to it will finally vanish. The Psalmist wrote that “the way of the wicked will perish.” (Psalm 1:6)

So Paul wrote to these at Corinth that only the mature, only the believer, could understand the truths of God’s wisdom. And, as we noted in the Carson quote, by implication, the immature, or unbeliever, cannot understand God’s wisdom. *Why is this?* Paul gives us some help in understanding this. He begins by referring to God’s wisdom as a mystery (v. 7)

1. Wisdom as a mystery (v. 7)

“**Mystery**” – Something in the past that has been hidden, but has now been revealed, uncovered, unveiled. The idea of “**mystery**” indicates a secret that man cannot penetrate but which God reveals [Vaughan, *1 Corinthians*, 35]. God’s wisdom is a mystery in that it has only been disclosed in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

In Greek thought, there were three great sources of human wisdom: *seeing*, *hearing*, and *thought*. All three alike fail here as it relates to this hidden “**mystery.**” In verse 9 Paul quotes two passages from Isaiah (64:4; 65:17) to reinforce his argument that human wisdom, this seeing, hearing, and thought could not by itself understand this mystery of God. “**THINGS**

WHICH EYE HAS NOT SEEN AND EAR HAS NOT HEARD, AND WHICH HAVE NOT ENTERED INTO THE HEART OF MAN.” Paul does not mean that they had not visibly seen or heard or known. His point is that what they had seen and heard and thought was not spiritually discerned. What had they seen and heard and known?

Sacrificial system – supreme sacrifice of Christ

Office of high priest – mediatorial work of Christ on our behalf

Passover – provides a picture of God's wrath that passes over those who have the blood of the Lamb applied in their lives

Old Covenant – New Covenant

However, these men confused the shadows and the types for the real thing. When Jesus Christ was with them, they denied Him as the true Messiah. The furthest their wisdom alone could take them was to see this man as an imposter, a lunatic and a blasphemer. They missed the gospel as it was visibly portrayed to them in Jesus death, burial and resurrection. To them, it remained **“hidden,”** a **“mystery.”**

2. Wisdom according to God's decree (v. 7-10a)

“Which God predestined before the ages to our glory” (v. 7) – God's comprehensive span of salvation. In this tight little statement we see the entire scope of God's wisdom in salvation. We see that salvation is from eternity, **“before the ages”** to eternity, **“to our glory”** which is a reference to the glory we will receive one day as a child of God when Christ returns, a body fitted to worship Him for all eternity.

What Paul asserts here, as in other places in Scripture, is that before time began, God determined those to whom He, through the Spirit, would reveal the truth of the gospel. It was in the mind of God before any person ever walked on this planet those who would be **“mature”** and, by implication, those that would remain **“immature.”** As one writer put it, “Before man was formed, before the first phosphor light of his little wisdom began to glow, God's wisdom was complete, God's decision was fixed as to the object and as to the result of that wisdom” [Lenski, from Wilson, *1 Corinthians*, p. 41]. However, both the **“mature”** and the **“immature”** serve the divine purposes of God. Notice in v. 8 that this wisdom of God was such that none of the rulers of Paul's time understood. His proof: If they would have understood the magnificent truths of the person and work of Christ they would not have crucified **“the Lord of glory.”** Paul uses this phrase intentionally. **“Lord”** is a term Paul used to designate the deity of Christ, His nature as God. Paul's contention is if these Jewish leaders would have known Jesus Christ as God, they would never have crucified Him. However, they remained ignorant of the fact of His deity and in fact crucified Him because of His identifying Himself as one with the Father.

John 8:43-45 – “Why do you not understand what I am saying? It is because you *cannot* hear My word. You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies. But because I speak the truth, you do not believe Me.”

And yet, even in this, even in their ignorance, they were serving the purposes of God (Read Acts 2:22-24). They were acting “by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God.”

v. 9 - That which was a mystery, hidden in the past, was in the past prepared for those who love Him.

“For to us God revealed *them* through the Spirit.” (10a)

Ephesians 1:8-9 – In all wisdom and insight He made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His kind intention which He purposed in Him.

II. A Contrast of Spirits (vv. 10b-13)

1. Spirit of God – Paul describes the Spirit of God as the searcher of **“all things, even the depths of God (v. 10b).** The word that Paul uses for “searches” is in the present, meaning that the Spirit’s work of searching never ends. What Paul has in mind here is not the searching of hearts of men (which the Spirit certainly does) but a searching, as Leon Morris puts it, “the unfathomable depths of God.” [Morris, TNTC, *1 Corinthians*, pp. 56-7]

In v. 11, Paul uses a human analogy to further illustrate this “searching” of the Spirit. **“For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him?”** Paul uses this illustration to point out that only the spirit of a man can know the thoughts and intents of his own heart. Plainly stated, he knows himself better than anyone else (and we might add that even that is not perfect because of the sinful deceit of man’s heart – Who can know it?). Likewise, the effects of sin aside in the human analogy, who better knows the thoughts, motives and intents of God other than the Spirit of God? Who better can spiritually drive home the truths of God’s wisdom than His own Spirit? Paul says that the believer has received **“the Spirit of God”** and that God is revealed to the believer **“through the Spirit.”** This is the mark of the believer – he has received the Spirit of God and truly understands God’s wisdom as it relates to Christ crucified.

2. Spirit of the world – In contrast to the believer, the unbeliever has not received the Spirit of God but continues to live according to the **“spirit of the world.”** Unlike the Spirit of God, this spirit of the world is the mark of all at birth due to the effects of the Fall. This spirit is marked by rebellion against God’s rightful established authority which is His by right as the Creator of all that is. This spirit, **“the spirit of the world,”** is diabolically opposed to the Spirit of God. The truth that the Creator has authority of that which is created is a repugnant thought according to this spirit.

- (1) **Attempt to usurp the authority of God**
- (2) **Attempt to make their own way of righteousness**

We see this spirit in numerous places throughout Scripture.

a. The garden of Eden – Gen. 3:5 – “For God knows that in the day you eat from it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.”

b. Prior to the Flood – Gen. 6:5 – “Then the LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.”

c. **Tower of Babel – Gen. 11:4** – “Come, let us build for ourselves a city, and a tower whose top will reach into heaven, and let us make for ourselves a name, otherwise we will be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth.”

d. **Israel's demand for a king – 1 Sam. 8:6** – “Now appoint a king for us to judge us like all the nations. Give us a king to judge us.” And what was the Lord's response to their request? “Listen to the voice of the people in regard to all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me from being king over them.”

e. **The pride of Lucifer – Isaiah 14:12-14** - How you have fallen from heaven, O star of the morning, son of the dawn! You have been cut down to the earth, You who have weakened the nations! “But you said in your heart, ‘I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God, and I will sit on the mount of assembly in the recesses of the north. I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.’”

So we see that the spirit of the world is tied to Satan and all those who serve him, which are all of those that reject the message of God's wisdom and refuse to trust the gospel. Paul puts this plainly in Eph. 2:1-3 – “*And you were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, of the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience. Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.*”

III. A Contrast of Persons (vv. 14-16)

The apostle Paul knows of only two classes of men.

1. Natural man (v. 14)

Under the term ‘natural’ the apostle includes all those persons who are not partakers of the Spirit of God ; it matters not how excellent, how estimable, how intelligent, how instructed they may be. If the Spirit of God hath not given to them a new and higher nature than they ever possessed by their creature birth, he puts them all down at once in the list of natural men. They are what they are by nature. They never professed to have received the Spirit. [Spurgeon, *MTP*, vol. 7, p. 473]

(1) Does not accept – Paul does not hear say that these men are mentally incapable of understanding God's wisdom (though he does say this in the remainder of the verse). He is simply reiterating the fact that anything that has to do with Christ's saving work of redemption is simply disregarded and considered foolish. These truths do not fit their world system and are considered to be a waste of time to discuss. As D. A. Carson points out, “These wonderful, life-transforming, redeeming things from the Spirit of God are dismissed as folly, for they are predicated on a crucified Messiah who does not easily fit into the triumphalistic biases of autonomous human beings” [Carson, *The Cross and Christian Ministry*, 57].

(2) Cannot understand – Here Paul focuses on their total inability to understand the truths of God's wisdom. He cannot understand the things of God because these things “**are spiritually appraised**” and the natural man does not have the Spirit of God for spiritual appraisal. When it

comes to spiritual things, the natural man is “dead in trespasses and sins.” Dead means dead – absence of any spiritual life because he has not been given regenerate life by the Spirit. He is incapable of seeing God’s truth because he is spiritually blind and unable to hear God’s truth because he is spiritually deaf.

2. Spiritual men (vv. 15-16)

All into whom the Spirit of God has come, breathing into them a new and diviner life, he puts down under the head of spiritual men. They may be as of yet babes in grace ; their faith may be weak ; their love may be but in its early bud ; as yet their spiritual senses may be little exercised, perhaps their faults may be in excess of their virtues, but inasmuch as the root of the matter is in them, and they have passed from death unto life, out of the region of nature into that which is beyond nature—the kingdom of grace—he puts them down also, all of them in one list, as spiritual men. [Spurgeon, *MTP*, vol. 7, p. 473]

John Owen stated that one of the most trying tasks for the pastor is to correctly discern an babe in Christ (i.e. – “spiritual” man) from an unbeliever (i.e. – “natural” man).

“He spiritually appraises all things” – Because the spiritual man has the Spirit of God, he is able to appraise all things spiritually. And, I might add, he does so *joyfully*. The spiritual man can discern that which is secular and that which is sacred.

I fear one of the great faults in the Church today is a lack of spiritual discernment. Some of you might remember the halftime events at the Super Bowl a few years ago and the hoopla surrounding Janet Jackson exposing herself on stage. Most Christians (and even some pagans) were morally outraged by her actions, as they certainly should have been. And yet, the immoral and impure things that were shown in many of the commercials during the Super Bowl and received awards from the secular media were barely even mentioned by any Christian watchdog groups. However, we need to understand that those things that “creep in” or “slip by” perhaps cause more spiritual damage than some outright blatant improprieties. The believer in this age has become numb to these “little things” that are not pure and holy and upright. In other words, the bar for measuring that which is outrageous gets lower and lower all the time.

Paul says that the spiritual man **“appraises all things.”** Because of the Spirit of God within, he has a different filter through which everything seen and heard and known goes. He does not see things as the unbeliever sees things. Because of this, **“he is appraised by no one,”** the thought being that the spiritual man is not to be judged by the natural man. Paul is clear in other passages that spiritual men are to hold spiritual men accountable. But because of this radical difference in worldviews, the spiritual man is not to be judged by the natural man.

Paul closes this section with the assertion that the spiritual man **“has the mind of Christ.”** Those who have received the Spirit of God, which knows the depths of God, have received the mind of Christ. This is another way of stating that the believer has received the Spirit of God. This in know way means that the believer knows everything that Christ knows but that all we need to know savingly has been appropriated to us by the Spirit. Further, those who have **“the mind of Christ”** see what He shows to them, hears what He says to them, and understands what He teaches them. They then follow Him in obedience to the truth that has been revealed to them.

Conclusion

(1) To the believer – Is your passion to obey the Lord? Do you take great joy in appraising all things spiritually? Or have you perhaps allowed the spirit of the world to creep in unnoticed and dull your spiritual senses? May you be reminded this morning what John wrote in 1 John

4:1, “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.” It has been said that it is easier to live according to the ways of the world than to follow Christ. While this might be true in the heat of the moment, it is not a true mark of those that truly have received the Spirit of God. Those that have truly received the Spirit of God are miserable because of guilt when they are not walking according to truth. If you can live like the world and enjoy it, then I suggest you examine yourselves in light of this passage.

(2) To the unbeliever – May I offer this word of warning: It is easy to hear a message such as this and become fatalistic in your understanding as to the commands of Scripture. You might think that since God is sovereign in salvation and the Spirit of God is a gift from him according to the predetermined counsel of His will then it does not matter what I do. You live a life *que sira sira* – Whatever will be will be. However, this mindset is an attempt to place the blame and consequential condemnation for your sin on God. However, God will not be judged! You alone are responsible for your sin and antagonism towards God and all men everywhere have been commanded to repent – and you alone are accountable to God for your lack of repentance. I implore you to cry out to God for His mercy and grace tonight.