

GOD'S TOOLS

by Ray C. Stedman

I have entitled this study *God's Tools* because it deals with those whom God uses to change the world, but I could have entitled it *God's Fools*, because the startling truth that Paul declares here is that God often prefers fools to use as tools when he wants to do a really great work in the world. Here are Paul's words, Verse 26:

For consider your call, brethren; not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth, 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 the things that are, {1 Cor 1:26-28 RSV}

This is part of a context where the apostle is dealing with the wisdom of the world versus the inscrutable, marvelous wisdom of God which is often mistaken by the world for foolishness or silliness, as we saw in our study last week.

Now, these "Californians" who were living in ancient Corinth were exalting the wisdom of the world. The Greek custom of philosophizing about everything had penetrated the church and they were dividing into various factions, following certain men, quarreling, boasting, dividing, glorying in men's ability and men's power, men's insight and men's wisdom.

To answer this the apostle shows us how God works. He sets it in very simple contrast and he uses these Corinthians themselves as his Exhibit A. He says, "Look at yourselves, consider your own call, look what has happened in your own life." He then points out two rather obvious, but very important, facts they were evidently overlooking in their thinking.

First, he says, "There are not many mighty among you, are there?" Fortunately, Paul did not say "any" mighty. Lady Hamilton, who was an evangelical believer among the English nobility in the early part of this century, used to say she was saved by an "m," because if it had said not "any" mighty or "any" noble, she would not have made it, but the "m" changed it all and let her in.

There in Corinth there were a few who had some standing in the community, but not many. Sosthenes (he is mentioned at the beginning of this letter), and Crispus, who had once been the rulers of the synagogue, were there and they, perhaps, were men of repute, and at the close of the letter to the Romans (which Paul wrote while he was in Corinth), he mentions a man named Erastus, who was the city treasurer. Also, there is mention there of a man named Gaius who was evidently a wealthy businessman in Corinth, but that is about all that Scripture records were men of repute or knowledge there in the congregation. The rest of them were the common, ordinary people of the city, those whom the world regarded as foolish. Many of them were slaves, perhaps, unknown people, plain, ordinary, "vanilla" people, like you and me.

Some of them were weak, the apostle says, i.e., they had no political or military clout; they were not men of influence; they had no "in" at city hall. They were without power, apparently, to affect life around them, but God chose them. They were made up of what we would call the working classes -- artisans, tradesmen, the little people of the world. Paul points out that God even chose things that are not to set at naught the things that are, i.e., future events which had not yet come to pass upon which great issues would ultimately hang. There in the pages of the Scriptures, but not yet fulfilled, God chose to bring to pass what he wants.

Perhaps Paul is referring here to certain technological secrets that had yet to be discovered. In those days they knew nothing about radio, television, and communications such as we know today. All that was known to God. Perhaps some of the predictions of Scripture about these last days rest for their fulfillment upon some of the things that have not yet been found. These are what God works with, "things that are not, to bring to

naught the things that are," weak things and foolish, obscure people. So, if you are feeling that nobody recognizes you, you ought to rejoice that you are a Christian because power and influence are not necessary to be greatly used of God. God delights in setting aside the impressive things of men, oftentimes.

Now, this does not mean that God does not often use people of status and stature as well. He does, but only, remarkably enough, when they have learned that their usefulness does not derive from their position or their abilities, but rather from his presence in their lives. Is it not strange that we think so highly of the wisdom of the world when God thinks so little of it? Jesus said once, "That which is highly esteemed among men is abomination in the sight of God" {Luke 16:15 KJV}, and all that Paul is saying here seems to flow from that fact. God works in different ways, and what men put great store by, and emphasize as so necessary, is often set aside totally by God; it is abomination in the sight of God.

Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, who was for many years an outstanding pastor in London, says this:

We Christians often quote 'not by might nor by power, but by my spirit saith the Lord,' and yet in practice we seem to rely upon the mighty dollar and the power of the press and advertising. We seem to think that our influence will depend on our technique and the program we can put forward and that it would be the numbers, the largeness, the bigness that would prove effective. We seem to have forgotten that God has done most of his deeds in the church throughout its history through remnants. We seem to have forgotten the great story of Gideon, for instance, and how God insisted on reducing the 32,000 men down to 300 before he would make use of them. We have become fascinated by the idea of bigness, and we are quite convinced that if we can only stage, yes, that's the word, stage something really big before the world, we will shake it and produce a mighty religious awakening. That seems to be the modern conception of authority.

Unfortunately, that is too true today; that seems to be the basic philosophy of the church. It is, "Seek ye first the Lilly Foundation and all these things will be added unto you." I find people everywhere who seem to think that it takes money to do God's work, that nothing can happen unless you get money first -- "If we could only get so much money, then we could begin a great ministry." It seems to me that that is a reversal of the whole position of Scripture, for in Scripture you do not begin with money, you begin with ministry. Anybody can be a minister of God. That is the glory of the church, because God has put us all in the ministry. If you begin to do what God wants you to do, right where you are, and God begins to work through you, all the money that is ever necessary to perhaps finally cause that to grow to worldwide dimensions is always available because money follows ministry, not the other way around. And yet how far we seem to have drifted from this. I think God delights in every generation to prove again by some unusual demonstration the fact of this great principle that Paul declares. God deliberately chooses the weak and the obscure and uses them in great power to remind us that it is not status, prestige, bigness or money that makes ministry for God effective.

I remember in my early Christian life reading of the life and ministry of Dr. George Washington Carver, the outstanding Negro scientist, who in the early part of this century was used of God in great ways among the black people of the South. Dr. Carver, a great believer and a choice servant of God, said that one day he prayed, "Lord, teach me the secrets of the universe." He said God said to him, "George, that is too big a subject for you. I want you to take a peanut, that is more your size, and work on that." So he began to explore what was in the peanut, and now it is a matter of record that he found over 325 different uses for it. He revolutionized the technology of the South. That is why our present President of the United States made his living by peanuts and the technology that followed the discoveries of George Washington Carver. God used that simple, humble believer to open secrets of the universe that he hid from everyone else.

Remember how Jesus once put it, "I thank you, Father, that you have hidden these things from the wise and the prudent and revealed them unto babes," {cf, Matt 11:25, Luke 10:21}. I have always loved that phrase from the eighth Psalm where David is rejoicing in the beauty and the glory of the heavens above,

**When I look at thy heavens, the work of thy fingers,
the moon and the stars which thou hast established;
what is man that thou art mindful of him,
and the son of man that thou dost care for him? {Psa 8:3-4 RSV}**

Verse two of that psalm always puzzles people,

**by the mouth of babes and infants,
thou hast founded a bulwark because of thy foes,
to still the enemy and the avenger. {Psa 8:2 RSV}**

What this refers to is this very principle, that God chooses to open the mouths of children and mere striplings and use them oftentimes to do what the wise and the important have been unable to accomplish.

One of the greatest awakenings of the 19th century began in Cambridge University in England when D. L. Moody and his singer, Ira B. Sankey, came to that center of learning. In 1950 when I was traveling with Dr. H. A. Ironside, I met an Episcopal rector in Virginia who had been a member of that class in Cambridge when D. L. Moody came. He told me that the whole University was outraged that this backwoods American preacher would dare to appear and speak in the center of culture of the English world. They well knew that he "murdered" the King's English. (Somebody once said that D. L. Moody was the only man he ever heard who could pronounce Jerusalem in one syllable!) So this rector said that he and others of his classmates who were not Christians determined that when Moody spoke in the chapel at Cambridge they would hoot him off the platform.

Now, Moody began by asking Sankey to sing. (Sankey must have had a wonderful voice, because whenever he sang audiences quieted and listened to him.) As soon as he finished, Moody stepped to the edge of the platform and looking directly at the students who were gathered there, he said these remarkable words, "Young gentlemen, don't ever think God don't love you, for he do!" This young man said that he and his classmates were dumbfounded by that beginning. Moody went on and in a few minutes he again said, "Don't ever think God don't love you, for he do!" Something about the very ungrammatical structure of these words captured them. The intense earnestness of this man spoke right to their hearts, beyond all the superficial, external things. That young man said that that day he sought out Moody for a private interview, and Moody led him to Christ. A great awakening came to Cambridge University at the hands of that humble servant of God.

Now, God does this again and again to remind us that though he made the human mind, and he encourages us to use it to search for wisdom and knowledge, when it comes to the use of this knowledge there is only one place we can learn to use it rightly, and that is in relationship to the Lord Jesus Christ out of the wisdom and understanding of the revelation of God in the Scriptures.

Why does God do this? Why does God seem to be so against all the "wisdom of the world" as Paul calls it here? Is he jealous of man? Is he the kind of God who loves to put people down? Paul says that God seeks deliberately to shame the wise and the strong, to bring to nothing things that are. Why? It almost sounds vindictive, as though God is envious of man, does it not?

Well, the answer is given to us in Verse 29, where Paul says God does this,

... so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. {1 Cor 1:29 RSV}

Now, why is God against human boasting? We are all experts at it, but God does not like it. Why? Well, surely the reason is not that he is jealous of us; he is not simply trying to put anyone down. No, the answer is that human boasting is always based on an illusion, but God is a realist. Those who boast in themselves or in their abilities are always thinking they have some power in themselves that will make them succeed, and God knows that that is a lie. They are deceiving themselves; they are living in a fantasy world.

Therefore, the kindest thing God can do is to find a way to puncture that sinful pride, collapse that platform of prestige, and shatter that illusion of self-sufficiency. That is what he does, and he does it by using the obscure and the weak and the things that are regarded oftentimes as foolish.

Some years ago I read an article by a businessman friend of mine who recounted his own experience in this regard. He learned this the painful way. He says,

It's my pride that makes me independent of God. It's appealing to feel I am the master of my fate; I run my

own life, I call my own shots; I go it alone. But that feeling is my basic dishonesty. I can't go it alone. I have to get help from other people, and I can't ultimately rely on myself. I am dependent on God for my very next breath. It is dishonest of me to pretend that I am anything but a man, small, weak and limited. So, living independent of God is self-delusion. It's not just a matter of pride being an unfortunate little trait and humility being an attractive little virtue, it's my inner psychological integrity that's at stake. When I am conceited, I am lying to myself about what I am. I am pretending to be God, and not man. My pride is the idolatrous worship of myself, and that is the national religion of hell.

Now, that is right in line with what the apostle is telling us. God sets aside the wisdom, the pride, and the boasting of man because it is based upon an illusion, a fantasy, that men have in themselves power to act.

Paul then sets forth for us in another beautiful passage the secret of true wisdom. What is it? It is the ability to recognize that though you may have little of what the world thinks it takes, if you have Jesus, and have learned to count on his power moment by moment, you have the secret of true success. Now, many Christians know that in their minds, but they do not act on it when the moment for action comes, and, therefore, they act like anybody else. The whole purpose of the Scriptures is to teach us to walk in a different way, to live by a different power, and to do so with respect to everything we do. The simplest tasks are to be done in the power of Christ.

Look at what Paul says now, in Verses 30-31:

He is the source of your life [i.e., God] in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption; therefore as it is written, "Let him who boasts, boast of the Lord." {1 Cor 1:30-31 RSV}

There is an interesting structure to the Greek sentence here. What Paul says is, "He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made to be our wisdom, even our righteousness, our sanctification, our redemption." In other words, righteousness, sanctification and redemption are the explanation of what wisdom involves. They are all contained within that one word.

Now, you will remember that last week we looked at wisdom. What is wisdom? Knowledge is the discovery of truth, but wisdom is the right use of truth, and it always takes three basic elements to be wise:

1. First, there must be a true perception of what is, i.e., an understanding of the nature of reality. When you face a situation, for instance, in your home, if you are going to be wise about it you have to understand what are the forces at work, what is happening, who is involved and what is driving them, etc. Therefore, one of the fundamental bases of wisdom is the ability to distinguish the true from the false and to have a fundamental concept of the nature of reality.
2. Second, there must also be a true evaluation of worth, i.e., you have to be able to distinguish between what is trivial and what is important. Have you ever had the experience of arguing with somebody, perhaps your wife, or your husband or your children, and it started out over some small matter but then you got all involved in it? You got hotter and hotter, and they got hotter and hotter, and soon you ended up, nose to nose, shaking your fists at one another, with your voices raised, and then it suddenly occurs to you, "What are we arguing about?" You began to see that you had built up a trivial matter into a mountain of meaning and it was foolish to do so. Now, we are all guilty of that. To act wisely you must be able to understand, to put things in perspective and keep them there so they do not get out of focus.
3. The third element of wisdom is the ability to blend the two essentials of human life, truth and love, together in that harmonious balance that keeps everything right on keel; to be honest and yet be patient, to be both frank and gracious. That is what you see so beautifully in Jesus. How honest he was, how frank he was, and yet he always had that gracious touch that was sensitive to the person to whom he spoke and the need of that person's life and heart. Speaking the truth in love, that is the sign of wisdom.

Now, this is what Christ has come to teach us -- how to live this way. Therefore, the mark of somebody who is growing in Christ is that he, or she, is becoming able to exercise that kind of wisdom, and it begins, as the

apostle tells us here, with the gift of righteousness. Christ is made unto us righteousness. And, as we have been learning all along from the Scriptures, righteousness is really what we mean when we use the word "worth," a loving, warm acceptance in the eyes of God. It is a position to which we are able to return whenever we are threatened, or guilty or afraid, a position from which we can handle pressure. If you feel worthless you cannot handle life, you lose the ability to function. You must have a sense of worth, of confidence, of acceptance, a sense of being of significance and value. The world says you have got to earn that, but God says you can have it as a gift; it is yours already. You are already there. Now, on that basis, start to handle life.

Then, wisdom moves into the process that Paul calls "sanctification." Now, that is the daily manifestation of a Christ-like character becoming more and more visible in our life -- the outward product of the inward righteousness. We will find ourselves manifesting this character of Jesus more and more as we learn to handle life according to the way God teaches us. We will become more loving, more patient, more understanding, more insightful, more courageous. We are all in the process. No one has made it yet, but we are on the way.

And finally, it results in redemption. Redemption is the restoration to usefulness of something that has been rendered totally useless. Have you ever pawned anything? I have. You put something in hock and you get some money (never anywhere near what it is worth) from a pawnbroker. That object of value is useless while it is in pawn. It sits there gathering dust on the shelf, or in the shop window, absolutely useless until it is redeemed. But when you go back and pay the redemption price, you restore it to usefulness. Now, that is what redemption is all about, and that is what God is doing with us; he is restoring us to usefulness. We, who in the process of sin have been rendered virtually useless, are gradually being restored. The day will come when it will be complete, body, soul and spirit, and God will open up to us an avenue of service such as we have never dreamed of because at last we have been made useful once more.

That is the wisdom of God. The world cannot do that, can it? It uses people for a little while and then discards them as useless. But God's wisdom is such that through the processes of life he is gradually restoring us to usefulness (redeeming us), and he does it through this wonderful gift of righteousness and this process of sanctification. Thus, we ought to give thanks continually for what he is doing in our lives. How much superior is the wisdom of God to the wisdom of man!

That is why Paul concludes this with these words, "Therefore, let him who boasts, boast of the Lord." It is the Lord who can change you, not you. It is not the courses you take or the programs you follow, though these may be helpful instruments, it is God who changes and God who teaches. We are all in his hands and that is what is happening to us.

So, with the apostle, we bow in wonder at the wisdom of God that is so different to the wisdom of man.

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