

GOD'S WISDOM

by Ray C. Stedman

As we are looking at this passage from First Corinthians together, we are learning why it is that all our accumulation of knowledge does not ever seem to help us handle life better. The reason, however, is not so much because of the lack of knowledge -- we all have lots of knowledge today -- but because of the lack of wisdom, true wisdom, and this is why this passage is so fantastically helpful to us.

We are beginning with Chapter 2 this morning, where the apostle is looking back to his first visit to Corinth:

When I came to you, brethren, I did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God in lofty words or wisdom. [Instead of "the testimony of God," some of the ancient manuscripts have the phrase, "the mystery of God," and I think, perhaps, because of what follows, that is a better translation.] For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. {1 Cor 2:1-2 RSV}

That represents a deliberate decision the apostle made when he came to Corinth that he would not talk to them along the lines of the wisdom of men. He would not use flowery phrases and lofty, high-sounding words; he would not attempt to try to impress them with the beauty and the glory of Christian living, but he started on the negative note of the cross of Christ.

The problem is the same with us as it was with the Corinthians -- that the wisdom of the world always sounds very impressive and very confident. We are exposed to it all the time through the media of newspapers, magazines, television, and even our conversations with one another, we are constantly bombarded with the so-called "wisdom of the world." It always speaks to us about very attractive goals. If you watch television you are encouraged to seek after "the good life," to become "beautiful people," to "live life with gusto," and to find the "real thing."

You know how these phrases come at us all the time. They are very attractive; they are what we all want, and usually there is a suggestion made with them as to how to attain them. Sometimes these suggestions are rather ludicrous. We all know that using a different deodorant is not going to change life that drastically, or that changing your brand of perfume is not going to introduce you into a world of romance and exotic excitement, even though that is what the ad tells you will happen. Those things are rather obvious. However, we are continually exposed to this idea that, if you only develop all your hidden powers, you will find life the way you want to find it, that there are things in you, in your personality, that need to be brought out.

There is a germ of truth in that that the Scriptures recognize also. God made man a very potentially wonderful creature, and it is not wrong to say that there are hidden possibilities in every human being that need to be developed. Where the wisdom of the world goes astray, however, is in how to do it. We are being bombarded again and constantly saturated with the idea that if we just know the right things, if we take the right course, if we get involved in the right program, or if we learn how to try to develop these things within us by meditative processes and various other methods, we will achieve what we are after. It always sounds so beautiful. It is usually couched in colorful and even brilliant phrases and words; it is supported by very clever arguments that sound real and right, and it is confirmed on television and in color in advertisements in the magazines by very impressive people and by very impressive facts so that it all seems right.

Things were no different in Corinth than they are here in California. In Corinth, when Paul arrived, people were following the same lines. The whole city was given over to exploring methods of fulfilling life by various philosophical schools, by giving themselves over to fleshly indulgences in the worship of sex, and in various commercial and business enterprises by seeking after beauty, art, music, and the aesthetic things of life. Because of this attitude, Paul says he made a definite decision that when he came to Corinth he would not speak in lofty, flowing phrases or great, high-sounding words or tell people that all they needed was a little

knowledge in special subjects on some insightful approach to life represented by a philosophy. "But," he said. "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified."

Why did Paul make that decision? The answer, of course, is that the cross of Christ is a judgment on the wisdom of man. What do the smart, powerful people of the world do with Jesus of Nazareth? Well, the answer is they crucify him, don't they? They reject him; they deny him; they put him to death if they possibly can. That is what they did in the 1st century and that is what they still do today. Why? Because they think he is crazy? No, even today, 2,000 years later, nobody thinks Jesus was crazy.

Well, why do they resist him? The answer, of course, is not because they think he is crazy, but because they are afraid he is right. He threatens people. That is what the element of the cross does because, as we have already seen, the cross is the result of confronting the world with the ways of God, and the only thing the world could think of to do was to nail Jesus of Nazareth to a cross, and by doing that they rejected all that he had to say.

I want to share with you a quotation from Dorothy Sayers, a very insightful writer and popular woman theologian who has done a fine job of defending Christian faith:

The people who hanged Christ never, to do them justice, accused Him of being a bore -- on the contrary; they thought Him too dynamic to be safe. It has been left for later generations to muffle up that shattering personality and surround Him with an atmosphere of tedium. We have very efficiently pared the claws of the Lion of Judah, certified Him "meek and mild" and recommended Him as a fitting household pet for pale curates and pious old ladies.

That is what the church, she says, has done to Jesus.

To those who knew him, however, He in no way suggested a milk-and-water person; they objected to Him as a dangerous firebrand. True, He was tender to the unfortunate, patient with honest inquirers, and humble before Heaven; but He insulted respectable clergymen by calling them hypocrites; He referred to King Herod as "that fox"; He went to parties in disreputable company and was looked upon as "gluttonous man and winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners"; He assaulted indignant tradesmen and threw them and their belongings out of the Temple; He drove a coach-and-horses through a number of sacrosanct and hoary regulations; He cured diseases by any means that came handy, with a shocking casualness in the matter of other people's pigs and property; He showed no proper deference for wealth or social position; when confronted with neat dialectical traps, He displayed a paradoxical humor that affronted serious-minded people, and He retorted by asking disagreeably searching questions that could not be answered by rule of thumb.

He was emphatically not a dull man in his human lifetime, and if He was God, there can be nothing dull about God either. But He had "a daily beauty in His life that made us ugly," and officialdom felt that the established order of things would be more secure without Him. So they did away with God in the name of peace and quietness.

This is a very astute observation on our times, isn't it? This is what we still do today, and that is why Paul announced to the Corinthians that the whole Christian message rests upon the crucifixion of Jesus. That is God's eloquent word of judgment on the whole of wisdom of man and his attempts to handle his life apart from the redemptive process in Jesus Christ our Lord.

So when Paul came to Corinth he did not start with the "power of positive thinking," or even possibility thinking. He seems to deliberately by aside all these attempts at flowery words and beautiful thoughts because Corinth had plenty of them. That was what was wrong with the city, but as Paul does in the letter to the Romans (which he wrote, by the way, from Corinth), he begins with a clear analysis of what is wrong with human beings. He sees all the impressive scholarship of his day, all the schools of philosophy that flourished throughout the land, all the brilliant thinkers and the leaders of military might and power in Rome and he understands all this, but, as he says in the letter to the Romans,

**"None is righteous, no, not one;
no one understands, no one seeks for God.
All have turned aside, together they have gone wrong;**

no one does good, not even one." (Rom. 3:10-12 {RSV})

There is only one answer and that is to lay hold, by faith, of what God has done on our behalf, and that is where Paul started.

But Paul does not mean to leave out the rest of the Word of God. (He goes on in this letter to speak about the resurrection and the gifts of the Holy Spirit and other truths.) But he starts with this thought that wipes out all the impressiveness of man and helps us to see that if we are going to find the wisdom of God, the true wisdom of life, we have to start by discounting all trust in our own wisdom, or the wisdom of the collective abilities of man through the ages. That is where we have to start, and that is the decision Paul made.

What are the results of that decision? Well, he goes on to tell us. First, he says, Verse 3:

**And I was with you in weakness and in much fear and trembling; and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and power, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.
{1 Cor 2:3-5 RSV}**

I think that ought to be one of the most encouraging passages to any of us who have tried to be a witness as a Christian, because if we have tried I think we have all had this same experience. Speaking of the things of Christ and the things of God is easy in a church like this where you are gathered with Christian friends, brothers and sisters in the Lord, because nobody objects; everybody agrees; you are not put down in any way. However, when you try to talk about these things with worldlings, people who have come from entirely different backgrounds, people who are committed to the philosophy of taking care of number one first and who are out to seek for fame or fortune or whatever it may be, you find it very difficult. You feel much personal weakness and fear and trembling. Well, that is the way Paul felt, and that ought to be an encouragement to us.

The reason he felt like this, of course, is because what he was saying to them was not in line with what the world wants to hear about itself. It did not massage the ego of man; it did not make him sound like he was incredibly important. Paul deliberately rejected that approach which is wrong because it does not help man. Instead, he began to talk about this judgment of God upon the thinking, the attitudes, and the wisdom of man, and it left him feeling rejected (that is the term we would use), or perhaps a better term is "suffering from culture shock."

When missionaries or business people go out into a different culture where the language and the whole system of purchasing things is different, where the way people handle one another is different, it is very easy under those conditions to suffer from what is called "culture shock." (You can even suffer from this when you move from one part of this country to another. Let somebody move to Texas. or New England, for instance, and he immediately has culture shock. We have seen it happen because customs are different.)

Now imagine what it is like if even the language is different. You find that you have been so used to communicating your value to people by clever things that you say, by the way you think, by showing compassion and friendliness and so on, and all of a sudden you cannot say anything. You cannot even conduct a conversation except on the simplest level of, "How much is this?" and, "I'd like so many of that," in the marketplace, and all of the approval signs that people are constantly giving you are missing. You begin to feel like you are out of step; you are out of whack; you feel rejected, and that what is called "culture shock." In a sense that is what Paul was suffering in Corinth. He came, but there was no great ego-pleasing reception for him, there were no dinners, there was no Academy Award given to him, there was no feeling of power or impact on this city.

In Acts we are told that he came to Corinth from Athens. He had come alone to Athens after being driven out of Thessalonika and Philippi and Berea, and he tried to witness there in the Areopagus in the marketplace, or in the city council, and his witness, through it was true and based upon the cross of Christ, was not received. So he came away to Corinth all alone and moved into this great, bustling, beautiful, corrupt, powerful, commercial city, and tried to witness for Christ.

He tells us how he felt. He felt fearful, weak, and ineffective. He felt his words were not outstanding; he felt he did not impress anybody by the way he came at this.

Have you ever felt that way? I have, many times. I have sat down with somebody to witness to him and I felt as if I had two tongues and they were stumbling over one another. I did not seem to have the right answers to things. I could only talk about how it affected me; I felt like I was doing nothing effective.

Yet Paul was not discouraged, though at first he was. In the book of Acts we are told that after he had been in Corinth for a few months the Lord Jesus appeared to him in a vision and strengthened him and said to him, "Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent, ... and no man shall attack you to harm you," {cf, Acts 18:9-10}. That is a revelation of why Paul was afraid. He was afraid he was going to be beaten up as he had been in other cities. He was afraid because of personal pride. He was afraid of being branded as a religious fanatic. He did not like those feelings, nevertheless he faithfully began to talk about what God had said in Jesus Christ.

Soon there was a second visible result. Paul calls it the "demonstration of the Spirit and [of] power." As Paul in this great sense of weakness told the facts and the story out of the simple earnestness of his heart, God's spirit began to work and people started coming to Christ. You read the account in Acts. First, the rulers of the synagogue turned to Christ, and then hundreds of the common, ordinary, plain, vanilla people of Corinth began to become Christians. Soon there was a great spiritual awakening, and before the city of Corinth knew what had happened, a church had been planted in its midst and a ferment was running throughout the city.

I believe that this is God's continuous and perennial way of evangelism. Frankly, though I support fully 100 per cent the ministry of evangelists like Billy Graham, Luis Palau, and others in their mass rallies, I recognize that kind of evangelism is not the primary means of evangelism intended in the New Testament. It is only possible when there has been a foundation laid by the individual approach that Paul is speaking of here. The real evangelism occurs by simple people like you and me sharing what has happened in our lives.

I remember when we first started here in Palo Alto, some 28 years ago, that in those early days of the '50s we used to have Bible classes where people would gather in homes in a relaxed setting in order to reach their non-Christian neighbors and friends. God greatly blessed that witness. We had meetings and classes that sometimes grew to tremendous sizes. We had a home up in Hillsborough, for instance, where there was a group of 200 to 300 people from that rich neighborhood that used to meet every Thursday night for a home Bible class. We had other groups of 30, 40 and 50, and sometimes because it was so open and so free, they would get into discussions about the principles of life and Scripture and it would get so interesting and intense it would go on until 12:30 or 1:30 in the morning. And do you know what the greatest problem was? Christians! Christians who were uneasy about talking to non-Christians, who loved the comfort of being with people who thought alike, and who felt uneasy when anybody proposed an idea that was not in line with scripture. We had a terrible time trying to educate Christians to be gentle and gracious with people who had a different viewpoint, to not strike them down or brand them as heretic or send them out angry or upset because of something that was said. But as they began to bear witness in a gracious way, and talk about their personal experience of life in Christ, hundreds began to come to Christ.

As I have traveled around the country I have spoken oftentimes to groups of pastors and even to this day some of them will come up to me afterwards, and refer to a sentence that I wrote in the book *Body Life*, in which I pointed out that never in all our history as a church have we here in PBC ever had an evangelistic meeting in the building. They will say, "What? How can you do that?" They are absolutely appalled at the idea that there is any way to reach people if you do not have an evangelistic service in the church. When I say to them that every year there are hundreds coming to Christ all throughout the whole Peninsula area at all levels and stages of life, and yet we never have had an evangelistic service, they shake their heads. Some have even walked away saying, "It won't work." But it has been working for many, many years.

That is the way Paul approached Corinth. There was nothing dramatic, nothing exciting, there was no great awakening, but there was a quiet, resistless, surging movement of the Spirit of God that was touching and changing lives every where -- a demonstration of the Spirit and power. Paul was not holding great healing

meetings or anything of that sort, but, as he tells us in the sixth chapter, some wonderful things were happening. He says, "Some of you were idolaters, some of you were adulterers, and some of you were homosexuals; some of you were drunkards; you were swindlers, thieves and robbers -- and it has all changed. Such were some of you," he says, "but you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified, in the name of the Lord Jesus," {cf, 1 Cor 6:9-11}. Dramatic things had been happening in their lives by this simple witness of the Spirit by the apostle in the midst of his own personal sense of weakness, fear and trembling.

Does that encourage you? It does me. You may sit down with somebody over a cup of coffee and hardly know how to say it, but you stammer out some word about what Jesus Christ has meant to you, and the earnestness in your face and the love and compassion in your heart comes through in that simple way and somebody is touched who would never have been reached by eloquent oratory or rhetoric. That is what Paul is talking about, the simplicity of the approach. He knew what he was doing because he was simply being honest with them. He was telling them what was true about their life.

I want to quickly state here that I am sure that, though Paul was preaching the cross of Christ, it does not mean that he was coming on with heavy-handed, threatening, condemning language. He was not preaching what we would call "hell-fire and damnation" as you hear that phrase used today. He did not have to. He was simply coming on, as he says later on in Second Corinthians, "by the open statement of the truth, commending ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God," {cf, 2 Cor 4:2}. You do not have to come on with somebody and say, "You're a sinner. You are going to hell," and expect them to say, "Oh! Am I? Help me! Save me!" They will not react that way. They will get mad, and turn their backs on you and walk off, and say, "Forget it, fella." Paul was not doing that. What he was doing was saying, "Look, you folks, you only have to look at your own lives. How do you feel about what is happening to you? Are you happy?" They were not. They were empty, lonely, miserable, afflicted, falling apart and feeling it, and he just came and said, "this is why you are that way, and do you know that in the death of Jesus, God has wiped out all other approaches except through him, but in him you can have everything you want from God?" Life can be filled with joy, peace, forgiveness, healing and wholesomeness. As Paul declared those words, there was awakened a great sense of desire in people's lives and they were coming to Christ by the hundreds. So Paul knew what he was doing. That is what happens every time people approach life with simple truth.

Some years ago I clipped these words from an article in *Eternity Magazine* based upon the idea that truth is the best approach. The article was called *The Slickest Gimmick of All*, and this is what it said:

There is potency and wholesomeness in living life transparently -- rather than endlessly erecting poses and postures and fraudulent pieties. This modern world of ours is generously supplied with pitchman, con artists and those who have axes to grind. These are enthusiastically and persistently using the big lie on us. Hence, it is an arresting and refreshing experience to meet a person or a group that is authentic and transparently open.

That is what Paul did. He knew what he was doing. He knew that no church could flourish in Corinth that did not recognize the weakness of the wisdom of men, and rest instead on the power of God.

In the next section, by contrast, he describes the content of that wisdom and power of God. We will just take a few verses, Verse 6:

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 glorification. None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But, as it is written,
"What no eye has seen, or eye heard,
nor the heart of man conceived,
what God has prepared for those who love him,"
God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit reveals everything, even the depths of God. {1 Cor 2:6-10 RSV}

Paul says he did not come with lofty words of wisdom, but that does not mean there is not a wisdom in Christianity. In fact, he says, the greatest wisdom of all, the wisdom of God, is there, and he refers to a body

of truth now, which, therefore, ought to be the standard curriculum for Christian education in any church. But the amazing thing is there are thousands of churches today where you would hardly ever hear anything about this being taught -- and yet look at how Paul describes it. He says it is the "mystery of God" in Verse 1, he calls it the "secret and hidden wisdom of God" in Verse 7, the "deep things of God" in Verse 10, the "thoughts of God" in Verse 11, the "gifts bestowed on us by God" in Verse 12, and "spiritual truths" in Verse 13. Finally, at the end of the chapter, he says it is "the mind of Christ."

Now what is this that Paul is talking about? Well, a lot of people think this is some kind of religious truth that only churchgoers would be interested in, but it is not. What this is talking about is basically the missing links of human understanding about ourselves, without which we are unable to function as God intended us. These are truths that people all over the world are searching for, and, therefore, if you come to people with a simple declaration of what these truths are, you will find they are always eager to hear. This is why churches that really expound the Scriptures never have any trouble filling up their seats. This is the most attractive truth the world knows anything about. It does not need a lot of foofaraw and hoopla to build it up to get people to come out. Once they understand that you are talking about the secrets of

- How to be a person,
- How to live,
- How to get rid of guilt and fear and hurt,
- How to interact with individuals,
- How to love God and be filled with the love and power of God,

they will be there; they will be breaking down the doors to get in. These are not truths that are merely "religious" truths. They are vital and essential truths about man, and God, and the universe. They are what I call "the lost secrets of our humanity."

Notice now, quickly, in closing, some of these statements that Paul makes.

First, these are permanent truths; they are not passing (Verse 6),

... it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. {1 Cor 2:6b RSV}

In First John 2:17 we read,

... the world passes away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever. {1 Jn 2:17 RSV}

This is not a passing fad that will change in the next decade: this is truth that remains, eternal and unchangeable forever.

Second, it is intended, Paul says in Verse 7, "for our glorification." Now glorification means the fulfillment of all the possibilities that are in you, discovering the "real you," to put it in modern terms. How do you find that out? Well, these truths will lead you to that, not all this empty talk about what you hear in the media. These truths are intended for your glorification. That is what Paul is talking about.

Third, this truth is not discoverable by natural processes. The rulers of this age know nothing about it, and when Paul speaks of "the rulers of this age," he means more than merely the officials of the day. He is talking about the leaders of thought, the mind benders, the shapers of public opinion, the philosophers, the sociologists, the politicians. They do not know these secrets. They do not understand this body of truth, and that is why nothing they propose ever works in the long run. You cannot find it out by listening to the speakers around today, Paul says. Neither is it observed, he says, by the eye, or the ear, or by reason. You will not get it in school or in any secular teaching. You will not learn it by observation of life. You will not learn it by studying all the history of the past, by hearsay. You will not get it by deep and profound thinking on your own level about all the things of life. It will not come that way, but Paul says that God, nevertheless, has revealed it to us by his Spirit.

He then introduces the great section on:

- How the Spirit of God
- Takes the Word of God, and
- Teaches the people of God.

We are not going to go into that this morning, but I want to tell you that this is what I consider the greatest truth ever set before men -- this body or knowledge that Paul is talking about here. This is the value of coming to church, and of Bible study, both personal and in groups. If you are involved deeply in profound Bible study, you are beginning to probe the greatest body of knowledge available to men anywhere, hidden secrets about life that will never be found out in the secular world around us, and yet, when understood, will lead you to fulfillment of joy and beauty, love and grace such as you never dreamed of. That is what Paul is talking about.

Prayer

Our Father, we thank you that you have not left us in darkness. You have come in Jesus Christ and have challenged and cut right across all the false thinking and all the foolish proposals that men make to try to solve our human problems. You bring us right to the heart of the problem, Lord, that we are essentially wrong at our basic being. We need to be changed, we need our thinking changed, and we need our approaches to life rearranged; we need to see things in a different perspective. Thank you that you have come to teach us that personally. You did not leave us alone. You did not let us struggle on endlessly finding emptiness in our life. You have come to fill us with the glory of the truth and of life, of hope and of courage, of faith and fulfillment. We pray, therefore, that we will be open and responsive to this teaching. In the name of Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

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