

A SECRET AND HIDDEN WISDOM

by Steve Zeisler

In the old television detective series, "Columbo," viewers were always told at the beginning of each show who had carried out the crime. Then the fun began as Columbo set about finding the criminal, unearthing information that the viewers already possessed. Watching Columbo was different from the experience of watching other mystery shows. If truth has already been made available to you, that necessarily affects your life experience and the choices and decisions you will make. As Christians, we have the opportunity to live life having been told ahead of time about truths that are hidden from the world.

What we believe about life essentially informs and influences how we live and how we make decisions. The information we have about life is the basis on which we make our way in life. "How ya gonna keep 'em down on the farm, after they've seen Paris?" goes the line from the song about small-town American GIs who had been sent to Europe in World War I. After they had seen all that Europe had to offer, would they ever again be content living in the anonymity of a small town? When people are exposed to the reality that there is another kind of world out there, they very often find it hard to return to their old way of life. They begin to change their decision-making processes.

In the section of 1 Corinthians we have come to today, we find the apostle Paul discussing wisdom, which is insight and understanding about the very nature of things. Paul well knows that one's awareness about life will certainly affect the kind of person he becomes, the actions he will take, his convictions and his character. The apostle here elucidates the competing forces of the wisdom of the world and the wisdom that is from God; between the philosophies of the "best and the brightest," the most capable people in any day and age (labeled by Paul in verse 21 as the "wise man, the scribe, the debater of this age"), and the message which comes from God, a message which to many seems foolish and weak.

A glance at verse 1 of chapter 3 reveals that, having discussed these competing wisdoms, Paul, almost with a sigh, says to the church at Corinth, "And I, brethren, could not speak to you as spiritual men, but as to men of flesh,..." "Even though I would like to speak to you of the great things which God has taught me," says Paul, "I cannot. You are more impressed with worldly thinking than God's thinking. You are still enamored of the wisdom that is based on appearances, a wisdom that is competitive, divisive and boastful. Although you are now in Christ, your pre-Christian viewpoint is still affecting your decisions." We need to examine ourselves, too. Do we merely hear God's wisdom or do we embrace it and grow?

The Corinthians had divided into factions who followed various teachers of the gospel (1:13). Furthermore, their worldly wisdom had resulted in their being boastful. This was the wisdom that thrilled in its own wiseness, that puffed itself up against all other voices. But Paul warns (1:29) that "no man should boast before God." Then, quoting the prophet Jeremiah, he says, "Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord." Speaking of his own preaching (2:4,5), the apostle says, "My message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not rest in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God." Paul deliberately chose to not try to persuade people, either by rhetoric or performance, about the truth that comes from God. Rather, he chose to make a simple appeal to repeating what the Spirit had already said and then allowing the power of God to do the persuading. The apostle feared that if people believed merely because he himself was impressive and powerful, when the hard times came, they would have nothing to fall back on as they would not have been changed by the power of God but by the human instrument.

Up to this point, Paul has mostly been commenting on why the wisdom which comes from the world is so inadequate. But in this section he points out that there is a wisdom which comes from God. There is truth available which will answer all of our questions about ourselves and about God. But the Corinthians are just too immature, too unwilling to hear this wisdom. They are still too impressed by the world. The Corinthians,

just like some of us, are still listening to other voices, and are not yet ready to hear the voice of God in all of its wisdom.

As we look into Paul's word to the Corinthian church, let us hope that we will have ready hearts which truly desire to know the wisdom that comes from God. This is a wisdom that is taught by the Spirit, one that will quicken our spirits to not be impressed by what is fading away.

Chapter 2, verse 6:

Yet we do speak wisdom among those who are mature; a wisdom, however, not of this age, nor of the rulers of this age, who are passing away; but we speak God's wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom, which God predestined before the ages to our glory; the wisdom which none of the rulers of this age has understood; for if they had understood it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory; but just as it is written,

"Things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard,
And which have not entered the heart of man,
All that God has prepared for those who love Him."

For to us God revealed them through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the spirit of the man, which is in him? Even so the thoughts of God no one knows 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 know the things freely given to us by God, which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words. But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised. But he who is spiritual appraises all things, yet he himself is appraised by no man. For who has known the mind of the Lord, that he should instruct Him? But we have the mind of Christ.

First, we will seek to discover what is the nature of the wisdom of God. Second, having seen that there is in fact a wisdom that comes from God, we must ask, Who teaches us of this wisdom? The answer, of course, is, it is the Spirit of God who teaches us these things. And third, we will discuss the spiritual man who, as Paul says, possesses the mind of Christ. This is the man who "spiritually appraises all things, yet he himself is appraised by no man."

To begin, what is the nature of the wisdom that is from God? God's wisdom, says Paul in verse 6, is distinct in that it is unlike the wisdom of the "rulers of this age who are passing away." The wisdom of the world is short-lived; it does not have any staying power. God's wisdom, on the other hand, will never pass away, is the inference here. It is eternal; its truth will never fade but will grow more and more impressive with time.

Do you remember the "pet rock" craze of a number of years ago? There was an enterprise that illustrates Paul's idea here that the wisdom of this world is doomed to pass away. Despite the fact that we are daily besieged with prophecies that certain thoughts, philosophies, and even material things--like the pet rock diversion-- are here to stay, these things are doomed to quickly fade away. I heard an interview with the editor of Webster's Dictionary the other day as he shared some of the difficult decisions he had to make in his job. Proper names seem to present the most problems, he said. Names such as George Washington and Abraham Lincoln would always find their place in any dictionary, but that is not true of many of the notables of our own day we hear so much about. Who knows, he said, if we will even care to be reminded of many of today's prominent figures even five or ten years in the future? Many who seem important today will interest no one but the trivia buffs a few years from now.

That is just what the apostle is saying here. Today's leaders of thought, who hold influence over so many, will soon pass away and will be supplanted by others. But that will not be the fate of the wisdom that comes from God. That is a wisdom that is eternal. It will never pass away. Nothing can supplant it.

Paul makes a second contrast in verse 8 which will help us discover something else about the wisdom of God by looking at its opposite: "the wisdom, which none of the rulers of this world has understood; for if they had understood it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory." The wisdom of this world does not make good judgments about life. The wisdom of God, on the other hand, attributes worth to that which is truly worthy.

The most extraordinary example of the lack of good judgment by the worldly wise, of course, as Paul points out, was the crucifixion of Christ. The rulers of Jesus' day put him on trial, listened to testimony concerning him, observed his behavior at his trial, and then condemned him to death. It would be impossible to come up with a more profound misjudgment. To judge the Messiah himself as an outcast and a criminal--what could be more lacking in good judgment? asks Paul. As terrible as it was to condemn a merely innocent man, the man they condemned was, in the apostle's description, "the Lord of glory." How could they have missed that? They had heard of Christ's healings, his compassion for people, his meekness, his gentleness, his authority, and still they crucified him.

But the wisdom that comes from God, declares Paul, judges things as they really are and embraces that which is worthwhile. The wisdom that comes from God, therefore, teaches us what is important and lasting, what is glorious and worthy, and which things we should reject.

Verses 7 and 9 have positive statements which will further help us understand the value of the wisdom of God compared to that of the world. Verse 7: "we speak God's wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom, which God predestined before the ages to our glory." We are not clever enough to discover this wisdom ourselves; we need to be initiated by someone. This is a wisdom that takes our brokenness, failure, anger and impurity--even the aging process--and turns us into beings that are glorious. This is the wisdom that reverses decay and makes us transcendent. It is our hope that in the resurrection, everything in us that has been in opposition to God will be done away with. This wisdom that comes from God, then, is for our glory.

Verse 9:

"Things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard, and which have not entered the heart of man, all that God has prepared for those who love Him."

Paul wishes he could talk about all that God has prepared for those who love him. People who qualify for the category of those who can learn the wisdom of God are, as Paul quotes, "those who love Him." The apostle has difficulty talking (eyes and ears are insufficient) about the wonder and the glory of what God has in store for those people.

The wisdom of God is about God giving himself to us, about his making something of us. It is not a passing wisdom that will be replaced by another version of wisdom in a matter of days or years. God's wisdom will not miss the important things. It is not the kind of wisdom that crucifies the Lord of glory and instead glorifies Caesar. While the wisdom of the world might make one "wise according to the flesh," or regard him as mighty or noble (1:26), the wisdom that is from God will bring us glory. The wisdom of the world might make us mighty in terms of this age so that we might compete with others in any field of endeavor, but what God offers instead is glory. Which would you rather have? These things are mutually exclusive. One is valuable and eternal; the other is shallow and fading.

There are a number of places in 1 Corinthians where Paul appeals to the revealed mysteries of God to challenge the worldly thinking of the Corinthian Christians. Perhaps a glance at a couple of these instances will be illustrative. In verse 3 of chapter 6, Paul asks, "Do you not know that we shall judge angels? How much more, matters of this life?" Prior to this he said that Christians shall judge the world. The Corinthians were taking each other to court, arguing over trivial matters of law before Roman magistrates and denouncing one another as unreasonable. That is why the apostle asks this question about judging angels, those powerful beings that Scripture declares as terrifying. "You're supposed to judge the world, and the angels," Paul declares, "according to the wisdom of God." Why then could they not settle their little arguments among themselves and thus spare the Christian community public embarrassment?

Paul asks another "don't you know?" question in 6:19, "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit...?" Don't you realize that, wherever you go," Paul is asking, "you take the Spirit of God with you?" "How then," he asks, "can you consider the act of coupling with a prostitute to not be a grave act? You take the Spirit of God with you." The wisdom of the world says that it doesn't matter what you do with your body; that your body is a plaything. But a Christian's body is the temple of the Spirit of God, Paul declares. Think clearly, Paul is admonishing the Corinthians; believe what you have been told, is the nature of much of the argument of this letter.

At the end of the famous thirteenth chapter of this book, Paul says, "Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but I shall know fully, just as I have been fully known. But now abide faith, hope and love, these three; but the greatest of these is love." Some day we will be able to see everything as clearly as God now sees us. The shadows will flee. The opaqueness and confusion of much of life will disappear and we will see things as they really are. Then we will see that three qualities will last forever: acts of faith, hope and love--the commitment to believe God, to hope in him, and to learn love from him. The wisdom that comes from God has made that known to us already, thus we have opportunity to live on that basis right now. For His sake, we can be lovers right now. We can reach out and support one another, building up those who need encouragement and in doing so know that these things will last forever. Paul is seeking to encourage us that the wisdom of God is worth knowing.

The next issue addressed by the apostle is that of the Spirit as teacher. How do we discover the wisdom of God? Verse 10:

For to us God revealed them through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the spirit of the man, which is in him? Even so the thoughts of God no one knows 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 know the things freely given to us by God, which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words. But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised.

Have you ever wondered at the amount of scholarship that has gone into the writings about the Bible over the years? Volumes have been written on just a single word in Scripture. It is extraordinary when you consider the effort that has gone into the observation of God and of his word, and the academic prominence that is granted to those who pursue that kind of learning. But much of this observation and research is done, unfortunately, from a distance.

Then, on the other hand, there are neighborhood groups of ordinary people who open the Bible and pray, "Lord, teach us," and they find themselves discovering God as his Spirit ministers to them. They think as clearly as they can and pray as humbly as they can, as the result is that the Spirit teaches them. Those who try to observe God from a distance, however, although they know a great many things about God, remain without revelation, still at a distance from God. It is the Spirit of God, as he draws near to us, who teaches us about the nature of God.

Paul makes the same point about humanity. When someone has sensed the central heartbeat that is our make-up, and knows what we are like spiritually, then he can be said to know us. Freud and other psychologists struggled with trying to discover ids and egos, whatever is inside people that accounts for what they say and do. Paul is saying that if we know the spirit of the man, we know the man. Likewise, it is the Spirit of God who communicates the nature of God to us. The wisdom that comes from God, taught to us by the Spirit of God, allows us to know God intimately, not just at a distance.

The last point I would like to make is that the Spirit uses words to teach us. At times, people imagine communication by the Spirit to be primarily ecstatic, emotional or metaphysical. But Paul says that the Spirit communicated in words. The apostles wrote down in words communications which came to them by the

Spirit. If we will listen to the Spirit of God teach us through these words, then the words themselves become channels of spiritual truth. You don't have more of the Spirit when you have ecstatic feelings. In verse 13 the apostle says, "...we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit..." There is not something wrong with your mind if you learn through it the words taught by the Spirit. But such learning has everything to do with our humility before God, our willingness to trust, to hear the hard things as well as the good things. Those kinds of issues either allow for spiritual teaching or that which is not spiritual.

Lastly, Paul says,

But he who is spiritual appraises all things, yet he himself is appraised by no man. For who has known the mind of the Lord, that he should instruct Him? But we have the mind of Christ.

The apostle is saying that in the last analysis, God does not need our vote. Nobody has known the mind of the Lord so he can tell God what is true and what is false and then God can pass it on to us. No such person exists.

However, when you find the essentially humble man or woman who has given up all rebellion, who has been taught to think by the Spirit, it doesn't matter if anybody votes with them or not. They don't need to seek the agreement of the majority--"they are appraised by no one." The mind of Christ, which is available to us, can teach us to think as Jesus would if he were in our place. Then when we react, we can react with the very wisdom of Christ. We can sense what is going on, and we can cut through to the quick. We can honor God, and it doesn't really matter if everybody else is coming at it differently or not. The teaching of the Spirit never leads us to exalt ourselves, but it can lead us to confidence. It is possible to have the mind of Christ.

But, sadly, as the first verse of chapter 3 goes on to say, "And I, brethren, could not speak to you as spiritual men, but as to men of the flesh, as to babes in Christ." Paul is saying here, "I would love to be able to talk to you more along these lines, but I can't do that in this letter. There is so much fleshliness left in your church, so much that would rather be exalted in the eyes of men rather than changed by the word of God; so much in you that is impressed by what man can do, and so little in you that is impressed by being transformed into the image of Christ." Paul therefore is stymied. He needs to return again to the basics of milk in his dealings with the church at Corinth.

There is a wisdom for the mature. The Spirit of God himself will teach us everything we need to know. We can have the mind of Christ. We can think as he thinks and minister as he ministers. We can discover what is really valuable in life and what is not. We can embrace things that will last forever instead of the things that are passing away. Or, conversely, we can retain whatever fleshliness is true of us--and all of us have some--and allow it to grow. We can become more hard of hearing with regard to the wisdom of God.

The Spirit is a willing teacher. Are we willing to hear Him?

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