

The Mystery of God's Hidden Wisdom (1 Corinthians 1:26-2:16)

Expository Lessons from Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians

I. Review from Prior Lessons

- a. Paul was writing to the Corinthian church, addressing a number of problems there that he was aware of, and also answering questions they had raised to him.
- b. Corinth was a wealthy and decadent pagan city, in Achaia (southern part of Greece).
- c. Many of the things Paul states in this letter, while consistent with the teachings of other apostles and Jesus, were profoundly counter-cultural in Corinth and in the ancient Roman world.
- d. The very first problem Paul addressed was that of division in the church, based on factions forming with strong veneration of and loyalty to prominent teachers and apostles (with Paul, Peter and Apollos being mentioned by name).
 - i. "Now I say this, that each of you says, 'I am of Paul,' or 'I am of Apollos,' or 'I am of Cephas,' or 'I am of Christ.'" (**1 Corinthians 1:12**, NKJV)
- e. Paul's arguments for why they must be unified under Christ rather than pursue a sectarian, divisive spirit and identify strongly with prominent leaders, included the following reasons:
 - i. Christ is not divided.
 - ii. They were baptized into the name of Christ (not in the name of Paul, nor of other prominent leaders in the church).
 - iii. It was Christ (only) who was crucified for them.
 - iv. Identifying with prominent men, rather than with Christ, is unspiritual. It is following the 'wisdom' of this world (the Gentiles and their philosophies) rather than the wisdom of God.
 1. Paul will develop this further in the passages we are about to read.
- f. The subject of division within the church continues to be the main theme through the first four chapters of this letter.

II. Wisdom of the World vs. Wisdom from God

a. Read **1 Corinthians 1:26-2:5**.

- i. By the standards of the (Greek) world, most of the Christians in Corinth would not have been considered “wise according to the flesh” nor otherwise outwardly impressive.
 1. However, it sounds like there were a few, since Paul says “not many”, rather than ‘none’.
 - a. Recall that Apollos was described in **Acts 18:24** as an eloquent man, mighty in the Scriptures.
- ii. Many Christians are tempted to want to impress those in the world around them with the ‘trophy’ of success, talents and worldly achievements.
 1. Especially here in a place like Boston, where such things are highly valued, and Bible-believing Christians are looked down on as being ignorant, out of touch, old-fashioned, unenlightened and narrow-minded.
 2. We are looked down on for such things as:
 - a. Belief in inspiration and inerrancy of the Bible.
 - b. Belief that there is only one, narrow way to God, through Jesus.
 - c. Our ideas on disciplining children, protecting them from worldly influences, homeschooling, etc.
 - d. Rejecting current views of the world on sex and gender that go against Scripture.
 - e. Also, often we are (unfairly) lumped together with bigots, nationalists, racists and war-mongers.
 3. In a desire to be seen as respectable (which is not bad in and of itself), we can be tempted to:
 - a. Highlight those Christians among us who have academic achievements or went to highly competitive schools.
 - b. Highlight those who have been highly successful in their professions or businesses.
 - c. ‘Show off’ families and feel pressure to make them appear better than they actually are.

- d. Even 'show off' that we have famous sports figures, movie stars or other famous people among us.
 - e. In other words, we try to impress the world that we are 'cool' and have plenty of worldly wisdom, too.
4. The proper perspective: that we Christians seek a completely different (and much greater) type of wisdom than that valued by the world.
- b. Read **1 Corinthians 2:6-16**.
- i. The wisdom of this age and of the rulers of this age are coming to nothing.
 - 1. **Question:** Who does the expression "the rulers of this age" refer to?
 - a. They were the ones who crucified Christ.
 - b. Read **Psalm 2**.
 - i. The *rulers of this age* conspired together against the Lord and against His Christ.
 - 1. This prophecy was fulfilled by worldly rulers such as Pilate, Herod and Caiaphas the high priest.
 - 2. John Chrysostom, in his *Homily No. 7 on 1 Corinthians*, also points to this passage from **1 Corinthians 2** as referring to human leaders in the world (as opposed to it referring to demonic forces of evil in the spiritual realm).
 - a. "Now by the 'rulers of the world,' here, he means not certain demons, as some suspect, but those in authority, those in power, those who esteem the thing worth contending about, philosophers, rhetoricians and writers of speeches. For these were the dominant sort and often became leaders of the people. 'Rulers of the world' he calls them, because beyond the present world their dominion extends not. Wherefore, he adds further, 'which are coming to naught;' disparaging it both on its own account, and from those who wield it. For having shown that it is false, that it is foolish, that it can discover nothing, that it is weak, he shews moreover that it is but of short duration."

3. An analogy from John Chrysostom, contrasting worldly wisdom versus wisdom from God:
 - a. “Darkness seems to be more suitable than light to those that are diseased in their eyesight: wherefore they betake themselves by preference to some room that is thoroughly shaded over. This also is the case with the wisdom which is spiritual. As the wisdom which is of God seemed to be foolishness unto those without: so their own wisdom, being foolishness indeed, was accounted by them wisdom.
 - b. “The result has been just as if a man having skill in navigation were to promise that without a ship or sails he would pass over a boundless tract of sea, and then endeavor by reasonings to prove that the thing is possible; but some other person, ignorant of it all, committing himself to a ship and a steersman and sailors, were thus to sail in safety. For the seeming ignorance of this man is wiser than the wisdom of the other. For excellent is the art of managing a ship; but when it makes too great professions it is a kind of folly. And so is every art which is not contented with its own proper limits. Just so the wisdom which is without [were wisdom indeed] if it had had the benefit of the spirit.
 - c. “But since it trusted all to itself and supposed that it wanted none of that help, it became foolishness, although it seemed to be wisdom. Wherefore having first exposed it by the facts, then and not till then he calls it foolishness; and having first called the wisdom of God folly, according to their reckoning, then and not till then he shews it to be wisdom. (For after our proofs, not before, we are best able to abash the gainsayers.) His words then are, ‘Howbeit we speak wisdom among the perfect:’ for when I, accounted foolish and a preacher of follies, get the better of the wise, I overcome wisdom, not by foolishness but by a more perfect wisdom; a wisdom, too, so ample and so much greater, that the other appears foolishness.”
 - i. (Source: John Chrysostom, *Homily No. 7 on 1 Corinthians*)

- ii. Points made by Chrysostom through this analogy include:
 1. For those with diseased eyes, darkness seems better than the light (since the light can hurt their eyes).
 2. The wise man is the one who recognizes the limits of his own knowledge and abilities. He is wise enough to entrust himself to those more capable, as a man paying a fare and boarding a ship trusts the greater abilities of the captain, sailors and ship-builders.
 3. Likewise, the truly wise person will turn to God for wisdom and direction. He will trust Jesus who rose from the dead, to guide him to eternal life.
- ii. The truly wise man will understand his own limits, and will know who to ask, where to turn, when he is 'over his head'.
 1. Example: In my career as an engineering manager at a consulting engineering firm, I was responsible for running the design of complex, multi-discipline infrastructure design projects. That would include advanced water and wastewater treatment plants.
 2. I personally would not consider myself to be an 'expert' in any of the the technical disciplines required to design these facilities.
 3. However, I knew who the experts were (within my company). I could deliver a complex project because *I knew who to call on for answers.*
 4. I simply knew who to trust, and who to ask!
 - a. I knew what the limits of my own knowledge and expertise were. I 'knew what I didn't know'.
- iii. Paul knows where to turn for the source of the wisdom we need. He knew where we can find 'the real thing' in terms of wisdom.
 1. "But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God." (**1 Corinthians 2:10**, NKJV)

2. The source of spiritual wisdom is God. We receive it from the Holy Spirit, who knows the things of God.
 - a. Read **Isaiah 11:1-2**.
 - i. This is a prophecy about Jesus, that the Spirit would rest on Him (which was fulfilled at His baptism).
 - ii. The Holy Spirit is first of all "*the Spirit of wisdom*".
 - iii. Jesus told us in **John 14-16** that He had to depart them, *in order for the Spirit to come*.
 - iv. The Spirit would remind the apostles of everything Jesus said, and guide them into "all truth".
 - v. We need more spiritual wisdom!
 1. Pray, asking God for the Spirit, as Jesus admonished in **Luke 11:13**.
 2. Seek the wisdom of Christ. Don't be rebuked on the Last Day by the Queen of Sheba! (**Matthew 12:42**)
 3. Meditate on the Scriptures to grow in spiritual wisdom, especially the wisdom-focused books (**Proverbs, Wisdom of Solomon** and **Wisdom of Sirach**).
3. We are to be instructed by the Lord, to "have the mind of Christ" (**1 Corinthians 2:16**).
- iv. Wisdom hidden in a *mystery*...
 1. "But we speak the wisdom of God in a *mystery*, the *hidden* wisdom which God ordained before the ages for our glory," (**1 Corinthians 2:7**, NKJV)
 2. **Question:** What does Paul mean when he speaks about a "mystery"?
 - a. The Greek word used here is first found in the Scriptures (in the LXX) in **Daniel 2**. There, the king has a dream that no one is able to interpret. Daniel prays to God, and the 'mystery' is revealed to him.

- b. In the Scriptures, a ‘mystery’ is some spiritual truth that is *hidden from view*, which *has to be revealed* before it can be understood.
- c. Jesus spoke about this. Read **Matthew 13:10-16**.
 - i. “He answered and said to them, ‘Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given.’” (**Matthew 13:11**, NKJV)
 - ii. Jesus is speaking in parables, but most people cannot grasp the meaning, because it is a mystery (something hidden, which needs to be revealed in order to be understood by others).
- d. Read **Matthew 13:34-35**.
 - i. The mysteries Jesus is revealing are things that had been kept secret *from the foundation of the world!*
- e. Paul discusses some aspects of these ‘mysteries’ that were hidden from the beginning, but which now have been revealed to us who follow Christ.
 - i. In **Romans 11** and **Ephesians 3**, he speaks of God’s plan to save the Gentiles as *a mystery that now has been revealed*.
 - 1. Paul also said that we will be cut off if we turn away, while the Jews can be grafted back in if they come to faith. Paul said, “I do not want you to *be ignorant of this mystery...*” (**Romans 11:25**)
 - ii. After Paul explains the “one flesh” unity between a husband and wife, he explains that it mirrors the relationship between Christ and the church.
 - 1. “This is a great *mystery*, but I speak *concerning Christ and the church.*” (**Ephesians 5:32**, NKJV)
 - iii. “But even if our gospel is *veiled*, *it is veiled to those who are perishing*, whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is

the image of God, should shine on them.” (2 **Corinthians 4:3-4**, NKJV)

1. Satan has blinded the minds of those who do not believe.
 2. In their preference for darkness and sin, they cannot receive the light of the gospel. It is hidden from their view.
- iv. “Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to *the revelation of the mystery kept secret since the world began but now made manifest*, and by the prophetic Scriptures made known to all nations, according to the commandment of the everlasting God, for obedience to the faith—to God, alone wise, be glory through Jesus Christ forever. Amen.” (**Romans 16:25-27**, NKJV)
- v. “Let a man so consider us, as servants of Christ and *stewards of the mysteries of God*. Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful.” (**1 Corinthians 4:1-2**, NKJV)
1. God has revealed these great mysteries to us. He has entrusted us to be stewards of those mysteries, for the whole world.

III. Summary and Concluding Thoughts

- a. The spiritual and intellectual battle is between *two different types of wisdom*.
 - i. The wisdom valued by the world is not so important. Don’t be fooled by it. It is real, but with very limited scope.
 - ii. Understand what we don’t know, and Who we need to seek in order to find the true mother lode of spiritual wisdom. That type of wisdom is so great that it makes the wisdom of the world look like foolishness!
- b. The truly wise turn to God, rather than to the world, for wisdom.
- c. The Spirit, who knows the deep things of God, reveals the wisdom of God to us.
 - i. The Spirit inspired the Word of God.

- ii. We need more of the Spirit. Ask for it in prayer, and meditate on the Spirit-revealed Word of God.
- d. The gospel is a mystery that was hidden for ages, but now has been revealed.
 - i. We have been entrusted with that mystery and must prove to be faithful.
 - ii. Let us grasp that mystery that has now been revealed, and share it with others.
 - iii. We realize that some will be blinded by Satan, and will not 'get it', because they prefer the darkness of sin. Let us recognize we are in the midst of a spiritual battlefield!
 - iv. May we play our part to bring forth the wisdom of God to a confused and blind world!