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1 Corinthians 2:1-16

Fourth Message

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THE MINISTRY OF THE SPIRIT

SERIES: EXAMINING LIFE IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

In our studies in the apostle Paul's first Corinthian letter, Paul is in the midst of a lengthy explanation which sets out the difference between the wisdom of God, which is centered on the cross, and the wisdom of men, which is centered on intellect and eloquence. When I think of human wisdom, I am reminded of a humorous little story. Some of you may know the name Paul Tillich. He was a brilliant theologian, but he was not a believer. In his prelude to his theological works he clearly states, "I have never had a conversion experience." But he was a very intelligent man who taught for a number of years at the University of Chicago. The story is told that when he died, he appeared at the gates of heaven. Saint Peter was there guarding the gates, and the apostle asked Dr Tillich the question Jesus asked him, "Who do you say Jesus is?" Dr Tillich answered: "Theologically, he is the ground of all being. Existentially, he is the ground of the divine human encounter. And eschatologically, he is the ground of divine hope." To which Peter responded, "Huh?"

Paul has said that behind the Corinthians' struggle to get along with each other was an overdependence on man and on man's wisdom. In this respect Corinth was somewhat like our beloved Bay Area. It was a place of wealth, beauty and culture, and it was much impressed by the accomplishments of men. And yet, in spite of its prosperity, inwardly it was decaying. The apostle therefore encourages the church to act on a different basis—on the wisdom of God rather than the wisdom of men. These two themes, the wisdom of God and the wisdom of men, are contrasted for us throughout these first four chapters.

The apostle begins in chapter 2 with a brief autobiographical section to show that in his own life he depended on God's wisdom rather than men's; then he will show us the process by which we can attain this kind of wisdom.

I. The Spirit's method: A simple and powerful ministry

And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. And 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 on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God. (1 Cor 2:1-5 NASB)

Paul is continuing his argument contrasting the wisdom of God and the wisdom of men. He thinks back to his own ministry among them and recalls his arrival in Corinth. There are two things he remembers—his manner and his message. Both of those tell us a great deal about effective ministry in our own lives.

Notice, first, *his message was one of simplicity*. He made a conscious decision to reject the path of contemporary philosophers, who depended on persuasive presentations for effectiveness, and relied

instead on the power of the message, both spoken and in his own life. He didn't philosophize or psychologize, but simply shared the story of Jesus' death, burial and resurrection. Paul was a gifted man. He probably knew four or five languages. He perhaps was one of the great minds of all time. Yet he made a conscious choice to reject the path of philosophy and instead rely on a simple message.

Secondly, notice that *his manner was one of humility*. He summarized his own feelings when he arrived in Corinth as *weakness, fear* and *much trembling*. He knew about the reputation of the city. He had just come from Athens. Earlier he had been driven out of Thessalonica and beaten in Philippi. He was tired, lonely and fearful. Even after a few months of fruitful ministry the book of Acts tells us that he was still discouraged. One historian, John Pollock, imagines the situation:

He would never win another Corinthian to Christ, see the sparkle of new life in a man's eyes. And he dreaded the physical agony of another stoning or beating with rods; the desolation of being flung out again with winter now on them, the seas turbulent, and nowhere to take his stiff, aging joints but the mountain trails of the Peloponnese. He wanted to give up, stop preaching, take himself away to live quietly at peace, back to Tarsus, to Arabia, to anywhere.

The Lord knew the pressures Paul felt: his discouragement, depression and his desire to opt out. We are told in Acts that Jesus appeared to him in a vision and encouraged his heart by telling him, "Do not be afraid any longer, but go on speaking and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no man will attack you in order to harm you, for I have many people in this city." What an encouragement! And what the Lord promised did indeed happen. There was, as Paul calls it, "a demonstration of the Spirit and power." In spite of his weakness and fear he shared the simple message of the gospel, and the Spirit took that message, delivered in simplicity and humility, and began to change lives.

I have a friend who is a living demonstration of one who understands these principles of effective ministry. He is a senior executive in a local company, and recently he was faced with an important decision. A management training seminar had been voluntarily offered a number of times at his company, and it was touted as a wonderful tool for building teamwork and unity. The president of the company had heard about this seminar and thought it might be a great thing for senior management to take. However, my friend had done some research into this training and he was very concerned. The author of the seminar was one of the original leaders in the Human Potential movement, and the training material was a totally humanistic tool which promised to develop hidden powers inside people. The president, knowing my friend's hesitation, asked him to meet with this gentleman and see if he could work out their differences. My friend said to me, "I knew there was no way I could hold my own in a debate with this man. It wouldn't be profitable. He would wrap me around his finger."

He said that after an amiable time of sharing with this man, he said to him, "You need to know where I'm coming from. I don't doubt that your seminar has proved to be of some help to people. But I need to tell that we are worlds apart in our understanding of life. At the core of who I am is a commitment to Jesus Christ as the answer to our human problems. I believe your seminar in a very real way is evil, because it arouses all kinds of needs and questions in people and then sends them in the opposite direction from the only real answer to those needs and questions, and that is the person of Jesus Christ. In that way your seminar hurts them more than it helps them. In the long run it leaves them empty, confused and angry." The man responded, "I can see why you shouldn't be a part of the seminar, but do you think we can still offer it? My friend lovingly replied, "I'm sure you can, if our president wants it." Later on the president said to my friend, "If you don't think this seminar is good, then neither do I. We've been through a lot together. And I appreciate our relationship more than anything our company produces." My friend told me, "It's only a matter of time before he comes to know the Lord."

That is the method Paul is referring to in this passage. Real evangelism takes place when ordinary people like you and I share that simple message and allow others to see what God has done in our lives. That is the way Paul approached his ministry in Corinth. There was nothing dramatic or sizzling, no great awakening, but there was a quiet, irresistible movement of the Spirit of God touching and changing lives everywhere. That is what he means in the words, the "demonstration of the Spirit and of power." God took that simple message and began to change lives. The apostle reminds the Corinthians in chapter 6 of some of the wonderful things that were happening. "Some of you were idolaters, some of you were homosexuals, some of you were thieves. But it has all changed. *You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified.*" Paul cherished those precious memories of the people in Corinth; they had become to him living proof of the faithfulness of a God who cares for and encourages his weary servants. God took that simple message, delivered in weakness and fear, and brought freedom to captives.

And God is still in the business of doing that. I hope that is an encouragement to you. There are people in your world, a neighbor, a classmate, a fellow worker, who are in need of that simple message. God may open up an opportunity for you to share over a coke or a cup of coffee at lunch. You may not know how to say it, but let me promise you that he will use your genuine testimony of what Jesus Christ has meant to you in spite of how garbled it sounds to you. As you deliver your message in sincerity and honesty he will multiply that message. If you are willing to appear weak, perhaps even a little foolish, and begin to love people with the truth, then you will discover the joy of ministry.

Verse 5 reveals the purpose of it all: "that your faith should not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God." The purpose of that humble manner and that simple message is to produce a correct dependence. It is God who changes lives, not men. Our job is to turn people to the only One who can truly help them. We are merely vessels, clay pots. The treasure is what is inside the vessel. Though the manner was humble and the message simple, God was at work to change lives in Corinth. His method was the simple message of the gospel. We can learn much about effective ministry by observing what Paul rejected as well as by what he determined to pursue.

Up to this point the apostle has been speaking of the inadequacy of the world's wisdom. We could deduce from the argument he has

been making that wisdom is something that Christians should not be pursuing, but that would be a false conclusion. In vv. 6-16 we learn about this true wisdom. Christianity possesses the greatest wisdom of all, says the apostle. We have it described for us in vv. 6-9; and then, in vv. 10-16, we have the process by which we can obtain it.

II. The Spirit's message: A secret and hidden wisdom

Let's look first at the description of wisdom:

A. Understanding true wisdom: Three important characteristics

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." (2:6-9)**

There is a wisdom which comes from God, a body of truth which is the greatest wisdom of all. It is referred to in several ways in this chapter: "a mystery," "secret and hidden wisdom," "the depths of God," "the thoughts of God," "spiritual thoughts," "things given to us by God," "the mind of Christ." When we speak about these things, we are not referring to religious truth that only people who go to church care to know. We are talking about insight into life that allows us to understand ourselves and the world around us. These are the truths that people everywhere are searching to know: secrets about how to deal with our guilt and fear; how to get along with people; how to help a hurting marriage; how to love your children, or your parents. These are vital truths about man and God and the universe. They are what Ray Stedman calls "the lost secrets of our humanity." That is the wisdom of God. It is not just religious talk, but truth which people desperately want to hear. That is why, when this truth is preached clearly and accurately, churches will grow: because they are dispensing insights into life that men and women long to know.

Paul tells us a number of things about this wisdom. There are three observations I would like to make about it.

1. This wisdom is permanent

In verse 6, Paul reasserts that God's wisdom is not *a wisdom of this age*. It does not originate in this passing world; it does not reveal the characteristics of the world; it cannot be obtained through worldly means. Nor is this wisdom known to *the rulers of this age*." He is referring to the opinion makers, those who shape our minds, the thinkers, the sociologists and psychologists. God's wisdom is far different from that of the leaders of our age, primarily because it is eternal rather than temporary. It endures; it is permanent. Because this age is *passing away*, any worldly wisdom will show all the inbuilt characteristics of this age. This wisdom, which comes from or is seen in *the rulers of this age*, will pass away as they will, because they are mortal, temporary, fleeting. One of the outstanding characteristics of human wisdom is that it does not last very long. The current thinking in psychology today will be set aside and someone will have a another theory. But we have a body of truth that transcends time, and it will prepare us not only for this life but the also the life to come.

2. This wisdom is hidden

Paul says “we speak God’s wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom.” That word *mystery* comes from the mystery religions of that day, those mystery cults that came from the East, from Babylon and other places, and filtered into Greek thought. Perhaps these were similar to our contemporary secret societies, such as the Masons. People who were initiated into these societies received the “mysteries,” as they were called—all the inside secrets, the special handshakes and so on. Paul says that God’s revelation is like that. It is hidden. It is not something you discern by observation alone. It is undiscoverable through natural processes.

That is the point Paul is making in verse 9, in the quote from Isaiah. God’s mind and thoughts are not discovered through the eye-gate or the ear-gate. The three great sources of human knowledge—seeing, hearing, and thought—all alike fail here. Man cannot penetrate the secret, but God has in his love unlocked it to those who humble themselves before him. You can’t find God through a microscope or through a telescope. God’s wisdom isn’t discerned in a laboratory. Do you remember when the first cosmonauts returned to earth? They proudly announced that they were assured that there was no God because they looked for him and couldn’t find him.

Paul reminds us that the only way you will get to know God is to love him. All of this hidden truth, this wisdom, is prepared for those who love him, those who submit themselves to him. It is then and only then that you will discover these lost secrets of humanity.

But if you continue to pursue wisdom in the manner of the rulers of the age, you will end up just like they did. They did not understand. If they did have understanding, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. Left to his own devices, that is the kind of mistake man makes. They murdered the only Man who had the answers to the searching questions that plague us. As my friend discovered with the leader of the seminar, man’s wisdom always leads us away from the only One who can help us.

I came across an insightful quote this week from Dorothy Sayers. She claims it is the church that has reduced Jesus to this meek and mild person who could be everyone’s pet; or, as she put it, we have “pared the claws of the lion of Judah.” And then she says:

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, calling them hypocrites; He referred to King Herod as “that fox”; He went to parties in disreputable company and was looked upon as a gluttonous man and a 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-four 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.

That sounds contemporary, doesn’t it? We still do this today because that is where human wisdom will always lead.

That is the end of the path of human wisdom. But Paul says for those who love God he has prepared the secrets of life, those truths that enable you to live life with grace and beauty.

This brings us to the third observation:

3. This wisdom is for our glory

Paul tells us this wisdom was created for our glory. It was given to make us into the people we were designed to be. Its purpose is to make us into healthy, whole people. That is what holy means—completely whole, beautiful people, not just outwardly, but inwardly: loving, joyful, patient, kind, strong, merciful, self-controlled, filled with grace and beauty, a glorified humanity. That is what this truth will do for you.

The process of obtaining this wisdom, these secrets, is given to us in vv. 10-16.

B. Obtaining true wisdom: Two observations

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 a 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. (2:10-16)

The key to these verses is understanding the meaning of the pronouns. The “us” and the “we” refer to the apostles. God has revealed to us through the apostles the deep things that are in his mind. That change of pronouns is very clear and purposeful. Up to verse 5, everything has been “I,” and it changes back to “I” in 3:1. It is clearly referring to the apostles: “for to us God revealed them.”

These verses reveal to us the process by which this teacher who has been sent from God, the Holy Spirit, will use the word of God to instruct us and lead us into the wisdom which will change our lives. Though this seems like a rather complicated passage I think we can summarize its message rather simply, in two statements:

1. This wisdom was revealed by the Spirit to the apostles

Paul reminds us that it is God who understands us. He is the one who created us and he has profound insight into how life was intended to be lived. But we would never know these deep things of God unless he revealed them. Paul illustrates that idea in simple terms that we can understand. He says we don’t know what others are thinking unless we inform each other. I don’t know what you are thinking right now. Some of you look very interested in what I am saying, but many of you are somewhere else. You may be thinking about what you are going to have for lunch. You may be working out in your mind some problem you are going to have to deal with later this week.

But God has revealed to the apostles these deep things that are in his mind, these lost secrets of humanity. Paul tells us in verse 10: “For to us God revealed them through the Spirit.” Look at v. 12: “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.” He is referring to revelation: God spoke to the apostles. And then he goes on: “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.” He is speaking about the way the Holy Spirit illuminated the minds of the apostles and spoke to them his secrets, and using their own personalities and gifts they spoke and wrote this truth. Thus in Scripture we not only have the thoughts of God, we have the words of God. If you are looking for a Scripture that speaks about the inerrancy of the Bible, here it is. Not only are the concepts and the thoughts of the Bible inspired, but the very words are important—combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words. That is why we look at words and their meanings, and verb tenses, not because we love grammar, but because the very words of Scripture are inspired. Doctrines can be discerned in word tenses.

What a wonderful process! God revealed his mind to the apostles. They spoke and wrote these truths that the Spirit revealed, and these words are what we have today in the Bible. We have in this book the prophetic and apostolic word. It is the word of God, the revealed mind of God.

This leads us to the second observation:

2. This wisdom is now revealed by the Spirit through the apostolic word

Paul says that even in the process of receiving the truth we are dependent on the Spirit. Look at verse 14: “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.”

The inspiration of the Holy Spirit is necessary not only for the instruction, illumination and enabling of apostolic messengers, but for those who hear them as well. The man who has not received the Spirit (the “unspiritual man”) does not have the resources to recognize, appreciate or welcome what the Spirit wants to impart through his messengers.

In verses 12-14 Paul uses six important verbs to describe the ministry of the Spirit to those who taught (the apostles) and those who hear the truth: The former he enabled *to know*, *to speak* and *to teach*; the latter he enables *to accept*, *to understand* and *to appraise*. Without such ministry of the Spirit there can be no communication and no growth into maturity. To the natural mind this truth is incomprehensible. The things of the Spirit are even regarded as foolishness.

That doesn't mean that non-Christians can't understand the Bible. They can. A year ago our pastoral staff spent several Wednesday morning study times studying the Scriptures with a Jewish professor from Stanford University. I was amazed at his insight into truth. He had a better grasp of much of the Scriptures than I do. But he did not submit himself to it. He didn't believe it. He didn't appropriate it. Some of you are in that very condition. You understand what I'm saying, but you have never submitted yourselves to the Lord or to his word. You will leave here this morning having absorbed knowledge of truth but it will make no change in your lives. That is the natural man.

But Paul says that “he who is spiritual appraises all things.” The spiritual man, on the other hand, is the one who possesses the Spirit: the Christian, the one who loves God. That is what makes one a Christian: the presence of the Spirit of God in his life. This person “appraises all things.” That is a remarkable statement. Paul is saying that as Christians we have revealed to us the basis for making moral judgments. We have a set of absolutes. We have the revealed mind of God.

It is this ability to appraise all things that allows us to stand up and have the courage to say, in spite of what anyone may declare, that abortion is wrong. That is clear from Scripture. It is this ability that allows us to know that homosexuality is wrong. You can pass laws to make it legal, but that will never make it moral. I find it beyond comprehension that some religious denominations debate whether to ordain practicing homosexuals. Certainly we can discuss our manner toward homosexuals, but we can say with conviction that homosexuality is wrong. We can say with conviction that greed is wrong, that materialism is wrong, that adultery is wrong, that bigotry is wrong. Because the spiritual man appraises all things he has the ability to make such judgments through the insight that is his through the revealed word of God.

Paul also says we will not be appraised ourselves. What I think he means is that many people will not be able to figure us out. Our actions will appear strange to many. C. S. Lewis in his novel *Till We Have Faces* tells the story of a young woman who married a prince. He tells of their wonderful love affair. This prince had a beautiful castle in which he cared for his new bride. She ate at his banquet table each day and he took care of all her needs. The only problem was that the prince was invisible and so was the castle. The people never saw any of these things and so they thought the young woman was crazy. She would keep talking about this lover who was providing all her needs. That is what many people will think of us because we walk to the beat of a different drummer. We have a different set of absolutes. We will be kind and compassionate when others are cruel. We will intolerant when others are tolerant. We will have convictions when others don't. It is because we have insight into the mind of God. It is that sense of conviction that allowed Martin Luther to stand before his accusers, with all the authorities of Europe before him, including the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, and change the course of history. Here is what Luther said, “Unless my conscience be taught and corrected by the Word of God, I will not change or recant anything that I have written. Here I stand: I can do no other, God help me.”

That is the conviction God will give us when our roots are down deep into the Word. And that is my exhortation to all of us this morning. We have revealed for us in this book the mind of God, the mind of Christ. The process of understanding this hidden wisdom unfolds as we begin to humbly understand and submit to this book. It doesn't happen all at once when you become a Christian. It doesn't happen through visions. In fact some of you have been Christians a long time and you still operate your life, your family and your business on the basis of human wisdom. This process begins as we humble ourselves before this word and give ourselves to it to study it and learn it consistently. It is my prayer that you will take the time to get to know God in his word. He longs to give to those who love him the riches of his wisdom.

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