

A CRITIQUE OF WORLDLY WISDOM

1 Corinthians 2:6–16

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1 Corinthians 2, continuing from last Sunday morning, we will look at verses 6–16 today. In the entirety of chapter 2, Paul is correcting Christian foolishness that presumes that the style of the message is the content of the message, saying, in the first 5 verses, “I didn’t come to you in any kind of sophisticated worldly kind of wisdom. But I came to you in weakness and in fear and I determined to know nothing among you except Christ crucified.” Having corrected Christian foolishness, which places, in some quarters, emphasis on flash and style, he then, in the next ten verses, proceeds to outline for us a critique of worldly wisdom and contrast that with the worldly wisdom that is spiritual.

“We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. No, we speak of God’s secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. However, as it is written: ‘No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love Him’—but God has revealed it to us by His Spirit. The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man’s spirit within him? In the same way, no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words. The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit

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of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual man makes judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man's judgment: 'For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct him?' But we have the mind of Christ" (1 Corinthians 2:6–16, NIV).

In this passage there are three criticisms Paul makes of worldly wisdom. He shows the contrast as it applies to the wisdom that is in the cross of Christ Jesus.

I. The first critique he makes of worldly wisdom is that it has no sense of ultimate purpose.

This is very clear in verse 6. "The wisdom of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing."

Here is the verdict on all human civilization and on the whole human race. Here is a way of looking at the rulers of the current age. Looking at a person like, for example, Brezhnev and realizing that with all of his power now, the time shortly comes when he will join Stalin and Khrushchev and he will be coming to nothing. That may be said for American presidents or European prime ministers or any person of high or low social or political rank. The world and the people therein without Christ are coming to nothing. There is no ultimate sense of purpose, and there is no hope. As one person in a poem expressed it well, "I wonder what I was begun for when I am so soon done for." The world itself agrees with Paul, the thinking non-Christian world. They wind up with a deep mood of pessimism in looking at the purpose of human life, because there is no sense of destiny.

A man who makes many people laugh, Woody Allen, has publicly disclosed his morbid preoccupation with death. As an atheist, Woody Allen does not believe in human survival after death. And in a philosophical moment he will soar to language like this, "The fundamental thing behind all motivation and all activity is the constant struggle against annihilation and against death. It is absolutely stupefying in its terror and it renders anyone's accomplishments

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meaningless. As Camus wrote, it is not only that he dies, or man dies, but that you struggle to do a work of art that will last and then realize that the universe itself is not going to exist after a period of time.” Here’s Woody Allen, pondering on his destiny. The films that he has made, the accolades that have been given to him by a movie industry—he’s looking at all of this and saying, “The universe itself isn’t going to last, so how can my films possibly last? How do I last? If my works survive me, then my work itself doesn’t survive. It’s coming to nothing.” The sensitive interviewer, seeking to comfort Woody Allen asked, “But aren’t you happy that you will achieve immortality through your achievements?” Gloom prevailed in Woody’s retort, “Who cares about achieving immortality through achievements? I’m interested in achieving immortality through not dying.”

Several years ago, when I had opportunity to be in the Istanbul, Turkey, museum I had a profound experience at an exhibit. It was a glassed-in exhibit, and inside was a skeleton. It was the skeleton of the king of Tyre, the Phoenician seaport town, now located in Lebanon. Here was a person in his time who had tremendous power. Now here’s this American tourist, standing in a museum in Istanbul, Turkey—a place that the king of Tyre would have never heard of—having the audacity to look down at his bones through the open window case. I tried to think of the living arrangements that that man had when he was alive, and the sort of person who could come and have access to him; not a whole lot of access could be had. When you have a king, you don’t get access to him. Now, the indignity of it all. That anybody could just walk in there and look at his bones, and he has nothing to say about his whole being exposed to public view. I thought—“coming to nothing.”

This is in contrast with the Christian wisdom that is centered on the cross of Jesus Christ and His resurrection. Paul immediately turns around and says, in verse 7, “We speak of God’s secret

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wisdom, wisdom that has been hidden that God destined for our glory before time began.” One is coming to nothing and the other is coming to glory.

The contrast should be strictly noted by us. We are either are coming to nothing or we are coming into the glory of the resurrected sons and daughters of the living God.

II. Paul also critiques worldly wisdom, indicating that it not only is coming to nothing with no sense of ultimate purpose, but he also critiques it from the standpoint that it has fatally flawed judgment.

None of the rulers of this age understood it. “For if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.” Here is an exhibit of the faulty judgment in the world. That the world, when given the perfect man in Jesus Christ, the perfect expression of God, would err and would push Him out of their world as someone has said, “off the end of a bloody stick.” They crucified the Lord of glory. How then, if the world crucified the Lord of glory, how then can we trust it in any other opinion and judgment it offers. If it erred in so great a matter, can it be right when it seeks to address moral and religious truths in other areas? Can we trust the judgment of this world? As Christians, of course, we live and encounter this all the time. That the philosophy of the world, in so many respects, runs exactly counter to what we are committed to, because of the person of Jesus Christ. The world is unable to make sound moral and spiritual judgments. And the case exhibit is the crucifixion.

I heard an interesting story recently that demonstrates a small example of fatally flawed judgment. The comment was on the paradox in this country, on the fact that the tobacco lobby appears stronger than the apricot pit lobby. It’s a known fact that tobacco does produce cancer and it’s somewhat debatable as to whether the essence of an apricot pit can help cure cancer. But one is banned and the other is subsidized by the government. Which goes to show that, in this

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country, the tobacco lobby has more political clout than the apricot pit lobby. It's another small example I would submit of the misjudgment of the world.

But let me look at some larger examples. If the world erred in the crucifixion of the Lord of glory, how then can we trust it when it speaks to us about human sexuality? When it says, for example, that it's all right to live together without the bond of marriage. When it approves homosexuality. When it blithely approves the killing of the human fetus. When it abuses its financial resources by consuming them simply on the pursuit of pleasure. When it grabs power and holds on to power, simply for the sake of manipulating others. When it brings into the world an alcoholic consumption that is destroying multitudes of thousands of people. How can we trust the judgment of the world? Here we have classic examples of the fact that, in other areas, the world speaks in moral and spiritual terms that are in disagreement with the gospel, in addition to its lack of judgment in the crucifixion of Jesus. This wisdom is not to be trusted.

On the other hand, Paul the apostle indicates to us that the spiritual person judges all things and is not subject to judgment. Here he's talking about the mature believer. He'll go on in chapter 3 to indicate that the Corinthians hadn't gotten there yet, because there are three groups of people—the natural man, the spiritual man, and the carnal Christian, who haven't yet come to the vantage point of wisdom. But he is, in effect, saying that the one who has truly entered into the cross of Jesus Christ understood what Jesus is asking of life. That person is able to judge all things, not know all things, but judge all things. That is, discern whether it is of God or not of God. Whether it is morally helpful or morally harmful.

The example of the spiritual man judging all things and not being judged—perhaps, a way of putting it across would be to indicate Martin Luther's experience. His great comment, as he stood on trial. "Unless my conscience be taught and corrected by the Word of God, I will not

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change or recant anything that I have written. Here I stand. I can do no other, God so help me.”

The spiritual man judges all things and, in turn, is judged by no man.

III. Paul then goes on to indicate further that the world has an inadequate source of knowledge.

He does this through verses 8 and following. He says “No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love Him.” We know today, for example, that this room is filled with all kinds of sounds and pictures. But we do not, at this particular moment, have in the room the apparatus that will allow us to tune them in. To flip the dial of the radio or the television set. But we know that, in the airways of this room, there are a multitude of opportunities that we might dial into in terms of sight and sound. We just simply don’t have the right equipment.

This is a distinction that the apostle is making in regard to critiquing the inadequate source of knowledge that is in the world. He puts before us two kinds of people. In verse 14, he identifies one kind of person as the man or the woman without the Spirit. In verse 15, he identifies another kind of person called the “spiritual man”. What’s the difference between these two? The natural man or man without the Spirit of God, versus the spiritual man?

One has the idea attached to it of the principle of physical life. In the Greek mind, everything alive has a psyche. Cats have a psyche. Human beings have a psyche. Although human being psyche is far more advanced. Man is far more advanced and complex. The “psyche person” is simply limited to what his eye can see or his ear can hear or his inner self can reason. This person lives as if there’s nothing beyond physical life. As if there are no other needs than physical and material needs, as if there’s nothing beyond the “what now?”

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This natural man, Paul says, does not accept or understand the things of the Spirit of God. They are foolishness to him. The beauty of the life of the natural person or the man without the Spirit of God, if there is any beauty at all, is simply in the things that surround him, in the here and now. But take that person out of this realm of life and there is no order of life beyond that. There is no beauty beyond that. His consciousness is simply what is in this world.

In contrast to the spiritual person, who Paul identifies in this verse as “the mature” or “the perfect person.” The person who is fully grown, who has developed. Why is it, for example, that for some persons, Scripture is a very dull experience to them? I’ve heard persons indicate that, before they came to Christ, they’d look at the Bible and sort of go to sleep, as the most boring thing in the world. Yet when they came to Christ, all of sudden, the Scripture began to come alive. Bible study began to be something they just couldn’t get enough of. The difference is in this very facet here that Paul is speaking about. The unsaved person, the natural man, does not accept the things of God—they are foolishness to him. Paul doesn’t say they seem like foolishness. They actually are regarded as foolishness.

Paul puts before us the fact that there are two sources of knowledge. One source of knowledge is the spirit of the world, which he again has identified in verse 9 as coming from the eye and the ear and the mind. It’s the spirit of the world that relies on human judgment and human insight.

This knowledge is not an adequate knowledge.

A poet has expressed it this way (speaking of this kind of knowledge), “Into this world to eat and to sleep and to know no reason why he was born, save to consume the corn, devour the cattle, flock and fish and leave behind an empty dish.” The things of God become foolishness.

But in Christ, we have another source of knowledge. It is the Spirit of God. The Spirit reveals God to us. In fact, Paul says, “What eye has not seen, what ear has not heard, what mind has not

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conceived [that is, what persons by their own rational discovery and their thinking have not found out], God has revealed these to us by his Spirit” (1 Corinthians 2:9-10). That, the Christian knows. We’re not simply waiting to see God, to know there is glory prepared for us, because we already know it now, because the Spirit has revealed this to us.

Paul goes on to indicate to us that the Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God.

“For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man’s spirit within him. In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God” (verse 11). Nobody can really know what is going on inside of you except you. Not even the person closest to you always knows what is really going on in you. From outside of you, other people, even the closest people to you, may guess concerning what is going on. But the spirit within you, the spirit of man, does not guess about what is going on inside of you. That spirit knows.

In the same way, Paul is saying no one knows outside of God what is taking place within God.

Nobody can know this except the Spirit of God Himself. That is to say that the Spirit knows God from the inside, searches the deep things of God. This Spirit of God has been made available to us.

How do we get access to this Spirit of God? Is it something totally mystical and experiential?

Where do you look to find the hidden things of God, which have been revealed? Where has the Spirit been at work? The Spirit is at work in the Word of God, in this Bible, which has been written for us, revealing to us the deep things of God, the mind of God. Taking the words of this page and putting them into our heart. Speaking to us in profound ways, as we encounter what He is saying. The Spirit operating, then, from the Word of God fits together spiritual truths with spiritual people. Verse 13, is a difficult translation. Some have said “expressing spiritual truths and spiritual words”. But we’ll go with the idea that the Spirit of God is fitting spiritual truth

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with spiritual people—people who now have that capacity to tune into what God is saying, because they've opened their life to Jesus.

This then brings us the results of knowing what has been prepared for us. Then, in our Christian experience, a practical ability to discern right from wrong. Therefore, it is said that the spiritual person makes judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man's judgment.

What had been wrong in the Corinthian church, we'll find out later, was that they were believers indeed because of their gross conduct, inviting the judgment of the world. Paul is saying the person who really understands what it means to be in Christ is going to live in such a circumspect and holy way that their life will not bring this condemnation from the world. Let the world criticize us for being believers in the atonement of Jesus on the cross. Let them, if you will, think that is foolishness. But let them not be able to criticize us for our lack of moral standards; or for our animosity toward one another. These were some of the problems with the Corinthian experience.

The spiritual man does not know everything. But he is able to pass judgment. This then brings us to the statement that is a fantastic statement. I'd like for you to ask yourself with a whole heart today if you can say this in your own experience. It is perhaps the litmus test, the key test as to whether or not you have become that spiritual person to be able to say from your heart, "We have the mind of Christ. We know how the Lord would want us to respond in the situations we face in life. We know that when we are tempted to retaliate, the Lord in us, the mind of the Lord in us, is asking us instead to sow seeds of love and understanding. We know the mind of Christ." Therefore, we can face the adversities of life and not become bitter or not become filled with blame or possessed with self-pity. Why? Because we have the mind of Christ. How did we get this mind? Because the Spirit of God, working through the Scripture, has revealed Jesus Christ in

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our life. We have a whole new way of knowing. Not a way of knowing that simply involves some experience in human philosophy or taking a course in positive self-help or reading a book on how you can be number one. But it is a source of knowledge that is outside the ability of the mind to reason and conjure up. A source of knowledge that belongs to God Himself, who has taken that great act of coming into the fish tank of our world and revealing who He is and what exists outside the tank, which we have been called to—His glory.

As you share in this experience of hearing the message today, you in your own life have a sense of destiny and purpose. Are you coming to nothing? Or are you destined for glory? Do you have fatally flawed judgment? Begin to correct that judgment by really understanding who Jesus is.

That Jesus is God's Son, who died on the cross for our sins. Do you have an inadequate source of knowledge? Have you been simply depending on what you can think and what you can see? The Spirit of God, in these moments, is speaking to you through His Word, which is being shared, and bringing you a source of knowledge outside yourself.

Closing Prayer

You are speaking to us, Lord, by Your Spirit, in these moments. We confess Your presence. It is no pride for us that we have discovered the way of gladness. Really, in a sense, we didn't discover it. You came seeking us. It was not our human wisdom or judgment that thought You up. But it was You, who have come down to us to lift us up to be with You. We pray, Lord Jesus, to be hidden in the wisdom of the cross, which tells us again and again not to rely on our own moral effort as a means of right standing with You, not to rely on our powers of perception and judgment as an indicator of how much we know of You. But instead, to come humbly as a lost son or daughter, as a lost sheep, to the cross where You died; to lay aside our respective views of You, which we have gathered from human sources; and to face You for who You are. The

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sinless Lamb of God who dies for us, the sacrifice for our sins. You, Lord Jesus, would not have come if there was another way for us to be saved outside of Your cross. But You bore the agony and You bore the pain that our sins might be forgiven and that we might be declared, in Your presence, righteous. We give thanks today, as we approach this time of communion, that You have done this for us. Our wisdom is in You. We now know, because of You, where we have come from. You have given us life. We know where we are going. It is to You. And we know why we are here. It is because You have called us to live for Your praise and for Your glory and to do Your will and Your work in the world. Thank You, Lord Jesus. In Your name. Amen.