

1 Corinthians: A Letter to a Troubled Church

A Spiritual Wisdom (1 Corinthians 2:1-16)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on January 29, 2023

Introduction

- ❖ In the last couple weeks, we've been in a series in the book of 1 Corinthians. Our plan, Lord-willing, is to preach through the entire book this year. But we plan on taking a break after Easter, to dive back into the book of Genesis and cover the life of Abraham. Then we'll come back to 1 Corinthians in mid-August to finish off the book in the fall. That's the plan.
 - Now we titled this series "*A Letter to a Troubled Church*" because that's a fitting description of the church in Corinth. They were a troubled church. **They were dealing with divisions between members, with rampant sexual immorality going unaddressed, with false teaching going around that threatened their faith and the oneness of their fellowship.** So Paul was compelled to write them a letter and to address these issues head on.

- ❖ But he faced a challenge because – even though Paul was the founding pastor – false teachers had turned the Corinthians against him. **As their theology gradually changed, their respect for Paul gradually faded.** He no longer fit their ideal of a spiritual, mature leader.
 - **These Corinthians were too easily impressed by smooth-tongued orators who were gaining influence in the church.** These guys could wax eloquently on seemingly advanced topics of the faith. But Paul, on the other hand, would just speak plainly and straightforwardly, and he kept returning to the same overall message of Christ crucified.
 - **So it's likely that part of the Corinthians' rejection of Paul was due to their assumption that he was treating them like babies.** Apparently he doesn't think much of us, which is why he only fed us spiritual milk (cf. 3:1-2). They think they should be chewing on more advanced teaching suitable for the spiritually mature. That's what these other teachers offered.

- ❖ **But, of course, their grudge against Paul is based on the assumption that the message of the cross is only for beginners.** That Christ crucified is a message for non-Christians or new Christians. It's merely the ABCs of the faith – what you teach to spiritual infants.
 - But these Corinthians want a deeper wisdom. They want to be intellectually challenged and inspired. They don't want to hear the same old message of the cross over and over again. Paul was known for that. And they couldn't respect it anymore.

- ❖ So, as we saw in chapter one, there was a divisive spirit in the church – where factions were developing around certain personalities. **And, as we'll see in this letter, some were elevating themselves above others, claiming to be wiser or more spiritual.** And, all the while, promoting these public speakers who were able to capture an audience with their beautiful words, with their lofty speech, and their eloquent wisdom.
 - That's the situation Paul faced. And I can imagine how relevant that is for many pastors today who labor faithfully and tirelessly to prepare sermons to feed their flock each week. Now that we have a proliferation of online resources – where you can easily watch sermons and listen to podcasts of the most popular preachers out there – **the average pastor feels the pressure to keep his own people's attention.**

- ❖ Church members wonder, “Why can’t my pastor be as dynamic as that preacher on YouTube? I wish the sermons at my church were as creative as that church’s. That preacher is so funny and engaging.” So the average pastor feels the pressure to step it up. **Just preaching through the text, trying to make application that centers on our hope in the gospel – it feels like that’s not enough anymore.** Preaching Christ crucified doesn’t seem like it’s connecting.
- ❖ But Paul has something to say about that. That’s why he wrote this passage. In chapter 1, he argued that the message of the cross runs contrary to human wisdom. **But here in chapter 2, he’s careful to explain that the gospel is *not* opposed to wisdom itself.** Christianity is *not* anti-intellectual. Preaching the message of the cross *is* wisdom – the truest form of wisdom. But it’s a kind of wisdom only accessible and discernible through the Spirit of God.
 - **That means preaching a simple gospel is *not* just for children or the uninitiated.** It’s not the ABCs of the Christian faith. It’s the A to Z. Christ crucified is what it’s all about. It’s true wisdom. A spiritual wisdom – wisdom imparted by the Spirit of God.
- ❖ I think Paul would say that if you can’t see that – if you can’t see that the message of the cross *is* the wisdom you really need and if you’re craving for something deeper – then that says more about you than it does the gospel. So what does that say about you? Well, that’s what we want to talk about today, as we dive into the text.
 - Let me show you three things that Paul is doing in our passage. (1) He is embodying a spirit of weakness in his preaching. (2) He is imparting a spiritual wisdom accessible to every Christian. (3) He is drawing a proper spiritual distinction between people.

A Spirit of Weakness in our Preaching

- ❖ Let’s begin by considering how Paul embodies a spirit of weakness in his preaching and how we can do the same. Now to understand what he’s teaching in chapter 2, we need to grasp his point in chapter 1. **So as we saw in the last two weeks, Paul was showing how this fascination that the Corinthians had with human wisdom and human eloquence is incompatible with the gospel.** From a human perspective, the word of the cross is utter folly. So if you’re enamored by the wisdom of this world, then it’s no wonder that you care little for the milk of the gospel and for those who try to feed it to you.
 - In chapter 1:18-25, Paul shows how human wisdom stands in contradiction to the message of the cross. Then, in vv26-31, his point is that it’s even in contradiction to the make up of your own church. You yourselves were not “*wise according to worldly standards.*” And now in chapter 2:1-5, Paul goes on to show how worldly wisdom is in contradiction to his own ministry as the messenger who brought them the gospel.
- ❖ **So the *message of the cross, the make up of your membership, and the messengers of this gospel – all together express a wisdom very different than the wisdom of this world.*** And in order to manifest this spiritual wisdom, Paul made an intentional decision when he arrived in Corinth. Listen to vv1-2, “*1And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. 2For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.*”

- ❖ His point is that he did not come to impress. He's not relying on lofty speech and eloquent wisdom to try to gain a following. That's what professional orators aim to do. **In those days, there were no Hollywood celebrities or all-star athletes to captivate a crowd.** The closest thing they had in the first-century were orators – professional public speakers whose job was to entertain the masses. Their goal was to impress you with the power of their rhetoric.
 - Paul was aware of that profession and that phenomenon of drawing a crowd with the power your speech. So when he came to Corinth, he made a point to carry out his ministry differently. He came – not to impress people – but to proclaim to them good news. **He came to do the job of an appointed herald. Not a professional orator.**

- ❖ An orator's driving concern is the creativity of the speech he's been hired to deliver. **But a herald's driving concern is the faithfulness of the message he's been appointed to proclaim.** And that's how Paul saw himself. He was a herald commissioned by a king to proclaim a particular message. That's why he was decided to know nothing among the Corinthians except the good news of Christ crucified.
 - Now don't misinterpret that so literally as to think he didn't teach any other lesson but the crucifixion during the entire year and a half he spent in their city (cf. Acts 18:11). **No, his point is that Christ crucified was the singular focus and passion of his preaching and teaching.** He was a Christ-centered, cross-centered preacher.

- ❖ **And, in another sense, he was a weak preacher.** He said he arrived in Corinth embodying a spirit of weakness. Listen to v3, *“And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling.”* He was likely referring to a physical weakness that afflicted him. Probably the same *“thorn in the flesh”* he alludes to in 2 Corinthians 12:7. We don't know what the “thorn” was, but it was significant enough to potentially hamper his ministry. But instead of ignoring his weakness or trying to hide it, Paul saw it as an opportunity to display God's all-sufficient grace and power – as the Lord works mightily through the weakness of his servant.
 - **Paul saw himself as a jar of clay, and he preached out of that spirit of weakness in order to, “show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.”** (2 Cor 4:7) His goal is to exalt the power of God through his weakness. Because he wants God to get all the glory from his preaching.
 - **He wants the Corinthians to know that their lives were changed by the power of God in the gospel – not by his words or his preaching.** Listen to vv4-5, *“⁴and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, ⁵so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.”*

- ❖ Now let's not draw the conclusion that Paul's preaching was neither powerful nor persuasive. **We have evidence in the NT that Paul was a good preacher.** In Acts 14, when he was with Barnabas at Lystra, after they had performed a miraculous sign, we're told that the crowd mistook them for gods, and they called Paul “Hermes”. Why? Because he was the chief speaker, and apparently a good one if he was mistaken for the Greek god of orators.

- ❖ **So let's not make the mistake of thinking Paul's preaching was bland or boring.** Or assume he didn't care to persuade anyone of anything. No, when he says his speech and message were not in plausible words of wisdom, he means his preaching lacked the rhetorical flair of the popular orators of his day. Compared to them, he appeared weak as a preacher.
 - **But the very existence of the Corinthian church was living testimony to the real power of his preaching.** The fact that those who were not wise, powerful, or noble according to worldly standards have been converted into saints – that takes powerful preaching. But a kind of power that the world fails to recognize and respect.

- ❖ This reminds me of what I once read about the great American theologian, **Jonathan Edwards**, who was a popular preacher during the Great Awakening, where scores of people across New England were getting converted through powerful preaching. **But Edwards would not be considered a very powerful or engaging preacher by today's standards.**
 - He never told a joke. He rarely told a story about his family or his personal experiences. He barely moved in the pulpit, and he preached from a full manuscript so his head was typically down in his notes. **But though he lacked natural eloquence and style, his preaching captivated his hearers.**

- ❖ A man in his congregation was once asked if he considered Edwards eloquent. The man said, *“He had no studied varieties of the voice, and no strong emphasis. He scarcely gestured, or even moved; and he made no attempt by the elegance of his style, or the beauty of his pictures, to gratify the taste, and fascinate the imagination. But if you mean by eloquence, the power of presenting an important truth before an audience, with overwhelming weight of argument, and with such intensesness of feeling . . . so that the solemn attention of the whole audience is riveted, from the beginning to the close, and impressions are left that cannot be effaced; Mr. Edwards was the most eloquent man I ever heard speak.”*

- ❖ I think that's the same kind of eloquence that marked Paul's preaching. I hope you don't come away thinking Paul is against eloquence – against trying to say truthful things beautifully. **But what he is against is any approach to preaching that results in people coming away thinking, “What a wonderful preacher!” instead of thinking “What a wonderful Savior!”** Paul is against that kind of worldly eloquence because he's so zealous for the Lord to get all the glory for all good that comes out of powerful preaching.

A Spiritual Wisdom Accessible to Every Christian

- ❖ That's why he embodies a spirit of weakness in his preaching. Now let's move on to v6, which starts a new section in his letter, but still very much related to the overall concern for divisions growing in the church. **As we said earlier, Paul is careful to explain that Christianity is not contrary to wisdom altogether – just the kind of human wisdom that elevates the self and leads to boasting and a sense of superiority.** So here in vv6-13, he says he came to impart a spiritual wisdom accessible to every Christian.

- ❖ **What Paul is challenging is this idea that there are these Christian elites who possess a greater wisdom than other Christians.** That seemed to be the overarching trouble in Corinth. **Certain church members were claiming a higher spirituality** – either because they were disciples of this or that particular leader (3:4); or because, unlike others, they could manage living a life of celibacy (7:1); or because they could eat food offered to idols without feeling guilty (8:1); or because they were given more spectacular spiritual gifts (12:1).
 - **That ended up creating a two-tiered Christianity.** Where we treat each other as if there were two types of Christians – spiritual Christians and carnal Christians. The spiritually mature and the spiritually infantile. That’s the mindset underlying these divisions in the church.

- ❖ Now Paul is pretty wise in the way he challenges that mindset. **In v6, he takes the very label these Christian elites were using for themselves, “the mature”, and applies it to every Christian.** The point he’s making is that true wisdom and maturity comes only through the Spirit of God. **So whoever has the Spirit in them has spiritual wisdom and can be rightly called mature.** And, according to Paul’s theology, that applies to every Christian. We all share the same Spirit.

- ❖ So there are no two-tiers. **There’s a real sense in which every Christian is already mature (just as we’re already saints according to chapter 1:2).** So Paul is criticizing those who claim to be mature for acting like infants. That becomes more pronounced in chapter 3. It’s infantile to use wisdom as a dividing line between fellow Christians. When, in fact, everyone who has received Christ crucified has equally received the same spiritual wisdom.
 - **That means the child who has received Christ crucified is no less wise than the pastor with a seminary education.** In fact, that child is spiritually wiser than the unbelieving astrophysicist with two PhDs. Not because the kid can grasp subjects like quantum physics. **But because the believing child can look at Christ crucified and see a beautiful Savior for who died for her sins to reconcile her to God.** While the unbelieving astrophysicist stares at the same cross and only sees folly; only sees a myth; only sees wishful thinking on the part of religious zealots.

- ❖ In the eyes of unbelievers, the message of the cross is not *“a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age.”* (2:6) **And it’s because they were blind to spiritual wisdom, the rulers of the age in Jesus’s day conspired together to put him on a cross.** If they were as wise as a believing child, they wouldn’t have done it.
 - Listen to v8, *“None of the rulers of this age understood this (the wisdom of the cross), for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.”* In a twist of divine irony, it was their actions, conducted in blind ignorance, that led to Christ crucified. **And now, through the Spirit, every Christian is made equally spiritually wise in that we can see Christ crucified for what it really is – our only hope in life and death.** But now, before we get too high on ourselves, Paul reminds us that we, as Christians, can only see – the blinders have been removed – only by the gift of grace.

- ❖ Look at v7. When Paul speaks of imparting a “*secret and hidden wisdom of God*,” I know, at first, it sounds like something a Christian could boast in. “We figured out this secret, esoteric knowledge that unbelievers still don’t get.” But this idea that the gospel is a hidden wisdom is presented in the NT – not like a secret puzzle that only really smart people can figure out – **but like a mystery, formerly hidden from all humanity, but now revealed in time and space through Christ’s life, death, and resurrection.** And in the here and now through the ministry of the Spirit, changing hearts and opening blind eyes.
- ❖ So the spiritually wise in Christ have nothing to boast about. **We would be blind and in the dark like everyone else – if God did not shine his light on us and reveal these things to us through the Holy Spirit.** Look at v10, “*10these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. 11For who knows a person’s thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God.*”
- ❖ Think about this analogy Paul is making. Only you know your own thoughts. No one knows what you’re thinking unless you reveal it to another. **Well, in the same way, no one knows what God is thinking – no one has access to his wisdom – unless he reveals it to us.** And Paul’s point is that the Spirit of God is the very One who reveals God’s thinking to us.
 - And we’re not talking here about some kind of mysterious utterance where the Spirit speaks to you privately in your head. **Paul is talking about the Spirit being the One who is ultimately teaching you through the biblically-faithful words of gospel preachers and teachers.** That’s his point in v13.
 - As a preacher of the gospel, he imparts this spiritual wisdom through words as he teaches – but his words would be incomprehensible without the Holy Spirit. “*And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.*”
- ❖ Friends, here’s the gist. **The spiritual wisdom that Christianity deals with is not native to any one of us.** It’s not something you can figure out on your own. It’s something you have to receive by faith. And the Holy Spirit is the One who mediates this wisdom.
 - You’ve probably noticed that, every time I preach, I start off by praying for the Spirit to accompany the preaching of God’s Word and to open the eyes of your heart – so that you can see and believe the wisdom of the Word and the gospel. **My confidence as a preacher – is not in my own eloquence – but in my belief that every Christian here, from the youngest to the oldest, has the Spirit indwelling in them.** So I trust that He will be the One to teach these spiritual truths to you.
- ❖ **And my hope is that anyone here who is not yet a Christian would be filled by the Holy Spirit this morning.** That you’d believe in Christ crucified for your sins and for your salvation, and that the Spirit of God would overshadow you and change you. My hope is that the message you once viewed as folly – or as merely a story your parents taught you – that you would see it now as gloriously true – as your only hope in life and death.

A Proper Spiritual Distinction Between People

- ❖ I'm praying for many of you to receive the Holy Spirit and the gift of salvation for the very first time this morning. I felt a greater urgency to pray for that this week as I studied this passage, especially Paul's words in vv14-16.
 - Prior to these verses, he's been trying to erase the lines of distinction that the Corinthian believers were drawing between themselves – this two-tiered mindset. **But now, in v14, he shows us where a proper line should be drawn.** This leads to a final observation. We see Paul drawing a proper spiritual distinction between people.

- ❖ **He mentions two types of persons – the spiritual person and the natural person.** And by that he simply means persons who have the Spirit of God (Christians) and those who do not (non-Christians). So if there's a proper distinction to be made – it's not between Christians in the church – but between Christians in the Church and non-Christians in the world.
 - Look at v14. Paul mentions the natural person first. *“The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.”*

- ❖ **So the natural person – not only does not accept the message of Christ crucified – but apparently he cannot accept it. Because he cannot understand it.** And that's because he doesn't have in him the only One who *can* understand – the Spirit of God.
 - But the spiritual person, on the other hand, has the Spirit. And through the Spirit's work, he doesn't just understand the message of the cross intellectually. The spiritual person is able to embrace it personally.
 - So what about you? **What kind of person are you?** Maybe you consider yourself a spiritual person because you know the gospel. **You believe in Christ crucified. But if you're honest with yourself, it doesn't feel personal.** It's just a story for you. It's a teaching handed down from others. You know it's important to them, but it doesn't mean all that much to you.

- ❖ **Let me speak directly to the youth and children of our church** – those of you who have been coming to church with your parents. **I think it's so important for you to understand that no one has ever grown up Christian.** You can grow up in a Christian household. You can grow up in a Christian church. But you can't grow up Christian.
 - **If you think you're a Christian just because you've grown up here in this church, then you could be fooling yourself.** Your presence here is welcomed, but your presence here is no sure sign of spiritual life. What you need to focus on is the word of the cross, and you need to ask yourself: **What's my reaction whenever I hear the message of Christ crucified?**

- ❖ **When I hear someone preach or teach or share about Jesus's great love for us;** how he took my place on the cross and died for my sins; how he rose again and grants new life to anyone who believes and receives his promised Spirit – **when I hear that message, do my eyes glaze over?** Do I start looking at my phone because that part is boring? Do I assume that part of the sermon is directed towards someone else?
 - Or does it warm my heart? Does it grant me comfort even though I've heard it a thousand times? **Do I appreciate being reminded of what Christ has done for me on the cross since I know how prone I am to forget it or to take it for granted?**

- ❖ **The point of our passage is that that second reaction is only possible through the Holy Spirit.** That second reaction only comes through a second birth where you're born again of the Spirit. Otherwise, you're likely still a natural person, and you're in need of a new birth.
 - If you're a youth and if you're not sure if you're a spiritual person – a person with the Holy Spirit – if you're not sure if you've received the new birth, then you should talk to Minister Stanley. He's holding a baptism class this afternoon, and even if baptism is not on your radar right now, that class will talk about the gospel and about how you know if you're really a Christian. So you should definitely be there.

- ❖ **Church, the big takeaway is that that mystery of the gospel – of Christ crucified – has been graciously revealed to us through the Spirit of God.** In that sense, we're all equally wise in spiritual wisdom. We can all see Jesus through the same eyes of faith.
 - So let's stop thinking and acting like natural persons – driven by the spirit of the world to draw distinctions between people for the sake of feeling superior to others in order to feel better about ourselves.
 - **There is a proper distinction to be made between the believing Church and the non-believing world.** But that distinction should give us a heart of humility and gratitude – grateful that the Spirit has graciously revealed to us the mystery of Christ crucified.