

THE DYNAMITE OF DIVINE WISDOM

God's Wisdom Vs. Man's Wisdom

Text: 1 Corinthians 1:17-24

Introduction:

1. Having lovingly confronted the church about its disunity (Vs. 10-16), the Apostle now tackles another central problem in the Corinthian Church, namely, their infatuation with worldly wisdom.
2. Historical background: "The Greeks were in love with rhetoric, which is the art of appealing to and swaying an audience with words. Aristotle divided the rhetorical appeal into three parts: ethos, pathos and logos. Ethos refers to the speaker's person, his character, appearance, attire, reputation, social status. Pathos refers to the speaker's manner of presentation, how he uses his voice and body to move the hearers emotionally. Logos refers to the words of the speech, the logic. The Sophists taught their students to argue any side of a debate and to win by the sheer power of rhetoric. The rhetorical flow of words was everything to them, not the truth." (D. Cloud)
3. Consider Paul's references to Greek philosophy in 1 Corinthians 1-2:
 - "wisdom of words" (1:17)
 - "the wisdom of the wise" (1:19)
 - "the disputer of this world" (1:20)
 - "the Greeks seek after wisdom" (1:22)
 - "excellency of speech" (2:1)
 - "enticing words of man's wisdom" (2:4)
 - "the wisdom of...the princes of this world" (2:6)
 - "the spirit of the world" (2:12)
 - "the words which man's wisdom teacheth" (2:13)
4. In this section the Apostle will expose the foolishness of man's wisdom and exalt the superiority of God's wisdom. Paul gives a running comparison between the wisdom of men and the wisdom of God. Biblical preaching is the method of Divine wisdom, not human rhetoric and oratory.
5. We will divide the Apostle's discourse on wisdom under **four headings** for our exposition.

Take note of...

I. THE MANDATE OF DIVINE WISDOM (VS. 17-18)

The Apostle Paul shares his own testimony of his calling and the kind of message he preached which stood in stark contrast with the philosophers and entertainers of Corinth. Verse 17 "marks a transition to the subject of wisdom. Paul makes his commission by Christ the ground for the unfolding of the relation between gospel and wisdom." (W.E. Vine) Paul was acutely aware of two realities:

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A. The Powerlessness of Polluted Gospel Preaching (Vs. 17)

1. What Paul's Commission Included (Vs. 17a)
 - a. "not to baptize" = Paul was not denying the biblical practice but he makes it clear that baptism was not a part of the Gospel message.
 - b. "preach the Gospel" = means to proclaim good news, evangelize. Paul defines the Gospel in clear terms later in the Epistle (1 Cor. 15:1-4).
2. What Paul's Commission Excluded (Vs. 17b)
 - a. "not with wisdom of words" = the words of man's wisdom. The Gospel is communicated in words but it does not rely on human rhetoric and oratory.
 - b. "lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect" = "made of none effect" comes from the Greek word meaning "to make empty, neutralize".
 - c. When men attempt to preach the Gospel with worldly wisdom, they rob the Gospel of its power. There is a kind of "Gospel preaching" out there, even in churches that claim to be Evangelical, which is lifeless and powerless because worldly philosophies are being employed to try and make the Gospel more palatable to a rationalistic, humanistic society.
 - d. Martin Luther said, "When we first meet the devil in the Bible he is camped under the tree of knowledge and he has been there every since." True knowledge is a great blessing but corrupt knowledge is destructive and damaging.
 - e. 1 Cor. 2:4 "And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power."

B. The Powerfulness of Pure Gospel Preaching (Vs. 18)

Paul contrasts the "preaching (logos) of the cross" with the "wisdom of words", the words of man vs the Word of God. There are two responses to the unadulterated preaching of the Gospel.

1. It is foolishness to the perishing (Vs. 18a)
 - a. "them that perish" = the word 'perish' is in the present tense and means "to destroy". It refers to those in the path to destruction. Christ came to rescue us from perishing (John 3:16).
 - b. The word 'foolishness' comes from the Greek word μωρία (moria) meaning "silliness, absurdity". It is only used in this Epistle. To the unbelieving mind, the preaching of the Gospel is an absurd thing.
2. It is life changing to the believing (Vs. 18b)
 - a. "us which are saved" = sharp contrast to those who are lost.

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- b. “it is the power of God” = set in contrast to “foolishness”. For those who respond positively to the preaching of the cross, they personally experience its life transforming power. There is nothing more powerful than the Spirit empowered preaching of the Gospel!
- c. Romans 1:16 “For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for **it is the power of God unto salvation** to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek.”

II. THE MASTERY OF DIVINE WISDOM (VS. 19-20)

Paul adds weight and authority to his argument with an insightful quotation and some incisive questions. Both serve to demonstrate the superiority of God’s wisdom over man’s wisdom.

A. The Quotation (Vs. 19)

1. The source of the quotation – the quotation comes from Isaiah 29:14 which reads, “Therefore, behold, I will proceed to do a marvellous work among this people, *even* a marvellous work and a wonder: for the wisdom of their wise *men* shall perish, and the understanding of their prudent *men* shall be hid.”
2. The context of the quotation – “In Isaiah’s background was the dreaded might of Assyria, a superpower that had embarked on a course of expansion. Little Judah lay directly in its path. Isaiah urged the people to trust God. The king’s counselors and wise men advised an alliance with Egypt (30:1-3), a policy Isaiah denounced. The king went along with the politicians so the prophet declared God’s Word: “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent.” Sennacherib’s army rolled south and Egypt soon proved to be a broken reed. Most of Judah was overrun and Jerusalem itself was besieged. God simply turned the counsel of the clever politicians into foolishness and brought Judah to its knees and Jerusalem to the point where it had no place to go but God.” (John Phillips)
3. The application of the quotation – Paul is applying the same principle to the subject under discussion. The foolishness of man’s wisdom had been exposed in the past and the same was true for the present.

B. The Questions (Vs. 20)

Paul deals human wisdom a series of further blows with three penetrating questions:

1. Where is the wise? Speaks especially of the Gentiles (See Vs. 22).
2. Where is the scribe? Speaks especially of the Jews.
3. Hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?

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4. Where are the philosophers, academics and intellectuals of the past? They rise to fame and power for a time then disappear from the scene and are often forgotten. God's eternal truth stands the test of time.
5. The world sees the Gospel as foolishness and their philosophies as wisdom but the exact opposite is true. Man's wisdom is foolishness and true wisdom is found in God's Word.

III. THE METHOD OF DIVINE WISDOM (VS. 21-24)

Paul makes it abundantly clear that the plain, undiluted, unadulterated **preaching** of the Gospel is God's chosen method for saving the lost, not the fair sounding speeches of human wisdom. Preaching is:

A. The Sovereign Pleasure of Almighty God (Vs. 21)

1. "the world by wisdom knew not God" = "In His sovereign wisdom God planned that exalted human wisdom would never be the instrument for knowing God and being saved." (Gromacki) This highlights just how destructive and damnable man's natural reasoning is apart from Divine revelation. Worldly wisdom does not lead one to the light, it leads to darkness. It does not lead one to God, it leads one away from God. It does not lead the sinner to know God, it keeps him ignorant of God.
2. "it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching" = God, in His infinite wisdom, Sovereignly chose preaching as His primary instrument for the salvation of the lost. "By saving such through human lips by a message which man's highest wisdom deems worthless and futile, God has displayed the folly of the latter and His own infinite power." (W.E. Vine)
 - a. Modern Christendom has come up with all sorts of new methods to evangelize the world. They almost always represent a rejection of Biblical preaching. The uncompromising, preaching of the Gospel has been replaced with rock bands, movies, and feel good "talks" that tickle people's ears. Preaching has been replaced with programs. Pulpits have been replaced with bar stools and crystal lecterns. Preaching time has been substituted with discussion time over coffee. Modern churches look, feel and sound like entertainment centers. What little "preaching" left is so watered down with worldly wisdom that it has no power to transform lives. Personal evangelism has been replaced lifestyle evangelism.
 - b. Preaching is still God's chosen method. Almighty God did not put an expiry date on this method! Modern technology has its appropriate use to disseminate the truth but it is not going to save the world. Social media is not going to bring revival! We need to get back to preaching!

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- c. Illustration: Movie makers claim that if Paul lived today he would make a movie rather than going around and preaching everywhere.

B. The Saving Power of Almighty God (Vs. 22-24)

1. The Demands of Unbelievers (Vs. 22) This verse “marks the two great representatives of human wisdom, and what they respectively regard as desirable.”
 - a. The Jews wanted to be convinced miraculously (Vs. 22a) The Jews said they wanted to see signs in order to believe. In reality, they had been provided with multiple miraculous signs. Christ performed countless Messianic miracles during his earthly ministry. The Apostles performed signs and wonders. But the sign of all signs was the resurrection of Christ from the dead. In reality, demanding more signs was simply an excuse not to believe.
 - b. The Gentiles wanted to be convinced mentally (Vs. 22b) The Greeks said they wanted wisdom but in reality, they didn’t want the truth, just something new to tickle their ears.
 - c. “Sinful, finite man cannot dictate to a holy, sovereign God what they want from God before they will believe (Vs. 22). The Jews wanted a supernatural sign. The Gentiles wanted rational proof (“wisdom”) before they would believe. “The Jews said, “Show me.” The Gentiles reacted, “Let me investigate.” (Gromacki)
2. The Determination of Paul (Vs. 23-24)

Paul’s determination in the face of such demands was to “preach Christ crucified”. Many get distracted from the preaching of the cross by these demands. Some become obsessed with signs and miracles, hoping that these will convince an unbelieving world. Some go to great lengths to try and make the Gospel acceptable to the world’s intellectualism. But such efforts are destined to fail. The Spirit anointed declaration of the Gospel will get the job done! Such preaching is met with a twofold response:

 - a. An unbelieving response (Vs. 23)
 - i. On the part of the Jews – The word ‘stumblingblock’ is from the Greek word ‘skandalon’. Our word scandal is based on this word. The Jews were expecting a political Messiah who would deliver them from Rome, not a Saviour who would suffer for sin on the cross.
 - ii. On the part of Gentiles – to the Gentiles such a testimony was an impossible standard of wisdom. Celsus, who wrote against Christianity in the second century, speaks of Christians as “actually worshipping a dead man”. (Vine) “The Greek gods glorified man. Their gods lusted and warred at will. They were immoral. The idea of a god

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becoming man wasn't strange to them but the lowliness and humility of the Son of God was. It didn't match their idea of what a god should be. Modern man is still the same! They look for solutions in every philosophy and man-made idea but not the cross. And yet it is the cross of Christ that has the power to transform!" (Phillips)

- iii. "To the Hebrews the preaching of the cross was scandalous. To the heathens it was senseless." (Phillips)
- b. A believing response (Vs. 24)
 - i. "them which are called" = the call of the Gospel"
 - ii. "power...wisdom" = recall the same words in Vs. 18 & 21.
 - iii. Christ "is God's power because He is the personal instrument of salvation. He is God's wisdom because in Him God has revealed and carried out, and will do so, all the eternal counsels and purposes of His mind." (Vine)

Conclusion: Are you building your life on God's wisdom or man's? What is your attitude to preaching? Will you speak the life changing Gospel message to others?