

The Way of Wisdom

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[0 : 00] If you've ever taken a turn around a gallery, it's usually not long before you come across a painting of Jesus. Even locally, one of the highlights of the Kelvin Grove is Salvador Dali's dreamlike painting of the crucifixion, which now it's open, worth having a look at, incidentally.

But I wonder how many of us are familiar with the earliest discovered visual depiction of Jesus. It was made roughly in the year 200, and it's a piece of graffiti from Rome. And it shows a man lifting up his hand to a figure on a cross. The figure on a cross has the body of a man, but has the head of a donkey.

And the scrawled writing underneath reads, Alexamenos worships his God. Whoever Alexamenos was, he is etched into history as a fool who worshipped a crucified God. How foolish is the notion of a crucified God? Well, foolish enough that the hands behind the graffiti decided to depict the dying Jesus with the head of a donkey.

[1 : 11] A crude and blasphemous image that nevertheless shows us how foolish the gospel appears in the eyes of the world.

This is what we saw last week as Paul began this letter to the Corinthians. The Jesus way is foolishness in the eyes of the world.

Christ crucified is weak-looking and is ultimately scandalous. When Paul came to Corinth, he didn't preach in a way that reflected the world and its wisdom.

But the Corinthians since then have adopted the world's love of influence and superficiality. They like people and things that look clever and attractive in the eyes of their culture.

And they've applied this to the church, thinking themselves to be wise and successful, forgetting that the Christ who saved them defied all human wisdom and success by dying in the most humiliating manner possible on a cross.

[2 : 19] The Corinthians, whose minds and way of life was shaped more by the world than by the way of Jesus, thought that they were wise and mature and spiritual.

But they were not. And what Paul intends to give them in this part of the letter is basically a comprehensive explanation of what true wisdom is.

True wisdom according to the Jesus way and the role of the Holy Spirit in revealing it. And so there are three big ideas governing Paul's logic here.

The first one is the mystery of God's wisdom. The second idea is the idea that the Spirit reveals God's wisdom. The third is that Jesus is God's wisdom.

So the mystery of God's wisdom, the Spirit reveals God's wisdom, and Jesus is God's wisdom. So the mystery of God's wisdom. As mentioned, the Corinthians, they thought they were pretty mature and they thought they were fairly wise.

[3 : 23] And perhaps according to the standards of Corinthian culture, they were. But here Paul follows on from where he left off last time, where he was talking about the manner in which he came to Corinth, which was in weakness, knowing nothing among them but Christ and him crucified.

And he came in this way, chapter 2, verse 5, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power. But he doesn't want them to think that there is no wisdom involved in the Christian life.

Wisdom is, in fact, pretty key to the Jesus way, but it's a different sort of wisdom. We do, however, says Paul in verse 6, speak a message of wisdom among the mature.

So what Paul's doing is he's basically setting up two big questions. First one, what actually is Christian maturity? And the second, what is Christian wisdom? So let's take the first one.

What actually is Christian maturity? Well, we have to start by asking, what does Paul mean by mature? When Paul mentions those who are mature, who is he talking about?

[4 : 36] Does he consider the Corinthians to be those who are mature? Well, I think probably not. In the next chapter, Paul is going to call the Corinthians mere infants in Christ, who he had to feed, metaphorically speaking, with milk rather than solid food, because they were not ready for it.

So when Paul speaks of maturity, he is not describing all believers. Basically, he's saying it is possible to be in Christ, but to be only an infant in him, to be immature in him.

The Jesus way, it's not a static way. It's not like a treadmill where you're running to stand still. It's a way where there is real growth, and there is development, and there is progress.

That's why John Bunyan called his famous allegorical story about the Christian life, the pilgrim's progress. The Jesus way is a journey. And it begins with believing that Jesus died to take away the sin of the world and trusting in him as Lord.

The Corinthians had done this. The journey then ends with our arrival into God's new creation, to enjoy his perfect holiness forever, in a world free from sin and death.

[5 : 51] In between these two points, it is hoped that there will be growth and development. In a word, maturity.

And maturity for the Christian is understanding the wisdom of God and living in a way that reflects the wisdom of God. It is not, as Paul goes on to say, the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age who are coming to nothing.

There's a touch of rebuke there in that phrase, because that is precisely the sort of wisdom that the Corinthians thought was worth having, and indeed thought that they had it in spades.

That wisdom is focused on knowledge and appearance and ability. It can be very, very easy to think that those who know the most theology, look like they have their lives together, and are blessed with gifts and abilities, are the most wise and mature in the church.

But to do that would be to look at the church with the world's vision of wisdom and maturity. So what is Christian wisdom? What does God's wisdom look like?

[7 : 08] Well, if you were with us last week, it'll be no surprise to hear that God's wisdom is made manifest and clear in Christ crucified. Jesus' humble, pitiful death on a cross.

Listen to Paul in verse 7. No, we declare God's wisdom, a mystery that has been hidden, and that God destined for our glory before time began.

So God's wisdom is a mystery. It's hidden, it's secret. But a mystery that was intended to bring men and women across the world and across history to glory in God's plan that was set in motion before the sounds of time had even started running.

And the mystery is God's plan to redeem people from sin and bring them to share in his glory. And so in that sense, it's now no longer a total mystery.

It's almost like an open secret, if you like. Because Christians everywhere have now been given an understanding of that mystery and have for 2,000 years been trying to share the good news of this mystery.

[8 : 21] But yet, not everyone understands it. Paul says in verse 8, None of the rulers of this age understood it. For if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.

The very Lord of glory, God incarnate, was rejected and killed by those who followed the wisdom of the world. The Jewish leaders, Herod, Pilate, they were all unable, incapable of seeing how the son of a carpenter could be the king of the universe.

He was even betrayed by one of his own disciples and one of his closest friends denied him three times. The wisdom of God in the weakness of Christ is a deep, deep mystery that cannot be understood without help.

Our sin blinds us. Sin blinds every person and stops us from understanding and comprehending God's wisdom to take up the mystery idea.

It's like trying to make a winning guess in Cluedo on the very first turn. It's impossible. I've tried it. It doesn't work. But even if we had all the clues in front of us, as the Jewish leaders did, for example, we still wouldn't get it.

[9 : 44] We still wouldn't be able to make sense of it. Sin, it clouds our eyes. It makes us unable to piece the clues together for ourselves. So the question then must be, how is this mystery revealed?

Well, Paul tells us that we need God's spirit to open our eyes and make sense of this mystery. What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived, the things God has prepared for those who love him, these are the things that God has revealed to us by his spirit.

The Holy Spirit is the key. But before we move on to consider the work of God's spirit in revealing his wisdom, let's note two implications from what Paul has said so far.

The first implication is that we might need to redefine our understanding of wisdom. And the second is that we might need to redefine our understanding of maturity. Redefining things is never easy. It's like trying to move furniture around in your brain and having moved house recently, I don't want to have to move wardrobes and tables and whatever through doors and upstairs for quite a while.

[11:04] It takes effort. But that's sometimes what God's word requires of us. It sometimes requires us to understand things and redefine them in a totally new way.

The one who reveals, God tells us in verse 10 that the spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who knows a person's thoughts except their own spirit within them.

In the same way, no one knows the thoughts of God except the spirit of God. No one knows what you're thinking at any given time except yourself.

Your thoughts are your own. They're hidden to the rest of the world. They're hidden to everyone else in this room. It is only, to use Paul's expression, your own spirit within you who knows exactly what you are ever really thinking.

Paul uses this truth to illustrate the knowledge of God's spirit. Who knows the deep things of God? Well, only his spirit, of course. Now, of course, our spirit within us is very much not quite the same as God's spirit who is a distinct person of the triune God, Father, Son, and Spirit.

[12:16] Paul's using the idea to illustrate the truth that only God knows himself and his spirit, being God, knows all the depths of God. The implication of this, therefore, is that no one knows God except himself.

But he himself, in his spirit, does reveal his depths to us so that we can know him. Which is why Paul can say in verse 12, what we have received is not the spirit of the world, but the spirit who is from God so that we may understand what God has freely given us.

And what has God freely given the Corinthians and all who have believed? Well, Paul told the Corinthians already in verse 30 of chapter 1, in Christ we have wisdom, righteousness, holiness, and redemption.

In short, deliverance from the power of sin. I think verse 12 is really helpful for addressing some common misconceptions that can very easily arise whenever we discuss the revelatory power of God's spirit.

The spirit searches the deep things of God and being God shares in them. But not all the depths of God are revealed, even to those that God has redeemed. The spirit of God helps us understand what Paul describes as what God has freely given us.

[13:48] This is quite specific, it's pointed. Not all of God's mysteries are ours to know. Consider God's speech to Job at the end of the book bearing his name. God speaks to Job from the storm and says, where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?

And then what follows is four chapters of powerful poetry proclaiming that not all of God's depths have been revealed to humanity. God is very separate from us.

God is God. As his name proclaims, I am who I am. There are some mysteries about the creator which man is just not privy to. Paul himself wrote in his letter to the Romans actually, oh the depths of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God, how unsearchable his judgments and his paths beyond tracing out.

There are limits to the spirit's revelation. But thankfully we don't need to know the deepest, deepest depths of God. We do, however, need to know some of those depths, which is why the spirit does reveal the wisdom of God to those who believe.

But let's not forget that the Corinthians had believed and yet had misunderstood the wisdom of God, i.e. the implications of their salvation on the way in which they lived their lives.

[15:14] So whilst the spirit searches the depths of God, God's people need to be attentive and listen. As a student I can remember many times when I would attend lectures, but really nothing much would go in if a lecture is boring, and particularly if it was after lunch.

It's just the worst combination. There was no hope. The lecture would just turn into a battle to keep the eyelids open. And this can sometimes be the experience of the Christian in listening to God's wisdom.

We can be in the room to hear it explained, but not actually listening or taking any of it in or actually applying it to our lives. The Corinthians, they had believed, but they had kind of filtered out the

implications of the gospel for how they lived.

So if we're going to avoid the Corinthian problem, and if we're going to listen and apply the revelation of the spirit who searches the depths of God, where are we going to go to find this spiritual revelation?

Because we don't want to confuse biblical spirituality, true spirituality, with a distorted worldly understanding of spirituality. The idea that the spirit reveals things is very easily open to abuse.

[16:33] For example, true spirituality is not a guy or a girl going out with someone because God told them to. Happens frequently and usually not in the best interests of the parties involved.

That's not how the Holy Spirit works. The Holy Spirit is not a mystical voice in our heads. The worldly idea of spirituality would suggest that spirituality is this mystical sense of being in touch with the divine, a sort of airy, fairy spirituality that very frequently divorced from the tangible realities around us.

Again, that's not how the Holy Spirit works. So how does the Holy Spirit reveal his wisdom?

Through words. tangible, understandable, written words.

Listen to Paul in verse 13. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom, but in words taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words.

Now, it's worth flagging up that that last bit of the verse can be translated differently. So the translation we're using, it says explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words.

[17:50] The other viable option is, and if you've got your own Bible, it might say this, is explaining spiritual realities to those who are spiritual. And to be fair, the jury is out on which is more accurate, but we don't need to go into all the reasons for that.

It doesn't hugely change the meaning, however, because the point that Paul is making is that the Spirit speaks and the apostles, God's chosen messengers, like Paul, are the ones who speak his words.

That's who the we refers to in verse 13. The apostles, they were granted a particular role in the founding years of Christ's church, and they taught and explained spiritual realities to spiritual people with words that came from the Spirit.

So what is true spirituality, and where can wisdom be found? what's in the words of God's messengers who spoke with the authority of the Spirit, the apostles, whose writings make up what we call now the New Testament.

And so for the Corinthians to find wisdom, they would need to listen to Paul and the apostles rather than listen to the culture that surrounded them. For Christians today, we too should listen to the spiritual truths and Spirit-taught words which are recorded for us in the Bible.

[19:15] We often call it God's Word, and that's precisely because he gave the writers of every book inspiration by the Spirit to write down his words.

If we want to be wise and if we want to be spiritual, which we should, the place to go is God's Word, because that is where we find the Spirit's revelation of the mystery of God's wisdom.

It is the route to maturity and wise living that reflects God's wisdom in Jesus on the cross. Before we go any further, allow me just to caveat what I've just said.

The revelation of the Spirit and God's wisdom is indeed in God's Word. But that doesn't mean that the Spirit never speaks in other ways. God spoke to men and women in a variety of ways before the Bible was written down for us, and the stories in the Bible itself make that clear.

And although we do have the whole counsel of God in the Bible, there are times when the Spirit does reveal God through other means. For example, some Muslims have been led to Jesus as the Spirit has spoken to them in dreams.

[20:27] Many Christians have had individual revelations from the Spirit that pertain to particular situations. So let us not put God in a box. He is, after all, the omnipotent creator God, the great I am.

Nevertheless, there is a sense in which he puts himself in a box, in a manner of speaking. These caveats are the exceptions rather than the rule.

And these exceptions never ever go against what God has revealed already in his Word. God's Word is the primary place where God has revealed himself, where we find the spiritual revelation of God's wisdom.

And the Spirit works through those words, brings them alive, makes them real, so that we can understand the true wisdom of God and grow to maturity.

And that's why we talk so much about the importance of spending time in God's Word. It's because God speaks through it and reveals his spiritual wisdom through it.

[21 : 36] As Paul would later say in his second letter to Timothy, all Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

The spiritual words of Scripture basically give Christians a roadmap to maturity. And so if we're going to grow and learn God's wisdom rather than the world's, listening to the words of the Spirit do actually need to be a priority.

Otherwise, we'll be liable to fall into the Corinthian way of believing in Jesus, but then trying to live for him by reflecting the culture around us. And that just doesn't work.

The Jesus way is reflecting Jesus. And that brings us to Paul's final governing idea, the fact that Jesus is God's wisdom.

This is an idea which we kind of mentioned in passing already as we've worked our way through these verses because we basically cannot speak about God's wisdom without the idea that Christ himself is God's wisdom.

[22 : 54] But it's in these last few verses of the chapter that Paul really doubles down and focuses on this idea in particular. And he expresses it in the last verse very clearly.

We have the mind of Christ. A wee while back we spent some time in Romans looking at the Christians' union with Christ. And this idea is pretty related.

The person who believes in Jesus is united to him and can be said to have a new mind that changes the way they see the world. The mind of Christ.

Now although the Prince of Egypt isn't completely accurate in its depiction of the Exodus story, it's not half bad and it's a pretty great film with some pretty great songs. One song, Through Heaven's Eyes, is all about seeing things, not through the eyes of man, but seeing things the way God sees them.

The chorus goes, I'll not sing it, you must look at your life, look at your life through heaven's eyes. I have to say I agree wholeheartedly with the sentiments of that song.

[24 : 04] And as Christians, it's imperative that we look at the world through heaven's eyes. But it's impossible to do that unless we have been given the mind of Christ.

Open our eyes. things. Now the alternative, of course, is the mind of the world. That's what Paul's getting at in verse 14. The person without the spirit does not accept the things that come from the spirit of God, but considers them foolishness and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the spirit.

As we said earlier, sin has blinded every single person, the whole world. So try as hard as we might. Without the spirit and without our union with Christ, the wisdom of God will make no sense. That's why some of the brightest minds in the world have not believed the message of Jesus. It's not because it doesn't make sense. After all, there are plenty of exceptional minds throughout history who have believed Jesus' message.

So for the world to write Christianity off as intellectually untenable or fundamentally unbelievable, disingenuous, it doesn't quite wash or stand up as a criticism.

[25 : 24] No, the problem is that it doesn't make sense without the help of the spirit himself. When the spirit does open our eyes, well, at that point then we fall into the category outlined by Paul in verses 15 and 16.

the person with the spirit makes judgments about all things, but such a person is not subject to merely human judgments, for who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him, but we have the mind of Christ.

Now, when Paul speaks of judgments here, that word is more often translated as to examine or to investigate. The word translated as discerned at the end of verse 14 above, it's actually the same word, and I think this brings a little bit of clarity to an otherwise quite confusing sentence.

Basically, what Paul's getting across is that the one who has the Holy Spirit is able to examine and therefore make judgments about all things, because it is the spirit which is giving that person insight and understanding.

To have the spirit is to be able to understand and examine the world in a way that the world cannot even understand or examine itself. And so, when Paul says that the spiritual person is not subject to merely human judgments, what he's saying is that when the spiritual person looks at the world

through the spirit's eyes and he or she understands things as they really are, well, those without the spirit do not.

[27 : 02] And so, they think that the spiritual person's conclusions are foolish or bizarre. They don't understand them. But their examination and their judgments of the spiritual person, well, they don't stick because ultimately they're wrong.

And the wisdom of the spirit is truth. The wisdom of the world is not. As Paul says, who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him? And you'd think at this point that Paul would actually answer that question by saying, well, no one.

No one has known the mind of the Lord. But the way he ends this section, I think it's actually quite surprising. He doesn't say no one. He affirms that it is actually possible to know the mind of the Lord.

Not in its totality, of course, but he says we have the mind of Christ. The world and culture can say what it likes about Jesus and his message.

It can repudiate God's existence. It can reject the morals that mark the Christian life. It can and will make a litany of counterclaims. But it doesn't change the reality.

[28 : 14] And it shouldn't agitate or surprise those of us who do know Jesus. Because we're not subject to the criticisms, declarations, or judgments of the world.

Because those judgments are only human. we, however, have the mind of Christ. And Christ is God.

And so one question remains. If the Corinthians, as those who had believed, had the mind of Christ, why did they not reflect Christ in the way they lived?

How is that possible? Well, without wanting to spoil next week, Paul goes on to tell them that they are acting like mere humans. it's possible to have access to God's wisdom, and yet to ignore it. It's possible to be united to Christ and yet not listen to him. It's possible to believe the Jesus message, but fail to live the Jesus way. But Jesus is the word of God.

[29 : 17] As God's spiritual wisdom is found in his written word, it is found in the word made flesh, Jesus Christ. The word speaks about Jesus, and Jesus is the word.

And the wisdom of God. And so to try and distill all of our discussions so far into one idea, if we believe in Jesus, then we have to listen to his wisdom and align our lives with that wisdom.

Because we have the mind of Christ, and we are able to understand the cultural upside down wisdom of God. And so the challenge is, are we going to?

And so as we finish up, let's come out of Corinth and let's go back to the graffiti in Rome with which we started. Alexa Menos worships his God.

Interestingly, not far from the image of the crucified donkey man is another piece of graffiti. A comeback. It reads, Alexa Menos, the faithful.

[30 : 21] The way of wisdom is the cross. Jesus way is the mystery of God's wisdom unpacked and made clear. The road to maturity, wisdom and spirituality is the road that leads to the cross.

And the spirit makes it clear to those who will listen to him. And if we do, I really hope that we'll be worthy of that epithet that Alexa Menos was given.

When we worship our God and live the Jesus way, I hope that we will truly be able to be described as those who are faithful.