

Wisdom from God

The Point: Believers have the wisdom of God because we have the Spirit of God.

Session Passages: 1 Corinthians 1:20-25; 2:9-16

1 Corinthians 1:20-25

Connection to the Point: Worldly wisdom amounts to foolishness.

Context. In 1 Corinthians 1:10-17, the apostle Paul wrote about the need for Christian unity among the Corinthian believers in the face of factious rivalries and unhelpful divisions. In verses 18-20, Paul addressed this same issue by contrasting the ways of the world and the way of God. In verse 19, Paul quoted the prophet Isaiah (Isa. 29:14); in its original context, Isaiah was pronouncing a woe on the people who lived in Jerusalem for forsaking the Lord and His wisdom and who were instead following human ideas and wisdom. Paul's questions in verse 20 all point to the same reality: Christ and His gospel are wiser and more powerful than anything the world has to offer. Amid the competing voices and ideas of the world, listening to and obeying the Word of God will be a sure and steady anchor and provide hope for the future. It is also the foundation for fellowship among believers.

The one who is wise . . . teacher of the law . . . debater of this age (v. 20). Paul asked three questions of the Corinthians. All are modified by the words “of this age” which indicates that they refer to those human beings that some might considered wise. But these groups cannot comprehend the wisdom of God. “Paul does not denigrate wisdom or human reason as such (2:6) but rather wisdom that is wedded to the value system and the motivations of this present world order.”¹

As he had done earlier in this letter, Paul introduced two phrases that stand in stark contrast with one another. Paul referred to two different, distinct groups of power—the “teacher of the law” and the “debater of this age.” The “teacher of the law” refers to a group among the Jews, particularly the religious elite such as the scribes and Pharisees. The Jews followed the Torah (Genesis–Deuteronomy). They believed they would find life and wisdom by knowing and living out all the demands of the law precisely and completely. The scribes and Pharisees even added oral traditions to the written Word of God and became equally stringent about keeping those traditions. Meanwhile, the “debater of this age” is a reference to Gentiles, the non-Jewish people of Paul's day—specifically the Greeks and their rhetorical skills. The Greeks were renown for their passion for philosophy, debate, and innovative ideas (Acts 17:22-34). These two groups of people, the Jews and the Greeks, collectively represented the world's wisdom. The wisdom of God as displayed in the gospel reveals both of these perspectives to be short-sighted, false, and ultimately foolish.

God's wisdom (v. 21). Paul explained two different types of wisdom: the wisdom of the world and the wisdom of God. God is the omniscient (all-knowing), omnipotent (all-powerful) Creator of everything that is seen and everything that is not seen—that is both the physical and the spiritual worlds. Therefore, the so-called wisdom of the world will always be subservient to the wisdom of God, and the wisdom of this age cannot comprehend the wisdom and ways of God.

Foolishness of what was preached (v. 21). Christ crucified was a stumbling block to the Jews, because the Jewish expectation was for the messiah to be a conquering military hero. The Jews expected him to throw off the shackles of Rome through miraculous physical signs that ultimately would lead to the messianic king sitting on a physical throne ruling over all things—including those who oppressed God's people. A messiah who was

not only killed but killed in a way considered to be a curse did not fit their expectations and therefore they rejected Jesus.

Christ crucified is foolishness to the Gentiles because they were also obsessed with power; but, instead of military power, they sought power through philosophy, debate, and ideas. In their view someone getting crucified did not demonstrate power and wisdom, but rather foolishness and weakness.

Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God (v. 24). Both the Jews and the Greeks were seeking to find truth and power, but in misguided ways. However, God is sovereign over all things, even non-Christian religions. The desire for transcendence some religions seek is an indication of the restlessness that humans feel until they find rest in Jesus. The desire for intimacy and closeness to God sought out in other religions is an indication of the homesickness all people will have until they find their spiritual home in Christ.

God's foolishness/God's weakness (v. 25). The entire book of 1 Corinthians is thick with irony, of which these two phrases are examples. God is all-powerful and all-knowing. As such, He can't be weak or foolish. Paul intended his readers to pick up on this use of irony and conclude with him that God is always wiser, more powerful, and more knowledgeable than human beings. But from the perspective of human wisdom, the gospel seems foolish and the crucifixion a weakness. But in the end the foolishness and weakness of God proved to be stronger than the human wisdom. God through Christ achieved what only He could achieve—redemption for those who will repent of their sins and place their faith in Christ.

1 Corinthians 2:9-11

Connection to the Point: The Holy Spirit reveals the mind of God.

As it is written (v. 9). As in chapter 1, Paul quoted the Old Testament prophet Isaiah (Isa. 64:4). Paul did not feel the need to defend the reliability and authority of the Old Testament. Because Paul was writing to a group of people who already accepted that the Old Testament is God's Word, the apostle could assume that they trusted Isaiah's words to be the Word of God and applicable to them. Similarly, we can trust that God's Word is authoritative and sufficient for us today.

God has prepared (v. 9). As the Creator and Sustainer of the universe, God is in absolute control of everything that happens in His creation. Theologians refer to this reality as the providence of God—"God's benevolent and wise superintendence of His creation."² God's providence is one of the reasons God's Word endures from generation to generation. God's providence means the Word delivered to Isaiah had enduring meaning for the church in the first century, as seen in Corinth. It is also the reason that God's Word in 1 Corinthians endures and applies to us today. However, in spite of God's providence, we will not understand everything that happens in our lives. There are mysteries and tragedies that God allows into our lives, the nature of which we will not understand fully on this side of heaven.

The Spirit (v. 10). The New Testament reveals that the Holy Spirit has many functions and actions. God the Spirit inspired and guided human writers to produce the Bible for us (2 Pet. 1:20-21). He also illuminates the Bible for believers so that when we read it, we can understand the meaning of Scripture; we can know how it applies to our day and age, and specifically understand its significance for our own personal lives (Eph 1:18-19). The Spirit indwells believers and empowers them to live, in cooperation with Him, according to God's ways (Gal. 5:16-25). The Holy Spirit convicts people of sin (John 16:7-11). He points people to Jesus. "Christians are initially born of the Spirit (John 3:1-8), receive the Spirit as a gift (Luke 11:13; Acts 2:38), are sealed by the Spirit (Eph. 1:13; 2 Cor. 1:22), receive the firstfruits of the Spirit (Rom. 8:23), and are given the Spirit as a pledge of final redemption (Eph. 1:14; 2 Cor. 5:5). In Christian experience the Spirit continues His activity . . . The Spirit gives [believers] assurance of their salvation (Gal. 4:6; Rom. 8:15-16) . . . He assists them in prayer, especially in times of suffering (Rom. 8:26-27). He enables them to resist sin (Eph. 4:25-32;

Gal. 5:16). The Spirit produces the fruit of Christ-likeness in their lives (Gal. 5:22-23). He empowers them for witness (Acts 1:4-8; 4:31). He fills their lives, enabling them to be changed in their daily walks with the Lord (Eph. 5:18-21).”³

The depths of God (v. 10). Human beings cannot know God exhaustively. In His perfection and eternity God is too great for us to fully understand. However, because of His great love for His people, God has chosen to reveal Himself to humanity in Jesus Christ (John 1:18) and thereby to grant believers the ability to know Him truly. Since the Spirit of God searches the depths of God and reveals those things to us, we can accurately and sincerely know God even though we will never know Him comprehensively and completely.

The thoughts of God (v. 11). Paul used an analogy of the lesser to the greater. Just as the human spirit within a human knows what the person is thinking so the Spirit of God knows the thoughts of God. The prophet Isaiah, from whom Paul quoted in this section, wrote that God’s thoughts and ways are not our thoughts and ways (Isa. 55:8). His ways and thoughts are far above and beyond our ways and thoughts (v. 9). The reality of God’s superior ways and thoughts, however, does not mean we can never know something about God. We can know God’s ways and thoughts in His Word, because He has chosen to reveal Himself to us in His Word.

1 Corinthians 2:12-16

Connection to the Point: We must depend on the Holy Spirit to distinguish God’s will from human thinking.

The spirit of the world (v. 12). The word “world” is used in the New Testament in at least three different ways. First, it sometimes refers to the entire created universe. In John 1:10, John used the word “world” in different ways, and the middle clause “the world was created through him” is an example of this first usage—all the created order. Second, the term “world” sometimes refers to the world of human persons. This usage occurs in John 1:10 in the third clause “the world did not recognize him” and also in one of the most popular verses in the entire Bible—John 3:16. Finally, the word “world” is sometimes used to refer to the systems of evil that have been organized by humans but are ultimately and at the deepest level under the control of Satan, the god of this age (2 Cor. 4:4). It is in this final way that Paul used the term “world” in this context—“the spirit of the world.” Satan has been deceiving and manipulating humankind from the beginning (Gen. 3). He and his spiritual allies work through the worldly systems in an attempt to deceive people and to oppose the mighty and salvific work of God. Satan blinds the minds of unbelievers so that they do not see the light of the gospel available through Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 4:4) In Ephesians 6:10-18, Paul wrote that all of our battles are ultimately against these spiritual forces and not against other people.

What has been freely given to us (v. 12). Salvation through faith in Jesus Christ is by the grace of God alone. Salvation and all that flows from it is freely given to us by God in Christ. Recognizing that spiritual understanding is part of this gift should produce confidence, humility, and joy. First, it should produce confidence because it is a gift from the omniscient and omnipotent Creator who loves us (Rom. 8:31-39). Second, it should produce humility because it is a gift not something that we have earned. The only thing that we deserve is death due to our sins (6:23). Finally, recognizing that spiritual understanding is a gift from God should produce joy because it means we have been granted the privilege to be the dwelling place of the living God, have been adopted as His children, and have been given eternal life (Rom. 8:9,14-17; 1 Cor. 3:16-17; 1 John 5:11).

Human wisdom (v. 13). All human beings are created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26-27). As God’s image bearers, humans have several abilities that are unique to them. They can relate, create, and think critically and deeply about all sorts of things. However, humans are also fallen and broken and have distorted the image of God in both their own lives and in the institutions they have created. As a result of this brokenness and fallenness, all solely human wisdom will ultimately lead to idolatry, self-deception, and self-destruction (Rom.

1:18-32). Wisdom that looks only inward into our fallen human nature and never outward to the revelation of God in Christ ultimately will never satisfy and is unable to save us.

Spiritual people (v. 13). Believers are spiritual people indwelt by the Holy Spirit. They are able to understand the hidden wisdom of God (vv. 6-7) revealed by the Spirit (v. 10). In contrast are “words taught by human wisdom,” a wisdom that never looks to God but only inward to fallen human ideas and institutions.

Evaluated spiritually (v. 14). Paul contrasted how people without the indwelling and empowering of the Holy Spirit evaluate ideas with how people who are indwelt by the Holy Spirit evaluate ideas. To those without the Holy Spirit, the things which are from God are foolishness (1:18,21,23),

Who has known the Lord’s mind (v. 16). This phrase is taken from Isaiah 40:13. The context of Isaiah 40 is God’s assuring the people of Israel through Isaiah that He would bring them back from exile in Babylon. He would not leave them there, but would restore them as He had promised (Jer. 29:10). The people in Isaiah’s day had not yet received the Holy Spirit and were living before the first coming of Jesus. Paul was assuring the church at Corinth that they were in a different situation. They had the indwelling and empowerment of the Holy Spirit and therefore “the mind of Christ” (v. 16), which is another way of saying “God’s hidden wisdom” (v. 7).

1. Mark Taylor, *1 Corinthians*, vol. 28, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2014), 68.
2. Douglas Blount, “Providence,” *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* [HIBD], gen. ed. Chad Brand, rev. (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2015), 1312.
3. Chad Brand, “Holy Spirit,” HIBD, 760.