

1 Corinthians 2:6-13
(Proverbs 8:12-17; Matthew 16:13-17)
“God’s Hidden Wisdom Now Revealed”

Introduction

Paul has been addressing the corrosive spiritual pride of the Corinthian Christians that lies at the heart of their quarrelling and divisions. Craving acceptance by the surrounding Greco-Roman culture, they have sought to present the gospel as a form of philosophical wisdom and to remove the scandal at the heart of the gospel: namely, the cross of Christ, the idea of worshiping and serving a crucified King.

However, Paul wants them to understand that the gospel is not anti-wisdom or irrational. It is rather a greater wisdom than is available to unaided humanity. So he writes now in the passage before us of knowing God’s secret and hidden wisdom. Such language – “secret and hidden wisdom” – has caused much misunderstanding over the course of the centuries since the apostle wrote these words, and it is important that we understand what he is saying. To that end, we will ask our text three questions:

- First, what is God’s secret and hidden wisdom?
- Secondly, how can we know God’s secret and hidden wisdom?
- And, thirdly, how can we tell others of God’s secret and hidden wisdom?

Body

1. What is God’s secret and hidden wisdom (2:6-9)?

The world’s idea of wisdom versus God’s wisdom:

To the ancient philosophers of Plato’s school, the quest for wisdom involved discerning the pure and lasting ideals in and through their transient and partial expressions in this world of shadows. Through deep thought and dialogue with other seekers of wisdom, one hoped at last to be freed from the material world to dwell with the unchanging ideals, the good and the true and the beautiful. To followers of the Greco-Roman mystery religions, secret and hidden wisdom was to be known through a series of initiations and secret ceremonies.

Some readers have therefore assumed that Paul here presents Christianity as a form of secret philosophical or religious wisdom to be revealed only to those initiates who have progressed far enough along to be entrusted with such wisdom. But this is precisely the kind of thing that Paul is opposing. The context of all that he has written thus far and will continue to write in this

letter should make it clear that Paul is equating the hidden and secret wisdom of God with the central message of the gospel: the cross of Christ, the Lordship of one who was crucified by Rome, but whom God raised up to life. This is the only message that saves, the only message that Paul would describe as “for our glory” (2:7). It is the way of salvation that appears weak and foolish to the surrounding world, but that Paul has already described as “the power of God” (1:18), the message that alone can humble human pride and destroy the power of sin and death.

2. How can we know God’s secret and hidden wisdom (2:10-12)?

The spirit of the world versus the Spirit of God:

But if this message is in fact the very wisdom and power of God, and the cross of Christ the one place where God is most highly exalted, why do the wise of the world not understand it? The answer has to do with the very core identity of each individual person. Paul says that by nature, we are under the sway of the world’s way of thinking, what he calls “the spirit of the world” (2:12).

He is *not* suggesting, I think, that there is a demonic spirit called “the spirit of the world” that somehow dwells in and influences humans who are as yet unchanged by God’s grace. What I think he means is that there is a way of living and thinking that marks all humans by nature, and that may enable them to accomplish great things: marvelous works of mathematical, scientific and creative thinking that transform our lives, works of art and music and literature that challenge, inform and delight us, feats of physical strength and athletic skill that bring us to our feet in praise and applause. But here is the point: all these things are utterly incapable of telling us who God is, and how we are to know him and be at peace with him. Why?

Paul uses a human analogy: I cannot know what you are thinking unless you choose to reveal it to me. I can guess, I can infer from your behavior, but until you speak to me in words that I can understand, I cannot know your thoughts. “Who knows a person’s thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him?” asks Paul. “So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God” (2:11). So, how can I possibly know the thoughts of God? “Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God” (2:12).

I know of no other passage in the Bible that more clearly states the limit of human knowledge. We can learn and accomplish so much – even travel to the moon – through human wisdom. But the one thing we cannot do is know God unless God graciously chooses to reveal himself to us. But there are many scriptures, many books that claim to be God’s Word to us. How are we to

discern between them. They all contain passages of great beauty and instructions on living more loving and noble lives. Here is the difference, says the apostle: this “secret and hidden wisdom which God decreed before the ages for our glory” but which “None of the rulers of this age understood” ... “These things God has revealed to us through his Spirit” (2:7,8,10). In other words, even the Scriptures cannot be rightly understood or received as from God unless God’s Spirit graciously illumines our hearts and minds.

3. How can we tell others of God’s secret and hidden wisdom (2:13)?

Merely human truth that can be discovered by observation and reason versus spiritual truth that must be revealed:

Then how can we possibly communicate the gospel to others, if only God’s Spirit can give them understanding and bring them to faith? Paul’s answer is, “And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual” (2:13). Is Paul, then, doing exactly what his opponents were doing: setting up a superior class of Christians, “those who are spiritual,” as over against typical, garden variety Christians, only the very spiritual being entrusted with the deep things of God? Absolutely not! That would be to rebuild what he is trying to tear down in this letter.

We plan to look next week at what these verses and the opening verses of chapter three tell us about the people Paul refers to as “the spiritual,” over against those whom he calls “the natural,” and those whom he calls “the people of the flesh,” “infants in Christ” (2:13,14; 3:1). But for now, the point we need to make is simply this: Apart from God’s grace, even the wisest people are incapable of knowing who God is and how he saves from death those who are his. We would never come up with the cross of Christ as the revelation of God’s wisdom and power. And until God gives his Spirit, that word will remain secret and hidden, appearing as foolish and weak to the wise and powerful of this world.

Conclusion

So, then, what are we to do? What is the use of sharing our faith with those whom we long to see transformed by God’s grace? Here is the answer: we are to go on loving them and loving the Lord and praying that the way we live our lives, the quality of our openness and compassion, arising from our love, will declare unmistakably that the gospel is true and much to be desired. Apart from God’s grace, they cannot believe. So don’t be impatient with those who don’t yet believe. For we are God’s instruments in vindicating his gospel and displaying his Spirit to them.