

# **Challenges Christians Face**

## **Wisdom from the Spirit**

*1 Corinthians 2:6-16*

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# Wisdom from the Spirit

## Scripture

“That’s not fair! Why can’t I do it?”

If you are a parent, you recall hearing these words at one point or another from one or more of your children.

You try to explain your decision to your child.

“It’s for your own good,” you say.

“No, it’s not! It’s just not fair!” comes the reply.

And then you present your crowning point, “One day you will understand why I am making this decision for you.”

And even as you make that statement you know that it is still completely unsatisfying to your child.

It may take years, and perhaps even decades, before our children see the wisdom of a decision that we made for them in their childhood. Often it is not because they are rebellious. No. It is simply that they are too immature to grasp the decision we are making for them. In that sense, wisdom is only for the mature.

Maturity has its downsides—aches and pains, bills and pressures—but one of the great benefits of maturity is that it often opens our eyes to wisdom. We are able to see things more clearly than we could have seen in our youth.

What is true about maturity in the natural realm is also true in the spiritual realm.

The apostle Paul points out in today’s text that there is a wisdom that is available only to the spiritually mature. It is a wisdom that comes from God and opposes the foolishness of a sinful world. Sadly, it is a wisdom that many in the church in Corinth lacked, and a wisdom that many in the modern church still lack.<sup>1</sup>

Today we continue our study in a series I am calling *Challenges Christians Face*. One of the challenges that Christians face

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<sup>1</sup> Richard L. Pratt, Jr, vol. 7, *I & II Corinthians*, Holman New Testament Commentary; Holman Reference (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 33.

is understanding what wisdom from the Spirit of God is.

Let's read 1 Corinthians 2:6-16:

<sup>6</sup> Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. <sup>7</sup> But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. <sup>8</sup> None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. <sup>9</sup> But, as it is written,

**“What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,  
nor the heart of man imagined,  
what God has prepared for those who love him”—**

<sup>10</sup> these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. <sup>11</sup> For 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. <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.

<sup>14</sup> 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. <sup>15</sup> The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one. <sup>16</sup> “For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?” But we have the mind of Christ. (1 Corinthians 2:6–16)

## Introduction

One of the first classes I attended at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School was a class on Systematic Theology. I remember the professor raising the question about whether or not a non-Christian

could understand spiritual truth. Some said, “No.” Others said, “Yes.” We talked about theologians who did not even profess faith in Christ, yet wrote on theological issues, and argued about whether or not they could understand spiritual truth.

This is really the question that the apostle Paul is dealing with in our text. He is answering the question, “Who can understand spiritual truth?”

## Review

But before we examine that question, let me briefly review what we have covered so far in *The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians*.

After the introductory salutation (1:1-3) and thanksgiving (1:4-9) of the letter, Paul immediately addressed the issue of divisions in the church in Corinth (1:10-17). Paul urged the Christians in Corinth to heal the divisions in the church because they are contrary to the unity that exists in Christ’s body.

The reason for the division in the church at Corinth was due to a misunderstanding of human wisdom versus the wisdom from the Spirit.

Paul came down hard on human wisdom because he argued against a Corinthian attitude toward wisdom that placed him and his gospel in a less than favorable light. Human wisdom about salvation that is purely philosophical, rhetorical, and speculative is wrong. Instead, there is a wisdom about salvation that has been revealed by God that is right.

The radical contrast that Paul set up between human wisdom and the message of the gospel could have led to the misconception that the Christian faith is foolishness. So, Paul carefully explained that the gospel is a very special kind of wisdom that can be discerned only by those who are spiritually mature.

## Lesson

Similarly, in today’s lesson we are told that the gospel is a

very special kind of wisdom that can only be discerned by those who are spiritually mature.

Let's use the following outline for today's lesson:

1. The Gospel Is Not Humanly Discovered (2:6-9)
2. The Gospel Is Divinely Revealed (2:10-16)

## I. The Gospel is Not Humanly Discovered (2:6-9)

First, I want you to see that the gospel is not humanly discovered.

Paul begins by saying in verse 6a, **“Yet among the mature . . .”**

The first thing we have to wrestle with is the word **“mature.”** What does that mean? Who is Paul referring to when he talks about **“the mature”**?

Some say that Paul is simply talking to believers. Others say that Paul is talking to advanced believers. Which is it?

It is very important that we get this right now because it is the key to understanding this passage and also the passage we will look at in the next chapter.

**Mature** can mean “perfect” (as in the *KJV*) or “complete,” but it can also refer to a person who has full membership in a group, or to one who is fully initiated.<sup>2</sup> **The mature** that Paul is speaking about here in this verse are those who are new creatures in Christ, that is, those who are Christians.

Paul is not saying that he speaks God's wisdom only when he is with believers who are advanced in the faith. Rather, he is speaking God's wisdom when he is among believers who are truly in the faith. That is, Paul is simply talking to believers, to Christians.

As John MacArthur says, “True believers are the only ones among whom the gospel can be wisdom. To all others it is a stumbling block or foolishness (1:23).”<sup>3</sup>

So Paul says in verse 6, **“Yet among the mature, that is,**

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<sup>2</sup> John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1996), 60.

<sup>3</sup> John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1996), 60.

among the believers, **we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away.”**

Here Paul asserts that the wisdom of the gospel is different than the world’s wisdom. All human wisdom is **doomed to pass away**.

**“But,”** Paul goes on to say in verse 7, **“we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory.”** The **wisdom of God** is a **secret and hidden wisdom**. Paul is simply saying that the gospel is something that God keeps secret and hidden from people—until he chooses to reveal it.

Now, Paul is simply echoing what Jesus himself taught. Remember when the disciples came to Jesus and asked him, “Why do you speak to them [the crowds] in parables?” Jesus answered them, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given” (Matthew 13:10-11; cf. 11:25).

Now, **“None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory”** (2:8). The crucifixion is proof that **the rulers of this age** do not understand the wisdom of God and, therefore, they do not understand the gospel. Without aid from God, they are incapable of discovering the gospel. They simply cannot do it.

Why is it that the gospel is not and cannot be humanly discovered? Alluding to Isaiah 64:4 the apostle Paul says, **“But, as it is written, ‘What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him’”** (2:9). Paul is not referring to the wonders of heaven or of this world. Rather, he is referring to the wisdom God has prepared for Christians. His point is that the natural eye, ear, and heart of man cannot know **what God has prepared for those who love him**, that is, for Christians.

There is simply no way that an unregenerate person can know God savingly. Oh, an unregenerate person can know a lot about God. But an unregenerate person cannot discover the gospel

without the aid of God.

So, since all people are born unregenerate, since all people cannot naturally know the gospel, how is it that anyone can come to know the gospel?

## II. The Gospel Is Divinely Revealed (2:10-16)

Second, I want you to see that the gospel is divinely revealed.

On our own, we simply cannot come to know God. We are unregenerate. We are dead in our transgressions. We are spiritually blind. We simply cannot come to God on our own.

But the glory of the gospel is that God comes to us. The wisdom of God comes to us.

And how does the gospel come to us? The gospel is divinely revealed in three ways.

### A. *The Gospel Is Divinely Revealed By Revelation (2:10-11)*

First, the gospel is divinely revealed by revelation.

Paul said in verses 10a, **“These things God has revealed to us through the Spirit.”**

It seems to me that when Paul uses the word **“us”** here, he is referring not to himself plus the believers but, rather, to himself plus those to whom **these things God has revealed**. In other words, I believe it is best to understand that **“us”** refers to those who have received divine revelation.

Specifically, that refers to the human authors of Scripture. They are the ones who have written down the revelation that God has given to them for our instruction. I think we will see this even more clearly as Paul develops his argument.

Then Paul says in verses 10b-11, **“For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For 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.”**

Let me ask you a question. As I look at you now, do you know what I am thinking about you? Someone may say, “Freddy, you are thinking that I am smart, well-dressed, and good looking.” Well, maybe I am. But how do you know for sure that this is what I am thinking about you? The point is that you don’t.

In fact, even spouses who have been married for decades don’t really know the innermost thoughts of each other. We simply do not know exactly what another person is thinking. That’s why Paul asks, “**For who knows a person’s thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him?**” (2:11a). No one except the person himself knows what he is thinking.

Then Paul goes on to say in verse 11b, “**So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God.**” Commentator Gordon D. Fee says that Paul is employing an argument that “like is known only by like.”<sup>4</sup> That is to say that only a fish knows a fish, only a bird knows a bird, only a person knows a person and, therefore, only God knows God.

Only the Spirit, who is God himself, knows the mind and will of God. That is why he is able to reveal the gospel to Paul and the other recipients of divine revelation, who then wrote it down.

### *B. The Gospel Is Divinely Revealed by Inspiration (2:12-13)*

Second, the gospel is divinely revealed by inspiration.

The process of the Spirit’s transmission of God’s truth is called *inspiration*. That is why Paul said in verses 12, “**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.**”

Paul wants us to understand that what he and the other writers of Scripture received was **not the spirit of this world**. Rather, they received **the Spirit who is from God**. And why did Paul and the other writers of Scripture receive the Holy Spirit? So **that we**

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<sup>4</sup> Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), 67.



**might understand the things freely given us by God.**

So, God the Holy Spirit first revealed truth to Paul and also to the other authors of Scripture. Then, he inspired them to write down in their own words the very words that he wanted to convey. Paul and the other writers did not record their own ideas and interpretations. They recorded what the Spirit revealed to them and only what he revealed to them. The Spirit used words that the human authors knew and used, but he selected and arranged them exactly the way he wanted them, while at the same time preserving the author's own personal style. The Bible, therefore, is not only God's Word but also God's words.

The apostle Paul wrote to Timothy in 2 Timothy 3:16a, "All Scripture is breathed out by God. . . ." The phrase "breathed out" is the Greek word for *inspiration*. And so Paul understood that all that God has revealed to the human authors of the Bible and what they have recorded is inspired, or, breathed out by God.

And so Paul says to the Corinthians that this wisdom from God, this gospel, is divinely revealed by inspiration. Therefore, he says in verse 13, "**And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.**"

Here again we see that Paul makes clear that the things of the Spirit can only be understood by believers, that is, by **those who are spiritual**.

*C. The Gospel Is Divinely Revealed by Illumination (2:14-16)*

And third, the gospel is divinely revealed by illumination.

Paul said in verse 14, "**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.**"

Here Paul moves to apply what he has been saying to all Christians. Only regenerate people, only Christians, can understand the gospel. Why? Because the gospel is **spiritually discerned**.

## Challenges Christians Face

God started convicting me of sin, righteousness, and judgment at the age of nineteen for a period of about 6 months. I had come to a realization that I was a sinner. I knew that if I died I would go to hell. I knew that I wanted to go to heaven, but I did not know how. During a large portion of that time I was actively involved in the war in northern Namibia and Angola. I was desperate to know the truth of the gospel. I remember praying on many occasions and asking God to save me. Nothing happened. I remember reading my little Gideon's New Testament, but it didn't make sense.

Finally, on Easter Sunday evening in 1976 I was wonderfully converted at a church service. I knew that if I died that night I would go directly to heaven into the presence of Jesus, my glorious Savior. I prayed, and I sensed that I was talking to God. I read my Bible, and it suddenly made sense! It felt as if the Word of God was alive!

Why is that? Why is it that prior to my conversion I could not really understand the Bible? But after my conversion the Bible made sense to me?

That is exactly what Paul is talking about in verse 14, **“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.”** But the Christian is spiritually alive and is now illumined by the Word of God.

In contrast to the unconverted and unspiritual person, **the spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one** (2:15). In other words, the Christian is able to understand the gospel and the things of God, and is beyond the critique of non-believers as far as the gospel is concerned.

Paul asks, **“For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?”** (2:16a). An unregenerate person does not understand the gospel. He cannot understand the gospel without wisdom from the Spirit. So he cannot instruct God about how he should or should not work in this world.

As Christians, however, God instructs us. We are able to un-

derstand the gospel because **we have the mind of Christ** (2:16b).

John MacArthur gives a helpful word of caution and counsel. He says, “The doctrine of illumination does not mean we can know and understand everything (Deuteronomy 29:29), that we do not need human teachers (Ephesians 4:11-12), or that study is not hard work (2 Timothy 2:15). It does mean that Scripture can be understood by every Christian who is diligent and obedient.”<sup>5</sup>

So, the gospel is divinely revealed by revelation, inspiration, and illumination. Revelation and inspiration were given only to the human authors who wrote down the Scriptures. All Christians, however, have been given illumination by the Spirit when they believed the gospel.

### Conclusion

So, the gospel is a very special kind of wisdom that can only be discerned by those who are spiritually mature, that is, by Christians.

The question I want to ask you is this: do you possess this special kind of wisdom? In other words, do you believe the gospel? Are you a Christian?

A Christian is someone who has been illumined by the Holy Spirit to understand and believe the message of the gospel.

If you are a Christian, the Word of God will be illumined to you. It’s basic message of salvation will make sense to you.

But, if you are not a Christian, the Word of God will not be illumined to you. I urge you to ask the Holy Spirit to give you the gift of faith so that you will be able to believe the gospel. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1996), 65.



# Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ  
and **membership** in his church family,  
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,  
equip them for their **ministry** in the church  
and life **mission** in the world,  
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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**PRAAYER:**

Our Father, I thank you for the apostle Paul and his first letter to the Corinthians.

Your Word teaches us that the gospel is not humanly discovered. Rather, it is divinely revealed.

The gospel is divinely revealed by revelation and inspiration to the apostles, prophets, and other authors of Scriptures. And it is divinely revealed by illumination to those who become believers in the Lord Jesus Christ.

O Father, if there are any here today who are not believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, would you grant them faith so that your Word will be illumined to them as well.

And for this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

**BENEDICTION:**

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

**CHARGE:**

Now, brothers and sisters, go from here today with the mind of Christ who illumines your understanding of the Word of God!