

Church Live Re-Visited: Session Two - Part 2

by Ron Bailey

The sermon emphasizes the contrast between human wisdom and divine wisdom, urging Christians to live by the principle of 'not I but Christ'.

Duration: 35:22

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 1:20, James 3:13

Topics: "Godly Wisdom", "Christian Humility"

Description

This sermon delves into the wisdom of God versus the wisdom of the world, emphasizing the importance of choosing God's wisdom which comes from above and leads to humility, mercy, and righteousness. It contrasts the mindset of independence from God with the surrender and dependence on God's power, especially exemplified through the cross of Christ. The sermon highlights the mystery of God's wisdom that confounds the rulers of this age, revealing the profound truth that God's strength is often displayed through weakness and humility.

Transcript

Those two key facts is that this was written to people who were genuinely Christians, first fact. Second fact, people who are not living in the way that Christians ought to live. They were living from the I. I remember, just before we move on, I remember when I was a very young Christian, all our meetings other than the church meetings used to take place in the rectory, which was kind of like the parish house, as it were, the rector or the vicarly.

And I remember that he had a big study and a big fireplace, and on the fireplace was a prayer card from a group called, what was the Rwanda Rundi Mission. It was a man named Joe Church, and they had a teaching that a man named Brian, Roy Hessian, later kind of adopted and kind of widely known. And on the car, on the mantel shelf, he had this card, and it was a quotation from Galatians 2 and 20, where Paul again uses this emphatic I, and he says, the life that I know of, yet no longer I. And he makes this, but I, I don't live this life, but Christ lives in me, he says.

And in this text that they've got, it had written out, no longer I but Christ. And what they've done is, in Rwanda Rundi, the ruling tribe over many centuries had been the Wotutsi. And if you can remember, not too distant ago, the Wotutsi is a very tall, noble kind of looking people, and they were almost hereditary rulers.

And the Hachu, I think, were the kind of the smaller in stature, anyway. And when this, there was a revival that moved among them for many years, and the Wotutsi always used to say that they knew when they were walking in the power of the revival, because they felt no pride or superiority towards the Hachu. And as soon as they began to become complacent, and life began to lose its fire, or began to lose its edge, this kind of sense of haughtiness and pride of place would begin to raise its head again.

And what they'd done in this thing was, when it said not I but Christ, in the capital I, there was a Wotutsi warrior standing very kind of proud and erect, and curled right up with his face on the ground into the sea of Christ, was another Wotutsi. Not I but Christ. Now, not I but Christ is the working dynamic of Christianity.

It's the working dynamic of Christianity. Not only Christ, but not I. A definite choice not to go my own way. A definite choice not to make my own preferences, that the pattern by which my life is directed, but to deny myself and to say yes to the word Christ.

So not I but Christ. Okay, I want to talk now in the second part about two sources, or two kinds of wisdom. I don't know whether you remember, because it's over a month ago now, but when we talked in the first sessions, I talked about the city of Corinth, and told you that it was actually a very sophisticated city.

It was a city where there was, there were many, many intellectual people. It was famous for its philosophers and all kinds of things. It was famous, in other words, for its wisdom.

But the trouble is that it was the wrong kind of wisdom. It was the wisdom of human intellect. It was the wisdom of man's pride in thinking that he can solve this problem.

Whatever this thing is, we can cure it. I always go back to my kind of quote about the six million dollar man at this point. If you remember, those of you who are old enough, remember the six million dollar man.

He was an air pilot, a test pilot, who was almost killed. And then he said, we can, we have the technology, we can rebuild it. And they made this kind of robotic character.

But it's that, it's that kind we can do it. We've got the resources, we can rebuild it. We can solve it.

And this pride in human intellect, and this pride in the human ability to get to the bottom of all problems and to solve everything, was endemic in Corinth. It was rife with it. Actually, it was rife through all the Greek empire, all the Greek world, but particularly in Corinth.

And Paul is now going to write about different kinds of wisdom and which kind of wisdom we're going to choose. And this is what he has to say in, in 1 Corinthians chapter 1 and verse 20. And this is one of those places where it is helpful to use the New King James Version, because I'll read what it says here in my version right in front of me.

Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? Now, if you're using an old King James Version, you'll have the word world twice. And one of the problems with the old King James Version is that there are three different words in the, in the original Greek language, which are all translated in the King James Version by the one word world. And actually they have a different kind of feel to them.

And that's why here it's actually split them up. Where is the disputer of this age? One of these words, aeon, really means a kind of an era, an epoch, a period of time. And what Paul is saying here is he's, he's, he's throwing out this challenge.

It's one of these many questions that Paul asks to engage our thinking. And he says, well, where is the disputer of this age? There's a lot of contrast in the New Testament between this age and the age that is to come. In the letter to the Hebrews, for example, it describes genuine Christians as people who have begun to partake of the powers of the world to come.

It's aeon, it's the age to come. So there is an age to come and there's this age. And regenerate men and women are people who have already begun to taste and enjoy and partake of the powers of a coming era where we're ahead of schedule.

And there is a regeneration coming where all things will pass away, all things will become new, when there'll be a new heaven and a new earth and the old world passed away. At the present time that hasn't taken place. We are ahead.

We're at the front of the crowd if we're born again, because in us already the work of regeneration has made its start. And in us all things have passed away and all things are becoming new. So that's one of the words, it's aeon.

And the other is this word world, which really means sort of the system. This is the word cosmos and it's actually the word you get cosmetic from. It has to do with kind of order and pattern and shape.

So what Paul is talking about is the fact that there is a way of thinking which really is, it's from this era. It's from, not the era of grace, it's from this era and this era has someone ruling over it. He refers to it in Ephesians as the prince of the power of the air.

And John's letter, if you remember, he says that the wicked one doesn't touch us although the whole world is in his embrace. So there's a sense in which the world, its ways of thinking, its order, its structure, its patterns, its organization, its ability to exist without God, its independence of God, it actually made possible because there is another kind of wisdom that's kind of flowing into it. And it's a wisdom that is diametrically opposed, absolutely opposite to the kind of wisdom that Paul wants to talk about here.

So what does he say? Well he's talking about this wisdom which is, if the world is, when people talk about the world, sometimes this used to happen more perhaps maybe 50 years ago amongst Christians, when they said the world they meant pictures or makeup or beer or cigarettes or something like that. And I don't know what you think of now when you say the world. But the world, you can't make that straightforward equation that the world is the cinema or the world is the dance hall.

Actually the world, it's an atmosphere, it's a mindset. And what is at the center of it is independence of God. I think I've said this to you before, but many many years ago now the Duke of Edinburgh was speaking at a meeting of farmers and he was quite amusing, he was saying different things that appealed to them.

And he was referring to the fact that they were doing some experiments, I think with silver nitrate, to seed clouds to see if they could make it rain. And he said, you know, we've got these kind of super seeds and we've got these fertilizers and we've got this and now we can even change the weather, we don't need God anymore. Now that's the essence of that.

I'm not criticising him because other people would feel the same, even if they didn't say it. What I'm saying is that that essence is that we don't need God anymore, that we can go it alone and our independence is the essence of the world mindset. It's there.

Of course it goes right back to Genesis chapter 3. It goes right back to the very beginning when the temptation was that if man was only willing to break free from God and break this single prohibition that God had put in place, this is what Satan said to Eve, God knows you won't die, you'll actually become like God, knowing good and evil. You will become in yourself the judge and the jury. You don't need any external absolute standard of any kind.

You yourself will be able to determine what's good and evil. You can be God yourself and you know that's actually the kind of world we live in, where people are, some people complain about foreign standards and they say morality isn't the same. What they're really saying is that in different times you see this in different ways, but the world is a system which has found a way of working without dependence upon God and it's prime, prime.

Years ago there used to be in the meetings that we had at Warsaw in Poland, there used to be two grandmasters, chess grandmasters who came to the meetings. Now if you played chess at all, these are people with three brains each. These are people of amazing intellect and ability of a particular kind anyway and I can remember talking to one of them one day and I said well what is the appeal you know of chess at the level that you play at? And he said prime.

He said what you're trying to do is you're trying to wrestle that man's brain down until he surrenders. It's interesting because that's really what the real prosthetic was, it's this competitiveness. Okay so it's this and Collins was famous for this kind of wisdom.

In fact the Greek word for wisdom is sophos or sophia which is the word we get sophisticated from and when we say sophisticated we mean well you know a person who is fairly kind of secure in life and they can, they're not dependent on people, they can make their own ways, they think in a certain way, they've got their own style, they're confident in the fact that they can survive and more than survive in this world. Okay now Paul begins to speak of another wisdom and this is what you'll see here in 1 Corinthians chapter 1 and verse 21. He says for since in the wisdom of God the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe.

And then he illustrates this by talking about two groups of people, the Jews and the Greeks and he says well the Jews always wanted a power sign, that's what they were doing. Remember the gospel, they're always wanting a sign and the Lord Jesus said a wicked and evil generation will seek after a sign and no sign will be given them. They wanted an absolute proof in time in terms of dynamic and power that they could see.

Now the Greek instinct was actually to want a different kind of a proof, not a physical proof but a mental proof, something which was absolutely watertight in its logical presentation so that you couldn't possibly come to any other conclusion other than this one and they were brilliant at it, they really were. And what Paul is saying is really is that what God has done in Christ, it's almost as though God has gone out of his way to kind of cause as big a stumbling block as possible to both these mindsets. The one who demands that God will show his power and muscle, show himself mighty on behalf of those and Paul speaks here in 1st Corinthians and in 2nd Corinthians about the cross and he describes it as God's weakness.

It says that Christ was crucified through weakness and here he describes it as foolishness and of course he's not sort of saying in absolute terms it's foolish, what he's just simply saying is that if you view this through and if you view this through the grid of natural wisdom, this is crazy, this is absolute folly, why would God do this? Why would a God who is the supreme power who holds the whole universe in his hands die in blood and sweat and rags and tears? Why would God do that? There's no sense to this and it's important to understand that when Paul talks about the foolishness and preaching he's not talking about the act of preaching, he's not saying that this preacher is making a fool of himself, he's talking about the content, it's the content of the preaching, it's the gospel that's foolish, it's the gospel that's weak. It does not give intellectual satisfaction until you've come to know Christ yourself. It does not give kind of dynamic spiritual satisfaction until you've come to know Christ yourself.

God is willing to show what he's done makes sense and he's willing to show the power of the gospel but he's not willing to do it in order to prove himself to anybody. Now the Greeks loved rhetoric and Arcturus to say they loved the ability to speak well and they really were brilliant at it and they could speak for two or three hours and they would do it without notes and that would be coherent and they didn't even have the parenthesis, they didn't even have brackets so they were able to kind of hold one thought in their mind and then to move away from it and then come back to it and draw it back into another conclusion. It's a skill, it's a skill that they had learned and Paul had set himself to have nothing to do with it, nothing to do with it and when he preached in Corinth he wasn't using skillful words.

This phrase here and there's that little phrase where he speaks about the gospel and he says, I'm looking for that bit where he says that well I can see what an example of in chapter two and verse one when he says and I brethren when I came to you did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God for I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified and I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. I think that's a wonderful notion I mentioned this a little while ago in the church that sometimes if you kind of view a man through the gift that God has given him and you'll get a completely wrong idea of what the man is like. We usually meet Paul through his writings.

Now in second Corinthians Paul records a criticism that was made of him and people were saying about him that his writings, his letters are weak, are strong and powerful, they're heavy but he himself, his bodily presence is weak and his speech, that's to say his oratorical skills are contemptible. Now they didn't just meet him in his writings, they met him in person and in his preaching and in his person and in preaching he was not impressive. He was not someone that you can say well yeah I want to be on board this because these are this is the winners sort of thing.

He really was, I've said this to you before I think that there's an old legend about Paul and what he looked like and someone was sent to meet him who didn't know him at the quayside and they were told to look for a small man, a Jew with a bald head and a large nose and eyebrows that met in the middle and bowed down and not leave. Now remember that the Greeks worshipped perfection. If you've ever seen Greek statues there's no middle age spread ever in Greek statues, they never lose their hair, everything is absolutely perfect and God sent to these people who worshipped physical and mental perfection this little run to the Jew with the gospel as a treasure hidden in an earthen vessel and it's typically God.

God does these kind of things, this is the way he works. So when God wanted to kind of reach the Jews primarily he sent Peter. Now Peter came from Galilee of the Gentiles which most Jews despised.

There were Jews or Gentiles up there, they didn't know what they were, they didn't like the way they preached, they didn't think they got any leaning, learning of any kind, they just they had no time for them. The Jews in Jerusalem often wouldn't even spend a time of day with people from up in Galilee so God sends Peter to them. You see God, he will not accommodate this pride in human nature, he will not do it.

So he dresses everything up almost in order to cause a stumbling for people who want it to be another way. God will not do it this way and this is what Paul is writing about and this has a point in what Paul is saying because these Greek people, they would have been proud in their ability to make their own minds up and they wouldn't have been people who were natural followers. They invented democracy, remember, it didn't work for them either and what happens with democracy is that you you give more and more rights to the individual until he's got absolute rights and nobody else has got any rights in his life and he's an island ultimately.

So you end up with this person who does exactly what he wants to do and you know that the Greeks really were never able to hold their empire together because the Greek city-states were always warring, Sparta wouldn't come to the Now this is the attitude of Greek culture which has come right through to our modern culture but it's also actually a very human culture to kind of stand on our own feet and be convinced that we can sort this thing out ourselves, we've got the mental power to do this, we've got the strength to do this, we can do this thing. You know this phrase that people like to put in their CVs I am a can-do person. Now that really would have kind of appealed, I mean it's on your CV, not on mine A can-do person.

Now the Greeks were really proud of being can-do persons, can-do people, they could do intellectually, they could do as regards that their strength, their natural strength and God will not accommodate this at all but he's determined when he writes to the Romans he says that it's going to be by faith because it's to be a grace. This salvation is going to come as a free gift of God and there will not be a corner that your self-effort can hide its head in. It will be absolutely clear to you that no kind of strength, mental, physical, spiritual of any kind made any contribution to your salvation.

So this is it but this is a revolutionary idea for the Greeks and they're going to have to learn this. Okay, let me show you in James, the letters of James and in chapter three and he speaks about wisdom too in verse 13 but he's talking about really sort of Christian wisdom, spiritual wisdom, really wisdom that comes from God and this is the key thing about this other kind of wisdom. It doesn't rise up from a man's intellect, it doesn't rise up because a man is able to think his way through.

The wisdom, the real wisdom is actually God's wisdom and it comes from above, it's a gift and this is what James says, chapter three verse 13, who was wise in understanding among you let him show by good conduct that his works are done in the meekness of wisdom but if you have bitter envy and self-seeking in your hearts do not boast and lie against the truth. This wisdom, so James is also talking about different kinds of wisdom, this wisdom does not descend from above. So there's two kinds of wisdom, there's one that descends from above which is the gift of God and there's another one which is originates in earth and is earthbound and then he says this, this wisdom does not descend from above but is and then he puts three little adjectives together, it is earthly, sensual, demonic for where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing are there but the wisdom that is from above is first pure and peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruit, without partiality, without hypocrisy, now the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

So there's another kind of wisdom that comes from God. Paul says in one sentence he said we do speak wisdom, we do speak wisdom but not the wisdom of the world and we do speak a wisdom to those who are mature, who are grown up in Christ but it's not a rational thing, it's not it's not that you're starting from the earth and working your way up to God, it actually begins with revelation. This I think this is really what the fall was all about, that man could learn by revelation, by dependence upon the tree of life or he could learn by taking the fruit of the tree of the knowledge in good and evil and that was self-discovery, it was self-strength, it was self-seeking, everything began in the self and that was the step which took us on the course away from God.

Okay, this wisdom, that was that little phrase there in James, the verse 15, this wisdom does not descend from above but is earthly, sensual, now your, what does the King James Version say there? It's interesting because the next section we're going to come on to is these three different ways of speaking and one of them is what is translated in the King James Version as natural and it's this word here, you've got earthly, this word sensual is actually now is soul and it really means soul-ish, I won't explain too much about that because I'll leave that till the third section but there's there's a wisdom that is it originates from the earth, it's soul-ish, that's to say it comes from man's animal instinct nature and then he says it's demonic, so there's all these things that kind of part in it, it's natural, it's earth-bound, it's self-asserting and actually it's fueled by an energy which is demonic, this is what James has to say, this is strong stone. Okay, so what Paul wants to talk about is other things, he wants to talk about a different kind of a wisdom which has a different purpose and a different kind of impact. Oh, I know that verse I was looking for, it's actually 1 Corinthians 1 verse 17, I've just seen it there in my notes, 1 Corinthians 1 verse 17, therefore Christ did not send me to baptise but to preach the gospel not with wisdom of words and then it's this little phrase at the end here, my King James Version, the new King James that I'm reading here says lest the cross of Christ should be made of no effect.

Now the ESV and the RSV I think it is, which is actually almost the same book, they use a phrase here which is very interesting, it translates something like this, not with wisdom of words lest the cross of Christ should be emptied of its power. In Philippians chapter 2 when it speaks of Jesus making himself of no reputation, it says he emptied himself, it's a word which means something which is empty and it's the same word here. Now this is a verse that kind of ought always to hold preachers and teachers and anyone, they ought to come back to this verse again and again and again, not with wisdom of words lest the cross of Christ should be emptied of its power.

Apparently it's possible for eloquence intellectual skill natural brilliance to be so effective that it actually snaps the gospel of its spiritual power. Now that is frightening but it's very very possible. It's very possible to become such a skilled speaker, such a skilled preacher that you're able to do things and it's it's almost like listening to a piece of music because some people can do this so well, it's a beautiful kind of thing and apparently it can actually empty.

That doesn't mean we've got to kind of be crude and it doesn't mean we've got to kind of fracture our English even more than we do. It's just simply saying that if you build in this kind of finery, this eloquence, this high soaring stuff, this wisdom of the world, if you put all that in it, the only way you can make room for that actually is by emptying it of its own power. There's only so much room in the gospel and it's either full of God's power or it's full of other things he's put into it.

It's a very very powerful statement and a real warning to us always. Okay, let me just show you where Paul speaks about the rulers of this age. In 1 Corinthians chapter 2 verse 7, he says, we speak the

wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the ages for our glory.

And then he says this in verse 8, which none of the rulers of this age knew for had they known they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. This is an amazing statement. Now who are these rulers of this age? Does it mean people like Pilate and Carthage and Caesar? Well I think it does but I think it means more than that as well because if you go to Ephesians, Ephesians 2 and verse 2 says this, he's talking about being dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, that word prince is the ruler, the spirit who is now working in the sons of disobedience.

The ruler, the ruler of this age is the spirit of disobedience, that's to say it's satan himself. And you've got a statement here in 1 Corinthians where Paul is saying, and it's another one of these really striking statements, he says, if they had known what was happening at the cross they wouldn't have allowed it to happen. There are things that satan doesn't know you see and he doesn't understand the significance of things because there are some things that are only spiritually revealed and God only reveals them by his spirit to people who he has prepared to receive these things.

That doesn't mean that satan doesn't understand the theology, I'm sure he understands the theology, it doesn't mean he didn't he doesn't understand some of the implications but he did not understand that this supreme act of defiance and rebellion in which he provoked the human race to become a god murderer actually was God's means of salvation. That the cross, not the crown and the scepter, not the sword and the white warrior horse, but this king who comes to you meek and lowly and riding on and that's his cult, this one, this one who is prepared to die in weakness, this is the power of God, this is deep, deep mystery. And it's something which to this day of course is something that is completely unintelligible to the world.

There's a there's a phrase in the world that they they use it quite often they'll talk about like lambs to the slaughter and and what they mean is these people won't stand up for themselves. When they say that this is sheep like and that they they they never describes them as being like a sheep in order to commend them, they always do it to kind of to say something bad about them. It's like and it's someone who said of Geoffrey Howe that it was like being worried to death by a dead sheep or something like that, savaged by a dead sheep.

But it's this idea because the sheep is despised, it's got virtually no means of defense, it doesn't have a shepherd around, it's just utterly vulnerable and and this method that God chose of sending his son to be the Lamb of God who took away the sin of the world is unintelligible to this mindset. It is unintelligible to this mindset, it doesn't mean that they don't know the facts, it just it just will not compute, it does not make sense to this mindset, it does not make sense to the power merchant of this world, the people who kind of control the currencies and the people who control the governments. This concept that God in abject weakness would do something which would break the power of hell, they cannot get their head around that, it's just it's unknown to them and but it isn't intended to be unknown to us.

But what had happened to the Corinthians was that they had they either have not seen or they've forgotten that this is the way God always does things, not by staging acts of kind of supreme strength but by surrendering and by laying down his life. Okay we'll have a pause.

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