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God Speaks Through His Holy Spirit

► IN FOCUS

The Holy Spirit guides us in knowing His will.

► THE PASSAGE

1 Corinthians 2:6-16

LOOK AT OUR WORLD

It's easy to be led by our feelings or emotions. We may convince ourselves to take a particular direction in life by saying, *It just feels right*. But is that a reliable method? What may have influenced those feelings? As Christians, we have an advantage. We have a source that is 100% more dependable than feelings, emotions, or conscience, each of which can be influenced or manipulated by other people, life experiences, media, and more. We have the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit through whom God reveals His will and guides us in making decisions and choices. We can truly get it right because what the Spirit makes known is always right!

► THE SETTING

Paul's initial visit to Corinth grew out of the vision he had in Troas during his second missionary journey. He heard a man call out, "Cross over to Macedonia and help us" (Acts 16:9). Paul accepted that vision as a manifestation of the Lord, and immediately changed his own travel plans, which led him to Philippi and Thessalonica in Macedonia and eventually to Athens and Corinth in Achaia. He stayed in Corinth eighteen months, established a church, made new friends, and enlisted more coworkers in the gospel. He may have made subsequent visits to Corinth and most certainly received updates about the church that prompted him to write the two letters included in the New Testament—and, most Bible scholars think, at least one and possibly two others.

The verses for this session are part of a larger section in the letter in which Paul addressed primary concerns he had for the church. They had become so impressed with themselves, their giftedness and wisdom, that they valued their accomplishments over the genuine work of the Holy Spirit. Paul confronted their thinking in an effort to impress upon them the urgency of relying on the Holy Spirit to guide them in knowing and doing God's will.

The previous session stressed the importance of the Bible as a major way God speaks to us. Therefore, we should read and study it to learn about the Lord and His ways. However, we may read the words of the Bible but miss its beauty and revelation. We need the Holy Spirit to open our eyes to the truth of Scripture so that we can hear more clearly what God is saying to us.

LEARN GOD'S WAY

► 1 CORINTHIANS 2:6-8

How did Paul describe the message he and his coworkers preached in Corinth? What did it stand in contrast to? What did Paul mean

by describing the wisdom of God as a mystery? Who originated the message Paul preached and when? Had the princes of this world actually known the wisdom of God, what would they not have done?

⁶ We do, however, speak a wisdom among the mature, but not a wisdom of this age, or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. ⁷ On the contrary, we speak God’s hidden wisdom in a mystery, a wisdom God predestined before the ages for our glory. ⁸ None of the rulers of this age knew this wisdom, because if they had known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.

God does a work in us that we can’t do within ourselves. In the first five verses of the chapter, Paul emphasized the superiority of the simple gospel message over a philosophy dependent on excellent oratory skills and a deep reliance on human wisdom. Verse 5 is an apt summary of his desire. “So that your faith might not be based on human wisdom but on God’s power.” The power and wisdom of God came through the work of the Holy Spirit.

Paul was not “dumbing down” the gospel He preached, and though he might not have been the best preacher in town, he was confident that what he had to say could stand up against the wisdom of the wisest, most eloquent speakers. **We do, however, speak a wisdom among the mature.** Just who is included in the *we* is not stated, although he did identify Sosthenes in his opening greeting (1:1) and extends greeting from “all the brethren” in ending the letter (16:20). We also know when the missionary journey began, he was accompanied by Silas (Acts 15:40) and subsequently was joined by Timothy (16:3) and then by Luke. Acts 16:11 begins a “we” section in the Book of Acts. Accepting that Luke is the writer of Acts, the “we” would include him. Paul was a strong individual, called by the Lord to minister among Jews and Gentiles alike—especially outside of Jerusalem and Judea—but he also knew the value of his partners in the gospel ministry and frequently credits them in the work. That is what strong leaders do.

What is the *wisdom* he and his coworkers spoke of, and who were the *mature* they addressed? Paul did not define *wisdom* in this instance, but in 1 Corinthians 1:20-30, wisdom denoted

God's wisdom, which is that salvation is accomplished through the cross. Such wisdom stood in stark contrast to **the wisdom of this age**. In subsequent verses in chapter 2, he joined the concept of wisdom with the Holy Spirit. Thus, he declared the wisdom of God made manifest through the Holy Spirit; not a wisdom developed in or reliant on the human mind alone, neither does it reflect the values of an *age* ("world;" KJV) without Christ. This does not mean Christians are not to use their minds. Mindless Christians are dangerous.

In the KJV, the word *perfect* (*telios*) is used for "mature," and usually brings to mind the concept of moral perfection. When used in reference to people, the word often means "full grown, mature," which would be the sense in this verse. Paul is referring to mature believers in Christ, with maturity defined as those who have responded to the gospel and received the Spirit. They are not a spiritually elite group, however, but individuals who live by faith and with the love only Christ can make possible.

Neither was Paul's message a wisdom originating with or perpetuated by **the rulers** ("princes," KJV) **of this age** ("world," KJV). Two views prevail as to who Paul had in mind. Perhaps he meant earthly rulers, like the Jewish religious-political authorities and Roman officials who had been active in the crucifixion of Jesus. Or, he may have been referring to unseen, supernatural beings who are at work in this world age (See Eph. 6:12). Perhaps Paul used the phrase as a composite of both human and demonic "rulers." I lean toward the former in light of verse 8. Whoever these rulers were, to follow them is a dead-end street; they have no future. Both *a wisdom of this age* and *the rulers of this age* will *are coming to nothing*. They will be destroyed, cease, and pass away. They have no future.

Paul continued to describe his message. **We speak God's hidden wisdom in a mystery**. "We declare God's wisdom, a mystery that has been hidden" (NIV). "We impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God" (ESV). "We speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, even the hidden wisdom" (KJV). Perhaps the puzzling words for us are that, in some way, God's *wisdom*—the message of God's salvation through the cross—is a *mystery* and *hidden*. The

concept behind the two words would have been familiar to Paul's Corinthian readers because of the influence of so-called mystery religions and Gnosticism. The mystery cults and Gnostics used the term in reference to people who were initiated in the cult or who had secret knowledge of spiritual things. "Only the members or those with superior, inborn, spiritual insight could understand the higher, secret knowledge. In one sense, these groups were like all secret orders in which one must be a member in order to know their detailed teachings."¹

Paul "Christianized" the terms whereby *mystery* and *hidden* designated God's redemptive plan through Christ's sacrificial death on the cross; a plan that included Gentiles as well as Jews. To those individuals who did not look with faith, the cross and the preaching of the cross was hidden; it was beyond their understanding. To them it was "foolishness" (1 Cor. 1:18, 21); but in truth, it was the wisdom of God and the power of God unto salvation (See Paul's more extensive discussion in 1 Corinthians 1:17-31.)

The wisdom of God—the redemptive plan of God—was not an afterthought to creation just in case something happened; neither was it a reaction to the failure of Adam and Eve in the garden. No, it was **God predestined before the ages for our glory** (See Eph. 1:3-10; 3:1-6). *Predestined* means "to predetermine, decide beforehand." In the New Testament, the word often refers to God's having decreed something from eternity. It didn't just come to mind; it was always on His mind. Moreover, He had our end in sight, *our glory*. The word *glory* commonly refers to one's preeminence, splendor, or praise. However, it also refers to the exalted state or the glorious condition of blessedness into which one will enter after the Savior's return from heaven. *Our glory* is the eternal life God has given us in Christ.

None of the rulers of this age knew the wisdom of God, **because if they had known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.** *Knew* denotes having knowledge with understanding. The *Lord of glory* refers to the majestic splendor of God and the exaltation of Christ, who is the giver of eternal life. The world rulers—an allusion to Pilate and Herod, as well as the Jewish

religious leaders, such as Caiaphas—lacked faith, they did not believe in Jesus. If they had, they would not have been part of the dastardly plan and cruel plot that resulted in Jesus being *crucified*. Their eyes were blinded, not because God hid the truth from them but because they refused to see with faith. “The spiritual principle involved was that only people with eyes of faith could see God’s redemptive plan and purpose.”² The *rulers* of this world were ignorant, yes, but it was a willful ignorance. Hence, they were responsible for their actions. They did not see—not because they could not, but because they would not.

What are some lasting truths from 1 Corinthians 2:6-8?

- The message of salvation through the cross of Christ stands in contrast to the wisdom of the world order, the faddish thinking of the times, and the misguided messages of influential people.
- God’s message of salvation is God’s alone; it is not something we have to search for and figure out for ourselves.
- God has revealed His message, which was in His mind from eternity, so that we might have eternal life and enjoy the glory of His kingdom.

► 1 CORINTHIANS 2:9-11

What is the point of verse 9 and why is verse 10a helpful in understanding Paul’s intent? Who helps us know and understand what God reveals? Why is the Spirit capable of making known the things of God to us?

⁹ **But as it is written, What no eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no human heart has conceived—God has prepared these things for those who love him.** ¹⁰ **Now God has revealed these things to us by the Spirit, since the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God.** ¹¹ **For who knows a person’s thoughts[b] except his spirit within him? In the same way, no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God.**

The Holy Spirit makes known the mind of God. Verse 9 is often quoted but frequently misunderstood or misappropriated. Some Bible expositors think the statement was based on Isaiah 64:4, although it is not a direct quotation. Thus, the actual source is not known. The usual interpretation declares that the wonders of heaven and all which **God has prepared . . . for those who love him** is not only beyond our sensory ability (**no eye has seen, no ear has heard**), it is beyond our imagination as well (**no human heart has conceived**). The statement is correct, but only partially so in this context. For the full picture, continue the thought by reading verse 10.

We cannot with our own abilities fully understand God's salvation and the wonderful, glorious future that is ours in Christ. **God has revealed these things to us by the Spirit.** God, *by the Spirit*, has disclosed what He *has prepared to those who love him* and have faith in Him. Because the unbeliever does not love God or affirm faith in Him, he or she can never conceive or understand such glorious manifestations.

No such limit exists on the ability of the Spirit. **The Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God.** *Searches* means "examines, investigates." Furthermore, the Spirit can make them known—will make them known—to those who believe. "The person devoid of God's indwelling Spirit is incapable of grasping this divine wisdom, which must be searched out with humility and receptivity by those who are truly spiritual—that is, those who have received the gift of the indwelling spirit."³ Our understanding of spiritual truth is dependent on divine revelation and Holy Spirit instruction.

Paul explained himself through a question. **For who knows a person's thoughts except his spirit within him?** Only you know what is truly going on in your mind. No other human being can really know what you are thinking; neither do you know what another person is thinking. Oh, we may guess, or we may claim to know, but we do not absolutely know. **In the same way, no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God.** Similarly, only God knows what God thinks. That the Spirit knows is witness that the Spirit is God. The Spirit searches, understands, and makes

known the rich truth of God. And what the Spirit reveals will be consistent with what God has revealed in Scripture. Therefore, be wary of anyone who says the Spirit told them to do something that is in violation of what God has made known in His Word. Such “voices” are of the evil one, for God does not contradict Himself.

What are some lasting truths from 1 Corinthians 2:9-11?

- The marvelous things the Lord has prepared even now for us who believe and love Him are beyond anything we can conceive in our minds alone.
- God has revealed His wonders to us through His Spirit, who, because He is God, knows the deep things of God and communicates them to us.

► 1 CORINTHIANS 2:12-16

What did receiving the Spirit of God enable the Corinthian believers to do that was not possible by relying on the spirit of the world? Who equipped Paul to be able to give spiritual instruction? In Paul’s mind, what were the two categories of people? What is the difference between the natural man and he that is spiritual? What amazing ability did Paul say was possible for believers because of their relationship with Christ?

¹² Now we have not received the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who comes from God, so that we may understand what has been freely given to us by God. ¹³ We also speak these things, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual things to spiritual people. ¹⁴ But the person without the Spirit does not receive what comes from God’s Spirit, because it is foolishness to him; he is not able to understand it since it is evaluated spiritually. ¹⁵ The spiritual person, however, can evaluate everything, and yet he himself cannot be evaluated by anyone. ¹⁶ For who has known the Lord’s mind, that he may instruct him? But we have the mind of Christ.

The Holy Spirit helps us apply God's Word to our lives. If the Spirit of God knows the things of God, and if we are not able to know the things of God by our own human faculties, then the next step is a logical one. We need to depend on the Holy Spirit if we want to learn the things of God and to distinguish God's will from human thinking—and God has made that possible for those who believe. Paul's testimony and affirmation was that we have received **the Spirit who comes from God, so that we may understand what has been freely given to us by God.** The **spirit of the world** is not capable of doing that, because the *spirit of the world* does not know the things of God. You can't speak credibly about what you don't know. You can't give what you don't have. That applies to spiritual beings as well as human relationships. Such thinking is why John warned in his first letter to "do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see if they are from God" (1 John 4:1). Be sure you are listening to the right voice.

Key words in this verse are *received*, *understand*, and *freely given*. To *receive* is "to take what has been given," "to hold on to something given and not let go," or "to take up a thing and carry it away." Two different words are used in verses 8, 11, and 12 for *know* (*understand*). The words may have a slightly different nuance, though some linguists minimize the difference. Both words include "knowing with understanding." The difference may be in how knowledge is acquired. In verse 8 (*ginosko*), the idea is "to learn to know." The word in verses 11 and 12 (*eido*) could suggest "knowing through experience." *Freely given* is one word in Greek (*charizomai*), which has as its root *charis*, the word rendered *grace*. It is "to show oneself gracious, kind, and benevolent." Paul was referring to divine truth that was given *to us by* ("by," CSB, ESV). Such wonderful things cannot be received and understood apart from the Holy Spirit.

However, those truths are the things Paul and his coworkers preached and taught (**we also speak these things**). Paul was a learned man, well-trained in the rabbinic methods by an outstanding scholar, Gamaliel (Acts 22:3). He could have overwhelmed his listeners with his knowledge and command of language. However, as he claimed in verses 1-5, he intentionally determined to

speak in simple language the message of “Jesus Christ and him crucified” (v. 2) because his ultimate desire was that the people be impressed by “God’s power” not “human wisdom” (v. 5).

He reiterated that thought in verse 13 by saying he and his ministry partners **speak these things, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit. “Speak, not in the words which man’s wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost [Spirit] teacheth”** (KJV). He taught by **explaining spiritual things to spiritual people**. He was focused on “explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words” (NIV). His concern was with “interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual” (ESV). He was devoted to “comparing spiritual things with spiritual” (KJV).

In verses 14-15 Paul described people as either **the person without the Spirit** or as **the spiritual person**. The *person without the Spirit* only understands things from the human perspective. Therefore, **what comes from God’s Spirit . . . is foolishness to him**. “The natural man ‘operates with two debilitating handicaps’. On the one hand, natural abilities are limited by created status. On the other hand, natural abilities have been further handicapped by sinful status. These two problems, with capability and with will, lead such a person to totally misunderstand what true wisdom is.”⁴ The *person without the Spirit* cannot **understand** (“know;” KJV) *spiritual things* **since it is evaluated spiritually**. *Evaluated* (“discerned,” KJV) means “scrutinized, evaluated, investigated.” One’s ability to understand spiritual things requires the ability to make spiritual judgments.

Therefore, **the spiritual person, however, can evaluate everything**. The word for *evaluate* (“judgeth,” KJV) is the same Greek word rendered *discerned* in verse 14. “The person with the Spirit makes judgments about all things” (NIV). “he that is spiritual judgeth all things” (KJV). The spiritually directed person is given the ability and insight to make decisions about spiritual matters that the person apart from the Spirit does not have.

The statement that **he himself** (*the spiritual man*) **cannot be evaluated by anyone** is not to say others won’t judge or criticize, but to declare that, even if they do, the spiritual person is not

accountable to others on spiritual matters but to God alone.

The quotation in verse 16 comes from Isaiah 40:13. **Who has known the Lord's mind, that he may instruct him?** The message of Isaiah 40 focuses on the supremacy of God over all human beings. No mere human is capable of instructing or telling God what to do. Therefore, if God reveals His truth to a person, then no other person relying on human ability has the grounds for telling that person otherwise. Again, that is assuming what the person claims the Spirit has said aligns with God's character and His revealed Word in Scripture.

Paul concluded his discussion with this amazing declaration: **But we have the mind of Christ.** Richard Pratt comments thusly on this assertion. "As believers' minds are influenced by the Spirit, they themselves take on **the mind of Christ**. They think as he thinks; they evaluate life as he evaluates it. Consequently, insofar as believers follow the teaching of the Spirit, they are beyond the criticisms and instructions of human wisdom. Those taught by the Spirit do not follow their own faulty reasoning; they learn from the Spirit, who judges all human wisdom."⁵

What are some lasting truths from 1 Corinthians 2:12-16?

- God has given us His Spirit so that we may understand all that He has revealed to us.
- If we rely on our own human thinking capabilities, we cannot understand spiritual things or exercise spiritual discernment.
- Without the Spirit within us, the things God has done in Christ will appear to be foolishness.
- The indwelling Holy Spirit enables us to think like Christ.

LIVE IT OUT

The point of this study is clear. On our own, we can't understand God's wisdom or comprehend His will. However, God speaks through His Holy Spirit who guides us in knowing God's will. Moreover, He reveals to us the mind of Christ. Therefore, we must depend on the Holy Spirit in order to distinguish God's will, thoughts, and ways from our human desires, thought processes, and actions. What the Spirit makes known will always be consistent with Scripture.

How do you discern God's will for you?

How comfortable are you that you are living out the will of God for your life? Who gives you that confidence?

What practices are part of your regular routine that help you stay in touch with what the Spirit is leading you to be and do?

When facing critical decisions, how do you test the voices that influence you to be certain that you are hearing and obeying the Spirit of God?

NOTES

1. Fred D. Howard. *1 Corinthians: Guidelines for God's People* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1983), 28.
2. Howard, *1 Corinthians*, 28.
3. Allan F. Johnson. *1 Corinthians*, in *The IVP New Testament Commentary Series*, vol. 7 (Downers Grove: IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 65.
4. Malcom Yarnell, "Expository Notes" in *Helping Your Church Stay on Course: Studies in 1 Corinthians, Expository Notes and Leader Helps, Adult Leader Guide, January Bible Study 2003* (Nashville: LifeWay Press, 2002), 29.
5. Richard L. Pratt, Jr. *I & II Corinthians*, in *Holman New Testament Commentary*, vol. 7 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 39.