

1 Corinthians 1:26-2:16: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 02 July 2020

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[0 : 00] 1 Corinthians 1, verse 26 to chapter 2, verse 16. And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.

And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom, for I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified, and I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not implausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God.

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. But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory.

None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. 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.

These things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. 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?

[1 : 50] So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit 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.

And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom, but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual. 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.

The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one. For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him? But we have the mind of Christ.

At the end of the first chapter of 1 Corinthians, Paul wants the Corinthians to look at themselves and to consider the demographics of their group. They are not, for the most part, wise, powerful, influential, and of noble birth.

There are a few exceptions. Erastus, mentioned in Romans chapter 16 verse 23, was the city treasurer, and Gaius, who hosted Paul and the entire church, was presumably a wealthy and influential man.

[2 : 59] However, for the most part, the Corinthians would be of little account in the eyes of their society, and yet they have been called by God. The very choice of God revealed as they look around them at their fellow Corinthian Christians should challenge their concern for pursuing social status and honour.

This choice was not accidental on God's part, but entirely purposeful. God chose the foolish things to shame the wise, the weak to shame the strong, and the low and the despised to bring to nothing the things that are.

The result of all of this is that no one can boast in their strength, wisdom, or social status. If they have these things, God has, if anything, chosen them despite them, rather than on account of them.

There was nothing in us or the Corinthians that merited God's choice. God's choice was entirely unconditional and gracious, and it is because of God's gracious choice that we are in Christ, in whom we have graciously received a new standing.

If the Corinthians wanted to look for a cause in themselves for God's choice of them, they would search in vain. However, having been chosen by God, we are in Christ Jesus. We now belong to him.

[4 : 08] We participate in his status and enjoy his riches. We had no wisdom to commend us. In Christ, we have wisdom from God. We were weak, lacking in social power and influence.

In Christ, we have the standing of righteousness before God, of right standing before the Father. We were despised. In Christ, we have sanctification. We're set apart as holy people to the Lord.

We were nothing. In Christ, we have redemption. We're bought at the costliest of prices, marked out as precious in God's sight. We now have a standing and a status to rejoice in, but no boast to make in ourselves.

The point of all of this is that when we do boast, we must boast in God alone. Paul quotes Jeremiah 9, verses 23-24, which clearly underlies the entirety of his argument here.

Thus says the Lord, Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom. Let not the mighty man boast in his might. Let not the rich man boast in his riches. But let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord, who practices steadfast love, justice and righteousness in the earth.

[5 : 20] For in these things I delight, declares the Lord. There is a carnivalesque character to the kingdom of God. The typical ways of the world are suspended and overturned. Yet while a carnival is merely a temporary suspension or inversion of the social structure, a short relief from its crushing burden or an escape valve for its pent-up energies, the church testifies to an ultimate order that exceeds the structures of this present age.

An order in which no one can boast or exalt himself over others, where the proud of this age are humbled and the poor are exalted. Such a vision is one of the greatest treasures of the Christian church.

When the theological foundation of this vision of equality is abandoned, its remarkable social vision starts to crumble and it cannot be easily recovered. It doesn't deny the great differences between people or pretend that they don't exist.

It doesn't reduce people to sameness. However, it declares a more ultimate reality that places all such differences in a completely different value system. It levels the ground beneath our feet and makes possible radical transformations in the ways that we imagine and live in society.

The epistle of James also raises some of these issues. James chapter 1 verses 9 to 11 And then in James chapter 2 verses 5 to 7 Like Paul, James challenges the value system by which many Christians still carefully seek the approval of the rich and honourable of this age, while dishonouring those who have been honoured by God.

[7 : 31] Paul looks back to his first visit to the Corinthians. In his presentation of the Gospel to them, he manifested something of the character of the Gospel by virtue of the absence of showy rhetoric and clever philosophical displays.

His message focused upon and foregrounded the cross, the reality at the very heart of the Gospel, the reality that punctures and overturns all proud human value systems.

His own presence among them was marked by weakness, by fear and trembling. Paul wasn't a stirring, charismatic and puffed-up orator, with words full of pride and bravado.

Rather, he seemed to cut a somewhat weak and unexceptional figure. His message wasn't filled with clever philosophy, but proclaimed the cross plainly and simply, attended by signs of the Spirit's power.

By his own account, Paul was no great speaker. In 2 Corinthians chapter 11 verse 6, he admits that he is unskilled in speaking. In 2 Corinthians chapter 10 verse 10, for they say, His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account.

[8 : 38] Christ's strength manifest in weakness is a recurring theme in Paul, most notably in 2 Corinthians chapter 12 verses 9-10. But he said to me, My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.

Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities.

For when I am weak, then I am strong. Paul's concern here is that his philosophical acumen or eloquence never obscure or undermine the content of his message, which is about the power of God, which overturns all of the value systems of this age.

Paul isn't building a movement behind himself, the great teacher, orator, and thinker, but he's bringing people to Christ and his cross. The contrast between human wisdom and divine wisdom, however, does not mean that divine wisdom is simply defined by its negation of the value structures of human wisdom and power.

There is a wisdom appropriate to the gospel. Paul has already argued that we have a wisdom given to us in Christ. And here he elaborates, This wisdom has been hidden since before the ages.

[9 : 54] It isn't a wisdom of this age, nor can it be understood by the rulers of this age. This wisdom was hidden before all ages, but also destined before all ages for our glory.

It is a glorious and a magnificent wisdom, a kingly wisdom, beyond the understanding of the supposedly glorious rulers of this age, who are brought to nothing by it. Had they understood it, they would not have crucified Christ.

And Paul brings together some echoes from Isaiah to underline his point. Isaiah chapter 64 verse 4, From of old no one has heard or perceived by the ear, no eye has seen a God besides you, who acts for those who wait for him.

And in Isaiah chapter 52 verse 15, Kings shall shut their mouths because of him, for that which has not been told them they see, and that which they have not heard they understand.

This wisdom is known and given through the spirit. Without the spirit there would be no way of knowing it, for it is spiritually perceived. Yet the spirit knows the things of God and can communicate them to his people.

[10 : 59] Through the spirit we can see that God doesn't just bring to nothing the pretensions of human wisdom, but he outmatches them with a higher wisdom. And it is Paul's task to communicate this wisdom in a manner fitting to its content and its character.

The spirit of God is at odds with the spirit of this world, which puts its trust and boast in human power and wisdom, all of which have been brought low by God. This is why Paul is so concerned about the downplaying of the cross for the trappings of human wisdom, eloquence, influence and standing.

The cross is the point where the wisdom of God is most clearly seen over against the wisdom of the world. Yet those who are so concerned with the way that they appear to the rich, the wise, the powerful and the influential of this age will always feel the greatest embarrassment about the cross and seek to avoid that point.

The spiritual person, the person who has received the spirit of God, is able to discern things that the natural person, the person who lacks the spirit, cannot. The person who truly operates by the spirit of God can judge all things, but cannot be judged by others.

Paul concludes the chapter by quoting a version of Isaiah chapter 40 verse 13, who has measured the spirit of the Lord, what man shows him his counsel. But he makes a crucial shift in his final statement.

[12 : 20] We have the mind of Christ. Christ here is substituted for Lord, and the mind that he speaks of is clearly connected to the spirit. Mind here, as in Philippians 2, means mindset or way of thinking.

In Christ we have a wisdom, a way of thinking, that is given through the spirit, and which is God's very own. Philippians chapter 2 verses 1 to 8 describes this. So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord, and of one mind.

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself.

By taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men, and being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

[13 : 33] As in Philippians 2, Paul's point here is that the mind of Christ is the mindset seen in Christ's going to the cross, and any approach that would downplay the cross, and the way that it overturns the values of the world, is not the Christian gospel.

A question to consider. How do you think Paul might have responded to Christians claiming some special spiritual status that exalted them above others, and some gnostic revelation that was exclusive to them?

How does his own position not fall prey to this?