

Sermon Subject: THE GIFTS OF WISDOM AND KNOWLEDGE

SCRIPTURE: Selected verses from the second chapter of I Corinthians.

And I, brethren, when I came unto you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God. And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power; That your faith should not stand in the wisdom of man, but in the power of God. Howbeit, we speak wisdom among them that are perfect; yet not the wisdom of the world, nor of the princes of this world, that come to naught; But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, even the hidden wisdom, which God ordained before the world unto our glory. ... Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him. But God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit, for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God Which things we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth.

If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, who giveth to all men liberally and it shall be given him.

In previous sermons we have discussed the church as the body of Christ, and have stated it as our belief that if the body of Christ is truly alive and functioning as it should be, there will be certain signs of life. These will be the signs which Jesus promised should follow the believer; they will be the spiritual gifts which Paul enumerates and discusses in the 12th, 13th, and 14th chapters of I Corinthians.

Near the head of his list of spiritual gifts, immediately following the gift of a testimony that Jesus is the Christ, Paul places the gifts of wisdom and knowledge. Although we cannot be certain, we may infer from this placement that Paul considered wisdom and knowledge to be the most important signs of life which could be manifested by the body of Christ.

In a physical body, it is impossible to localize or isolate life, or intelligence, or wisdom, or to pin it down to one location or one organ of the body. The life and intelligence and wisdom of the body are to be found in every remote cell, in every member, in every organ. There is a fascinating field for exploration and study in observing the hundreds of ways in which the wisdom and knowledge and life of the body find expression in times of injury or emergency, without any conscious direction from the brain. White corpuscles in the blood stream mobilize around an intruding infection. Swelling immobilizes a fracture or sprain to keep down the chances of additional injury through movement. New tissue automatically grows to close wounds; and scar tissue is built up to isolate and wall off foreign objects or infection in the body. Blood vessels enlarge to provide new blood supply, when the old supply sources are cut off. So it is in the body of Christ, that every member of that body should partake in some degree, not only of the life, but of the intelligence, the wisdom, and the knowledge which permeate and direct and enliven the body.

The Old Testament concept of wisdom, as it is exemplified in the book of Proverbs and other "wisdom" writings, is that wisdom is the ability to use knowledge to moral and proper and peaceful ends, to interpret and choose the best from the field of knowledge, and to integrate a mass of unrelated knowledge into a meaningful whole. Wisdom was a sort of culture -- a refinement or polish -- a familiarity with life and how to live it, acquired through experience. This kind of wisdom, therefore, was usually thought of among Old Testament writers, as being the particular prerogative of old age.

There is, however, a higher wisdom, which is quite separate and apart from worldly learning, knowledge, experience, or culture. This higher wisdom and knowledge are God-centered: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." It should be remembered that intellectual power -- or knowledge -- without moral control was the fruit of the forbidden tree; that the best educated man is not necessarily the wisest or happiest man; that knowledge without moral control leads only to destruction, and the greater the knowledge, the quicker, surer, and greater the destruction.

There is an interesting contrast between worldly wisdom and the spiritual wisdom and knowledge which are gifts of God to his church, in the first three or four chapters of I. Corinthians. It is well to keep in mind that Paul was writing to people in the largest city in Greece, and that at the time he wrote, Greece was the center of culture, art, learning, philosophy and wisdom for the whole world. Yet throughout these chapters Paul again and again points out the difference between the wisdom of the world, and the wisdom of God. Paul says that he is sent to preach the gospel, "not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect." He admits that "the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness." The wisdom of the world could not help but conclude that one who died as a common criminal on the cross -- an execution usually reserved in Greece for slaves, -- could hardly be worthy of even passing notice. "But unto us which are saved," Paul says, "it is the power of God. For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nought the understanding of the prudent For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe. For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom: But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumbling-block, and unto the Greeks foolishness; but unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men...."

Continuing in the second chapter of this First Corinthian letter, Paul counsels the Corinthian saints that their faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God; and reminds them again that he speaks the wisdom of God in a mystery, even the hidden wisdom; that he speaks not the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; and he concludes, "we have the mind of Christ. In other words, the thesis of his entire introductory chapters is that unless men have the gift of wisdom, and of knowledge -- unless they have the wisdom and knowledge that come from God, all of the wisdom of men, all the knowledge which they can learn from worldly sources or factual observation is foolishness, because it will not, cannot save. "If any man among you seemeth to be wise in this world, let him become a fool, that he may be wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God, for it is written, he taketh the wise in their own craftiness." It is against the background of this teaching that we need to study Paul's statement in the 12th chapter of First Corinthians: "for to one is given by the Spirit the word of wisdom; to another the word of knowledge by the same Spirit." (vs. 8)

We must be careful not to fall into the error of the early Gnostics, who believed that the gift of wisdom was reserved for the chosen and elect few; that the wisdom of God was so esoteric, so mystical, so difficult to perceive, that common, ignorant, or lowly people could not receive it. The wisdom and the knowledge of God are free to anybody -- black or white, bond or free, rich or poor, young or old, educated or uneducated. But they are reserved for those who will make themselves worthy, who will exercise faith unto belief, and follow their faith with repentance, and the new birth of baptism in water and the laying on of hands for the gift of the Holy Ghost. The wisdom of God is perceived not by the human, natural mental powers, but by the power of the Spirit of God, which resides within those who have become members of the body of Christ -- functionally attached to that body, living its life and enjoying the direction of the Spirit which permeates, activates, and directs that body.

Any man with a little effort can acquire knowledge. Some men devote their life to the pursuit of knowledge, and cram their heads with myriad facts and figures and theories and philosophies, only to become tiresome, boring, educated fools. The world is full of brilliant men, clever men, informed men, educated men, who have no knowledge of the things of God, and who are therefore pathetically ignorant, stupid, helpless in the midst of world-shattering problems and devilish philosophies and isms. Why? Because although God's gift of godly wisdom is free and available to all, only a few are willing to pay the price in order to receive the wisdom from above which is beyond price.

"What man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him? Even so the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God. Which things also we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth ..." (I Cor. 2:11-13) "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart (imagination) of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love him. But God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit; for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God." (I Cor. 2:9-10) "The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness unto him; neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned." (vs. 14) The gifts of wisdom and knowledge, then, are spiritual, not natural gifts; they are therefore reserved for those who have prepared themselves and made themselves worthy to receive the Spirit of God. The door is open to all, but because men who are wise in worldly wisdom are so prone to rely on that wisdom instead of on the wisdom of God, Paul observed long ago, "Not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, no many noble are chosen; for God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise....." (I Cor. 1:26,27)

The gift of wisdom is a major and basic gift among the several spiritual gifts which are received by the church of Christ. Wisdom is the gift which controls, directs, and determines the proper time, place, and circumstances for the exercise of all the other spiritual gifts; for even genuine spiritual gifts can be exercised in an unseemly manner, or at the wrong time, or under improper circumstances, to the detriment rather than the blessing of those who receive them. Without the gift of wisdom, gifts of faith, of healing, of miracles, and of tongues could very easily degenerate into mere sensationalism, with no lasting benefit, and probably serious harm done to those manifesting them and those receiving them."

Jesus, to whom we point again as our example in all things, manifested this gift of wisdom and of knowledge to a remarkable degree. Of his earliest years we are told only that "the child grew, and waxed strong in spirit, filled with wisdom: and the grace of God was upon him." At the age of twelve, as he stood among the learned doctors of the temple, both hearing them and asking them questions, "all that heard him were astonished at his understanding and answers." The period of his life between this incident and the beginning of his ministry is covered in one verse, "And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man." (Luke 2:52) Jesus was the supreme exemplification of the gift of wisdom and of knowledge. Human knowledge stood awed and amazed before the heavenly wisdom, even when Jesus was only twelve years of age!

Jesus promised his disciples that they too would have this spiritual gift -- this gift of heavenly wisdom which would seem to be foolish to men of worldly wisdom, but which would be so far superior to that worldly wisdom that man could not stand against it. "Settle it therefore in your hearts not to meditate before what ye shall answer," he commanded his disciples, "For I will give you a mouth and wisdom which all your adversaries shall not be able to gainsay nor resist." (Luke 21:14,15)

This promise was literally fulfilled in the case of Stephen, as he debated with the Jews in the synagogue of the Libertines, for the scripture says, "they were not able to resist the wisdom and the spirit by which he spake." (Acts 6:10)

The wisdom from above cannot be acquired by natural means. When we want worldly knowledge, we study, we perform research and investigation, we gain experience; and these make possible, although they do not guarantee, the acquisition of wisdom. God may require work, effort, and study on our part before he grants us the wisdom from above; but nonetheless, the gift of wisdom is just that -- a gift. It comes not by will of man, but by the will of God. Like other spiritual gifts, it is a result of right living, wise and moral choices, and a certain spiritual quality of life. It is given to those who have prepared and cleansed themselves and made ready for this gift. It comes from Christ, in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

And in conclusion, we pray as Paul prayed for the Ephesians: "that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give unto you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him: the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that ye may know what is the hope of his calling, and what the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints....." (Eph. 1:17,18) May you find the wisdom from above, that is "first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy."