

Leadership in Word and Spirit

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Date: 09 January 2005

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[0 : 0 0] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 9th of January 2005. The preacher is Tim Johnson.

His sermon is entitled Leadership in Word and Spirit and is based on 1 Corinthians 2, verses 1-16.

Well, good evening everyone. If you'd like to leave your Bibles open, we're going to be looking today at 1 Corinthians 2, verses 6-16. It's the second part in our series on Christian leadership, looking at the first four chapters of 1 Corinthians.

So we're going to go through that together. But let's pray as we start. Heavenly Father, thank you for your word, where we can learn about you and what you have done in the world for us.

Lord Jesus, thank you that you were crucified to take away our sin so that we can be in relationship with you. Holy Spirit, thank you that you reveal the truths of God to us.

[1 : 1 5] And we pray that you would do that this evening as we gather together. Amen. Well, when I was at uni in Sydney, one night I was at home and there was an unexpected knock on the door.

And a mate of mine who I'd been through school with, Gar, and who I'd been praying for many years that he would become a Christian, out of the blue, just turned up on the doorstep for a chat.

And it wasn't long in our conversation before he started asking a lot of questions about Christianity, which was really exciting for me because he'd been someone that I'd prayed for for many years, that he might come to know Jesus.

And in the end, we chatted for something like two hours about Jesus and what Jesus had done. And in that time, I was able to explain to him over and over again that Jesus had died on the cross to take away his sin.

And all he needed to do was to trust in Jesus and he could be in relationship with him and have his sins forgiven. Looking back on it, I don't think I could have made it any clearer.

[2 : 1 6] I laid out exactly what Jesus had done for him. I went over and over it. And yet, no matter how many times I explained it, he just didn't get it.

My impression at the time as I was speaking to him was that as I was trying to explain the gospel to him, it was as if he had a blindfold over his face. He could not see or understand what I was explaining to him about Jesus.

I would explain God's grace, what God had done in Jesus. Explain to him that Jesus had taken his sins on the cross and all he needed to do was to trust in Jesus.

And he would respond by saying, Yeah, but I do so many things wrong. I'm not good enough. God wouldn't accept me. And I'd respond, No, that's not what it's about. It's about the fact that Jesus has done it for you.

He died. It's not about you being a good person. You can't do it by yourself. Yes, yes, I know that. I know that, he'd say. But I'm not good enough. You don't understand. He just could not understand God's grace to him in Christ.

[3 : 19] And at the end of the evening, sadly, he went away still not having understood and still not having accepted Jesus. And he's a friend who I still pray for, that he might come to know Jesus.

Well, after that conversation, I was left to ponder what had gone wrong. What had I done wrong? Particularly someone thinking about Christian leadership and Christian ministry.

What mistakes had I made in my conversations with my friend? Had I not made things clear enough? I thought I'd been really clear. But had I made some mistake in not being clear enough?

Especially in light of last week's passage where we looked at the fact that the key to powerful ministry is proclaiming Christ crucified. I'd done that. So what had gone wrong?

Why hadn't my friend accepted the gospel? Well, tonight's passage tells us something very crucial for Christian ministry that we need to understand. It's something that should force anyone in any form of Christian leadership to be humble.

[4 : 22] And it's something that should also force each one of us onto our knees in prayer. The truth that we learn from this passage is this. God's secret wisdom, the gospel, is revealed only by the Holy Spirit.

And without the Holy Spirit, people are powerless to understand it. Let's have a look through these verses together. Starting at verse 6. You might remember that last week we saw that the content of Christian leadership, Christian ministry, is proclaiming Christ crucified.

And Paul has just shown that human wisdom and human strength can never reach God. Human wisdom on its own can never reach God. But God reaches out to humans by sending his son to die on the cross.

And that message about the cross seems like foolishness to people who are perishing. What good can a man suffering and dying on a cross do? That's complete folly.

But in fact this apparently foolish gospel is what saves people. And so it is the power of God and the wisdom of God. And it's important to keep that context in mind as we come to this passage.

[5 : 38] Because Paul is following on his argument in the verses that we read. So in verses 6 to halfway through verse 10, Paul is explaining that although the message of the cross seems like foolishness to those who haven't accepted Christ, it isn't foolishness at all.

In fact it's God's secret wisdom. Have a look at verse 6. Yet among the mature we do speak wisdom. Though it's not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age who are doomed to perish.

Now some people argue that in this verse the mature there is talking about mature Christians as opposed to immature Christians. And that the wisdom being spoken about is kind of some form of advanced teaching which goes beyond or draws out the implications of Jesus' death on the cross.

But I think in the context we've got to understand here a distinction between Christians and non-Christians. Because in the context that is what Paul is speaking about.

And so I think we should understand the mature here to be talking about Christians as opposed to non-Christians. To those who have accepted Christ as opposed to those who haven't. The word mature has the sense of being complete or being whole.

[6 : 58] And Paul sometimes calls Christians on to maturity. But I think equally the idea of being complete in Christ can be intended by the word. And Paul is using it here to contrast those who are in Christ and so are complete with those who are not in Christ.

And the wisdom that he's referring to in this verse is not some advanced form of Christian teaching. But it's the message of Christ crucified. I think when you get down to verse 8 you see that the message, the wisdom that he's talking about is Christ crucified.

So to those who are not in Christ this message seems like foolishness. But among the mature, those people who are in Christ and who recognise the truth, it is in fact wisdom.

They realise that it's wisdom. They rightly recognise that Christ crucified is God's great wisdom. It's not worldly wisdom. It's not the wisdom of the age.

It's not the wisdom of the human rulers of this age who are doomed to perish. No, verse 7, it is God's wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory.

[8 : 08] You see, God's plan of salvation was set up before the creation of the world, but it only recently has been revealed. Before that it was secret and hidden.

The Old Testament prophets pointed towards Jesus and what he would do. But before Jesus came and lived among us, died on the cross and rose to new life, God's plan was not fully understood.

Certainly the rulers didn't understand it because you see in verse 8, if they had understood it, they wouldn't have crucified the Lord of glory.

The rulers of this age, who are the people Paul has been speaking about in chapter 1, the wise, the strong, those who are in prominent positions, leaders, were the ones who put Jesus to death.

They didn't understand God's plan. And they killed Jesus, who is the Lord of glory, God himself. They did not understand what God had planned and killed Jesus, God's great king.

[9 : 13] So the rulers of this age fail to understand God's plan. Does that mean that those of us who have accepted Jesus has some basis for boasting? The stupid rulers didn't understand it, but we've understood it, so we're pretty good.

No. Have a look at verse 9, where Paul uses a loose quote, probably based on Isaiah 64 or 65. It is a loose quote.

But as it is written, What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him.

It's not as though the rulers failed to understand because they're particularly stupid and we're particularly smart people. Because the message of the cross, the message of Jesus crucified, is something that is unseen, unheard of, unthought of.

This wisdom of God that sees his son die on a cross. It's something that we couldn't fathom with our own wisdom. It's something that we wouldn't come up with and we can't understand.

[10 : 20] But we don't need to because if you have a look at verse 10, we see that these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. God's Spirit makes them known to us.

And that's what Paul goes on to explain further, from halfway through verse 10 down to verse 13. You see, there's two types of revelation that are required for us to understand the Gospel.

Firstly, in an objective sense, God has revealed his plan because Jesus did come and live among us and he died on the cross and people saw him and people heard him.

And even though we're 2,000 years later, we've got the historical evidence that we can look at objectively and see the things that Jesus said and the things that Jesus did. But that's not enough.

Many people see that. Many people were there looking at Jesus dying on the cross and didn't understand it. And many people see the evidence and the teaching of Jesus today and they don't understand it.

[11 : 25] They see God's revelation and they think that it's foolishness. That's exactly what we've been seeing in the earlier chapters of 1 Corinthians. So how is it that some people see this objective revelation of God and understand it and see it as the wisdom of God and not foolishness and others don't?

How is it that some people can see God's wisdom rather than foolishness? Well, it can only happen because the Holy Spirit reveals it personally to an individual.

Imagine I have something here on a stand covered in a sheet which I want to reveal to you. Objectively, I can take off the cover so that everyone can see.

But you see, there's something wrong with that illustration because it's not enough for God to just reveal objectively what he's done because we as human beings have sinned and rebelled against God and we're so twisted in our sinfulness and rebellion against God that we're blinded to what God has done.

So in terms of my illustration here, it's not just a matter of revealing the cover because it's as if each one of us is blindfolded or our vision is distorted in some way and I would need to move among people and remove the blindfold so that they could see what is here.

[12 : 45] And that is what God has to do by his Holy Spirit. He must open people's eyes to see the wisdom of his gospel so that they can accept Christ.

Read with me from halfway through verse 10. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. The picture there is like a deep sea explorer plumbing the depths of the ocean.

That is what the Holy Spirit does. He knows God. He knows the deep things about God. He knows the deepest truths about God and so he can reveal them to us.

Paul gives an illustration to help us in verse 11. For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God.

So if I ask you, what am I thinking about now? It's very hard for you to work that out. I was thinking about cows. It's very hard to work out what's going on inside other people's heads unless they reveal it, what is going on in their head to you.

[13 : 58] Of course, I know what I'm thinking because the Spirit that is within me knows and of course God knows what I'm thinking as well. But other humans, except perhaps on occasions Anna, do not know what is going on inside my head.

How much harder then is it for us who are humans and finite to know God and to know the deep things of God and to understand him? I was a speaker at an evangelistic dinner some years ago in Sydney with the Sydney Uni EU and it was a dialogue dinner so there were four Christian students, four non-Christian students and the idea was to gather over a meal so that we could discuss the Christian faith and for me to attempt to answer questions as they arose.

In the course of the conversation, one girl said that the thing that she struggled with about Christianity was how Christianity could claim to be right, to be the religion that had God right and understood him.

She said something to the effect of God is so massive and we're so limited in our knowledge. How can anyone be completely right about what God is like?

And I said to her, you're right, you're exactly right but in fact you're understating the case. Ultimately it's impossible for finite humans to know anything about God of themselves with our limited human minds.

[15 : 33] How can we understand anything really about God? Unless, of course, God reveals himself and shows us and tells us what he is like.

That is the only way that we can know what God is like. And that's exactly what God does by his Holy Spirit. In fact, it's stronger than that. God actually gives us his Holy Spirit to live in us.

The Holy Spirit who has plumbed the depths of God, he gives to live in us. Which is awesome. Have a look at verse 12. Now, we have received not the spirit of the world but the spirit that is from God.

We have received the spirit that is from God. This spirit that has plumbed the depths of God so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God.

It's probably better there so that we may understand the things bestowed on us by God. Using the word gifts there, it's confusing to think that we're just talking about spiritual gifts here but it's more general.

[16 : 42] It's the things of God that we might understand those things that God has bestowed. God's Holy Spirit lives within the believer so that we can understand the things of God.

not only does God send his son to die on the cross to take away sin but because he knows that we're blinded and we can't see the objective revelation of God in and of ourselves because we're in rebellion against God.

He also sends his spirit to open our blind eyes so that we can see what God has done and understand it. And this same spirit has prompted Paul to preach the gospel message the way that he has.

Verse 13. And we speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual.

As we saw, Paul hasn't used fancy rhetorical tricks and human wisdom in his preaching but he speaks the gospel of Christ crucified. He speaks the things of the spirit, interpreting, explaining, showing spiritual things of God to those who are spiritual.

[17 : 57] That is, to those whose eyes the Holy Spirit opens to understand the message. And as the last part of our passage goes on to say, in fact, without the Holy Spirit we are completely powerless to understand God's gospel and wisdom.

That's what the last three verses show us. By highlighting the difference between the person who has the Holy Spirit and the person who does not have the Holy Spirit. Verse 14. Those who are unspiritual, who don't have the Holy Spirit, do not receive the things of God's Spirit for they are foolishness to them and they are unable to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.

Those who are spiritual discern all things and they are themselves subject to no one else's scrutiny. There has been some misunderstandings about that last part of verse 15 that you see there and it has been used sadly by some Christian leaders to say that no one has the right to call them to account or to judge them or to tell them they've done anything wrong because they are spiritual and therefore, as it says, they are themselves subject to no one else's scrutiny.

But that misses the point of the passage because the contrast is between the spiritual person who has the Holy Spirit and the unspiritual person who does not. The point is that the person who has accepted the gospel of Christ crucified and received the Holy Spirit is able to discern all things, the things of the world and the things of God because God reveals them by his Holy Spirit.

But the person without the Holy Spirit who hasn't accepted Christ crucified thinks that the things of God are foolishness and so they can't understand the person who has put their trust in Christ either.

[19 : 41] It seems like foolishness to them too, putting their trust in a crucified Saviour. It's like the contrast between a blind person and a seeing person again.

A person who is seeing can look at themselves and they can look at the other person but the blind person can't. That is the point being made here. There's a chasm between people who have received the gospel of Christ and therefore received the Holy Spirit because they've received Christ and can now understand the things of God and people who have not.

And it's again highlighted in the final verse. For who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him? Answer, nobody. How can people know God's mind and instruct God?

but we have the mind of Christ. Because God has given us his Holy Spirit and allowed us to understand the things of God, Paul can go so far to say that those who have trusted in Jesus have the mind of Christ.

The Holy Spirit within us shapes our minds so that we can understand the things of God, so that we can think like Jesus thought, so that we can start to live like Jesus lived.

[20 : 59] Without the Spirit it's all foolishness. But with the Holy Spirit we have the mind of Christ and start to think the way that he thought.

What an awesome thing it is that God has done for us. So as a result of hearing this what do we need to go away and do? Well I think there's two key things that we must do in response to this passage.

In terms of Christian leadership this passage calls Christian leaders to be humble and it calls Christian leaders to prayer.

You see the fact that it is God who by his Holy Spirit who reveals to individuals and allows them to understand the deep things of himself means that Christian leaders have no basis for boasting.

When people come to understand the gospel or when people are changed by a Bible study when children or youth in our care grow in their understanding of God then it shouldn't cause the respective leaders to boast about how well they've done but to acknowledge that it is God who has worked in each of these people.

[22 : 16] Paul's going to go on to say in chapter 3 of the role of Christian leaders Christian leaders have work to do but in every instance it is God who gives the growth.

Christian leaders have a key role to play in proclaiming the gospel in teaching the Bible and in caring for people but it is God who gives the growth. He is the one who works by his Holy Spirit to change people.

So if we're in any form of Christian leadership this passage calls us to be humble because it is God who gives the growth.

But finally these truths about the Holy Spirit must drive Christian leaders to their knees in prayer. If it is true that only by the work of the Holy Spirit can people come to understand the truth of God and see his gospel of Jesus crucified as wisdom rather than foolishness then we must ask God in prayer to change people by his Holy Spirit to be at work in them.

It is no accident that in Acts chapter 6 when the ministry of the apostles is described it says that they devote themselves to the ministry of the word to teaching and to prayer.

[23 : 39] We saw last week the importance of preaching Christ crucified that is important but alone it is not enough. Leaders must also pray that the Holy Spirit will open people's eyes so that they understand the wisdom of Christ crucified rather than see it as foolishness.

John Calvin wrote these words Without the illumination of the Holy Spirit the word can do nothing. Without the illumination of the Holy Spirit the word can do nothing.

We must proclaim the word we must tell people about Jesus crucified for them but we must also pray that God by his spirit will be at work.

So my challenge tonight is will you do that? Will those of you who are leaders go away from this Bible passage and pray?

Will you pray for your Sunday school kids? Do you pray for them by name that the Holy Spirit will show them the wisdom of God? Do you pray for the members of the youth group who you care for?

[24 : 57] Will you pray for those in your Bible study group that God's Holy Spirit will reveal his wisdom to them? Will each of us be praying for other members of this church?

Do we pray for people who have come into Holy Trinity for the first time and hear the message of Jesus crucified? Do we pray that God by his Holy Spirit will show them that it is God's wisdom not foolishness?

Will we pray for our family and friends that God by his Holy Spirit will be at work in them? As I've been reading this passage this week the challenge for me is that I need to go away and continue praying for my friend Garth who I spoke to you about because to him still the message of the cross is foolishness.

He cannot see it. He cannot understand God's grace to him. His eyes are blind to the truth of the gospel even though it's there plainly for him to see.

I need to pray that God would show him by his Spirit the wisdom of Jesus' death on the cross for him. So who will you go away from this passage and pray for?

[26 : 11] to the cross to the cross to the cross fair and pray for him to the cross as a symbol O the cross is yet by your of Jesus' death and pray for him the cross and pray for him by his hip to the cross and pray for him to join for him to the cross and pray for him to the cross and pray for him to the cross and pray for him