

## Life in the Spirit 8 – The Wisdom of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:1-16, John 16:7-15)

*Who is the wisest person you know and why? (PAIRS)*

Might have been a range of answers to that question – from parents, to best friends, to various teachers you've known over the years. And the reasons might have varied too: perhaps it was the wisdom of their life experience, perhaps they always knew just what to say in any given situation, perhaps they had simple mottos which they passed on to you.

Wisdom comes in all shapes and sizes, but there are common threads, aren't there? The wise person seems to know how to live life right. It's not mainly about IQ or formal education: they might or might not be well-educated, but what they do have is an ability to get to the heart of things, to know how to make life work better. And that's not a bad definition of wisdom as the bible describes it. Wisdom is truth in everyday clothing, it's about what makes life work and it's about how to weave God into all aspects of our lives. Information is useful, knowledge is better, but wisdom goes beyond knowledge to the very fabric of what it means to be human and how to live a true life under God.

And we might as well admit at the start that wisdom is in short supply in our modern world. Even a century ago, the great poet TS Eliot lamented: 'O the wisdom we have lost in our thirst for knowledge; O the knowledge we have lost in our thirst for information!' And what was true then is doubly true now – the amount of information on the web doubles every 2 years, we spend billions acquiring knowledge as a society – but how many people are leading better, happier, more fruitful, wiser lives? Most of us build relentlessly on sand, and wonder why it doesn't feel more like rock. And I think someone had something to say about that once....

So what can we learn about true wisdom today – that is, spiritual wisdom, the stuff that goes to the heart of life and what it means to be human? Well, there's so much in these passages, but I've tried to boil it down to 3 simple headings:

**The wisdom of the Spirit is truth which has the power to touch the heart.** This takes us to the passage in John. Jesus is teaching his disciples on the night before he dies. They're traumatised because he's just told them he's going to leave them – what will they do now? Don't worry, Jesus says. I'm sending some help – my Spirit. And what will this Spirit do? Well, we've already learnt that he will dwell within us, he'll encourage us and he'll also give us peace. But here we also learn that the Spirit guides us into all truth – READ v13. And this truth ultimately will reveal more of Jesus – READ v14. As we've noted many times in the last couple of months, the whole purpose of God's Spirit is to reveal Jesus to us. To help us to know him and love him and follow him. So the *truth* the Spirit is particularly keen on is everything that points us to Jesus.

But it's more than knowledge. It has a power to touch our hearts. In the old language this was the word '*conviction*' – the Spirit convicts us. In other words, we feel at a deep level that these truths are for us. In particular, the Spirit reveals simple but absolutely fundamental truths about who we are and where we're heading – READ v8-11. He reveals our sinfulness to us – in other words a deep acknowledgement of our selfish desires and behaviour. He also reveals God's righteousness

– in other words we look at Jesus and can see how far we've fallen short of what we were meant to be. And then we also carry that sense that we *all* deserve judgment for it. That our sin matters, that judgement is not just for other people worse than me.

This is pretty old school stuff, but most of us have these moments don't we – when someone explains the good news about Jesus for the first time or maybe not the first time but it feels like it, and it's like that person is speaking directly to us. When they talk about Jesus dying for us, we suddenly think – yes, Jesus did that for me. Suddenly what seemed like abstract propositions are completely personal. Often when that happens, someone says – why didn't I see it before? Why have I heard this again and again and it's like it was for someone else? And the scales fall from our eyes and we know that God loves us and we give ourselves to God.

That, my friends, is what it is to be convicted by the Spirit of God. That is the wisdom of the Spirit, which has the power to touch our hearts. That is what Jesus means when he says that the Spirit will guide us into all truth – in other words, Jesus will be real to us. It's no longer just head knowledge, it's *wisdom*, it's what we live our lives by.

It's why every few months I go back to these simple truths and preach quite directly, encouraging people to receive it personally for themselves. I'm basically trying to be obedient to this teaching of Jesus. Because I know that every time I do, there'll be a few people in the pews for whom the message will be very real that day, who'll feel that God is speaking directly to them. All I'm doing is allowing the Spirit to make those truths real and powerful, and to allow God to touch people's hearts. And that's something we can pray every time we open God's word: Holy Spirit speak to me, guide me into all truth today. You'll be surprised what a difference that simple prayer makes!  
(PAUSE)

I have heard it said that this kind of approach is a bit old school in the modern world. It might have worked for the great evangelists of the past – the Billy Grahams and John Wesleys – but it's not for now. And I would agree that perhaps the days of big open-air missions are going, we simply don't gather in public to listen to people like we used to. But let's not throw the baby out with the bathwater. What the evangelists relied on to be fruitful in their work is absolutely as relevant as ever: we still need the conviction of the Holy Spirit as much as ever to change a person's heart – in fact probably more so, since we live in a sceptical age. We might share these truths with fewer people and in more intimate settings, but we need the power of God by His Holy Spirit as much as we ever did, to dwell in what we preach and what we believe. Indeed Jesus insists that we need the Spirit for the truth to really touch our hearts. So I'm going with Jesus on this one – he still sends the Spirit that his life-changing truth might have real power in our lives.

Which leads nicely onto.... **The wisdom of the Spirit has power to change lives.** And here we switch across to Corinthians. Now here we find ourselves in the middle of a debate between Paul and the young church in Corinth. Corinth was in Greece, which was famous for its philosophers and scholars, and so it relied heavily on the glamour of intellectual argument. If you wanted to say something in Corinth, it had to sound good, full of learned references and fine-sounding rhetoric.

But how does Paul describe the gospel? 1:18 – ‘foolishness’. A God who allows himself to die? A king who refuses political and military power? A teacher who never wrote a book or learned from the philosophers? This gospel of yours – what a lot of rot. And Paul says: READ v25. In fact, as we begin ch2 he goes further and says – you know what, all this academic learning of yours, I deliberately didn’t use any of that when I came and preached to you. All I preached was the cross and then backed it up with signs that God was real: READ v4-5.

I want briefly to address a major issue we have in our culture our present. We’re not too worried about truth anymore. At least, not on the surface. All the way through to the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, we relied heavily on proving truth at the heart of our mission as a church, because most people operated on the principle that if it was true, then it was real. Now I think fewer people ask whether something is true, mostly people ask ‘is it real?’ Which is not to undermine what I just said about truth, because when it comes with spiritual conviction then it’s every bit as real. It cuts right through the mind and goes straight to the heart. But if you look at courses on teaching faith, we’re still very keen to prove the basis of our faith through argument and logic.

And here is where I think Paul has something powerful to say to us today. He poses the question: what do you want your faith to rest on? When the going gets tough, what’s going to see you through? *It’s not how well-educated you are – it’s your experience of the real power of God.*

How do we experience the power of God today? In 3 ways in particular – in the love we see in a church community, in other words we actually see people full of the love of God and that makes following Jesus real. Secondly in the evidence of changed lives. People who come to faith often see someone else come to faith and their life changes. That speaks more loudly than any arguments that God is real. But thirdly it’s what Paul is talking about here – **miracles**. Tangible demonstrations of the power of God. As I’ve observed before, everyone has a problem with miracles until they see one. I’ve been privileged to witness a number of miracles – whether extraordinary answers to prayer, spontaneous but medically verifiable healings, or words people shared that they couldn’t possibly have known beforehand. Others have encountered a sense of God’s tangible presence or a dream or vision of Jesus.

And friends, I think we need more of this today. We live in a sceptical but spiritual age – what we need is not more words but more power. More signs that God is real. And in fact it’s still true today that miracles are most likely to occur on people’s journey to faith – God is still doing today what he did then, giving people signs that he is real. I saw that when I was leading Alpha courses in Wandsworth prison. These men needed miracles to change their lives and by God’s grace they got them. Miracles were a weekly occurrence. That’s an extreme environment in which to be sharing faith, but every week I was in there it was like this passage from 1 Corinthians was coming alive – I was living it in early 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain – nervous, trembling, speaking a simple message and seeing God’s extraordinary power at work. I know Paul often writes quite dense text, but never forget that what he is speaking about is personal experience. He was there! He saw God do amazing things and these letters represent his attempt to reflect on those experiences. He never writes his letters from a theological college but usually from a prison or a safe house.

Now we can't predict miracles or make them happen but we can create an environment where we expect them more often, and we can encourage people to pray for and experience the real power of God. I think we're beginning that journey and I think God will bless us if we are brave enough to continue with it.

Finally, and very briefly, **the wisdom of the Spirit reveals things more deeply than human arguments**. This is really a summary of what we've already shared, but Paul echoes Jesus in reminding the Corinthians that it is the Spirit which reveals truth about God – READ v10-12. But he goes further and reminds them that without it, someone may never understand this Christian thing we're always going on about: READ v14.

So as I close, one simple piece of advice – if you have people in your life you'd love to share your faith with, and so far it's never really worked, can I encourage you to pray that God's Spirit would speak to them, beyond your human words? To return to where we started, that God would convict them, in other words take truth beyond their minds and into their hearts.

And so... READ v7 – and this same God makes it real to us today by His Spirit. Amen.