

How to Grow

the town church • 1 corinthians 2:6-16 (pg. 953) • 3/1/2020

As we've seen so far in this letter, the church community in the city of Corinth is concerned about their status, how they are viewed by others. They have this ambition and desire to accumulate intellectual and philosophical wisdom and knowledge. This concern reflects the culture of the city and time they live in. This has led to division within their community, which has expressed itself in many ways: sexual immorality, conflicts, factions, theological arguments, elitism, and many other controversies we'll be looking at in the coming months.

In the first chapter, the Apostle Paul is drawing the Corinthians back to what they have already learned about in Jesus. He isn't teaching them something *new* in this letter—he is recalibrating their sense of sight and sound. They have been looking at things wrongly and listening to voices that have led them astray. So Paul has reminded them of their identity, he's reminded them that they follow Christ (not, ultimately, any human leader), and that the power and wisdom that they've been seeking (the values of the world) is inferior to the power and wisdom of God. What is that wisdom? It's the power of God as displayed through the death of Jesus, the Son of God.

In the passage we will look at today, we see what true wisdom looks like and how to grow in it. Today we will see a *Plan for Growth*, a *Power for Growth* and a *Path to Growth*. **Let's read 1 Corinthians 2:6-16 (#953)**

A Plan for Growth

After spending a good amount of time stressing that the wisdom of the world, which is essentially the way that we view the world outside of Jesus, that this “wisdom” is worthless and passing away, Paul then pivots and begins to talk about what wisdom looks like in the community of Jesus. He's basically saying that “wisdom” isn't the problem—Christianity isn't an anti-intellectual religion. The problem is when we try to define wisdom outside of what God has revealed to us, when we try and make our own rules, establish our own authority outside of God's. Now that Paul has established this, he turns to look at what true wisdom looks like for those who follow Jesus. He says: *[6] Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom...*

There *is* a wisdom that Paul and the other apostles teach. But Paul gives a condition here; *who* does he teach it to? The *mature*. Who are the *mature*? For the church community in Corinth, it is likely that the idea of a “mature or spiritually adult” type of Christian has taken shape. In the same way that there were different tiers socially and intellectually, different *levels* had formed in the church. It is very possible that on the basis of education, social status, or the expression of spectacular spiritual gifts, that some claimed the rank of “mature” leaders who possessed a special “wisdom” which they were using to direct others or elevating their status in the community.

But is this what Paul means by “mature.” Based on what he's said so far in the letter, we know that that can't be what he means. He's said that any kind of “wisdom” that looks like that is of the world, not of Jesus. Wisdom is shaped by the cross of Jesus...and so must our idea of what maturity and growth is. He is redefining for the Corinthians what a “mature” or spiritually adult follower of Jesus looks like: *someone who reflects Jesus*. If you want to grow in Christ, you have to shape your life in the way of Christ. Maturity and growth doesn't come through social status, but through living out our new identity in Jesus. So what does it look like to be mature in Christ? Anthony Thistleton says that *it is the flowering of those qualities which characterize the God who reveals himself in the humiliation of the cross and the love of Christ for others*.¹ Maturity in Jesus means to reflect who Jesus is: humble, gracious, loving, committed, concerned for the good of others, dedicated to honoring God. It's not an elevation of yourself; it's an elevation of Jesus and others. Christian maturity is a life shaped by the cross.

So...there *is* a wisdom that we pursue and live by, but that wisdom is only for those who are mature, those whose lives are shaped by the cross of Jesus. So then, what *is* this wisdom? Well, we know what it is *not*: *it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away*. Though information and knowledge are more available than ever (internet, books, phones, podcasts), this is not the wisdom that Paul is talking about.

What then is this wisdom that Paul does teach? [7]...*we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory*. The wisdom that Paul teaches is *a secret and hidden wisdom of God*. Now, this sounds very mystical and spiritual to us; secret, hidden, something that requires a guru or spiritual guide to lead you to, or something you have to spend years and years of contemplation trying to understand. But in the NT, the concept of something secret or a mystery (literal translation of hidden) is pointing us not to our inability to understand it, but in it's *revealing*. God has been working an eternal plan and purpose and in Jesus, it is coming to light. The mystery is being revealed. But not everyone sees this: [8] *None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory*. But there are some who are beginning to understand the mystery of God: the ones he is showing it to: [9] *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”*—

One way we can think of the wisdom of God is not as information to be gained but as a story to be told. A great example of this is in the writing of C.S. Lewis. In his book *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*, he tells of 4 siblings who magically enter the kingdom of Narnia and find themselves as the fulfillment of an age-old prophecy, to take the place of thrones that had been long empty. Of course, the one who had been ruling Narnia—the White Witch—doesn't want this to happen. She must stop this.

So she tricks one of the children, Edmund, into betraying his siblings for her. In doing so, he becomes subject to what is called *The Deep Magic*. The Deep Magic was a set of laws placed into Narnia by the Emperor-beyond-the-Sea at the time of its creation. This law stated that the White Witch, Jadis, was entitled to kill every traitor, and if someone denied her this right then all of Narnia would be overturned and perish in fire & water.

When it comes time for Edmund to pay the penalty for his betrayal, Aslan, the one true king of Narnia, offers to take the place of Edmund. The Witch is delighted! This is working out even better than she had hoped. Though he is innocent, Aslan is killed on the Stone Table by the White Witch. Edmund's two sisters Lucy and Susan watch the whole thing and, in mourning, go to the table in the morning. But they are shocked to find that Aslan is gone! Turning around, they find that Aslan has been resurrected—he has come back to life! What has happened? Aslan explains: *...though the Witch knew the Deep Magic, there is a magic deeper still which she did not know. Her knowledge goes back only to the dawn of time. But if she could have looked a little further back, into the stillness and the darkness before Time dawned, she would have read there a different incantation. She would have known that when a willing victim who had committed no treachery was killed in a traitor's stead, the Table would crack and Death itself would start working backwards.*²

The wisdom and values of the world operate in the same way as the Deep Magic of Narnia. But Jesus is operating under the principle of *the Deeper Magic*; the old age is passing away, a new age has broken in and the Cross, something despised and humiliating, is shown to be the power and wisdom of God. And this is how it has always been—not an afterthought, not an adjustment, not a plan B. Jesus' death on this cross for our salvation—for our glory!—has been God's eternal plan, purposed before the foundation of the world.³ To be mature, to be wise, is to know this plan and purpose and to shape our lives by it. As Brian Rosner says: *[maturity is] the wisdom of the cross applied to everyday life.*⁴ This is God's plan for our growth.

But if the wisdom of God cannot be learned through intellectual or philosophical knowledge, how can we understand God's plan and purpose? How can what is hidden become known? Vs. [10] *these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit.* Here is God's power for growth.

A Power for Growth

When I say that the Holy Spirit is God's power for our growth in Jesus, I don't mean that the Holy Spirit is some kind of essence or impersonal force that we learn to manipulate or master. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of God. The Holy Spirit is a person and our experience with the Holy Spirit is always personal. This personal nature of God is precisely what Paul is getting at, beginning in the second half of vs. 10: *For the Spirit searches [knows the thoughts of] everything, even the depths of God. [11] For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God.*

The very things we cannot understand (the things of God-his eternal plan and purpose, the Deeper Magic), the Spirit of God can. In the same way that our my thoughts and motivations can only be truly understood internally (and even that is complicated), the Spirit of God understands and comprehends the thoughts of God.

But here is where the Holy Spirit of God gives us a power for growing in Jesus: *[12] 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.* The Spirit of God reveals to us what has been hidden, uncovers the full and glorious plan and purposes of God. This is not something we achieve; it is something that we receive. What an incredible gift!

It is this gift that Paul is pointing the Corinthians toward; he knows that they are worried about what they can achieve, but he says “Look at what you've already been given—the Spirit of God has shown you the way of Jesus. You don't need anything else.” This is what he has always taught them: *[13] 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 NIV interprets this as *explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words.* For both the teacher (Paul and other early church leaders) and the students (the Corinthian church), they are operating from what they have received: what the Holy Spirit has given them.

During dinner the other night, our Gospel Community was talking about how impossible it feels for people to believe the good news of Jesus. People we work with, people we care about, our family, friends, neighbors...how can we convey to them the beauty and importance of who Jesus is and what he has done for us? We read, we study, we try and anticipate questions... but at the end of the day, can we really convince people?

The answer here is clearly “No.” And the way we can best see that is to think back on your own entrance into the kingdom of Jesus. How did you come to see your need for salvation in Jesus? How did you come a point where you believed and trusted that what Jesus did on the cross was for you? The answer is the same for us as it is here in 1 Corinthians: we believe because the Holy Spirit has revealed Jesus to us. He's uncovered the mystery of God's eternal plan to us. We have been invited into this. We weren't smarter or faster or more spiritual or more curious than anyone else. But in God's sovereign wisdom, he chose to reveal Jesus to us and call us into his family through the Holy Spirit.

And it's the *ongoing* work of the Holy Spirit, revealing how much we need Jesus everyday, that is the power for our growth in Jesus. That's real maturity: it's not a point of arrival; it's recognizing your need for Jesus every day. The Holy Spirit is continually at work in us, uncovering our sin, pointing us to Jesus, showing us the way of the cross. It's here that we see a path to our growth.

A Path to our Growth

Paul concludes this section by giving us one final contrast: [14] *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.* [15] *The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one.* [16] *“For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?” But we have the mind of Christ.*

Essentially Paul is saying that there are 2 paths we can take in order to grow: The first is the way of the world, the way of the “natural person.” In this way, we can reject the message of Jesus. We can say “I don't need to be saved from anything because I haven't done anything wrong. I'm as good as the next person and I'll just keep on trying to be kind and do good. I'll make my own way, write my own story, walk my own path.”

The second path to grow is the way of the Spirit. In this way, the Holy Spirit reveals our need for salvation and the provision for that need in who Jesus is and what he has done for us on the cross. In order to walk and grow on this path, we must learn to stop caring about the judgements and opinions of those on the other path. It doesn't mean we don't care about *them*; it simply means that we have different values.

What is the difference between these 2 paths? It hinges on either our rejection or acceptance of the way of the cross, the way of Jesus. And how do we come to accept the way of Jesus? Through the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, revealing to us the glory and beauty of Jesus.

I am assuming that we have people on both of those paths here today. But here is what is true for all of us: it is hard to walk and live in the way of Jesus. For those who reject Jesus, it's impossible. Even if you admire Jesus as a teacher or example, you aren't going to submit your whole life to him. You still have objections. There's too many holes in Christianity for you. To that, I would give you a quote from G.K. Chesterton: *The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried.*⁵ Today, you are being given an invitation by the Holy Spirit to try the way of Jesus, to walk a new path. I pray you do that today.

Even for those of us who have accepted Jesus through the work of the Holy Spirit, this path is still hard. Walking in the way of Jesus is difficult. But we don't do this in our own strength, our own efforts, our own willpower—we walk in the way of Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit. If God has loved us and revealed his eternal plan and purpose to us and called us into his family, he's not going to abandon us. He's not going to give up on us. So keep walking with him. Keep seeking him. Keep asking him to grow and mature you. Keep asking him to show you your need for Jesus and keep asking him to show you Jesus meets every need you have. Bring him all your hopes, all your longings, and all your needs. Walk with him.

- 1 Thiselton, A. C. (2000). *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: a commentary on the Greek text* (p. 225). Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans.
- 2 https://narnia.fandom.com/wiki/The_Deeper_Magic_from_Before_the_Dawn_of_Time
- 3 Witherington, B., III. (1995). *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (p. 127). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.
- 4 Ciampa, R. E., & Rosner, B. S. (2010). *The First Letter to the Corinthians* (p. 123). Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.
- 5 <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/13211-the-christian-ideal-has-not-been-tried-and-found-wanting>