

1 Corinthians 2:6-16
How to get the deep things of God
Notes from a sermon preached at Christ Church Liverpool

Girdharilal Maurya, like his ancestors, was born "achuta," - untouchable. He is a leatherworker, and Hindu law says that makes him, someone to avoid and revile. To make matters worse Maurya is a prosperous leatherworker whose unseemly prosperity disturbed many others in his village. One night, while Maurya was away in a nearby city, eight men from the higher Rajput caste came to his farm. They broke his fences, stole his tractor, beat his wife and daughter, and burned down his house.

To be born a Hindu in India is to enter the caste system. There are, essentially, 5 ranks in Hindu society:

Brahmans—the priests and teachers.
Kshatriyas—the rulers and soldiers.
Vaisyas—merchants and traders.
Sudras—laborers
And "Dalits" or Untouchables.

Untouchables are shunned, insulted, banned from temples and higher caste homes, made to eat and drink from separate utensils in public places, and, in extreme but not uncommon cases, are raped, burned, lynched, and gunned down. I'm sure we hear about things like that, as do an increasing number of Hindus of course, with horror and distaste. But I hope we're not so foolish as to imagine that nothing similar has ever happened in supposedly Christian societies and communities. People who call themselves Christians have a disturbing habit of classifying people into the more and less spiritual.

The most obvious example is Roman Catholicism, of course. Where the really spiritual people take on a "vocation" – that is become a priest a monk or a nun. Only those people in "holy orders" are spiritual enough to, for example, break bread at the Lord's Supper.

But in protestant churches too this kind of thing goes on. Whether it's the high Anglican priest who stands at the front of the church and waves his arms about in magic ritual...or the charismatic "prophet" who freely dispenses instruction to other members of the church about every detail of their lives.

In churches like ours, of course, there is the constant danger that the elders or the deacons or the housegroup leaders or the ministry apprentices are seen as somehow more spiritual than everyone else. Just the other week I had a letter about someone who is off to work for a Christian organisation sharing the organisations conviction that the person had been "called" to

work with the particular group of people they would be ministering to. I wonder if the person who wrote that letter would have used the same language to talk about the Christian hospital porter doing his work?

All of this contributes, doesn't it, to the creation of a kind of hierarchy of spirituality in people's choices and careers.

Now there is definitely a great need for far more of us to serve abroad as cross cultural missionaries and for more Bible teachers and pastors in this country too. And lots of people in this church should be strongly considering those options.

But, as we'll see from the section of Paul's letter that we're studying this morning, we must not imagine that the job you do, or indeed anything else, can be the basis for a hierarchy of spirituality.

Fair enough. But how **do** you become spiritual as a Christian?

I mean the cross might be fine for saving you – after all Paul has just spent much of chapter 1 showing us that the message of the cross is the power of God for salvation.

But where do you go from there? You've come to the cross and you've become a Christian – how do you become a **spiritual** Christian? How can you be **wise**?

It seems that in C1st Corinth many people were into classifying people as being either "spiritual" or not. That spirit of classification seems to have infected the church in Corinth. And a good number of the people in the church wanted to move on from the weak message that Paul had presented to get hold of, v10, "the deep things of God."

In a supreme twist of irony this very passage in Paul's letter to the church, has been used by people throughout the history of the church to teach that there are classes of Christians, some spiritual, some not – or at least some more spiritual than others.

Back in 1:18, if you were here last Sunday, you'll remember that Paul made it clear that there are only two sorts of people in the world: those who are saved and those who are perishing.

And we also saw Paul urging the Corinthians, who were obsessed with worldly wisdom, not to value such academic sophistication, because the wisdom of the world led people only to ignorance of God (1:21).

But, Paul says, in 2:6, his message, the message of the New Testament, is wisdom – it is just not the wisdom of this age or the wisdom of the rulers of this age.

In fact...

1 The Gospel is wisdom for the mature (6-10a)

This section is quite difficult so if you've fallen asleep now is the time to wake up and get your brain in gear.

The gospel is not wise, v6, to the rulers of this age. In other words the powerful people in the world – in Paul's day people like Pilate, Herod and the Sanhedrin - those kind of people did not understand the wisdom of the gospel.

Instead, v7, the gospel is God's secret wisdom that **has been** hidden. Notice the past tense there. The gospel wisdom has been hidden. It is not hidden any more.

OK, so the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ and his cross, is a previously hidden wisdom that the clever people of Paul's day didn't understand.

In fact, v8, none of the rulers of this age understood the wisdom of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

How do we know that? Well if they had, Paul says, they would not have crucified the Lord Jesus. In other words if, when he was walking around people had really, properly, understood who Jesus was they wouldn't have killed him.

And in fact, Paul says, that was exactly how God knew it was going to be, And to prove it he quotes again from the book of Isaiah, just like he did in the previous chapter, some words written 600 years before Jesus came:

*"No eye has seen
No ear has heard
No mind has conceived
What God has prepared for those who love him"*

Nobody fully understood who Jesus was or what his cross was going to achieve.

The cross that brings freedom from sin, forgiveness, eternity with God, the tearing of the curtain, a way back to know the living God.

The Corinthians wanted the wise people in their church and were prepared to tailor what they believed to attract those kind of people. But Paul says why would you want to do that? Why would you want to chase after the wisdom of the kind of influential and powerful people who were so stupid that they took the lead in nailing God to a cross?

V9 must be one of the most abused verses in the entire Bible. It is often quoted by Christians to say something like:

"heaven will be better than we can possibly imagine, nobody has even really thought about what it's going to be like, it's going to be amazing"

Well that is certainly true! But Paul isn't saying anything about that here. Just think for a minute who Paul is talking about here. There are two lots of people in these verses aren't there? There are the people whose eyes have not seen and whose ears have not heard etc. **And** there are the people to whom God has revealed something by his Spirit.

So who are they? Well it's obvious really. The first group are the non-Christians. The people of this age – the kind of people who reject Jesus and despise Christians. They have not worked out what God has prepared for those who love him. They have not realised that Jesus and his cross offer salvation and rescue.

But, v10, God has revealed that salvation, that rescue through the cross to **us**, that is to *all Christians* by his Spirit. The point of this verse is not that Christians **don't** know something what heaven will be like. The point is that Christians **do know** how God saves people. The wisdom of God – the message, the gospel of Jesus has been hidden. But **now** it is revealed to Christians by God's Spirit. If you are a Christian here today you **do** know what God has prepared for those who love him. He has prepared the gospel. He has prepared forgiveness. He has prepared eternity with him.

In other words we can't move on from the wisdom of the cross. There isn't something better to be had than the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. That is the best that God has to offer. And all the clever people in all the world could not work out what God had prepared – it could only be revealed by God the Holy Spirit.

Notice as well that Paul talks about what God has prepared for those who **love** him.

Reading through this letter it's very obvious that one quality that the Corinthians were supremely lacking in was love. They esteemed all sorts of gifts, especially speaking in tongues, that they felt marked some people out as particularly spiritual. But, as we'll see when we get to chapter 13, Paul says that without love all those things are utterly worthless.

The people to whom God reveals his wisdom are not the clever people or the gifted people or the noble people but the people who love him.

The Corinthian Christians had misunderstood Christian maturity. They thought it came from being wise in the terms of the world. From being able to have sophisticated arguments or seeing the visibly supernatural at work.

We often do the same. There are all sorts of Christians today who teach that having the gift of tongues is a sign of maturity. There are other Christians today who think that maturity is attained by studying theology and having lots of letters after your name. The world has MAs and PhDs and so we must have them too.

But you don't become a mature Christian by studying academic theology or by having a particular spiritual gift.

Real wisdom is understanding the cross and its implications. Mature Christians are not the most gifted – they are the ones who love God the most.

And that's good news. Because it means that maturity isn't for a select few – it's for every Christian.

2 The Spirit gives us deep insight (10b-13)

I think it's likely that "the deep things of God" was actually a phrase used by some of the Corinthian Christians for their superior understanding – they had access to the deep things of God and other people didn't. And, let's face it, they are hardly unique in that. Throughout the history of the church and still today people have claimed to have an insight into God that other Christians don't have.

But if we take what Paul says here seriously we will always be very, very suspicious of such claims. We will be very sceptical about books and talks and conferences that claim to reveal a new insight that people haven't had before.

Who is it, Paul asks, that knows the deep things of God – the profound wisdom and insights right at the heart of God?

Well only one person can know those things – the Spirit of God, v10b.

Imagine that I told you I am thinking about something right now and I want you to tell me what it is.

You might have a lucky guess in the general area. But if I was thinking about something very specific it's incredibly unlikely you'd work it out.

Who knows your thoughts? V11 – only your spirit. Other people can look at you and they might even be able to guess what you are thinking and feeling. But they can't know unless you tell them.

Well it's just the same with God. Only God's Spirit knows God's thoughts.

Christians, v12, have not received the Spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God. If you are a Christian here this morning you have been given the Spirit who knows what God is thinking and doing. God has given Christians his Spirit so that we may understand.

Isn't that amazing?

The very Spirit who searches the deep things of God lives in every Christian so that we may understand. Now obviously that doesn't mean we know everything that God knows. We won't understand astrophysics or the reproductive habits of sea-turtles just because we're Christian.

No. God gives us his Spirit so that, v12, we may understand "what God has freely given us" – that is so we can understand the gospel, the gift of life in Christ Jesus.

And what that means is that **that there are no second class Christians**. Every Christian has the Spirit of God. Every Christian has access to the deep things of God. Every Christian can know everything that God has revealed about himself. There is no inside track to knowing God.

As we'll see next week when we look at chapter 3 that doesn't mean all Christians are the same – Paul will show us that some are more mature than others. But there are no classes of Christian. There are only two groups of people in the world. The saved and the perishing.

If we are Christian we have access to the deep things of God. We have everything we need to become mature.

So the challenge for us as Christians, as people who believe and trust in the cross of the Lord

Jesus, is **not** to discover things that God hasn't revealed to anyone else. We are not trying to get ahead of the game.

Our challenge as Christians is to grow up. To learn more about what God **has** revealed to us by his Spirit.

There is no special anointing for a few. There is no book you can read, speaker you can hear, conference or church you can go to that will give you a special inside track to knowing God better than other people do not have.

The deep things of God is the gospel. The deep things of God are the truths taught by Paul the apostle:

"not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words."

Paul brought a spiritual message in spiritual words.

He didn't come with wisdom in the world's sense – he didn't impress as a speaker and nor did his message.

But it was a spiritual message because it was given by the Spirit.

For us that means that the way to go deep with God is simply to continue to study the message of Jesus, recorded for us in the Bible and to pray that God will help us understand it more and more profoundly.

And it means that we are not free to change the gospel, the good news of Jesus, just because we think it will work better.

We too need to express spiritual truths in spiritual words.

3 The Christian need not listen to the world (14-16)

Now at this point in the letter you can just imagine the Corinthians crying out:

"so if what we have, the message of the cross, is the deep things of God, then why, when we share the gospel, when we express spiritual truths in spiritual words, don't people listen?"

Well it's simple, v14. If people don't have the Spirit, if they are not Christian, they won't understand spiritual things. In other words the person who is not a Christian doesn't truly understand the gospel. Because, if they really understood it, they would become a Christian!

But the person with the Spirit, the Christian, makes judgments about all things, v15. The Christian understands the world, how it works and what God is doing. So the Christian is not subject to any one else's judgement.

Now we need to be really clear what Paul means by that. Paul is not saying that Christians do not need to listen to other Christians, to take godly advice, to learn and so on. Because the Bible makes it clear that no Christian is exempt from accountability to other Christians through the family of the local church. Paul isn't setting up a charter for arrogance!

What he's saying is that Christians don't have to prove themselves to the world. It doesn't undermine what you believe about Jesus Christ if people around you think it's nonsense. Of course they think it's nonsense, Paul says, because they don't have the Spirit!

Paul clinches his argument with another quotation from Isaiah.

Isaiah 40:13. *For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct him?*

In this passage Isaiah is showing the foolishness of those arrogant people who think they know better than God (read v12).

Last week I mentioned the kind of people, I'm sure you know them who says things like: "I like to think of God as..."

Sometimes it can be easy to be wrong footed by that. What do you say in reply to that?

Well Paul says that our response should be (maybe not in so many words) "who cares how you like to think of God? You don't know God!"

But Christians, have the mind of Christ.

To be a Christian is to have the mind of Christ – to know what God has done and is doing and will do in the world.

So please, please, please don't let the fact that the lots of your friends and family find bits of the gospel offensive put you off saying them.

Because that's nothing new. 2000 years ago in Corinth the "modern mind" couldn't accept the gospel either. They couldn't accept that they were sinful, that they deserved God's judgement, that the only way to escape it is to trust in what God has done in Jesus. That message is offensive in every generation. Because it tells people what we don't want to hear – that we are sinners who deserve judgement.

Don't allow criticisms of the message you believe of good news about Jesus to put you off. People have always criticised the Christian message. And they always will. But it is still good news. Still the truth about God's rescue, his power and his wisdom.

As we restart Christianity Explored next term, as we run events for new students, as we restart our regular evenings at The Pilgrim some people will be interested in the Christian message and believe the gospel. And some won't.

But even if lots of people aren't interested we don't need to change message.

We might need to think about how we are presenting it. But not change the message.

Sure we need to listen to the world. We need to understand where people are coming from. What are the issues, how do people think (cinema, TV, books etc). But we will never be more spiritual or more effective by adopting the way of thinking or speaking or acting of people without the Spirit.

If we want to be more spiritual we need to understand the message of Jesus found in the Bible better and consequently learn to love God more. That is real wisdom. And it is available to every Christian.

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August 2004*