A DEMONSTRATION OF THE SPIRIT’S POWER AND WISDOM

1 Corinthians 2:1-16

Key Verses: 2:4-5

“My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, so that your faith might not rest on men’s wisdom, but on God’s power.”

This passage teaches us how to deliver the message of the cross. It also teaches us how to understand the message of the cross. Paul contrasts the wisdom of the world and the wisdom of God. The wisdom of the world is temporary and false, but the wisdom of God is eternal and true. The truth about the cross of Jesus cannot be understood by everyone. Only those who have received the Spirit of God can understand it. So we need the Spirit of God in order to understand the secret of the cross.

I.  How to deliver the message of the cross (1-5).

In this part Paul explained how he delivered the message of the cross in Corinth. He explained the contents of the message, his attitude in delivering the message, his source of power and purpose in delivering the message.

First, the contents of Paul’s message (1-2). When Paul pioneered Corinth he resolved not to speak with eloquence and superior wisdom, but to know nothing except Jesus Christ and him crucified. Why was this necessary? In Corinth at that “one could not go down the street without meeting a philosopher.” In the atmosphere of flourishing philosophy, rhetoric and oratory weres highly developed in order to enable teachers to speak with eloquence and superior wisdom. Rhetoric was the most popular subject of the times. Professors of rhetoric were the most famous and influenced many people and made a lot of money. Though they had no radio or television, famous rhetoricians drew huge audiences. Once such a man appeared in a city, thousands of people thronged around him and listened to him. In those days rhetoricians moved people’s minds by quoting the words of famous philosophers such as Homer’s “Odyssey.” The city of Corinth had such an atmosphere. When Paul went to Corinth he must have been tempted to deliver his message with eloquence and superior wisdom. He was a highly educated scholar under the famous teacher Gamaliel. He grew up in Tarsus, which was a center of Hellenistic culture. So he mastered both Hellenism and Hebraism. When Paul delivered his message before King Agrippa and Governor Festus, Festus shouted, “You are out of your mind, Paul. Your great learning is driving you insane!” (Ac 26:24) In Athens, Paul disputed with a group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers. He overpowered them (Ac 17:18). So Paul could have spoken more eloquent and beautiful words than many of the poets of Hellenism. He could have talked about philosopies more profound than all others. However, he resolved to know nothing except Jesus Christ and him crucified while he was among the Corinthians. He wanted to deliver the message about Jesus Christ, especially about his crucifixion. We can learn Jesus in many ways, such as teacher, healer, perfect man, philosopher, a revolutionary, and so on. However, the most essential truth about Jesus is that he is the Christ and he was crucified for our sins. When we confess that Jesus is the Christ and that he was crucified for our sins on the cross, we are saved by receiving the grace of forgiveness. That is the gospel. To deliver only this message is not easy. The message of the cross is not popular. It is also very challenging. It demands men’s repentance. Greeks loved wisdom and searched for the truth, only to enjoy the search. They did not commit to the truth or sacrifice for the truth. When they heard about the word “cross” they got allergies. It seemed unreasonable to them to deliver the message of the cross. So when Paul deliverd the message of the cross, he had to be ready to receive persecution and ridicule from them. But Paul resolved not to know anything while he was with them except Jesus Christ and him crucified. It is because only the message of the cross could give them life. According to Acts 18:5 Paul devoted himself exclusively to preaching, testifying that Jesus is the Christ. When he did so for one and a half years, there was a great work of God. These days many people have a tendency to avoid the message of the cross. They want to hear something psychologically appealing or something about prosperity. But we should not compromise at all. We must resolve to deliver the message of the cross. Only the message of the cross gives life to men’s souls.

Second, Paul’s attitude in delivering the message (3). Paul contrasts his attitude with that of the Greek philosophers. They were very confident about their knowledge and ability. However Paul came to the Corinthians in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. When we are weak physically, emotionally, or mentally, we have nothing in ourselves to depend on. We can only depend on God. If we have confidence in ourselves, we don’t have to depend on God. Then God cannot use us. Paul came with fear and trembling. It was not because he feared Corinth’s advanced culture. It was because he feared the power of his enemy, Satan. According to Acts 18:6 many Jews grouped together and opposed Paul when he tried to deliver the message of the cross. Because of this he became fearful and did not want to deliver the message any more. But the Lord appeared to him at night and said, “Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city” (Ac 18:9,10). Because of this Paul kept delivering the message with fear and trembling. Paul did not fight with the opposing Jews. Paul fought with Satan. Satan’s purpose was to stop him from speaking the gospel by planting doubt, fear and despair. But the Lord encouraged him to keep on speaking. When he obeyed, there was a great work of God. The battle of the messenger is not with flesh and blood, but with the spiritual forces of evil, that is, Satan. That is why we must be equipped with the full armor of God and depend on God alone (Eph 6:11-13).

Third, Paul’s source of power and purpose (4-5). Paul wanted his audience to put their faith, not on human wisdom, but on God’s power. Because of this, he did his best not to deliver the message of the cross with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power. He knew that the work of God is the work of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the Spirit of truth (Jn 16:13). Therefore, the Spirit works through God’s word, especially through the message of the cross. When people heard the message of the cross, they were moved to repent of their sins and accept the saving grace of God. Paul knew that the power source was not human wisdom, but the Spirit. Human wisdom cannot change man, even though it is very attractive. Only the Spirit changes man through the words of God. The Spirit can give life. That is why Jesus said to Nicodemus, “...no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit” (Jn 3:5).

Faith based on human wisdom cannot last long. This kind of faith may be based on theoretical and humanistic ideas. It does not have power to change men. It will be destroyed when trials and hardships comes because it is like a house built on the sand. But faith based on the demonstration of the Spirit’s power will last forever because it has a root in practical obedience and personal experience. This kind of faith is like a house built on a rock. For this, Paul prayed hard for the Corinthians. He wanted them to have a foundation of faith not on human wisdom, but on the Spirit’s power.

II.  How to understand the message of the cross (6-16).

In this part Paul explains why he resolved to deliver only the message of Jesus Christ and him crucified. He also explains how to understand the message of the cross.

In verses 6-9, Paul explains that the secret wisdom of God is hidden and that the rulers of this age cannot understand it by their own wisdom. Paul spoke a message of wisdom among the mature. Here, the word “mature,” does not mean humanly mature people, but spiritually mature people. It refers to a man of faith. So Paul wanted to talk about wisdom among the mature. This wisdom was not the wisdom of the rulers, or philosophicial or scientific wisdom. It is God’s wisdom that has been hidden. Gnosticism classified people into three groups: physical people, intellectual people, and spiritual people. They claimed that only a few spiritual people can know the way of salvation and be saved. But God did not reveal the secret of his wisdom only to a few special people; he revealed it to all people who accept Jesus Christ as their Savior. That is why the gospel is called the “known secret.”  Since the gospel is a hidden secret, it is very precious. At the same time, it is all known and anybody can believe it and be saved. But those who reject Jesus cannot know the secret of the gospel because their eyes become blind. If worldly rulers understood God’s wisdom, they would not have crucified Jesus, the Lord of glory. Man, by worldly wisdom, cannot know God’s wisdom. Worldly wisdom changes and disappears. It is not true wisdom. It is the wisdom that deceives people. But God’s wisdom is the wisdom that makes man alive. It is the universal wisdom that can be applied to any person in any generation. This wisdom has been hidden. But at God’s time he revealed it through Jesus Christ (Ro 16:25-26).The wisdom of God cannot be seen or heard or understood by human faculties. The wisdom of God can only be seen and heard and understood through faith alone. This wisdom has been prepared for humble people who love God (9).

In verses 10-12, Paul explains that God revealed his secret to those who accept Jesus Christ as their Savior by his Spirit. We can understand the message of the cross because we received the Spirit of God. No one knows the thoughts of man except the man’s spirit within him. In the same way, no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. So when we receive the Spirit from God we can understand the gospel. When we study the Bible we must receive the Holy Spirit in order to understand the deep meaning of the passage.

In verse 13, Paul explains why he delivered the message of the cross not in words taught by human wisdom, but in words taught by the Spirit. In verses 14-16, Paul explains that only those who receive the Spirit of God can become spiritual men who can discern truth and understand and have the mind of Christ.