

I Corinthians 3:18-23

Stupid Wisdom

- The Christian church has always faced two challenges in its relationship with the world. How can it speak so as to be heard? This is the challenge of relevance. And how can it keep from being corrupted by the world? This is the challenge of defilement.
- When Paul wrote I Corinthians he was addressing both issues but especially the latter. The church was supposed to act like a thermostat (governing its environment) rather than a thermometer (reflecting its environment).
- Menlo Park Presbyterian Church in the Bay area of California has had a practice of giving away any money left in its account at the end of each year so that it starts every New Year from scratch. Over the last few years it has given away over 4 million dollars in this way. This may sound foolish to the world but it sends a loud message to its members and its culture that says, "We believe that God is alive here and will sustain us as we take risks of faith in serving others." A skeptic might think that this church is acting irresponsibly (it has a large staff, programs, budget, etc.) and that it would discourage people from giving (knowing that the money may fly out the door at the end of the year). In reality, people want to support a church that is willing to put its money where its mouth is. And the world takes notice, wanting to know what makes this congregation of well educated, upper middle class political conservatives act this way.
- Paul realizes that worldliness is not only a way of behaving. More importantly, it is a way of thinking. Carnality is a world-view and a set of values that come from a way of seeing "reality."
- In I Corinthians 3:18-23 Paul will give us some clues as to the nature of Godly wisdom over against worldly wisdom.

A. Worldly wisdom is self-deceiving.

¹⁸Let no man deceive himself.

1. **Prove.14:12** "There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death."
2. Godly wisdom is not so concerned about the outward conduct as the thinking that lies behind the behavior. Paul recognizes that carnality is not corrected on the surface but at its root - its way of thinking, its "stupid wisdom."
3. Another person can deceive you. But self-deception is more serious. It is a flaw built into the internal operating system of the person rather than a virus from without. The mind must be challenged and renewed if there is going to be a real change.
4. The first step to disobedience is deception. The first step to repentance is a renewed mind. "As a man thinketh in his heart, so is he" Prov 23:7

B. Deception #1 Wisdom is relative.

“18 . . . If any man among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become foolish that he may become wise. 19 For the wisdom of this world is foolishness before God. For it is written, “{He is} the one who catches the wise in their craftiness”; 20 and again, “ The Lord knows the reasonings of the wise, that they are useless.””

1. Paul understands that the Wisdom of God is going to look foolish to the world. Those who choose to have their minds renewed (moving from worldly to Godly wisdom) must be prepared to become “fools” in the eyes of the world.
2. Paul does not see wisdom as one species with “worldly wisdom” as immature and “Godly wisdom” as mature. He sees two different systems.
3. Paul does not see worldly wisdom as “secular” and Godly wisdom as “religious.” From Paul’s perspective, religious people (the Corinthian Christians) could walk in worldly wisdom.

C. Deception #2 Wisdom is all about us.

“21 So then let no one boast in men.

1. Paul is speaking in the context of divisions within the church - “I am of Paul. I am of Apollos.”
2. “Set your affections on things above,” Col. 3:2. The Greek word for affections is the word, *phroneo* which means “to think.” The noun means “mind.” There are many popular books addressing the “Positive Mental Attitude.”
3. The book “Think and Grow Rich” by Napoleon Hill deals with the temporal, material things of life. It is consistent with the Scripture at one important point. It realizes that the way we think or how we view the world will shape our behavior and our fate. While it may offer practical advice in gaining material wealth, it fails to recognize the nature of true wealth.
4. The world’s wisdom has all kinds of “good reasons” and even “Scripture verses” to support its foolish path.
 - a. The temptation of Eve in Gen.3 and the temptation of Jesus in Matt.4 are graphic examples.
 - b. Temptation starts with a world-view that supports a set of values that dictate a path of behavior.
 - c. These values place an emphasis on self-sufficiency and temporality.
5. There are 4 areas of battle in the culture wars. **Secular humanism is defining reality and making decisions as though God did not exist.** Its wisdom touts a world-view of:
 - a. **Total temporality** - There is no reality beyond this world of time, space, and matter.
 - b. **Absolute autonomy** - Man is accountable to no one outside himself.

- c. **Comprehensive contingency** - Everything has a natural explanation.
- d. **Radical relativity** - There are no moral absolutes.

D. Deception #3 You will miss out if you follow Godly wisdom.

“. . . For all things belong to you, ²² whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or things present or things to come; all things belong to you, ²³ and you belong to Christ; and Christ belongs to God.”

1. One of the challenges of worldly wisdom is the temptation to think that such wisdom is the best path to all the “good things” of life.
 - “God helps those who help themselves.” “Look out for number one.” “Do onto others before they can do it onto you.”
 - “If I just had more money, better health, different circumstances, and loving friends I would be successful and happy.”
2. The temptation of Eve in *Gen.3* is a classic illustration. Satan convinces Eve that if she does not follow her “natural” instincts she will miss out on life. The Word of God will keep you from an abundant life. It will repress, deprive, and rob you of joy, peace, and success. Paul says that in Christ we have access to all things as we seek the wisdom that is from above.

3. James 3 summarizes much of Paul’s concern for the Corinthians and for us.

“¹³Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom. ¹⁴ But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and {so} lie against the truth. ¹⁵ This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic. ¹⁶ For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing. ¹⁷ But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy. ¹⁸ And the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace. ¹ What is the source of quarrels and conflicts among you? Is not the source your pleasures that wage war in your members? ² You lust and do not have; {so} you commit murder. And you are envious and cannot obtain; {so} you fight and quarrel. You do not have because you do not ask. ³ You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend {it} on your pleasures. ⁴ You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God. ⁵ Or do you think that the Scripture speaks to no purpose: “He jealously desires the Spirit which He has made to dwell in us”? ⁶ But He gives a greater grace. Therefore {it} says, “*God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble.*” ⁷ Submit therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. ⁸ Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. ⁹ Be miserable and mourn and weep; let your laughter be turned into mourning, and your joy to gloom. ¹⁰ Humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord, and He will exalt you.”

E. The point of the text

Much of our conflict with Kingdom values is linked to our relationship with worldly wisdom.

Godly wisdom will lead to Godly values and Godly behavior.

F. Areas of application

1. The church can accept worldly wisdom without knowing it.
 - **Ends and Means** - If the end (church growth) is deemed good then any means that gets us there must be good. If the means (faith) is of God then any ends (material wealth) must be O.K.
 - **Pragmatism** - If it works we too often assume it is right or even "of God."
 - **Truth and values** - Uncritically accepting a postmodern perspective is not uncommon.
2. Christians can confess outwardly that they are not defiled by worldly values but the real test is seen in how they view reality and make decisions.
 - **Money** - How do we use money?
 - **Sex** - What do we see as acceptable, normal, or healthy?
 - **Power** - How do we use power?
 - **Cultural diversity** - How do we relate to those who are different (ethnically, economically, educationally, politically, and socially)? This is where Paul is addressing the Corinthians.