

1.3 Spiritually Mature or Stuck on Milk

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 27 June 2021

Preacher: Josh Johnston

- [0 : 0 0] But we're going to turn to our Bibles now. Josh is leading us once again in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. And we're going to read this evening from chapter 2 at verse 6 through to the beginning of the first few verses of chapter 3.
- And in what goes before, Paul has been talking about how the word of the cross is seen to be foolish. And the minister of the cross, Paul himself, was not one who demonstrated the wisdom and the prowess of the world in his speech.
- But rather the wisdom of God and the power of God. And he says in verse 6, yet among the mature we do, that is we the apostles, we do impart wisdom.
- Although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age who are doomed to pass away. My goodness, how we thank God for that.
- But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom from God. Which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understand this.
- [1 : 2 1] For if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But as it's written, what no eye has seen, nor ears heard, nor the heart of man imagined.
- What God has prepared for those who love him. These things God has revealed to us. Apostles. Through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything.
- Even the depths of God. 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.
- Now we have received not the Spirit of the world. But the Spirit who is from God. That we might understand the things given us by God freely.
- And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom. But words taught by the Spirit. Interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.
- [2 : 3 1] The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God. For they are folly to him. He's not able to understand them.
- Because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual person judges all things. But is himself to be judged by no one.
- For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him? But we have the mind of Christ. But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people.
- But as people of the flesh. As infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food. For you are not ready for it. And even now, you are not yet ready.
- For you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you. Are you not of the flesh? And behaving only in a human way? For when one says, I follow Paul.
- [3 : 3 6] And another says, I follow Apostle, Apollos. Are you not being merely human? Amen.
- May God bless us his word. Well, good evening. Do turn again in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians chapter 2.

What does it mean to be spiritual? Well, unsurprisingly, we can find all kinds of definitions to such a question.

All kinds of answers. Lots of the contemporary definitions of what it is to be spiritual that I've found go along the lines of, It's feeling at home in nature.

It's having depth to your personality. It's being kind. Loving to travel. Of course, there are also a growing number of people who take New Age spirituality very seriously, Put their trust in things like crystals.

[4 : 43] And now, it would be easy for us to cast these things aside or make light of them And suggest they're more than a little clouded with wishful thinking. But we do have some similarly confused ideas in the church.

I wonder how many of us have come across some of these things in our Christian lives. To be spiritual, to be one of us, a proper Christian, You need to be baptized in the right way.

You need to have an extra experience of being baptized by the Spirit. So that you can do supernatural things. And so you're not really a Christian unless you can speak in a so-called heavenly language.

Or unless you've got a direct line with God himself speaking to you. Or to be a spiritual Christian, you must get up at 6 o'clock every morning to pray, Read the Bible, and tick off the next chapter of Calvin's Institutes.

Maybe you've heard things said about our church not being alive to the Spirit. Or indeed, maybe you've cast aspersions yourself on other churches. What is it to be a church alive to the Spirit?

[5 : 56] Is that something that's determined by the power of the preacher? I hope not. Or the ability of the praise band to entrance the congregation? Is it a church that helps us feel transcendence with all of our senses?

Is it most assuredly any church other than the one who believes in Father, Son, and Holy Bible? Is it a church that's big, bustling, and full of young people?

Corinth, as we've been seeing, was a church that thought itself mighty, mature, spiritually impressive. The words and experiences that the Corinthians loved were things like glory, power, strength, wisdom, maturity.

All things spiritual to boot. They detest any notion or association with shame and weakness, and they want to be as far away from foolishness as possible.

This is a church that loves a dazzling preacher, but it's also a church that loves so-called manifestations of the spiritual-looking things.

[7 : 08] They particularly love when these two things go together. Impressive speaking gifts and the Spirit. We'll see more about that later on in the letter in chapters 12 to 14.

And so in the Corinthians' might, Paul just doesn't do it for them. He might have been okay way back at the start, before they were spiritual giants, but not now.

Paul's a manual laborer. He has to build tents to get by. He's more likely to cause a riot, an angrious city, than he has to blow anyone away with his charisma.

He isn't the way to win the world, the glorious Christian life. He's a liability. The world looks at Paul and sees a trembling, tiresome, intolerant, intolerable, kind of fringe preacher.

A bit nutty, a bit daft. But if the world were to look at Corinth, they'd see all the razzle-dazzle. Here was a church that anyone would be desperate to join.

[8 : 13] They were triumphant, powerful, impressive. They thought they had a glorious message matched by glorious lives. And so the world watching on would no doubt take Corinth's side over Paul's.

Corinth looks spiritual. They have all the paraphernalia of spirituality. But that's the very point. That is the world's verdict.

We saw last week that Paul was arguing about the foolishness of the cross. And now he turns to the cross as the very manifestation of wisdom.

The truth is that there is nothing more spiritual than the gospel of the cross. And so Paul says, firstly, God's wisdom is beyond this world, verses 6 to 8.

God's wisdom is beyond this world. No matter how unlikely it looks, the gospel of the cross is the most beautiful, most real, only true wisdom the cosmos can ever know.

[9 : 21] Paul has spent some time in chapter 1 talking about the cross as foolishness. 118, the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing. 121, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to see of those who believe.

Or 127, God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise. And so on. But it's important that we're clear that this isn't Paul admitting that the gospel is foolish.

It may be, in fact, it is foolish looking or sounding to the world. But looks can be deceiving. The reality is something different altogether.

The problem here isn't the gospel. The problem is the world. The gospel isn't a flawed design. It doesn't need to be taken back to the shop. No, those who hear the gospel are the problem.

Because Paul says, 2.6, among the mature, we do impart wisdom. It is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age who are doomed to pass away.

[10 : 32] Paul's preaching is the very wisdom of God. But notice, he says, it's only to the mature that is received as wisdom.

Now, I don't think that Paul is here setting up classes of Christians, the mature and the rest. The answer to the Corinthian problem of division and sort of self-involved might can't be to establish different tiers of spirituality.

That's their very problem. That's their very problem. So I don't think that's what Paul is doing here, the mature and the rest. I think Paul uses the word mature in verse 6 simply because that's what the Corinthians think of themselves.

He's pointing out that they are no such thing. In fact, Paul's ministry doesn't look like wisdom to them because over in chapter 3, verse 1, far from being mature, they are infants.

Infants in Christ, people of the flesh. The Corinthians look at everything with world-shaped glasses. They are entirely worldly.

[11 : 39] To it, they make the same mistake as the rulers of this age. So whether it be in Jesus' own day or with the Corinthians or with us, worldly thinking will never understand why Jesus' mission was always cross-shaped.

They just can't see that that could ever be wisdom. Now, in this chapter, it's very important that we know who is who when we read the chapter.

There's a lot of we, us kind of language. And it's sometimes read, I think, wrongly as referring to all Christians. I don't think that that can be the case here.

Verse 6 picks up straight from Paul explaining his weak-looking ministry among the Corinthians. Verses 1 to 5. His preaching, his ministry is in view. And then verse 6, he continues the theme, yet among the mature, we do impart wisdom.

We do teach wisdom. The we is Paul, the apostles, the teachers God has given his church here in Corinth. Quickly turn over to chapter 3, verse 9, if you don't believe me.

[12 : 55] As the section continues, Paul is more explicit with who he's talking about. And he says here, for we are God's fellow workers.

That's Paul and the apostles. You are God's field, God's building. We, gospel workers, Paul and the apostles. You, the church, the Corinthians.

Now back to chapter 2. Notice verse 7. It's somewhat surprising. The wisdom that Paul imparts, which he has already told us is the gospel of Christ crucified.

This wisdom was decreed by God in eternity for our glory. Most of the commentaries here seem to take our glory to be referring to all Christians.

Paul imparts a wisdom which God decreed in eternity for the glory of all Christians. And that's a true and helpful thing to say. We will one day share Jesus' glory with him as we are raised to reign with him for eternity.

[14 : 04] But I'm not so sure that that's what Paul is saying here. Remember who the we, us language is all about. Right? It's about God's fellow workers, Paul and the apostles. So it would be strange if verse 7, Paul talks about we, the apostles, at the start.

And then finishes with are. And suddenly means something completely different. And so in the midst of dealing with wrong ideas about choosing which Christian leaders to follow.

So I wonder if Paul is saying here that God's plan has always been to have apostles, to have preachers, who are just like the Lord of glory himself.

Don't pick the preacher based on how the world will view them. Pick them based on whether they look like the Lord of glory.

Notice that Paul uses the word glory in both verse 7 and verse 8. And I think we ought to take the meaning as the same. Verse 8, Paul qualifies what exactly it is that is glorious about the Lord Jesus.

[15 : 11] Jesus, he was the crucified Lord. Jesus' glory was seen in the cross. His crown was a thorny crown.

His throne was the cross. The cross is the apex of Christ's glory. His message, his ministry was always at odds with the status quo. And as with Jesus, so with the apostles.

That's the way God's designed it. So don't write them off if they look like idiots. Paul has just spilt out for the Corinthians, as we saw last week, that he is weak looking, foolish to the world.

The appearance of weakness, the appearance of folly is different from actually being weak and foolish. The truth is that Paul is not shameful.

He is glorious because he imitates Jesus. The cross isn't foolish. It's the very wisdom of God. And so the apostle, the preacher, the minister, the church, the Christian, who looks like the cross, who lives like the cross, is anything but shameful.

[16 : 33] The cross isn't foolish. It is the very wisdom of God. It is real. It is wise. And it is what we have revealed to us in the gospel. But the Corinthians are too childish, too worldly to see it.

The gospel reveals to the world the most glorious wisdom imaginable. A wisdom that has at its heart the only hope for humanity. A wisdom that can satisfy the deepest longings of the human heart.

A wisdom that can reunite treacherous rebels with a benign king. A wisdom that tells us to be bothered more with that which will last forever than that which will soon pass away.

A wisdom that offers hope to the most hopeless person. A wisdom that reaches down to the least deserving. And lifts them up.

But it is a wisdom that verse 6 isn't of this age. A wisdom that verse 8, none of the rulers of this age understand.

[17 : 37] The eyes of this world are blind to it. And so ironically, in failing to understand the mission of Jesus, the rulers of this age were the very vessels used to crucify him.

Paul is saying to the Corinthians that if Jesus himself were walking in their midst, he wouldn't get a hearing. They're so spiritual that they wouldn't even listen to Jesus.

Glorious churches are those who personify and preach the gospel of Christ crucified. God's wisdom is truly glorious.

But it's beyond merely human understanding. Some brief implications of this before we move on. First, the gospel is never deficient.

Many of those who witnessed Jesus himself rejected his wisdom. The world will hate the gospel because they hate the implications of the cross. The cross humbles us.

[18 : 45] It leaves us with no boost. And at the same time, it summons us to a life of sacrifice and shame. All of these things are undesirable in this world.

And so they only become something that we are comfortable with when we receive the cross. Because when we receive it, our whole outlook is transformed.

We are no longer blind to ultimate realities. Paul even suggests that it is possible that in a church there will be people who won't understand these things.

And wouldn't even if Jesus himself explains them. That tells us that the deficiency is not in the gospel. Because who could put it better than the Lord Jesus himself?

It may be that we can be clumsy with our explanations of it. We can be off-putting as people. But the gospel itself isn't lacking.

[19 : 45] It doesn't need to be beefed up. It doesn't need to be given some extra dazzle. It is God's wisdom. Second implication.

We don't need to be clever to respond to the gospel. Understanding Christ crucified and all of its implications isn't anything to do with our brain power. We just need to be prepared to respond to the faithful preaching of God's word.

Be prepared to humble ourselves. And to accept that this world, with all that it offers, isn't ultimate. Indeed, the mature in chapter 2 verse 6 must be all those who do trust in the cross of Christ.

And thus don't belong to this age. But belong to the glorious age to come. You don't need a big brain. You just need to say, yes, I trust Jesus as Lord.

And final implication. Anything that sets itself up against God's wisdom is doomed. Any ideology, any trend, any cultural manifestations and identities that would denigrate, deny, distract, or damage God's wisdom will be exposed.

[21 : 05] The LGBTQ+, whatever it is, lobby. The progressive agenda of this age that says love trumps all. The thinking that elevates how we feel above objective truth.

The plots and schemes of governments to control their people. The propagating of fear to coerce people into singular thinking. All of these things have a shared fate.

Verse 6. God's wisdom is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age who are doomed to pass away. These things will pass away.

The world's thinking is time limited. God's wisdom, the cross, is eternal. Well, Paul moves on, secondly, to say that God's wisdom is graciously given by his spirit.

Verses 9 to 16. God's wisdom is graciously given by his spirit. God's spirit has been and is at work to bring the mind of God to the people of God.

[22 : 12] God's spirit has made known the deep things of God. God's spirit has revealed to the church the very wisdom of the cross. We don't have to fumble around in the dark.

We don't have to be like the rulers of this age who couldn't understand the Lord Jesus. We are freely offered all that makes us spiritual. Anyone can be spiritual.

Revelation has come. God's spirit has been at work. Verse 9. Paul loosely quotes from Isaiah saying, but as it is, what new eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him.

These things God has revealed to us through the spirit. God's wisdom can be known. But how?

Well, the key word here in verse 10 is us. God has revealed these things to the apostles. Verse 12.

[23 : 18] Now we, the apostles, have received not the spirit of the world, but the spirit who is from God, that we, the apostles, might understand the things freely given us, the apostles, by God.

And we, the apostles, impart this in words. We teach it. We pass it on. It isn't uncommon for some Christians to be led astray to think that they have a special line of communication with God, that God speaks directly to them.

And so, of course, they must be listened to as a channel of God's own voice. The Corinthians would love such an idea. Well, but God told me this. What a way to get ahead of other Christians.

What a way to separate yourself from the average Jew Christian. God speaks to me. Listen to me. And that's why Paul is so clear here.

That is not the case. God's spirit will never contradict his word. Verse 10. God's spirit has searched the mind of God searching everything.

[24 : 32] Verse 11. Who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person? The only person who can possibly know my deepest thoughts are me.

Usually they add up to very little. My wife often asks, what are you thinking about? Nothing. And I mean it. It's not a cover. But when I'm thinking about something, no one can know what that is at any time unless I decide to tell them.

In the same way, the only way God's thoughts can be known is if he himself draws them together and communicates them. But look at this.

Verse 12. God's spirit has been specially poured out. It's been given to Paul and the apostles that they might understand the things freely given by God.

this isn't just the latest version of the spirit of the age. No, it isn't the spirit of the world that brings the message of the cross to light. It's God's own spirit.

[25 : 37] After a day at work, my wife finds it murder trying to get me to communicate about anything clearly. Same conversation every day. How was your day? Yeah, it was fine. How was Paul?

I think he was okay. Phil? Yeah, fine. God's wisdom, his thoughts on the most mundane boring things are far, far wiser than any of our thoughts ever.

And yet, the mind of the one who created the universe, the mind of the one who sustains life itself has been made known. His wisdom, all that we need to know, has been made known.

And not made known in a stubborn husband who doesn't want to talk. Not made known in the most complex puzzle book of all time. Not made known if he can crack enigma. No.

They are made known by his own spirit. God hasn't kept it to himself. Now, you might be thinking, that's all very well, but we're not the apostles.

[26 : 44] What use is that? Why doesn't the spirit speak to everyone like this? Well, verse 13, the apostles then were tasked to impart all that the spirit has revealed.

And as the apostolic message is spoken, as it's preached, it isn't just another philosophy. It doesn't just slot in aside as an alternative to what the world thinks.

No, as it's preached, God's spirit accompanies his words to make sense of it for those who listen. God's spirit does speak to every Christian, but his speaking is through his revealed word.

His speaking is reaffirming what he has already said to and through the apostles. God's spirit is at work, but his job is in rooting his gospel deep in the lives of those who belong to him.

And so, in verse 14 and 15, we see that the signal of whether someone is truly spiritual is what they do with the cross of Christ. That's the barometer of who's spiritual.

[28 : 01] Turn over to chapter 12. We'll see this in a verse. chapter 12, verse 3. Therefore, I want you to understand that no one speaking in the spirit of God ever says Jesus is accursed and no one can say Jesus is Lord except in the Holy Spirit.

The signal of whether someone is truly spiritual is what they do with the cross of Christ. Do they see in it their Lord and Savior or something else?

And when the gospel is explained to non-Christians, the words don't suddenly become gobbledygook. It isn't that suddenly the faculties of the brain stop working when Jesus is mentioned, but rather, verse 14, the natural person, the worldly person, the unspiritual person doesn't accept the gospel.

It is that they think it is foolish, weak. The gospel messes with their understanding of life and the world. It ruins their autonomy.

It exposes their failure. It humbles them. It tells them they are not better than anyone else. And so lost in the haze of all that it would mean to believe, the cross is just written off as foolish.

[29 : 27] foolish. The world is magnified and so any notion of the world to come is muted. But verse 15, the spiritual person on the other hand, that is the person who hears about Jesus and his cross and it's a sweet relief to them.

Well, they're the ones who can see the world in the right way. Verse 15 is an often abused verse. I'm sure we can picture some sanctimonious person, some super spiritual person declaring that no one can possibly pass judgment on me.

As a truly spiritual person, more spiritual than you, you couldn't possibly comment on my life. Such a reading of that verse is both contrary to the warp and woof of the Christian life and utterly ill-fitting the context.

The natural person is proven unable to engage in spiritual things. That's what Paul said. Instead, they're locked in to the wisdom of the world.

Whereas the spiritual person, the Christian, is able to see what the natural person can see of this world. They can see the world as the natural person does. And on top of that, can view it also in light of how God sees the world.

[30 : 50] I'm sure most of us at some point have been told that we're narrow-minded as Christians, simple creatures for believing in Jesus, that we need to expand our view of the world.

Well, Paul's telling us here that that is most assuredly a backwards view of things. Because it is only those who have encountered the Lord Jesus, it is only those who trust him and listen to him, it is only those who God's spirit is at work in who can see the world with a comprehensive, realistic view.

We are the ones who see the world rightly. When we listen to the Lord Jesus, when we come to know and love and live the cross, we are the ones who have an understanding of this world.

And it's an understanding that makes sense of every facet of life in this world. It is us, the church, who have a joined up, consistent, true view of things.

Because as we have the Lord's spirit at work within us, we have his wisdom. And so we see things differently.

[32 : 09] Or to put it another way, verse 16, we have the mind of Christ. And so where does that leave the Corinthians? Well, Paul finishes by saying, the worldly need to be weaned.

The worldly need to be weaned. chapter 3, verses 1 to 4. If spirituality becomes a competition, then the alarm bells are ringing.

Scrap that. Then the baby monitor is beeping. If the spirit is the one who has shed light on true wisdom, if he is the one who enables us to trust and enjoy the cross, then that leaves no space whatsoever for petty squabbling about who is most spiritual.

spiritual. There's nothing for us to boost in. It's not our big bulging brains. The Corinthians think that they're mighty. But the mature of chapter 2, verse 6, are those who treasure the cross above all else.

That is maturity. That is what it is to be spiritual. But look at what the Corinthians are. 3.1, I couldn't address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ.

[33 : 25] At this point, we might wonder how Paul can say that they're even in Christ. It wouldn't seem like it to us. But Paul is ever the pastor. His task is not to try and convince people who profess faith that they're not Christians.

His desire is that they live up to what they claim. Paul is laying down the challenge. You want to be spiritual? Here's what it looks like.

It looks like the cross in every facet. The cross is the source and shape of the truly spiritual life. But you Corinthians are stuck playing with your rubber duck in the bath.

Verse 3, there is jealousy and strife among you. You're falling out with each other over who's more spiritual. You're falling out with each other over which leader to follow, who's going to make you look best.

Aren't these things evidence of worldliness within you? Don't these things belong to the old man, not the new? As long as the carnal is more evident in you than the cross, then you aren't spiritual giants, you're infants.

[34 : 40] So verse 4, when you're divided over your preachers, when your minister is a source of shame to you because he's mundane and not magnificent, when your minister or your church might reflect badly on you because they're not quite in vogue, because they don't quite fit the world's standards, are you not being merely human?

Notice that the four leaders of chapter 1 we read of some follow Apollos, some follow Paul, some follow Cephas, some follow Christ.

Now by the time we get to chapter 3 that's down to just two leaders, Paul and Apollos. Turn over with me briefly to Acts chapter 18 verse 24.

Acts 18 24. See if you can spot any Corinthian words here. Now a Jew named Apollos, an native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus.

He was an eloquent man, competent in the scriptures. We go on to read that Apollos taught the scriptures accurately, he was eloquent, he was bold, although even at this point we're told he's deficient, Priscilla and Aquila have to pull him away and help him out with things.

[36 : 09] I'm sure we've all come across preachers who have a great gift to engage the crowd, gifted orators and what can often come with that is a lack of caution and carefulness.

The gift can shine leaving the message in the shade. I wonder if Apollos perhaps played to the crowd in Corinth. He was eloquent, the same word in Acts and here in Corinth.

I wonder if he was perhaps not careful enough to let the message take center stage. I wonder if Apollos might have been the particular flavor of the month because he played into the hands of what the Corinthians loved.

He was impressive, he was engaging, he was easy to invite people along to hear, he was respectable. But the problem is Corinth's might, their predilection for pump reveals something very worrying about them.

If Paul were back preaching in Corinth, as he looked out at the congregation, looking back at him would have been a bunch of grown-ups in nappies sucking their dummies, waiting to be entertained, and they'd be ready afterwards to give Paul some feedback.

[37 : 27] Paul, you could make your illustrations just a little bit more sharp, be a bit more culturally sensitive, try and be more sophisticated, and above all, maybe you should talk a bit more about resurrection than the cross.

It's a bit more popular, a bit more mighty. A spiritual church is a church that has been weaned off of the world and instead fastened to the cross, feasting on the gospel of Christ alone that takes the light in the cross.

This is a salutary word for the church, Paul's challenge in these verses. We are bombarded with the wisdom of this world in school, at work, through family, the media, films, TV, all kinds of things push upon us day after day, the thinking of the world, telling us the way to win at life, by being strong, by having status, by sounding reasonable and respectable, by asserting ourselves, adopting the trends of the time, by aiming to be the best.

Paul is very clear with the Corinthians. If they look just like the world around, if the church runs just like any other business, if our goals are no different than the goals of our friends and colleagues and neighbours, then no matter how much we dress it up in pious language and spiritual sounding things, Paul is saying to us that if that's us, we are like fully grown adults who still feed at the breasts of our mothers.

picture that. It's absurd, isn't it? Disturbing. So as uncomfortable as it will be for us, there is nothing more important for a church than to accept that we can't win with this world and win with God.

[39 : 37] To accept that God's wisdom is in conflict with the world and it always will be. There is nothing more important than we let go of the world's wisdom, their way of operating and cling to the cross.

This world and God's wisdom are absolutely abused. The spirit of God has revealed the wisdom of God.

That has been passed down to us in the apostolic gospel and the spirit is still at work applying this wisdom to his people. And when that wisdom is at work in a church, the world is turned upside down.

It is then that we see glory as something wholly different to the way the world sees it. It is then that we see every instance of sacrifice, every instance of facing shame and scorn as glorious.

grace. Because that's the way God has designed things. Because that's what we see in the person and in the cross of Jesus Christ.

[40 : 54] Because sacrifice, shame, because the cross itself is the wisdom of God. God, let's pray.

Lord, we thank you for your spirit and we ask him now to be at work within us, helping us to renounce the foolish wisdom and the fragile strength of this world.

And to instead rejoice in the cross of your son. that it would be our message and our manner.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.