

You Don't Get It; You Can't

Westview Church | 1 Corinthians 2:12-16 | Pastor Brett Toney | February 25, 2024

Monumental Shift

Have you had the experience where you read one verse from the Bible, and it changes everything? Maybe that is part of your story in coming to faith or as you have grown in your walk with the Lord. You read a passage and conclude, “Well, if that is true, then everything I’ve thought and believed has to change.” That happened to me with 1 Corinthians 2:14. It was 2006—a year that was quite transformative for me, leading me eventually to be standing here. I was taking a college class that Fall on 1 & 2 Corinthians and was confronted with v.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.” This verse was the fulcrum, and I teetered over the edge. By the end of the 2006, my understanding of God and the gospel had been completely transformed.

The natural person cannot understand the wisdom of God, which is Christ crucified. You don't get it; you can't! That's Paul's point in this passage as he gives further rationale for why the oh-so-wise rulers of this age do not appreciate the wisdom of God. Not only is it hidden in a mystery, but it is only by the Spirit's activity that any of us can comprehend it. I was assailed with the reality that Fall in 2006 that the only reason you or I love God (2:9) *and* Christ crucified (1:23) is if you have been taught by the Spirit. Apart from the Spirit of God, no one—you, me, the rulers of this age—no one will understand the wisdom of God freely given by God. And rather than that breeding a defeatist mindset, it frees us to pay no attention to the appraisal of natural people. As we consider that the natural person cannot understand the wisdom of God, Church, may you heed the tacit exhortations of this passage to receive the gift, to be taught by the Spirit, to recognize their inability, and to not seek their appraisal.

Receive the Gift (1 Cor 2:12)

First, receive the gift, v.12. Paul has just explained how the wisdom of God hidden in a mystery has only been comprehended in the depths of God by the Spirit of God. That very Spirit is the one we have received. We do not imbibe the ethos and worldview of the age—whatever form such a spirit of the unbelieving world takes. Hear in this contrast the same “Christ or Corinth” dynamic I’ve mentioned. Not *that* spirit but *the* Spirit of God is the one we have received. How unfathomably generous is God that he has not merely sent a prophet or a holy book to impart the mystery of the wisdom of God. No, God has commissioned his very own Spirit that we might understand the free gift of grace given in Christ crucified. The Father calls; the Son accomplishes; the Spirit applies. Christian, the Triune God is at work in you such that you *have received* the gift. And because that is true, don’t do yourself or your church the disservice of diluting that gift with the ways of the world. Don’t entertain or bring in their categories of gender or ethnicity. God’s very own Spirit has united you to Christ and his Bride; we have no need of the spirit of the world to aid our understanding of our unity.

Be Taught by the Spirit (1 Cor 2:13)

Rather, we submit ourselves to be taught by the Spirit. Such teaching is not a mystical experience though. It’s not characterized by setting aside books or teachers and just waiting for an impression to motivate you. How does the Spirit do his teaching? Verse 13, when “we impart this in words ... interpreting spiritual truths.” God’s Spirit carries out his teaching when Christ’s people take the apostolic word about Christ and him crucified and bring it to bear in the lives of others. Or more simply, by sharing the gospel. Do you want to see a miracle? Open the Bible with your unbelieving neighbor and explain from the Scriptures who Jesus is and what it means that he died and rose again. That’s what the Spirit loves to use. That’s what the apostles did.

We don't share the gospel relying on "lofty words of wisdom" (2:4) and our powers of persuasion. We rely on the Spirit of God to use the Word of God to affect spiritual transformation. If our hearers are spiritual—Paul does not mean that in the way the word is so often used today. He's not talking about New Age spiritualism or a vague, generic sense of being "religious." He means a spiritual person is someone who is *of* the Spirit of God. So, if our hearers are spiritual, if the Spirit of God is at work teaching them, they will receive our words about the things of the Spirit as what they are: the wisdom of God. And, brothers and sisters, you are equipped to do that as you yourselves are taught by the Spirit. And you have here in Holy Scripture the definitive, complete, authoritative instruction of the Spirit.

Recognize Their Inability (1 Cor 2:14)

However, as you open the Bible with your neighbor or speak of Christ with the person working at the table next to you at Caribou, you need to recognize their inability. We see this in v.14. If that person is not spiritual but is natural—if they are devoid of the Spirit's work in their lives, they are unbelievers, non-Christians—such words will not only be folly to her, but she is incapable of understanding them. Are you seeing how this verse slapped me around so many years ago? We can quite naturally understand how if we make the free offer of the gospel that some would refuse it. They are blinded by their sin. But to suggest that they *cannot* accept that offer? Well, that would indicate a person's volitional decision is not *the* decisive, determining factor in whether or not they repent and believe. If they are *unable*—and that's exactly what Paul is saying; they do not have the power to understand. If they are *unable* to repent and believe apart from the Spirit teaching them, then that must mean God is sovereign in salvation. God is *the* decisive, determining actor in who will repent and believe and behold the hidden mystery of Christ.

Sit in this inability of unbelievers to believe a little more. When Paul says that such a person “is not able to understand,” he does not mean the facts of the gospel are incomprehensible. A non-Christian can read Romans and grasp Paul’s logic and reasoning. In fact, there are scholars who can dance circles around us in their grasp of the nuanced themes and literary structure of the Bible ... and still regard it as folly, as merely an archaic Near Eastern relic. What Paul means is that scholar cannot understand the Bible for its intended purpose of making one wise for salvation (2 Timothy 3:15). Reason and logic alone cannot usher you into the Kingdom. And neither can great music and entertaining gimmicks. Martin Luther captured it well when he wrote in his catechism, “I cannot by my own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to Him; but the Holy Spirit has called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith.”

Kids, Students—consider this illustration of how it is that your friends or family who do not love Jesus, cannot love him apart from the Spirit. How many of you know of Mr. Tumnus? No, not the fawn of Narnia. I mean our family dog, of course—the big, excitable, fluffy dog. Now, don’t tell my family I said this, but Tumnus is really a pretty good dog. I can tell Tumnus, “Sit,” and guess what he does? He sits! That’s great! Especially when kids like you come over. But does Tumnus speak English? Does he know what the word “sit” means? Absolutely not. He knows when he hears that sound, and I’m pointing at the ground, he’s supposed to lower his hind legs to the ground. He certainly doesn’t understand that I told him to sit so he doesn’t jump on kids. Similarly, the natural person cannot understand the wisdom of God. They can hear the sound and arrive at some correct conclusions. But they can’t get to the real purpose and goal of faith in Christ. And that’s why we pray for God’s Spirit to move in such people.

Don’t Seek Appraisal (1 Cor 2:15-16)

And it is also why we don't look to such unbelievers and their worldly wisdom for guidance or affirmation. That's our fourth exhortation; don't seek appraisal from natural people. Verse 15, "The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one." This verse is made more difficult by the use of the word "judge." Paul isn't saying that a Christian now enlightened by the Spirit makes determinations on all matters and is not subjected to anyone. I think the New American Standard Bible is better, translating it, "He who is spiritual *appraises* all things, yet he himself is *appraised* by no one." A value judgment is passed. But what are the "all things"? Verse 14, "the things of the Spirit of God," that is: the gospel. The spiritual person rightly appraises and values the gospel.

Similarly, who is the "no one"? Verse 14, "the natural person [who] does *not* accept the things of the Spirit." If you hear someone use the verse to say none can confront them because they are spiritual and can be judged by no one ... run. They are out of step with the Spirit. What Paul means is that the natural person cannot rightly appraise and value the things of the Spirit, so of course such a person will regard you and your Christ as foolish. And how can he? Does he understand the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him (v.16)? No, but you, Christian do have the mind of Christ. So don't seek the appraisal of non-Christians of the message you preach and treasure. Walk faithfully in the freedom of the Spirit who has taught you.

The Table

When you do, you will see the miraculous. Last Sunday in our Discipleship Class, I referenced the predominant Western worldview that gives attention to only the material world—the things that can be touched or observed. And it's relevant to our passage as we come to the Table. The prevalent thought is, "Maybe there is an immaterial realm, but it doesn't interact with this material world." That leads us to use categories like "natural" verse "*supernatural*." If

we can't explain something through our materialist worldview, it must be supernatural. Yet this natural world is intimately governed by our Creator to accomplish all of his purposes. It is less like we inhabit one of two realms, and more like we live and move and have our being in the overlapping segment of a Venn diagram. God's Spirit is present and active to remove the blinders of pride that keep people from seeing the wonder of Christ crucified, the awe of the mystery of redemption now revealed in his broken body and shed blood. Is this Table natural or supernatural? By God's Spirit, yes. And you will not accept such things—you *cannot* accept such things—unless he transforms you from the natural to the spiritual. So, if by faith you look at this Table and see not folly but the wisdom of God, rejoice that such understanding has been freely given you by God.