

T.B. Baines

Words of Man's Wisdom

-

-

1 Corinthians 1:17-31

The most familiar and most forgotten of truths is, that the flesh in the believer is just the same as the flesh in the unbeliever. This was doubtless known, but certainly neglected, by the saints at Corinth; and as the evil which the flesh brings into the Church always resembles that prevailing in the world around, so here we see the vices of Greek society penetrating into the Corinthian assembly. License of walk and license of speculation distinguished the world in which these new converts dwelt, and license of walk and license of speculation were the evils which soon appeared in the church. The license of walk showed itself in their tolerance of moral conduct such as was not even "named among the Gentiles," in their drunkenness and indulgence at the Lord's table, and in the disorderly and lawless character of their meetings. The license of speculation showed itself in their sceptical reasonings about the resurrection, in their lax thoughts about identifying themselves with idol worship, and in their readiness to divide into schools of doctrine according to their preference for certain teachers.

They did not, in fact, see man's ruin. They believed, of course, as Christians do now, in the fall as a fact; but they failed, as these also do, to grasp the consequences it involved. They would have allowed that it alienated man from God, but that it so utterly blinded his moral nature as to render him incapable of seeing the truth of God they do not appear to have understood; and this is just the error of our own times. Many indeed think that the flesh wants mending, and is susceptible of improvement. Others, again, admit its moral ruin, and confess the need of a new nature; but how few see the total incapacity of man's natural wisdom to judge

rightly in the matters of God. The Corinthians, overlooking this truth, brought their own fleshly wisdom to divine things, and the inevitable result was confusion and division. They were splitting into schools of doctrine, the germs of sects like our own; and the apostle declares that they were carnal, and walked as men.

It is for the purpose of meeting this tendency to exalt, or rather to allow, man's wisdom that the passage before us was written. Paul says that Christ sent him "to preach the gospel: not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of no effect." How solemn this in the light of what we see around us. In how much of the preaching of the day is human wisdom not only allowed but demanded! Preachers are sought after for their eloquence, their logic, their talents, rather than for the fidelity with which they present the truth of God. Simple subjection to Scripture is not up to the level of modern thought, shows that the preacher has not kept abreast with the progress of the age. But God's word is clear. The cross of Christ and the wisdom of man cannot go together. If the cross of Christ is to be exalted man's wisdom must be brought low. If man's wisdom is to be magnified the cross of Christ must "be made of no effect."

The reason is simple; "for the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness, but to us who are saved it is the power of God." So widely do man's thoughts diverge from God's, that even in the most marvellous display of God's saving power man can discern nothing but foolishness. No wonder, for if God is to be known at all He must be known morally. But men's consciences shrink from looking at God in His moral character. Therefore, long ago, "even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind." The very wisest became fools in the things of God. The most learned and philosophical people in the world owned their ignorance by raising an altar "to the unknown God." Others groped in idle speculations, but all were equally blind as to what God was. This was according to God's wisdom; for as He is holy and righteous, these are the first things that a sinner must learn, and these are just the truths to which natural wisdom can never attain. God must be known, not as fallen man can understand Him, but as He has revealed Himself; and this only the soul taught by the Spirit can comprehend. "The natural man received not the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness unto him; neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned."

But when "in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save those who believe." For God's salvation must address itself to man's moral ruin, and this is just the fact which the pride of human wisdom will not and cannot recognize. Hence the cross becomes the scoff of the wise, the stumbling-block of the worldly-minded. Power and wisdom are the

two things which man admires, but they must be power and wisdom suited to his own thoughts. The Jews looked for a messiah arrayed in worldly majesty and glory; the Greeks sought after a god suited to their own philosophical speculations. How could either, then, recognize or receive a Savior who came clothed with humility and weakness? "For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling-block, and to the Greeks foolishness; but to them who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God."

It was impossible for the Jew, with no sense of the moral ruin of his people, to recognize the power of God in the One whom he had seen scorned and spit upon, scourged and crucified. It was impossible for the Greek, with no consciousness of sin or need, and seeking only for the gratification of his intellect, to discern the wisdom of God in the death of an obscure Galilean peasant who had been crucified between two thieves. To perceive the wisdom and power of God in such a scene there must be the complete giving up of all human pretension, the submission of heart to God's righteousness, the consciousness of need as a lost, ruined sinner. It is only "to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks," that the power and wisdom of God can shine out from such a background.

But to them what marvels of power and wisdom are here disclosed! Where was victory so complete and so far-reaching as that which was achieved when this Man of sorrows bowed His head and gave up the spirit? The iron bondage of sin and Satan, of the grave and death, was forever broken; the veil which hid God from man and kept man from God, was rent in twain from the top to the bottom; the righteous judgment of God was borne by the spotless sacrifice and the fountain of His grace and love set free to flow out in streams of richest blessing to a ruined world. Such was the display of God's power in Christ crucified; nor was His wisdom less conspicuous or less adorable. If it is in the Church that God now displays His manifold wisdom to the principalities and powers in heavenly places, where would that Church have been but for the hours of darkness passed by the Holy One upon the cross? There it was that the cunning and craft of Satan were turned to his own confusion, his seeming victory changed to defeat, Christ's seeming overthrow converted into triumph. Thence, from that lowest depth, it was that He ascended up on high, led captivity captive, and gave gifts to men; for truly "the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men."

And this is always God's way, that "no flesh should glory in His presence." It was so when Jesus was in this world; for then the things of God were hid from the wise and prudent and revealed to babes. So it was of old. It was by the foolishness of blowing rams' horns round a powerful fortress that "the walls of Jericho fell down

after they were compassed about seven days." It was by the weakness of Shamgar's ox-goad, Gideon's three hundred, Samson's jawbone, that Israel was delivered, and the armies of the aliens were turned to flight. Everywhere we see God choosing "the foolish things of the world to confound the wise," and "the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty."

Such is, and ever has been, God's way. That man's natural wisdom is corrupted and useless in the things of God, and that God has poured contempt upon it, and chosen to work by that which the world's wisdom despises as foolish, is plain wherever we look. He would strip fallen man of all glory in order that He may make Christ Jesus to be to the believer "wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption." How worse than useless, then, to bring in the thing which God has thus discredited, to the preaching of the gospel, the teaching of God's truth, or the ordering of His Church. When brought into the preaching of the gospel, its effect is to make the cross of Christ of no effect; when brought into the teaching of God's truth, its effect is to cause strife and sect, to substitute "philosophy and vain deceit" for that mystery in which "are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge;" when brought into the ordering of the Church, its effect is to displace the directions of Scripture for rules and forms of man's devising. Whether it takes the form of wisdom or ceremonial, of rationalism or ritualism, it is, as we see in the epistle to the Colossians, an intruder and disturber, from which those who are dead with Christ should know their deliverance.

There is but one rule for the new man, and that is the word of God; but one interpreter of Scripture, and that is the Holy Spirit. Here we have God's wisdom, and not man's; and if we would rightly understand it, we must do so by discarding man's wisdom altogether and taking the place of learners in God's school. If any man "seems to be wise in this world, let him become a fool that he may be wise." In an age when man's wisdom and science are exalting themselves against God, and even true believers are beguiled by their pretensions, it is well to see clearly the utter worthlessness of these things in helping us to understand the mind of God, and to grasp with firmer hand the truth of the all-sufficiency and sovereign authority of that Word which "is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works."

