

The wisdom of the cross

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[0 : 0 0] chapter 2, even though I'll be introducing you to some of the themes throughout the book. It's clear as you begin to read 1 Corinthians that Christ needs to be the central thought in the believer's mind. And therefore, loyalty to the church is measurable, and loyalty to Christ is measurable. And it's easy to come up with a disjointed loyalty in that, you know, you can just be sort of loyalty on your own terms. But what Paul shows us here is that loyalty to Christ and loyalty to the church requires the wisdom of the cross. Now, one of the things that you need to understand as you open up a book like this and you begin to read is what God is actually doing with all of us? What does he want us for? What is he going to do with us? And what is the point to all of this? And the answer is very clear that God in Christ Jesus has created a new humanity, and that new humanity is called Christianity, and Christianity forms the church. And so the new humanity, what it ought to look like in the world, is that it ought to look like the church. And therefore, loyalty to Christ and witness to the world is important because we are God's completion or beginning to become complete and a witness to the world of what God is doing. So how we respond to God and how we respond to each other within this new community reflects out into the world, and then people go, oh yeah, that looks like something God would make, or it looks like something that's just been thrown together. So what kind of witness are we demonstrating towards each other and to the world depends on our loyalty to Christ, our loyalty to each other, our loyalty to understanding that Christ Jesus is central in all things. But the important thing is that Christians are going through a transformation. They're not already transformed. We're becoming like Jesus because we're not already like Jesus. And one of the mistakes that some Christians can fall into very, very easily is that upon becoming a Christian that you're automatically therefore qualified in every area. Well, I'm saved.

Well, being saved doesn't make us qualified in all the areas that the church requires us to be qualified in. You know, and there are several qualifications spelled out throughout the New Testament that allow us to understand that. You know, there's qualifications for deacons, there's qualifications for elders, pastors, teachers. There's qualifications that we have to grow up into before we can then take on any of those roles in the church. So the church is a maturing body because we're not already mature.

We're becoming like Jesus because you're not already like Jesus. You're saved, but you're not like Jesus yet. And that, you need to remember that. And you also need to remember that that's true of everybody else that you speak to. Okay, so when two Christians fall out with each other, what's happening is, if I can put it in a basic format, is that your old nature is rubbing up against my old nature. And we need to remember that we're becoming like Christ. And this is, we're not going to sort it out by rubbing each other up the wrong way with old natures. We're both in the maturing process.

And of course, the one who is the more mature one is the one who recognizes that and then sort of says, I'm going to take a few hits here in order to preserve the maturing process that we can grow together.

Okay, and this doesn't mean that you say sorry just to end the conversation. We don't do that. Remember, I said to you a bit ago that one of the things you ought to be encouraging your children, parents to do, is when your children are falling out with each other or you've fallen out with your husband, is don't encourage sorry. Encourage asking for forgiveness. And the reason being that it needs to be that way round rather than the sorry is because sorry means that the wrong person is ending it and moving it forward. So, two people fall out and the person who wants to end it and doesn't want to talk about it anymore will use the word, I'm sorry. Can we move on? But that's not the issue. The issue is you need to ask for forgiveness and the person then has to forgive you for

the sin committed. Okay, that's biblical maturity. Okay, so those say sorry so that they can move on are wanting to move on, but they're wanting to move on in an unforgiven state. Okay, let's forget about it and not talk about it anymore rather than in a forgiven condition the way that Jesus wants it to be. The Corinthian church are going to have to do a lot of this. They're going to have to learn how to forgive one another and they're going to have to learn that at the center of all of that is the wisdom of the cross.

[5 : 31] Some will see it and some won't and the mature then are to instruct the immature that this is the way forward. You are a people, Paul was saying, that have been made anew in Christ Jesus. The old is gone, which he says in 2 Corinthians 5, and the new has come. You're a brand new creation. And so you're to walk then in this new way of life. You're to be like-minded. You're to agree. You're to be of the same judgment. Now move ahead. And then once he said that, he goes straight into the wisdom of the cross. So let me try and illustrate what's going on here. Imagine a couple of, a mom and a dad to be, baby, or even you who've had children. And the child's brought into the world. And of course, when they're still a baby, they're not even at the stage yet where they're thinking about what car they're going to drive or, you know, are they going to comb their hair on the left side or the right side. You know, none of those things have even entered their head. But as they begin to mature, they think they're a lot further ahead than what they really are. But it's only the parents that look at them and go, the road is a lot longer than you think it is. Okay? You are maturing, and you know that you've got some maturing ahead of you. But the parent, in their wisdom, looks at the child and goes, no, you've got a long way ahead of you, much longer than you think you've got ahead of you. And the child, of course, thinking that they know better than the parent, doesn't want to listen. Well, if you can imagine that in a family setup, it's no different in the setup of the church. Okay? Even an old person who's got a lot of maturing to do may not take the wisdom of a person half their age who's twice as mature of them. Because maturity is not about age in the Christian church. It's about loyalty to Christ. It's about growing up in the things according to Scripture. This is why you can have old people who are foolish and young people who are wise. But you can also have it the other way around. Age is not the marker here. The marker, the measurement, is maturity that is becoming or being like Christ as much as you possibly can be at the moment you're in, through obedience and through disobedience and through God working through you. So here's Paul's summary then of what he has to say to this church who need to know all of this, but need to know it in the same way the five-year-old does who thinks he's a 15-year-old. Okay? What do you do? What do you do in that kind of situation? Well, Paul is saying, look, never ever forget that Jesus is the key.

Never forget that Jesus is central. Never forget that as you come to church that it's all about Jesus. Don't, just don't do that. Never forget that the wisdom of the cross is why you belong to God, not because you figured it out all by yourself and therefore you're the clever one amongst us because you made your way to God without the need of Jesus. Paul says no. Nobody gets to God without making their way through Jesus. Nobody comes to God unless they come through the wisdom of the cross. Some people will build their lives on the Lord Jesus Christ and some people will stumble right over him. Okay? And you can never work out ever how precious Jesus Christ is by how many people believe him. You cannot work out how precious Jesus Christ is by how many people build their lives on him.

You can't work out how precious Jesus Christ is by how many people are in churches. That's not the way to figure it out. The way to figure out how precious Christ is, is by looking at Christ. Okay? By looking at him, by what he has done. And the wisdom of the cross teaches us is that Christ has done for us before God what we could not do for ourselves and that's why we are a new person. That's why we belong to him in Christ Jesus. God the Son died in your place to make you anew with God. And for those who think, you know, well, I don't need this. Those who are full of pride, those who stumble over Jesus, they've only got a couple of answers they can come up with. And that is either I don't need Jesus to do that for me or he did it for you but I didn't ask him to. Okay? That kind of foolishness, that kind of, you know, that kind of pride that sort of exerts itself to say, no, I'm fine just as I am, is a pride that takes no notice of the wisdom of God but only their own wisdom, which is foolishness. So a person who thinks that they're all right without Jesus is foolish. And those who recognize that they're only right with God through Jesus Christ have wisdom. And that wisdom is being given to them by Christ Jesus. This, for anyone who struggles with pride, this is a real sledgehammer because it reminds us that I'm nothing without Christ Jesus in God but I'm

everything because God has given me Christ Jesus in God. Okay? It is God who makes the difference. It's Christ Jesus who makes the difference to my life, not me. That which is broken cannot fix itself when it has to be fixed by another person. And that's what humanity is. So God has made us a new humanity in Christ Jesus and we have to grow up in lots of different ways. So here's a number of different ways. Paul recognizes that as he speaks to this church, he's not neglecting the world but he understands where his responsibilities lie. In other words, Paul says, I have no authority to speak to those in the world about these matters.

[11 : 45] My boundary lines stop at the church. I'm only allowed to judge those inside the church and not allowed to judge those outside of the church. My authority ends. Now that doesn't mean that he is not allowed to speak the gospel out into the world. In fact, he encourages and he demonstrates what it is to speak the gospel out into the world. But when it comes to marriages, when it comes to children, when it comes to idolatry, when it comes to relationships between men and women, when it comes to how believers are to participate at the Lord's table, which we're about to do this morning, when it comes to the spiritual gifts, when it comes to resurrection, then he says, this is my field. But it's my field given to me by God because I'm the one who, Paul is saying, has to write you about these things, instructing you about these things so that you would grow up into them. And so when Paul starts talking about the condition of their marriages, there are some in the church that might think, hey, you're stepping on a few toes here, Paul. You're overstepping the boundary. And Paul has to remind, no, no, you're now in the new humanity in Christ Jesus. That boundary is within the boundary of the church. This means that your marriage in the new humanity is to be, come under the same maturity as you do as an individual. Same comes with raising children, relationships between men and women in the church, spiritual gifts, resurrection, the Lord's table.

These are all things that we need to grow up into. But what we do, but what we do is that we grow up into them without ever recognizing what they are. So a five-year-old child can sit around the dinner table and eat a very nice meal prepared for them without ever knowing how that meal got to be that way. Well, how did it get there? What's the ingredients? What are these green things? They don't taste very nice, right? But they're able to make judgments at that level, but they're unable to know where do you buy them from? How long do you cook them for? Okay, what do you mix them with?

And that's the type of maturity that Paul wants the church to have. It's not enough simply to come to the Lord's table and go, this is bread and this is wine, and we do it because we remember Jesus. That's not the point. That is like sitting at the table, enjoying the meal put in front of you, and having no idea what it meant for that meal to be put in front of you. There are different levels that we have to grow up into, and the way to begin is here, in the wisdom of the cross. Paul wants to make you abundantly clear in your own mind that your faith and your maturity needs to rest in the cross, in God, in the wisdom of the cross. Not in the messengers themselves, not in Paul who brings this message to you, but in the actual message itself. So the message that Paul preaches transcends him.

The message Paul is saying is even more important than me. As I tell you these words, these are the things that you're to hold on to because they'll direct your life towards God. But he puts a little benchmark here at the end of chapter 2 in verse 14 where he says, look, the natural person won't understand these. They'll come to church, hear the preachers speak, and go away, none the wiser. Well, of course they'll go away, none the wiser. They're a natural person. They've not been converted. They do not understand the things of God, nor can they understand them, and they go out the door in the same manner they came in. No different. Now they may, as Hebrew 6 says, pick up on a few of the benefits of the church. They may get a few things out of it. They may enjoy the singing. They may enjoy the fellowship. They may even come to the Lord's table. They may even have gone through baptism, but they may have enjoyed all of these benefits covenantally without ever actually being transformed as a person. And so Paul wants to make abundantly clear that the people who get this get it because the Spirit of God is at work in them, because they're a new humanity. They're no longer the old people.

[16 : 22] They have changed, and the person who has changed them is God. The wisdom of the cross is able to point out to a person the way you got to be the way that you are, the way you understand the importance of prayer and understand the importance of the Lord's table in marriages is because God has made it clear to you, and you've received this humbly, joyfully, and

you live in accordance with it.

And those who don't, those who don't, well, then Paul says there's a question mark over your head. Why is there a distinction between those who are following Jesus in the church and those who aren't?

And Paul says, well, there's no question mark over those who are obeying God, but there has to be a question mark over those who aren't. Okay? Those who want to pick and choose their loyalties have a question mark over their head. Okay? God already knows. The trouble is, we don't. Okay? We don't. And the reason why this is so important to Paul is because he wants to make the distinction between the wisdom of the cross and where his boundary line for dealing with people and dealing with issues lie. It's within the church. So the whole of God's people are to mature, and they are to mature in such a way where they're able to see the distinctions clearly between the old life and the new life. They're able to tell the difference between a Christian marriage and a non-Christian marriage, between Christian parenting and non-Christian parenting, between Christian schooling and non-Christian schooling, between Christian healthcare and non-Christian healthcare.

They're able to tell the difference between Christian charity and non-Christian charity. And you think, well, aren't they all doing the same? Well, it may look like they're doing the same, but there's big distinctions there that need to be made. And the wisdom of the cross allows us to see that because it is the Spirit of God at work in people. If a difference, or in other words, if Christ Jesus has made a difference in your life, then it naturally follows that that difference ought to be seen. And that's what Paul's looking for. That's his main argument. If Christ Jesus has made you a new person, then you ought to look like a new person. And it's that simple. If you are a new person, then you will look like a new person.

And there's only so much time you can have a pretense of saying, yes, I can do it, yes, I can do it, yes, I can do it, before you're then asked to show that you can do it. And one of the examples that I would use is that I was the best footballer in primary school out of my whole class until someone put a goal at the other end of the pitch. And then suddenly it became abundantly apparent that I could kick the ball anywhere apart from in that little white square at the other end. The moment you introduce a standard, everything becomes apparent. Everything becomes apparent. Remove the standard and you can get away with a lot. You can get away with saying a lot. So what we have here is the wisdom of the cross is the standard. And the standard is then shining light on everything else, marriages, communion, fellowship, maturity, on everybody. And therefore, if Christ has made you different, that difference ought to be seen. The next thing Paul moves on to then is you have a new freedom in Christ Jesus, but the freedom is not what you think it is. Okay? When you read in Galatians, you know, that you are free in Christ, it isn't a freedom to do whatever you want to do. And this is what Paul has to point out to the Corinthians. Now, there is an argument back in the day for those who understood the classic argument between Lloyd-Jones and John Stott and a number of others over the

[20 : 41] Romans 6 issue. And that is, if a person has truly been saved by grace, which I said that this has got me in trouble before by saying that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ Jesus alone. And that's the only thing that transforms us alone. Now, most people are happy with that until you get to the point where, what does it mean? Okay? I want to affirm that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone. Okay? I want to affirm that. And therefore, when people say, they look at other people and go, well, they don't believe this, they don't believe that, they're not doing this, they're not doing... Well, what are we saying? Are we arguing that they're saved by grace alone through faith alone?

Or are we arguing? Well, they don't believe what I believe. Well, if salvation is by grace alone, then it's not by believing in grace alone. Okay? I said this last week in Romans. If we believe that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone, then we understand clearly that it's not by believing in salvation by grace alone through faith alone. It includes that, but that's not how you get saved. And that's an important distinction. And so this freedom that we now have in Christ is a freedom not to sin. Not a freedom to do whatever you want. Before you were set free in Christ, you were bound in sin. This means that you could not help but sin. You couldn't help it. Where the transformation that happens in Romans 5 and 6, for instance, and spelled out here in Corinthians, is that you're now free not to sin. You can now say no to sin. And Titus 2 makes abundantly clear that the grace that God gives you enables you to say no to lawlessness. It enables you to say no to sin. Okay? But

there is a distinction in that just because you can say no to sin doesn't mean that you're therefore going to.

It all goes back to your loyalty to your new humanity, your loyalty to Christ, your loyalty to what God has done for you in Christ Jesus. So Paul wants to make abundantly clear to all of these Christians here. Yeah, you're free. But your freedom is a freedom to obey God without sin holding you back. Your freedom is now a freedom to become mature without sin holding you back. Without you saying, I can't help it. It's the way that I was born or it's the way that I was made. That's an old argument.

[23 : 22] That's to go back to your natural birth. That's to say, that's true for the person who hasn't been changed by the cross of Christ. But it cannot be true for the person who has been changed, or else it wouldn't be called a new birth. The new birth, it brings with it new virtues. It brings with it new gifts. And the Spirit of God is the one who brings all of these things home to us. New people look like new people. Okay? New people look like new people. God is creating a new humanity, and they are to become like the Lord Jesus Christ. And so as you listen to this, don't trust the person who's telling you, but trust the person who's telling you. What difference does that make? Understand that these words are God's words and not mine. Paul's saying to the church. Understand that these words are God's words and not mine. They're coming through Paul, but they are the wisdom of the cross. They're what God would have us know and understand. And so Paul goes on to say in verse 13 that the Spirit of God interprets spiritual truths to those who are spiritual. Okay? He then goes on to say in verse 14, the natural person doesn't get it, doesn't understand it, but the spiritual person does.

God is at work in people that he has changed. He's at work in people that are not yet believers, but he's in work in them in a different way. Okay? That's the evangelistic field, but the church is no longer the field of evangelism. It's the field of maturity. It's the field where we grow up into our new humanity in Christ Jesus. The world out there is the world that is to be converted and brought into the new humanity and to be changed. And so there is a freedom, but the freedom is not to continue in your old way of life. It's to continue in your new way of life to no longer do the old.

And that's Paul's point. So when Paul has to deal with some of the marriage issues here of a son, some children amongst us, we'll leave that bit out until we grow up. I'll just stop myself, hopefully. Go read it yourself. Okay? It's sort of 18 plus material in Corinthians, but it's the type of thing where you think that's a serious issue and someone's going to have to speak into that. And so Paul says, look, this can't continue in here. That's the type of thing that goes on out there, but it's not the sort of thing that goes, that should go on in here in the church. It just can't continue in that. And that's the thing that people need to grow out of. But here's the problem.

When people have lived with established ways for so long and they don't mature, what do they do? What do they do? Well, let me give you another illustration as we wrap this up. Imagine a person who gets halfway through a degree, having done a job for 15 years or perhaps even 20 years, and they get halfway through the degree, but don't finish the degree. What do they go back to? Well, they go back to the thing that's been established for so long. And Paul says it's exactly the same in the church, that when people don't mature in Christ Jesus, that they're not getting more and more like Christ in their thinking and in their doing and in their behavior, that they're not growing up. They default to their old ways before they were saved. They just go back.

[27 : 07] This is how I used to think back then. This is what I'm comfortable with. I'm just going to go with it. And Paul says, you know, that's not what freedom's for. Your freedom is not to go back and default to your own ways just because it feels like second nature to you. And of course it feels like second nature to you because it was part of your nature for perhaps quite a long time. But it's something that you have to grow out of and come into the fullness of Christ Jesus. So here's the exhortation as we wrap it up.

In the church, Paul thinks that we can all agree. In fact, he even encourages us to all agree in chapter one. As he moves through the book, the question of like-mindedness becomes apparent. But the only way to become like-minded and to become of the same judgment is to become more and more like Christ Jesus. But Paul has enough wisdom given to him by God to understand that this isn't going to happen all of a sudden. And so there are a lot of differences in the church that need to be ironed out with the gospel. They need to be addressed with the gospel. This means that somebody has to say to somebody else, the mature instructing the immature, you're not to be doing that now that you're saved.

You shouldn't be continuing in that now that you're saved. And if you do, if you do, you live with a question mark above your head. And no one's putting that question mark above your head there. They're not doing it. But you're doing it to yourself because you're not changing when you know you ought to change. So if new people have been made new in Christ Jesus, they ought to look new. And God says, I dwell in such people. I dwell in such people. These are the people that I've given my spirit into. These are the people that I'm transforming. This is where my presence will be.

[29 : 11] And so this church here doesn't need any more no people. Sometimes we think that's a good thing in a church. Sometimes we think it's a good thing in a leadership. What the eldership needs is someone who can say no. What a congregation needs is a few more no people. Not according to the church, we don't.

Not according to Christianity. What we need is everybody to say yes. The trouble is, is how do we get to that yes? Well, we get to that yes by some people saying no. Okay? And that's the difficulty. Okay? No, that can't happen. But this needs to. And this growing up is more difficult in the church because you have a multiplication of families and individuals than it is for you as an individual to do all by yourself or for a family to do all by itself. Everything is amplified in the church because you have all of those differences coming together, all of those backgrounds coming together, and we're all to become like Christ from different backgrounds. And the question is, it's not about where we've come from as much as it is about how much ground we're making in our maturing. So here's the conclusion.

There are two things here that I want you to do as I do, that we ought to do. The first is this, that in everything that you do, do it in the wisdom of the cross. See everything in the light of what Christ has done for you, what God has done for you in Christ Jesus. So that all of your considerations now fall into, is this conforming to the maturity of Christ, or am I railing against it? Am I becoming more like Jesus by making that decision, or am I challenging becoming more like Jesus by that decision? And that's the way to think. If I do this, does this enhance my maturity in Christ, or does it detract from it? So whatever you think, say, and do, the underlying question in that is, is this going to enhance my maturity in Christ, or is this going to detract from it? The next thing that follows on from that is you'll begin to spot immediately those things which mature you in

Christ Jesus from those things which don't, which those things which don't. So don't come to church even this morning, or this evening, or any other day, as if nothing's happening to you.

Don't ever come to church as if nothing is happening to you. God, in these few moments that we've had together this morning, is maturing you, changing you, making you more like Christ Jesus. And as you go out into the world, don't think that God has somehow stopped that because you're not in the building. No, he's doing the same thing out there. It's just that out there, there's a lot more decisions to make. Because as you come here, a lot of the decisions have been made for you. This is what we'll sing, this is what we'll pray, this is what we'll read, this is how we'll come to the Lord's table this morning. It's made easy, but out there it's not quite so easy. You have to do it all by yourself.

[32 : 33] And so the maturity in here enables us to be mature out there. And so if we don't learn it in here, we're unable to be it out there. So remember, as you leave this morning, God's always at work in you.

God is always at work in you. And he's always at work in everybody else around you. And he's always at work in the world. God never ceases. Amen.