

FOOLISH WISDOM

A SERMON

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“For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God.” 1 Corinthians 1:21

WHAT a divine secret is a saving acquaintance with the Lord Jesus Christ! It may well be called a path which no fowl knows, a path which the vulture's eye has not seen; it may well be called the strait gate and the narrow way, and few there be that find it. There is no saving acquaintance with God but by the quickening power and indwelling of the eternal Spirit. There must be a personal sight and sense of our lost condition; there must be a fervent desire in the soul for deliverance from that condition; there must be an apprehension of the gift of salvation, a Savior that we need; so that just as that Savior is opened up in the dignity of his person and in his work to the soul, so the soul gladly receives him. The angel was in the secret when he said, “Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.” And be assured of this, my hearer, if we have not that personal experience that makes the tidings of the gospel to us good tidings of great joy, that makes the tidings of the gospel far surpassing in excellency, in delightfulness, and in blessedness, everything else, if this be not our experience, there is something deficient somewhere. So, I say, what a secret it is! “The secret of the Lord is with them that fear him, and he will show them his covenant.”

“The world,” then, “by wisdom knew not God.” I shall, this morning, in the first-place notice four kinds of wisdom which the Lord makes foolish. For in the preceding verse it says, “Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?” That is to say, he has demonstrated the wisdom there referred to, to be nothing but foolishness; and I shall point out those four kinds of wisdom which the Lord has demonstrated, and does and will demonstrated to be foolishness. And I shall be particular upon this part, that we ourselves may read out whereabouts we are: whether we are among the wise, who are to inherit glory; or whether we are among the fools, whose final promotion is to be shame, ignominy, and eternal contempt. You will at once perceive that our text, if we take what it implies as well as what it expresses, is a discriminating scripture.

The wisdom by which men know not the Lord, and which the Lord makes foolishness. Only distinctly understand here it does not mean that wisdom which the Lord has bestowed upon men by which they carry on with discretion, with prudence, and with advantage to themselves and

others, the lawful avocations of this world. It does not mean that. We cannot suppose the Bible says anything against a man understanding his business and attending to it. The Bible never says anything against that kind of wisdom, that kind of industry, nor anything that is advantageous to our welfare. Let us, then, look at the kinds of wisdom that the Lord demonstrates to be foolishness, though I must say but little upon each. Take, in the first place, the wisdom of the man that makes no profession at all; for you will generally find that every man is wise in his own eyes as to the course that he takes. Perhaps there may be one here this morning saying, Well, I am too wise to make any profession of religion at all, I, think the best way is to let it alone altogether, and to go on simply doing to others as I would others should do to me, and not to trouble myself about religion at all; I think that to be the wisest course." And so, you conclude that you are a very wise man. You are contented to rest without any saving acquaintance with Jesus Christ. That is your wisdom. Now the Lord will by-and-bye. to you, I hope, or rather I pray it may be in mercy, but if he does not in mercy, he certainly will in wrath, demonstrate to you that in taking this course, which you think to be a wise course, you are a very great fool to your own soul. Hear what the Scripture says concerning you that make no profession at all, and that pride yourself upon having nothing to do with religion, and think yourself very wise. The Scriptures speak of you in this way, that Jesus Christ. "shall take vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ; who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his power." And then, again, "It is a people of no understanding." And so you pique yourself and pride yourself that you do not belong to this sect, that sect, and the other; you make no profession at all; but the word says of you, "It is a people" such as you, "of no understanding; therefore he that made them will show them no favor, and he that formed them will not have mercy upon them." And then, again, so solemn are the Scriptures upon this matter that they speak even in this way, that "judgment must begin at the house of God." The Lord is very searching, we may say, in some respects, very severe there; and if judgment must begin at us, what shall the end be of you that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ? And if the righteous scarcely has faith enough to overcome his unbelief; if the righteous at times sinks so low in his faith as to feel as though it would give way; and if the righteous scarcely be saved, where shall the ungodly and the sinner appear? Ah, you think yourself wise, but you are a fool to yourself, you are a fool to your own soul, you are a fool altogether; you are utterly destitute of that wisdom that you will need when you shall come to the swelling of Jordan. So, then, the Lord will demonstrate unto you that your supposed wise course is foolishness. Only think of it, to come before the Lord at last, and to plead before him that you never loved him, that you never sought him, that you never prayed to him, that you never owned his name, that you never cared about him, that you lived apart from religion altogether. Very well; the Lord says, All the time you were living you said to me, "Depart from me; I desire not the knowledge of your ways;" and now I say to you, "Depart from me, you cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels." Oh, happy those of you who were once pursuing this course! But God showed you that you were fools, that you were deceiving your own souls; he showed you your foolishness, made foolish your wisdom, and you came, before the Lord and confessed that you were fools; as says the apostle Paul, "If any man will be wise, let him become a fool." If I am, then, speaking to any who are wise in their own eyes in this respect, may the Lord open your eyes, and give you to see that your present wisdom is the height of folly, deadly to your own soul, and will bring you down to everlasting perdition. Thus, then, if you do not know God, and boast about not understanding him, that is one kind of wisdom that the Lord will make foolishness. We are to speak these things not in any confidence in the creature, but in a

confidence in the Lord, that the solemnities, of his judgment must be testified, as well as the riches of his mercy.

The second wisdom that I notice that the Lord will make foolishness is that that will require great care for me to handle; because the wisdom which, in reality is folly, that I am about to touch upon, is that that I suppose we are all more or less tinged with. But, nevertheless, if largely tinged with the kind of wisdom that I am about to touch upon, yet there is such a thing as being so tinged with it as not to be fatally tinged with it. And it is this, the wisdom, or folly, is this. Here is a man all whose hopes of happiness lie in the accumulation of the white and yellow dust that belong to this world, which he can no more carry with him to the next than he can the dust of his body, and which will be no more use to him. How many have, anticipated the ecstatic delight, the wondrous pleasure, the comfortable ease, that they will enjoy by-and-bye! When I have saved so much I mean to retire. I will scrape all together that I can. I will take the cheapest seat in the chapel, and I will not give above a penny a time to the collection, and that I will give back-handed; they shall not see what there is in my hand, and I will not make a noise in the plate for anyone to hear what I do give. I will save in every possible way; for I would not lose my heaven for ever so. I mean to get away from all this, where I shall not be asked to give anything, and I intend to be happy and comfortable, Well, now, this looks very wise, and you think it is very wise. But now suppose, just as you have made up your nest, just as you have laid the last feather, just as you have taken your house, just as you have furnished it, just as you are going to retire and live at your ease, this scripture comes, and the Lord follows up the word with the act, “You fool; this night shall your soul be required of you, and then whose shall these things be?” and the Lord smites your health, and casts your soul into eternity. Where will the wisdom, be then? So, then, does not the Lord make foolish the wisdom of this world? This is an abuse of wisdom. But when I look at many that I know that have succeeded in the world very much; when I see (for I learn some things in private, as well as see some things in public that delight me much); when I see and know their many charities,, the many amounts of money they give in private as well as in public, Ah, I think to myself, there is the blessing of the Lord; there is that that scatters and yet increases; there is an illustration of the truth of good John Bunyan’s words,

“There was a man, though some did count him mad,
The more he gave away the more he had.”

Ah, the Lord will never turn that into foolishness. That is true wisdom; that is honoring the Lord with your substance; so shall your barns be filled with plenty, and your presses shall burst out with new wine. But I must have a word more upon the other character, that of selfishness. If all that professed the Christian name were like some, there would not be a chapel to meet in, nor a church either, except built by the State: there would not be a place of worship to meet in. There are some among us, half a dozen or so; and I am exceedingly grieved concerning them; not on my own account personally, nor on account of the cause, because the cause can do very well without them, indeed, better without them, and as far as that is concerned, I wish they would go, and not come into the place again. Nor am I grieved on account of the people; they would be better without these icebergs than with them. But I am grieved on their own account, because I am afraid that the words will not belong to them, “I was hungry, and you gave me meat;” and so on. I am afraid that when they appear at the judgment bar of God, when evidences are weighed up, their selfishness will amount to an evidence of their being destitute of grace; sound in the head, sound in creed, and

passable in life, but as rotten in heart as a sepulcher full of all manner of corruption. The Lord, he will not suffer his cause to depend upon any such; no, he gives his own children the right spirit, a spirit of practical love to his name and to his blessed ways. Now such persons, then, that make it their business to be everlastingly speaking disrespectfully of their minister, and disrespectfully of the people, and trying to hinder them in their work of devotion to the cause of God, such persons think they are very wise. But the time will come when God will make their wisdom foolishness; when the Lord will turn all their contrivances against them, and then woe unto them if it should prove at last that their profession is but a thing of nothing! The Lord has a variety of ways of putting his people to the test. There was a woman raised to great honor after the flesh; and now came a circumstance that should put her to the test. She trembled. Her heart was right, and allowances must be made for her trembling. But Mordecai stood to no repairs. He knew God's cause was God's cause; he knew that God would take care of his own. Therefore, he said to Esther, Now you are raised up into that lofty position, let us see whether your religion is real, whether you will stand the test. "For if you altogether hold your peace at this time, then shall enlargement and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place; but you and your father's house shall be destroyed." See the way you must view things. If one turn against you, never mind; deliverance will come in another way. If one who has professed to be your friend turns against you or is afraid to speak for you, never mind; deliverance will come in another way. Look to God. He will turn the wisdom of crafty hypocrites into foolishness, and work deliverance for his own. But Esther stood the test, came off triumphantly and nobly; she risked her life by going in before the king without his command so to do. She ought to be ranked as a sister to the upright, faithful Rahab. Rahab abode by her mission without a flaw, without a failure. Her integrity was sterling; and though self-conceited, pettifogging, blundering judges condemn her, authorized judges, Joshua, Paul, and James, give sentence in her favor; and above all, the great Judge of all has not suffered a single syllable, from one end of the Bible to the other, to be put upon record against the faithful Rahab. She was real. Bless God for reality. And if there had not been such sterling integrity in the souls of hundreds and hundreds of you, this chapel had never existed, and your humble servant would not have been where he is. The Lord still keep us in this sterling integrity, leaning upon the Lord, looking to him. That is the wisdom that he will never make foolishness. But if Rahab does not use any evasion, if she does not tell that which is literally untrue, but morally true, for I still stick to it, and will to my latest breath, with all the misinterpreting judgments that have been or may be passed upon the matter, if she had not done so, the whole would have broken down; for the whole safety of the spies depended upon the very part of the defense that these gentlemen would take away; let the devil in, and the mischief would be done. How true it is that God sees not as man sees!

But again: while the Lord, then, will make foolish the reasoning of you, some of you that shelter yourselves under no profession, so he will make foolish, and that in a most solemn manner, your wisdom that live in selfishness, care nothing for the suffering people of God, for the prosperity of the cause of God; can come and sit down in the chapel, and grudge the very money you pay for your sitting. God turn the covetous devil out of your heart, make you a new man or a new woman, or whatever you are. You will be happy then, when your soul is enlarged, and you feel you are called of God to serve him in every shape and manner possible, to honor his blessed name by all the means in your power. Oh, I can't afford it. No; they could not of old. They could plaster the roof of their houses, they could decorate their houses, they could polish their houses. "Is it time for you, O you, to dwell in your plastered houses, and this house lie waste?" Go to their own houses, and find everything to minister to their comfort, while the house of God was a scene of

desolation. I have said not this in anger, but in love; with a concern that Satan in all his shapes and forms may be cast out, and that your souls may be increasingly a palace for the holy God, for the benevolent-hearted Redeemer, for that spirit of liberality which is the very essence of the gospel; for “he that shows no mercy shall have justice without mercy, and mercy rejoices against judgment.”

The third kind of wisdom that the Lord will make foolishness is that of putting something of human invention into the place of the Lord Jesus Christ. This also is a very solemn part. And I want you to take (praying the sermon might fall into the hands of some Roman Catholic or Roman Catholics) I want you to take notice of what I am going to say upon the next point. If we put human invention into the place of or into connection with the work of Jesus Christ, this will appear very wise in the eyes of men. There appears in the eyes of the Catholic priest a deal of wisdom in his religion. In the eyes of the Puseyite I have no doubt there appears a deal of wisdom in the contrivance and construction, or carrying out of his ceremonies. But is it not a remarkable thing, worthy of your close attention, that while the Roman Catholic Church has chosen Peter to be its head and representative, that same Peter should at one fell swoop cut down every one of their inventions, ceremonies, and doings, with these words in the fourth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles? Now if there is one Roman Catholic here this morning, I would say to him, Do read for yourself. You will have to die for yourself; your priest cannot die for you. He may die before you or after you, but he cannot die with you, and he cannot die for you. Read for yourself, judge for yourself. The same Peter who is held as the representative of the Roman Catholic Church said concerning the name of Jesus Christ, “Neither is there salvation in any other; for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.” Why, that is the cutting away of everything. Now there are five grounds at least—perhaps I ought to have said fifty, but I will mention four or five grounds—upon which the Roman Catholic expects salvation. First, by the merits of Jesus Christ. That seems so far so good. Yes, it does: but while he names the merits of Jesus Christ, he does not know what those merits are; he does not understand them; if he did, the other things I am about to name would not merely go for nothing, but he would cast them from him as idols to the moles and to the bats. First, by the merits of Jesus Christ. Second, by the sufferance of the church. Only think of that, that you cannot be saved unless the Roman Catholic Church suffers you to be saved. Cardinal Wiseman in his book tells us that the moment you doubt the authority of the church you are outside the pale of the church, and therefore outside of salvation; and that if that church does not choose to receive you, saved you cannot be. So that you are saved first by the merits of Christ, but the merits of Christ are entirely neutralized, entirely negated, if the church does not suffer you to be saved. That is the second ground. Third, the good works and merits of the creature himself; though the word of God declares, “By the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified.” Fourth, by the merits of the apostles, and especially the meritorious intercession of the Virgin Mary; though, by-the-bye, there is no such person in existence as the Virgin Mary, for there is neither male nor female in heaven; for the soul is neither male nor female, but a glorified spirit; so that in reality there is no such person in existence. That is another ground of their salvation. And then the fifth and last, I will name (you see I have not touched upon transubstantiation and many other things), the fifth is a very curious ground, and it is this, by works of supererogation. That is to say, the Roman Catholic Church has a large stock of superfluous good works in possession, and if you have a large stock in the bank (you know what I mean), that will obtain for you a large amount of these good works, and if you give the priests of that church a few thousands, they will throw these good works into the scale in your favor, and so they wrap it up.

Thus, then, according to that religion, you are saved, first, by the merits of Christ; second, by the sufferance of the church, if the church will suffer you to be saved; third, by the merits of the creature himself; fourth, by the merits of the apostles and the intercession of the Virgin Mary; and fifth, by works of supererogation which they will sell to you at the best price they can get. Now just look at the delusion. Here, then, has not God made the wisdom of this world foolishness? All this appears very wise in their eyes; but the Lord has demonstrated all that unto us to be foolishness. The Roman Catholic says, How wise this is! how wise that is! and how wise the other is! But we bring Peter again, "There is none other name" for all the names that are saved are indebted to that one name, the name Christ Jesus, "there is none other name under heaven." So, they can't say, Well, Peter does say there is no other name, that is, not in such and such a locality, but we have found out there is another name somewhere else. But Peter makes a universal sweep, as though he saw that the devil would become a universal pretender, and therefore said, "There is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved." Thus, then, that wisdom that would connect anything with the work of the Spirit, with the work of the Savior, is that that God proves, demonstrates, to be foolishness. It would not matter so much if this foolishness were not so dreadful in its consequences to the soul. Take the man that makes no profession; see the vengeance that awaits him dying in that state. Take the worldly professor, and hear the word of God declare that it is idolatry, and that such are denounced throughout the Bible. Take the man that mixes up something with the Lord Jesus Christ, and then go for an explanation of the destiny of that man to the 23rd chapter of Matthew, where they had mixed up all sorts of things with the name of the Lord: "You generation of vipers, how can you escape the damnation of hell?" What, then, before I just glance at the next point, shall I say to these things? We were once foolish; thought we were better without God than with him. Thanks to his dear name for making us wise. We were once earthly, and only earthly, made this our heaven; were as a man tempted to sleep on the top of the mast, or as he that lies down in the midst of the sea. Now we are brought to say with pleasure that that we have been singing this morning,

"On Christ the solid rock I stand;
All other ground is sinking sand,"

And then, as to ceremony, bless the Lord, he has brought us away from it all. The apostle Paul would have no works of the law; he would not have even circumcision; he would not have anything; no, "the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me." What else do I want, then? I hold in infinite contempt the doctrine that would add anything to such a Person as this, "who loved me, and gave himself for me." He has given himself in the dignity of his person, the fulness of his work, the riches of his grace, the relations he bears in an eternal covenant that is never to be altered. This, then, is that wisdom that makes wise in the saving sense of the word.

Then there is a fourth kind of wisdom that the Lord will also make foolishness. And here, were it not for the awful judgments upon the adversaries, I could speak with great pleasure indeed, if I were to view this part only in relation to the people of God, I mean that kind of wisdom by which men have thought to get rid of God's truth, or to get rid of his people. I dare say the old world thought Noah very foolish, and thought themselves very wise. But we see at last who the foolish were. I dare to say the villainous wretches of the plain thought Lot an old fool; but the event showed who the fools were. Pharaoh said, "Come, let us deal wisely," and no doubt Pharaoh

thought his plan was well laid; and when he pursued the Israelites into the Red Sea no doubt, he thought he was acting very wisely. But how the Lord made that wisdom foolishness! And no doubt, passing by many, many things, Joshua, Gideon, Samson, Jephthah, and others, no doubt Goliath thought David was a little fool, or a great fool, and that he himself, Goliath, was a very wise man. But; we see the result. And no doubt the persons that got the three into the fiery furnace thought themselves very wise; but in the result we see who the wise were, and who the foolish. And when they accused Daniel, and got him into the lions' den, they thought themselves very wise, but when the lions got hold of these accusers, they showed them no mercy; we then see who the wise were and who the foolish. But above all things (and I need an archangel's mind and a seraph's tongue to set forth the folly of man in that great event), be astonished, O heaven! and wonder, O earth! that men thought themselves very wise when they planned and contrived the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus Christ! Oh, said they, his blood be upon us; we will stand the consequences of it; his blood be upon us and upon our children; we do not care. Crucify him, crucify him! We shall get rid of him. Was there ever, never, I think, friends, such a cloud of folly as was there collected. Blind indeed! blind indeed! Thought themselves to be very wise; but who proved to be the fools at last? Ah! when the thunderbolts of heaven, by sword, pestilence, and famine, set in upon that devoted nation, and they were subjected to sufferings unexampled as their sin had been unparalleled, here God turned the wisdom of the world into foolishness; it was indeed made foolishness. And I need not refer to the apostles, their sufferings. How wise men thought themselves in opposing themselves to God! And if we go back again to the Old Testament, I have no doubt that Haman thought he was very wise when he had got the gallows erected for Mordecai, and especially when he was invited to the banquet. That was because Esther wished to keep him under her eye. She had got an under-train of thought; she had a little time to reflect. No doubt Haman thought he was very wise; but when the great God stepped in and demonstrated to Haman that he had done a very foolish thing, who is the fool now? who is the wise now? Thus, then, if we would escape deadly folly, we must fear the Lord and seek him. If we would escape deadly folly, our affections must be upon him. "If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him." If we would escape deadly folly, we must renounce all human authority, all human ceremony, and our hope must be in the Lord alone. If we would escape deadly folly, we must not injure the people of God, nor the cause of God, maintain and stand up for our rights, and utter what we feel, so far as it is proper to utter, with decision. We should not cow nor crawl before any man whatever. Christians must stand upon even ground. And therefore, if any class of men try to put me down, I shall give them to understand that I am not to be put down. I have never tried to put them down; but if they try to put me down I shall put them down as well; and then if we determine to get up together, very good; but if they are resolved to keep me down, I will keep them down as well. We are to maintain our freedom and, our rights. Therefore, I hope the day will come, though perhaps not in my time, when the people of God will understand each other better, and when they will understand where they differ better. And my difference about Rahab, why, it is a very simple question, after all. (Now I will mention here that I have seen a book, which one of our deacons lent me (and if I should be spared till Good-Friday, I do not know that I will not read the names of the subscribers to that book), and this book contends that Rahab committed no sin whatever; that she did no fault, but did what she ought to have done. And there are twenty-three ministers, some of them great men, subscribers to this book; and of course, they would not subscribe to the book if they did not approve of the sentiments contained in it; and the great Dr. Cumming is among them, and the Reverend Mr. Hope and Mrs. Hope, I thought it was a very nice idea to close, with, the Reverend Mr. Hope and Mrs. Hope. So, then, we need not despair; we shall get Rahab right yet,

having so many great men among us. I hope the time will come when the people of God will understand each other better; not, as soon as ever they differ, begin to revile and reproach each other, but examine the principle, the argument, the point; and if it be wrong, let the wrong be made manifest and put right; and if we still must differ, let us differ in love. For instance, some of you are not Baptists; but if I were to come here and scold you about it Sunday after Sunday, I should be a fool. I would not wish you to be baptized on any account unless you were convinced it was right, certainly not. Some of you do not see your way clear to join the church. Well, you have a right to your own judgment and to your own conviction; and I love you none the less. I should like to see you baptized, of course, because it is natural for me to like others to see as I see; but I am not going to be angry with you. I love you all the same for that. Let you be Independents, or Baptists, or Church people, or what you may, if you are lovers of free grace, lovers of the Lord Jesus Christ, and are made wise with that wisdom that descends from above, I desire to receive the people of God to the glory of God, even as Christ receives us to the glory of God, and we should so receive each other.

Your time is gone, but I am not halfway through the text; so we must have another sermon upon it, because there are deep things yet contained therein.