



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

THE SMARTEST ONE IN THE ROOM

SERMON BY REV. DOUG PRATT ■ AUGUST 2, 2020

Intellect and Faith

It was the biggest financial scandal of a scandal-ridden era. In December 2001, a Houston-based energy company called Enron declared bankruptcy, wiping out \$63 billion in assets and stock valuation and also leading to the worldwide collapse of the Arthur Andersen accounting firm. Enron had for several years looked like one of the greatest success stories of American business. From humble roots as a natural gas pipeline company, its ambitious chairman Ken Lay hired two brilliant but ruthless visionaries to transform their operations. Jeff Skilling (CEO) and Andy Fastow (CFO) discovered and exploited loopholes in the energy brokerage market, and even more loopholes in accounting and financial manipulation, to vastly enrich themselves and to present a public veneer of invincibility.

But all along the Enron empire was a vast fraud, a house of cards waiting to collapse. Skilling and Fastow were feared and notorious in their corporation and their industry. They were often labeled “the smartest guys in the room.” But all that brain power couldn’t save Enron. The clever masterminds ended up behind bars, while thousands of employees lost their nest eggs. In this modern morality play, the lesson is undeniable: Brilliant minds with corrupt morals can produce great harm.

The modern world values intellect, cleverness and knowledge greatly. But today we will consider the limits of human knowledge, and the relationship between intellect and faith. Our text will be some surprising words written by one of the towering intellects of world history. The Apostle Paul, whose writings and thoughts have profoundly shaped the Christian church and the modern world, is considered by many scholars

to have been a world-class genius. One theologian put it this way: “If Paul had turned his attention to philosophy, he would have surpassed Aristotle and Plato.” But God had a different plan for Paul: he became a completely sold-out spokesman for a crucified Galilean carpenter who claimed to be the Savior of the world. Paul lived in a time when people were just as obsessed with the acquisition of knowledge and the valuing of the mind as in our own. Listen to these unexpected and counter-cultural words.

The message of the cross is foolish to those who are headed for destruction! But we who are being saved know it is the very power of God. ¹⁹As the Scriptures say,

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise
and discard the intelligence of the intelligent.”

²⁰So where does this leave the philosophers, the scholars, and the world’s brilliant debaters? God has made the wisdom of this world look foolish. ²¹Since God in his wisdom saw to it that the world would never know him through human wisdom, he has used our foolish preaching to save those who believe. ²²It is foolish to the Jews, who ask for signs from heaven. And it is foolish to the Greeks, who seek human wisdom. ²³So when we preach that Christ was crucified, the Jews are offended and the Gentiles say it’s all nonsense.

²⁴But to those called by God to salvation, both Jews and Gentiles, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵This foolish plan of God is wiser than the wisest of human plans, and God’s weakness is stronger than the greatest of human strength.

²⁶Remember, dear brothers and sisters, that few of you were wise in the world’s eyes or powerful or wealthy when God called you. ²⁷Instead, God chose things the world considers foolish in order to shame those who think they are wise. And he chose things that are powerless to shame those who are powerful. ²⁸God chose things despised by the world, things counted as nothing at all, and used them to bring to nothing what the world considers important. ²⁹As a result, no one can ever boast in the presence of God.

³⁰God has united you with Christ Jesus. For our benefit God made him to be wisdom itself. Christ made us right with God; he made us pure and holy, and he freed us from sin. ³¹Therefore, as the Scriptures say, "If you want to boast, boast only about the LORD."

1 Corinthians 1:18-31 (NLT)

The Human Mind and Its Limitations

Let's begin by acknowledging our gratitude and indebtedness to the remarkable accomplishments of the human mind. You and I are blessed by the discoveries and practices of modern medicine. Many of us are alive today, and nearly all of us, if we have lived long enough, are beneficiaries of scientists, researchers and medical practitioners who have healed our bodies or helped make our lives much better by their intervention, their drugs and surgeries and therapies. You and I are also blessed by the creations of modern technology. The light bulb, the telephone, the automobile, air conditioning, radio and television, air travel, computers: life would not be imaginable without these amazing inventions. How grateful we have all been in the past several months for internet technology that keeps us connected during a pandemic when we are isolated in our homes. We have all thrilled to the remarkable accomplishments of the human intellect in space travel, in architecture, in music and the visual arts. What men and women have been able to accomplish through the centuries is astounding. How smart we are!

And yet there are also limitations to our brainpower. As much as we have learned and achieved, there is so much more that remains beyond our grasp. Could there have been a more dramatic demonstration of the limits of even our best and brightest minds than the little microscopic organisms that began to spread in Wuhan, China less than nine months ago? Our best brains are stumped by so much about coronavirus 19. The whole world is applying its efforts to defeating it, and we haven't won the battle yet. We love our scientists and researchers, but they don't know it all. How humbling.

It may seem strange for someone like me who has spent a number of his years pursuing college and graduate degrees to say that education also has its limitations and is not the ultimate answer. Periodically, naïve

and optimistic theorists propose that the solution to mankind's problems is to be found in more education. Learning is a good thing, but it's not enough. The smartest guys in the room at Enron showed that: enhancing the brain without changing the heart does not eliminate the problems of the world. It may, in some cases, make the problems worse, empowering bad people to do even more clever evil.

Our experts have their limits. Lots of people are paid by the media corporations and political parties to predict what will happen in the future. A lot of smart people confidently offer their opinions and report their allegedly infallible polls. But they don't really know, because the ability to look into the future with accuracy is not granted to any man or woman. Not a single expert in January 2020 predicted a worldwide economic collapse and widespread contagion. Not one. Nor did the political polls and journalists and other "experts" get the 2016 election right, nor the British decision to leave the EU. The pundits may be entertaining, but we can't trust them. Who knows for certain what even the final five months of this year will bring?

Preconceived Biases

Why is the human brain not completely reliable? Partly because we are plagued by preconceived biases. We see what we expect to see, rather than what's really there. It happens in journalism: reporters rush to judgment on an event, often choosing what fits their preferred narrative before getting all the facts. It happens in biomedicine: researchers, with a biased self-interest towards their clinical trials succeeding, are tempted to skew the data favorably. It happens in business: auditors at Arthur Andersen had an incentive to approve Enron's financial books because they were such a lucrative client.

This is what Paul puts his finger on in verses 22 and 23. The gospel message of Christ's work on behalf of mankind was dismissed by many of those who heard it in the first century because it didn't fit their preconceived ideas. The Jews had it in their minds that the Messiah would have to be a great and mighty king, exerting military and political power to restore an earthly kingdom headquartered in Jerusalem (and they insisted on this in spite of the many clues sprinkled through the Old Testament that God had a different plan). The intellectual Greeks and

Romans who were enamored of their philosophers expected to hear eloquent oratory and convoluted theories. And the common people who practiced the pagan rituals of worship of the mythological gods couldn't imagine that a god would actually be able to suffer and die; their gods up on Mt. Olympus were supposed to be removed from the earthly day-to-day life of mere mortals. So, when Paul laid out the Christian message it was rejected by many without being given fair consideration.

How different are we today, two millennia later? There are bright and educated people in our own times who have ignored or dismissed the message of this book just as the ancients did. For some, the thought of trusting in a dead and then alive-again Jewish preacher to forgive their sins and change their lives seems "unscientific," anti-intellectual, even "foolish" (in the words of 1 Corinthians 1). For some, the thought of placing faith in God rather than in themselves and their own brains and skills is too humbling to consider; they'd rather do it themselves. They don't need God. For some, influenced by peers who are unbelievers, the cost of embracing Christ would be social embarrassment and loss, and that's too steep a price. And for some, the thought of inviting Christ into their lives would be too risky, for it might mean they could no longer do the things they like to do and live the way they like to live.

A Search for the Truth

Very few people I have met or heard about have rejected the Christian message because they have studied and examined it carefully with an open mind and concluded that it is not intellectually credible. I am personally convinced that the Gospel will withstand the harshest scrutiny, and that the more you learn about it the more you will be convinced. There are a lot of really smart people who have traveled the path from doubt and skepticism and even atheism to faith in Jesus. Let me tell you about one, who is very prominent in the public eye today.

His name is Dr. Francis Collins. He is the current Director of the National Institutes of Health (he is Dr. Anthony Fauci's boss). For years he headed the Human Genome Project that cracked the genetic code—allowing our best researchers today to develop gene-based candidates for a virus vaccine. He is brilliant, and he's a very vocal Christian.

Raised in an unbelieving home, he considered himself an atheist and never gave further thought to the Christian faith—assuming it was just an emotional crutch for weak and uneducated people. Through college at UVA, a PhD program in advanced biological science at Yale, and then medical school at UNC, he assumed that science had the answers to life. It was when he started into medical practice that he discovered what a difference faith in Christ made in many of his patients. And his own ignorance about the spiritual dimension began to bother him. This is what he writes in his book *The Language of God*:

Did I not consider myself a scientist? Does a scientist draw conclusions without considering the data? Could there be a more important question in all of human existence than ‘Is there a God?’ And yet there I found myself, with a combination of willful blindness and something that could only be properly described as arrogance, having avoided any serious consideration that God might be a real possibility.

Thus began his intensive search for the truth. It was a search that led him much farther than just an intellectual conclusion that the evidence indicated a Creator. It actually led him to a change in his inner heart and emotions, nothing short of a surrender to Christ and a decision to live differently from that time on. Dr. Collins embraced what Paul says in verses 24 and 25: “Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God. This foolish plan of God is wiser than the wisest of human plans, and God’s weakness is stronger than the greatest of human strengths.”

Living by Faith

There are smart people who are atheists and smart people who are believers. That fact is undeniable. The logical conclusion therefore is that the key factor is not human intellect. To believe in Christ is ultimately a decision of faith. And so is **not** believing.

Since no human being, with our limited brains and our limited powers of observation and our complete inability to know the past or future, can ever know everything, we have to make decisions based on faith—which is a conclusion based on only partial evidence. We live by certain kinds of faith all the time.

We may have had positive experiences in boarding an airplane in the past, and we may personally know the pilot and feel confident in his or her ability. We may even have researched the characteristics of the Boeing 737 we are boarding and concluded that its safety record is good... but when that plane takes off, we don't know for sure that it will land us safely at our destination. We make a commitment on the basis of faith.

When we say "I do" to another person at an altar, we don't know everything that will happen in the years that follow, nor do we know for sure that person will honor the promises of their wedding vows. We make a commitment on the basis of faith.

Francis Collins, the brilliant geneticist, again:

Science is the only reliable way to understand the natural world, and its tools when properly utilized can generate profound insights into material existence. But science is powerless to answer questions such as 'Why did the universe come into being?', 'What is the meaning of human existence?', 'What happens after we die?'

To answer those questions requires truth from beyond this world. It requires revelation. We will need help. And if it comes to us, we can only receive it with humility. If God is present, He is always the Smartest One in the room.

Simple and Profound

The message of Christ, the whole message of the Bible, is at the same time simple and yet profound. Young children, with only partially developed minds, can understand the simple Gospel: that they are loved and precious to their Creator, and that by embracing the love of Christ they can be forgiven and secure in Him. And yet the finest scholars and thinkers can spend a lifetime plumbing the depths of insight in this book and never feel that they have grasped it all.

My hope, for every person who hears my words, is that you will seek the truth with your whole mind and your whole heart. ■



FIRST
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

BONITA SPRINGS

9751 Bonita Beach Road | Bonita Springs, Florida 34135 | 239 992 3233 | fpcbonita.org