

Sermon 134: Romans 11:33: The Deep Riches and Wisdom of God

OUTLINE

Riches
Wisdom

INTRODUCTION

'Sound Biblical exposition is an imperative *must* in the Church of the Living God. Without it no church can be a New Testament church in any strict meaning of that term. But exposition may be carried on in such way as to leave the hearers devoid of any true spiritual nourishment whatever. For it is not mere words that nourish the soul, but God Himself, and unless and until the hearers find God in personal experience they are not the better for having heard the truth. The Bible is not an end in itself, but a means to bring men to an intimate and satisfying knowledge of God, that they may enter into Him, that they may delight in His presence, may taste and know the inner sweetness of the very God Himself in the core and centre of their hearts.¹ So writes A W Tozer in His preface to his book *The Pursuit of God*. The information we receive from the bible is not to be studied in order to build a library of facts but to confront us with the truth of who God is draw us out in worship before Him. And it must be worship for when we understand something of God as He actually is, our souls only have one response, we fall down on our faces before Him. For this reason we come to one of the best parts of the book of Romans 11:33-36.

Paul has been speaking in great detail about the mystery of God's plan for the Jews. This discussion has come on the heels of 8 chapters of discussing the gospel of God which has the power to save all who believe. And here we see Paul cannot go on, He must worship. The truth in all of its dimensions has overwhelmed His mind and his heart is taking over and must respond. That word 'Oh' at the start is a word of surprise, it is a word of adoration, it is a word expressing a soul that is too full and overflowing who is overwhelmed by God and must express it. Here we see doctrine serving its true end, doxology. It is good that we have these outbursts by Paul, he is like a cyclist who we are riding behind and we are able to follow more easily as we hide in his slipstream. But when it comes to Paul it is like trying to hang onto the outside of the bullet train and your nails are threatening to tear out because of the heights and speed he is moving. This passage amounts to a train track that takes us higher and higher until we are launched over the end into the endless infinity of God, and it dismantles every part of you as you are confronted with the reality of the beauty, the glory, the infinite majesty of our Triune God.

So today we are going to piggy back Paul as he leads us to the highest heights of worship. 11:33-36 can be broken up into four sets of 3. In v33 we see 3 words about God's unknowability, in the words depths, unsearchable and inscrutable. In v33 we see 3 aspects of God drawing Paul's soul out in worship, God's riches, His wisdom and knowledge. In v34-35 we see 3 rhetorical questions, each of these seem to be working backwards with the 3 aspects of God just mentioned. 'For who has known the mind of the Lord.' Corresponds to knowledge; 'or who has been His counsellor' corresponds to wisdom; 'Or who has given a gift to Him that he might be repaid' corresponds to God's gracious riches. And then in v36 we have three inclusive descriptions of God's plan, 'For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things.' And it is all capped with a final declaration of eternal praise.

1 A W Tozer, *The pursuit of God*, p10.

Riches

Picture it, you are Paul, you have just expounded on 11 chapters of doctrinally intensive explanations of the gospel and your heart is brought to the brink of being lost in what God has done. What's the first thing that strikes you? Paul lists three things, riches, wisdom and knowledge, and all our qualified with 'Oh the depths.' So he is considering the deep riches, deep wisdom and deep knowledge of God. We must first appreciate the 'size' of God that comes into view. Paul is saying he sees the bottom of God, he is only beginning to see what he cannot see, and at this he is responding in worship. After all if you could fully comprehend and understand God you would be God, but He is infinite and we are not. Paul fixes us firstly on God's infinite riches. What does he mean by this?

God is a giver who has infinitely deep pockets. We know from v36 that Paul views everything being from God, from Him are all things. So in order to register the depth of God's riches we would need to list everything that is. But this is so abstract so let us use a few categories.

Creation: God created everything from nothing, and we live as squatters in His universe, lent the very breathe we breathe. Piper highlights how God is infinitely rich for He can create everything from nothing, and there is no end to nothing, so God can constantly create more if He willed it. If we list the things of creation we are overwhelmed by the riches. We have a stable earth to live in, bodies with five senses that experience life, we have minds, imagination, emotions, family, relationships, work, purpose, identity, community and many more things. God is generous in creation.

Common grace: But we must remember the story line of the bible as we consider all that God gives to humanity in the world. God has not only created a world where He gives the bounty of our lives for nothing. We are in fact sinners, and undeserving of all the good that He gives. We not only have all by unmerited favour but by a demerited favour. God pours out His rain on the just and the unjust. Every moment He does not give us all that we deserve and continues to lend us life all the while we use it to wander further and further from Him. God is generous in common grace.

Salvation: God not only allows us to live in His world while His enemies and sustains our lives; He also acts to save us. Here is where God's generosity shows. 'For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.' God's most precious possession is His Eternal co-equal Son. The love of God is measured out for us by the measure of the worth of the one given. Christ is co-equal and co-eternal with the Father and the Spirit, there is no angel more worthy, nothing in all creation can compare with the uncreated Son. If we can mount this infinite leap there is another that confronts us, Christ is not given for something of near value, but for us, His enemies who deserve nothing but punishment. Romans 5:8, 'but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.' But another mystery stands to greet us, for not only was God rich in sending His Son, and saving His enemies, He grants His enemies not merely life, but eternal life as sons in His eternal presence enjoying as co-heirs a full entitlement to all that Christ has. But there is more.

God: God has not saved us to sit on the shelf, or as trophies. He has saved us to Himself, into the deepest possible relationship a creature can come to enjoying communion with God being in full fellowship with Him and enjoying Him the greatest of all things. Not only is there no condemnation there is also no separation. He pledges Himself to us using images of husband and wife to pledge Himself as our portion forever. We are not only rich we can be no richer, Psalm 73:25-26, 'Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.'

Wisdom

The next thing that we see astounds Paul is God's deep wisdom. I must confess that it has been my own study of Romans that has amplified my appreciation for the wisdom of God in how He has worked. We have marvelled at the love of God, but few stop and allow the tremendous work of the gospel help them appreciate the profound problem solving wisdom of God. Here are a few of the conundrums that God solves in the gospel.

Just and the justifier: we know that in the gospel we get full forgiveness of sins. We do not have a salvation that saves a little but that saves completely. But this highlights a problem how can a holy judge, an all seeing judge, a perfect judge forgive sin? Prov. 24:23-24, 'These also are sayings of the wise. Partiality in judging is not good. Whoever says to the wicked, "You are in the right," will be cursed by peoples, abhorred by nations.' When God saves us in Christ doesn't He say to us who are wicked you are righteous? Yes He does, how then can God justify the sinner and still be just? God in His wisdom put forward a substitute, Jesus Christ to take our place and satisfy justice on our behalf. Rom. 3:25-26, '5 whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. 26 It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.' In no other court room can it be that justice is served and the criminal goes free but this is God's wisdom that with the gospel and the most important court case we will ever be in, our sins are paid for yet we go free. Once we have seen our sin and know how impossible it is to stop or offer anything worthy to atone for them, we see how truly lost we are and only then can we appreciate the way God solved his problem.

The second problem we see being solved is the works problem, or the holiness problem. We cannot save ourselves by works. None of us is good enough to earn eternity in the presence of a holy God and entitle us to all His bounty. On top of that each one of us is a sinner worthy of damnation, and every attempt to try and save ourselves by our works is another damning act whereby we reject Christ's work for our own. For this reason because we are poor and there is nothing we can offer to God, God provides what we cannot provide for ourselves in Christ, His life and death for us. God solves the problem of unholy people becoming holy by making holiness a free gift that we receive in Christ. God gives us the gift of a new legal standing a new criminal record not only free from sins but full of Christ's own loving life. His righteousness becomes ours, more technically Christ Himself now is our righteousness. 2 Corinthians 5:21, 'For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.' It is not by works that we are made holy in the eyes of God but by faith on account of us receiving the free gift of righteousness offered to us in Christ. Marvellously free holiness for salvation; this is the triumph of the wisdom of the God in the gospel when needing to save unholy people who can't afford it.

But for many to say that God offers to declare you righteous for free raises concerns about the Christian continuing to live a holy life. Many a legalist has raised this concern. They say something like this: if God forgives all your sins, and gives you your judgement day verdict now; if He saves you in such a way as to pay for all sins past, present, and future, then wont that encourage people to abuse God's grace and lead them to sin. They would add that the great problem with the Christian church today is that Christian salvation is too free, that the Christian is made to feel too secure, that they need a little fear of hell to compel them to be holy. So many in one way or another have snuck works back into the gospel. Some have tried to sneak works into our predestination by making God react to a foreseen

act or will on our part to make Him choose us. Some have put it before conversion making repentance along with faith an instrument by which we are justified. Some have put works into the action of faith making it an earning act instead of a receiving act. Others have put works after salvation saying that one's justification depends on the progress of their sanctification. Others have tried to insert works into judgement day saying that the works God weighs on judgement day are not merely evidence of justifying faith but contributions to our salvation.

Paul encounters this issue in Romans 6. Paul has just explained that just as we freely received guilt and death through our legal representative Adam, so we have received righteousness and life through the Second Adam, Christ. And we have gained more in Christ than we lost in Adam, Romans 5:20, 'Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more.' Paul anticipates that there will be those who object to a free gift of righteousness that does not depend on works. And he anticipates the questions of 6:1, 'What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? 2 By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?' Paul highlights the wisdom of God that guarantees the holiness of His people. But let us be very clear, all true Christians will pursue holiness, if there is no fruit of holiness there is no root of salvation. But God guarantees this not by putting your works in there somewhere but showing how God baptised you with Christ causing you to die to sin. In other words God guarantees holiness in our lives by the change He brought about in us by the new birth where we participated in Christ's resurrection power and can now put sin to death and pursue holiness and experience real change into Christ's image by the power of the Spirit as we cooperate with Him. There is a change at the level of our being that enables holiness to inevitably flow. We do not have to undo the free grace of God by adding works to try and get people to pursue holiness, no God in His wisdom has guaranteed this by our new birth. Only God can guarantee that we are saved apart from works yet to works.

This raises other mysteries for us to consider. But how can I who am a Christian, and who sin today still be a child of God and considered holy in His sight? Why am I not cast off at every moment because of my failure to love God with all that I am, for my sins of omission and commission? Here again the wisdom of God has prevailed. God has saved us in such a way not only do we receive a new criminal record we receive Christ's record. We become one with Christ, like a bride with her husband, and all that is His becomes ours. In fact the bible also uses the picture of a body and a head, and we are identified with our head who is Christ in God's presence. So whenever God wants to look at me to examine my righteousness, 1 Cor. 1:30 reminds me that Christ is my righteousness, 'And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption.' Because of my union with Christ, that He is my covenant head and federal representative I am always seen as unchangeably holy in Christ despite my performance.

Tapestry illustration:

Another mystery is the mystery of God's working and my responsibility. This problem has confounded many philosophers and theologians. How can I be responsible, have a duty to obey and receive rewards when it is God who and works to will and do within me? We have looked at this issue, and highlighted that in salvation and holiness, it is not a case of either God or man, but both. God is sovereign and acting as God, and we are choosing creatures who act and are held responsible for our actions. God in His power and wisdom has worked this wonder.

Besides the many others we could mention let me mention one last mystery that demonstrates the wisdom of God. How can a Jewish nation who have lived under laws that force them to separate from Gentiles, be incorporated into one body with Gentiles without the Gentiles having to become Jews in the process? This was the problem the early church faced and the problem that Paul is addressing in Romans 9-11. There we have God's plan laid out in full. That God's sovereign election saves Jews and Gentiles. And that God saves the elect Jews in such a way that there is one olive tree, that all are children of Abraham by faith; that by Jewish unbelief Gentiles are saved, and that by Gentile belief Jews are provoked to jealousy. Something that could never be accomplished under the OT is accomplished in Christ. This is the wisdom of God. And there is so much more to say, but I think we have entered into some of what Paul was feeling and thinking when he said these words, 'Oh the depth of the riches and wisdom.'

This is our God, the gospel puts His glory on display, if all our study of the bible does not lead us to this place then we are not reading it right, and if we are not here then we need to stop and reconsider all He has done.