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Sermon Series: *Sing in Exultation*, No.5

Better Contemplations

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I Corinthians 1:18-31 (NIV)

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.
¹⁹ For it is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate."

²⁰ Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹ For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. ²² Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

²⁶ Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. ²⁸ God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things – and the things that are not – to nullify the things that are, ²⁹ so that no one may boast before him. ³⁰ It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God – that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. ³¹ Therefore, as it is written: "Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord."

We are in First Corinthians, Chapter 1, this morning, if you'd like to turn there with me. (Perhaps not a classic Christmas Scripture passage!)

I have come to believe that one of the most effective strategies our enemy uses in his attempt to destroy followers of Jesus, especially at this time of year, is to get into our heads and try to send us down thought paths of either disappointment or hopelessness or self-condemnation, because he knows that if he can get us thinking down a negative track like that, it will wreak havoc, not only in us, but in those around us.

Instead of encouraging us to dwell on all the blessings of this season, the enemy tries to remind us of all the deficits, so that instead of celebrating what we *do* have, we begin to dwell on what we *don't* have.

Instead of giving thanks for what's *going well*, we begin to complain about what *isn't*.

And once you get on board the "complain train," it can be really hard to get off.

It starts with the way we think. That's where the enemy attacks us.

The truth is, whether we realize it or not, every serious Christ-follower is in an active "thought war" with the enemy.

But we are not in any way at his mercy. We can win this war, with God's help, by doing the few, simple things, regarding the way we think, that are outlined for us in Scripture – mostly, interestingly, by the Apostle Paul.

In fact, you see Paul mention the Christian thought-life so much – he understands this so well – you might wonder if he knew, personally, the power of this temptation.

For example, to the Philippian church, Paul writes, "**Whatever is true...noble...right...pure, whatever is lovely...admirable...excellent or praiseworthy, this is what you need to think about.**"¹

To the Colossians, he says, "**Since you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts...and your minds on things above, not on earthly things.**"²

To the Roman church, Paul writes, "**Don't conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.**"³

To the Philippian Christians, Paul says, "**If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind.**"⁴

Paul encourages the Thessalonians to "**Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances...**"⁵

In just about every letter he wrote, Paul includes some word about the importance of how you think – what you think about, what you let your mind dwell on – because he realized that that has the potential to affect everything else about you: how you look at yourself, at others, at life, and at God.

And this seemed especially true, and Paul seemed especially concerned about it, with regard to the Christians at Corinth.

The Corinthian church was in danger of dividing – maybe even disintegrating, in large part because of the ways its members were thinking.

They were thinking in terms of men, leaders, parties, slogans, personalities and earthly allegiances. They had allowed things that this world deems important to control their minds and thoughts and aspirations. And because of that, they had grown proud and puffed up and had become so convinced that they were right that they were nearly at each other's throats.

You see, wisdom, in Paul's day, was very tightly connected with self-promotion, which is why Jesus seemed so utterly ridiculous to most of earth's supposedly "wise" people.

¹ Philippians 4:8

² Colossians 3:1-2

³ Romans 12:2

⁴ Philippians 2:1-2

⁵ 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

And it is especially why Jesus' death was so confusing.

To the worldly-wise who were Jewish, Paul says there in verse 23, that Jesus' death was a "*stumbling block*." That's because Jews could never consider a "dead savior." That's an oxymoron to the worldly-wise Jew.

And much less one who was crucified. Their own Law spelled out that anyone who is hung on a tree is cursed.⁶

They didn't want a man on a cross. They wanted a king on a throne, so the whole idea of Jesus as savior was downright offensive to worldly-wise Jews.

And then to the Gentile elite the whole Jesus thing was just, as Paul says in several places, but especially verse 23, "utter foolishness." There was no place for suffering in any Greek conception of God, so some random, executed peasant could never possibly stand for God or mean anything of significance.

For those who dwell on and live according to the world's standards of wisdom, you see, Jesus is essentially eliminated from any thoughtful consideration right from the start.

All because of the way they *think*.

And that was what was so concerning and dangerous to Paul: he knew that if you start down the world's path of thinking – if you jump on the world's thought train, it invariably winds up taking you a long way from Jesus.

So, Paul reminds these Corinthian believers who were so enamored with worldly wisdom that the wisdom of the world cannot be trusted to get one to God. In fact, there in verse 19, Paul repeats Isaiah's assertion that, "*God will destroy the wisdom of the wise and frustrate the intelligence of the intelligent.*"

The thing is, no one will ever get to God if they demand that God think like them.

On the contrary, it's *our* way of thinking that needs to be adjusted – broadened, deepened, sanctified, you see?

It's the world's wisdom, not God's wisdom, that is compromised and broken.

And though God will help us, it's up to us to decide that we're going to give God's way a try.

Every person, individually, has to come to the point of declaring, by faith, "OK, well, God says to consider this, so I'm going to do that. God says to think this way, so I'm going to try that. From here on out, I'm going to ride *His* thought train and see where that leads."

That's what Paul was inviting – even urging – the Corinthians to do here: stop thinking like the world and begin thinking like God.

If we'll do that, God will take care of the rest. God will prove Himself if He's given opportunity.

That's Paul's position – his message – here, to the Corinthians and to nearly every other church to whom he wrote: "You want to be healthy? You want to be whole? You want to be complete? You want to be the person, the family, the church God created and intends you to be? You want to be close to God? It starts by changing how you perceive the world, what you value and how you

think. It starts up here, in the mind. You have to stop thinking like the world and start thinking like God."

About 1800 years after the Apostle Paul, this same sentiment was caught by British poet James Montgomery.

The son of a pastor, James began writing poetry at age 10, inspired by the faithfulness of the Moravian Christians – the same group that influenced John Wesley.

In 1792, James flunked out of boarding school at age 14, but found a job writing for a local newspaper, which he eventually took over and ran for 31 years.

Writing hymns came easily to Montgomery, and he stands behind only Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley, as English hymn-writers go.

He published *Angels From the Realms of Glory* on Christmas Eve, 1816. That's number 131 in our hymnal.

As you read its words, you pick up the sense of urgency that it communicates. It's full of imperative verbs directed to those groups who first encountered Jesus.

But the one that relates to us today is that third verse – addressed to the sages. He's speaking of the Magi: the scholars, the wise men of that age. He writes, "Sages, leave your contemplations; brighter visions beam afar. Seek the great 'Desire of Nations.' You have seen His natal star."

These wise men that Montgomery speaks to: people have wondered about them almost as much as they've wondered about Jesus. Some think they were Persian; others think they were Arabs. Others have different theories.

Wherever they were from, they were most likely what we'd call some combination of philosophers, theologians and astrologers, since in those days, many felt the heavens held the keys to the world's secrets.

Whatever they were specifically, they were people who were unusually sensitive to, and engaged with, the greater issues taking place on earth. Their thoughts were not trapped in the world's confines. They allowed themselves to wonder and to think widely. They were looking for wisdom and truth. They were spiritually open and willing, to the point that they crossed many boundaries of all different kinds in order to get to Jesus.

And in their presenting of their treasures, we're to understand that, in Jesus, they found what they had searched for.

This is what Montgomery celebrates about them – and encourages in them.

"Sages, leave your contemplations; brighter visions beam afar."

It's as if he's saying, "Guys, no matter what your ways of thinking have been, no matter where you've looked for wisdom and truth before, don't waste your time in those places anymore. Here in this Jesus is something way better and higher and deeper; here in Jesus is something far more complete and fulfilling than anything this world could possibly offer. Leave your past contemplations. No need to search anymore. You've found, in Jesus, what you've been looking for."

"Sages, leave your contemplations; brighter visions beam afar. Seek the great 'Desire of Nations.'"

⁶ Deuteronomy 21:23

Montgomery is quoting here a prophetic word and title for the Messiah from the prophet Haggai.⁷

According to Haggai, He's the one who will come and cause all to be made right in the world. That's why the nations desire Him – even those nations represented by these Magi.

Montgomery is appealing to the international appeal of Jesus.

He's not just for Jews. God's Savior is for every nation, so it's only appropriate that people from far away – non-Jews – would be interested in Him and would look for Him.

Every nation that wants peace and calm and joy and truth wants Messiah – they want Jesus, whether they know it or not.

So sages – you who think, you who wonder, you who are open to life's deeper, spiritual realities: if you want satisfaction, if you want fulfillment, then you need to turn your thoughts – your contemplations – in Jesus' direction.

Don't waste your time pursuing the world's lesser wisdom.

Change the way you think.

Change what you think about.

Think the very thoughts of God.

That's what will take you – that's the *only thing* that will take you – where you want to go.

It was true in the Magi's day.

It was true in the Apostle Paul's day.

It was true in James Montgomery's day.

And it is true today.

Today, everybody wants to be an influencer. Every person with a social media account seems to be shouting at the world with every post, "Hey, listen to me! I have wisdom. I know something that you need to know."

And ninety-eight percent of it is nothing but straw that is not worth the time to consider.

Ninety-eight percent of it is either wrong, temporary, inconsequential, eternally useless, or all of the above.

You want to think about something that actually matters? You want to be truly wise?

Listen to the Magi, to the Apostle Paul, and to James Montgomery:

Leave your contemplations. Forget about the earthly places you've looked for wisdom in days past.

And instead, look to the brighter visions that come from beyond this world – that come from God.

Seek the "Desire of Nations," the Christ, the Savior, the Messiah that the world needs and even unknowingly looks for.

Invest yourself, your thoughts, in Him.

Follow the star to the One who provides wisdom you can depend on.

Doing that, friends, will transform not just Christmas, but every day and week and year to come.

Closing Prayer:

Father, we live in a world that is full of people and influences clamoring for our attention and allegiance.

In the midst of all that noise, let us be a discerning people – a people who leave earthly contemplations behind and seek first your Kingdom – and it's King – the great Desire of Nations. We have seen His star in these days of Christmas. Help us to follow it and Him all the days of our lives.

Closing Song: *Angels from the Realms of Glory*, (vv. 1, 3)

Benediction: You know, what we have in the hymnal as verse four here is not Montgomery's last verse. There is one more verse to this hymn that does not usually appear in hymnals. It goes like this:

Sinners, wrung with true repentance,
Doomed for guilt to endless pains,
Justice now revokes your sentence,
Mercy calls you; break your chains!

That one's not usually mentioned, because people think it ends a Christmas carol on a downer. But it really doesn't, because it completes Montgomery's progression through the song. He moves from the Angels' song, leads to the Shepherds' adoration, to Sages' gifts, to Saints' praise in heaven, and then finally, to the Sinners' repentance on earth.

Which is right where so many people are today: bound by earthly influences and searches for wisdom that is not wisdom at all.

So many are chained by what seems to be, by earthly standards, wise and important pursuits.

But in light of eternity, they are nothing but straw.

Jesus came to break those chains.

Let Him do that for you, would you?

⁷Haggai 2:7