

The Knowledge of Jesus Christ the Best Knowledge

By George Whitefield

Sermon 45

“I determined not to know any thing amongst you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified.” 1 Cor 2:2

The persons to whom these words were written, were the members of the church of Corinth; who, as appears by the foregoing chapter, were not only divided into different sects, by one saying, “I am of Paul, and another, I am of Apollos;” but also had men amongst them, who were so full of the wisdom of this world, and so wise in their own eyes, that they set at nought the simplicity of the gospel, and accounted the Apostle's preaching foolishness.

Never had the Apostle more need of the wisdom of the serpent, mingled with the innocency of the dove, than now. What is the sum of all his wisdom? He tells them, in the words of the text, “I determined not to know any thing amongst you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified.”

A resolution this, worthy of the great St. Paul; and no less worthy, no less necessary for every minister, and every disciple of Christ, to make always, even unto the end of the world.

In the following discourse, I shall,

First, explain what is meant by “not knowing any thing, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified.”

Secondly, give some reasons why every Christian should determine not to know any thing else. And

Thirdly, conclude with a general exhortation to put this determination into practice.

First, I am to explain what is meant by “not knowing any thing, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified.”

By Jesus Christ, we are to understand the eternal Son of God. He is called Jesus, a Savior, because he was to save us from the guilt and power of our sins; and, like Joshua, by whom he was remarkably typified, to lead God's spiritual Israel through the wilderness of this world, to the heavenly Canaan, the promised inheritance of the children of God.

He is called Christ, which signifies anointed, because he was anointed by the Holy Ghost at his baptism, to be a prophet to instruct, a priest to make an atonement for, and a king to govern and protect his church. And he was crucified, or hung (O stupendous love!) till he was dead upon the cross, that he might become a curse for us: for it is written, “Cursed is every man that hangeth upon a tree.”

The foundation or first cause of his suffering, was our fall in Adam; in whom, as the living oracles of God declare, “We all died;” his sin was imputed to us all. It pleased God, after he had spoken the world into being, to create man after his own divine image, to breathe into him the breath of life, and to place him as our representative in the garden of Eden.

But he being left to his own free will, did eat of the forbidden fruit, notwithstanding God had told him, “The day in which he ate thereof, he should surely die;” and thereby he, with his whole posterity, in whose name he acted, became liable to the wrath of God, and sunk into a spiritual death.

But behold the goodness, as well as the severity of God! For no sooner had man been convicted as a sinner, but lo! A Savior is revealed to him, under the character of the seed of the woman. The merits of whose sacrifice were then immediately to take place, and who should, in the fullness of time, by suffering death, satisfy for the guilt we had contracted; by obeying the whole moral law, work out for us an everlasting righteousness; and by becoming a principle of new life in us, destroy

the power of the devil, and thereby restore us to a better state than that in which we were at first created.

This is the plain scriptural account of that mystery of godliness, God manifested in the flesh; and to this our own hearts, unless blinded by the god of this world, cannot but yield an immediate assent.

For, let us but search our own hearts, and ask ourselves, if we could create our own children, whether or not we would not create them with a less mixture of good and evil, than we find in ourselves? Supposing God then only to have our goodness, he could not, at first, make us so sinful, so polluted as we are. But supposing him to be as he is, infinitely good, or goodness itself, then it is absolutely impossible that he should create any thing but what is like himself, perfect, entire, lacking nothing. Man then could not come out of the hands of his Maker, so miserably blind and naked, with such a mixture of the beast and devil, as he finds now in himself, but must have fallen from what he was; and as it does not suit with the goodness and justness of God, to punish the whole race of mankind with these disorders merely for nothing; and since men bring these disorders into the world with them; it follows, that as they could not sin themselves, being yet unborn, some other man's sin must have been imputed to them; from whence, as from a fountain, all these evils flow.

I know this doctrine of our original sin, or fall in Adam, is esteemed foolishness by the wise disputer of this world, who will reply, How does it suit the goodness of God, to impute one man's sin to an innocent posterity? But has it not been proved to a demonstration, that it is so? And therefore, supposing we cannot reconcile it to our shallow comprehensions, that is no argument at all. For if it appears that God has done a thing, we may be sure it is right, whether we can see the reasons for it or not.

But this is entirely cleared up by what was said before, that no sooner was the sin imputed, but a Christ was revealed; and this Christ, this God incarnate, who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, that he might be freed from the guilt of our original sin; who was born of the Virgin Mary, that he might be the seed of the woman only; who suffered under Pontius Pilate, a Gentile governor, to fulfill these prophecies, which signified what death he should die. This same Jesus, who was crucified in weakness, but raised in power, is that divine person, that Emmanuel, that God with us, whom we preach, in whom ye believe, and whom alone the Apostle, in the text, was determined to know.

By which word know, we are not to understand a bare historical knowledge; for to know that Christ was crucified by his enemies at Jerusalem, in this manner only, will do us no more service, than to know that Caesar was butchered by his friends at Rome; but the word “know,” means to know, so as to approve of him; as when Christ says, “Verily, I know you not;” I know you not, so as to approve of you. It signifies to know him, so as to embrace him in all his offices; to take him to be our prophet, priest, and king; so as to give up ourselves wholly to be instructed, saved, and governed by him. It implies an experimental knowledge of his crucifixion, so as to feel the power of it, and to be crucified unto the world, as the Apostle explains himself in the epistle to the Philippians, where he says, “I count all things but dung and dross, that I may know him, and the power of his resurrection.”

This knowledge the Apostle was so swallowed up in, that he was determined not to know any thing else; he was resolved to make that his only study, the governing principle of his life, the point and end in which all his thoughts, words, and actions, should center.

Secondly, I pass on to give some reasons why every Christian should, with the Apostle, determine “not to know any thing, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified.”

First, without this, our persons will not be accepted in the sight of God. “This (and consequently this only) is life eternal, to know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou has sent.” As also St. Peter says, “There is now no other name given under heaven, whereby we can be saved, but that of Jesus Christ.”

Some, indeed, may please themselves in knowing the world, others boast themselves in the knowledge of a multitude of languages; but could we speak with the tongue of men and angels, or did we know the number of the stars, and could call them all by their names, yet, without this experimental knowledge of Jesus Christ, and him crucified, it would profit us nothing.

The former, indeed, may procure us a little honor, which cometh of man; but the latter only can render us acceptable in the sight of God: for, if we are ignorant of Christ, God will be to us a consuming fire.

Christ is the way, the truth, and the life; “No one cometh to the Father, but through him;” “He is the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world;” and none ever were, or ever will be received up into glory, but by an experimental application of his merits to their hearts.

We might as well think to rebuild the tower of Babel, or reach heaven with our hands, as to imagine we could enter therein by any other door, than that of the knowledge of Jesus Christ. Other knowledge may make you wise in your own eyes, and puff you up; but this alone edifieth, and maketh wise unto salvation.

As the meanest Christian, if he knows but this, though he know nothing else, will be accepted; so the greatest master in Israel, the most letter-learned teacher, without this, will be rejected. His philosophy is mere nonsense, his wisdom mere foolishness in the sight of God.

The author of the word now before us, was a remarkable instance of this; never, perhaps, was a greater scholar, in all what the world calls fine learning, than he:

for he was bred up at the feet of Gamaliel, and profited in the knowledge of books, as well as in the Jewish religion, above many of his equals, as appears by the language, rhetoric, and spirit of his writings; and yet, when he came to know what it was to be a Christian, “He accounted all things but loss, so he might win Christ.” And, though he was now at Corinth, that seat of polite learning, yet he was absolutely determined not to know any thing, or to make nothing his study, but what taught him to know Jesus Christ, and him crucified.

Hence then, appears the folly of those who spend their whole lives in heaping up other knowledge; and, instead of searching the scriptures, which testify of Jesus Christ, and are alone able to make them wise unto salvation, disquiet themselves in a pursuit after the knowledge of such things, as when known, concern them no more, than to know that a bird dropped a feather upon one of the Pyrenean mountains.

Hence it is, that so many, who profess themselves wise, because they can dispute of the causes and effects, the moral fitness and unfitness of things, appear mere fools in the things of God; so that when you come to converse with them about the great work of redemption wrought out for us by Jesus Christ, and of his being a propitiation for our sins, a fulfiller of the covenant of works, and a principle of new life to our souls, they are quite ignorant of the whole matter; and prove, to a demonstration, that, with all their learning, they know nothing yet, as they ought to know.

But, alas! how must it surprise a man, when the Most High is about to take away his soul, to think that he has passed for a wise-man, and a learned disputer in this world, and yet is left destitute of that knowledge which alone can make him appear with boldness before the judgment-seat of Jesus Christ? How must it grieve him, in a future state, to see others, whom he despised as illiterate men, because they experimentally knew Christ, and him crucified, exalted to the right-hand of

God; and himself, with all his fine accomplishments, because he knew every thing, perhaps, but Christ, thrust down into hell?

Well might the Apostle, in a holy triumph, cry out, “Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this world?” For, God will then make foolish the wisdom of this world, and bring to nought the wisdom of those who were so knowing in their own eyes.

I have made this digression from the main point before us, not to condemn or decry human literature, but to show, that it ought to be used only in subordination to divine; and that a Christian, if the Holy Spirit guided the pen of the Apostle, when he wrote this epistle, ought to study no books, but such as lead him to a farther knowledge of Jesus Christ, and him crucified.

And there is the more reason for this, because of the great mischief the contrary practice has done to the church of God: for, what was it but this learning, or rather this ignorance, that kept so many of the Scribes and Pharisees from the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ? And what is it, but this human wisdom, this science, false so called, that blinds the understanding, and corrupts the hearts of so many modern unbelievers, and makes them unwilling to submit to the righteousness which is of God by faith in Christ Jesus? But,

Secondly, without this knowledge our performances, as well as persons will not be acceptable in the sight of God.

“Through faith,” says the Apostle, that is, through a lively faith in a Mediator to come, “Abel offered a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain.” And it is through a like faith, or an experimental knowledge of the same divine Mediator, that our sacrifices of prayer, praise, and thanksgivings, come up as an incense before the throne of grace.

Two persons may go up to the temple to pray; but he only will return home justified, who, in the language of our collects, sincerely offers up his prayers through Jesus Christ our Lord.

For it is this great atonement, this all-sufficient sacrifice, which alone can give us boldness to approach with our prayers the Holy of Holies: and he that presumes to go without this, acts Korah's crime over again; offers unto God strange fire, and, consequently, will be rejected by him.

Farther, as our devotions to God will not, so neither, without this knowledge of Jesus Christ, will our acts of charity to men be accepted by him. For did we give all our goods to feed the poor, and yet were destitute of this knowledge, it would profit us nothing.

This our blessed Lord himself intimates in the 25th of Matthew, where he tells those who had been rich in good works, "That inasmuch as they did it unto one of the least of his brethren, they did it unto him." From whence we may plainly infer, that it is seeing Christ in his members, and doing good to them out of an experimental knowledge of his love to us, that alone will render our alms-deeds rewardable at the last day.

Lastly, as neither our acts of piety nor charity, so neither will our civil nor moral actions be acceptable to God, without this experimental knowledge of Jesus Christ.

Our modern pretenders to reason, indeed, set up another principle to act from; they talk, I know not what, of doing moral and civil duties of life, from the moral fitness and unfitness of things. But such men are blind, however they may pretend to see; and going thus about to establish their own righteousness, are utterly ignorant of the righteousness which is of God by faith in Christ Jesus.

For though we grant that morality is a substantial part of Christianity, and that Christ came not to destroy, or take off the moral law, as a rule of action, but to explain, and so fulfill it; yet we affirm, that our moral and civil actions are now no farther acceptable in the sight of God the Father, than as they proceed from the principle of a new nature, and as experimental knowledge of, or vital faith in his dear Son.

The death of Jesus Christ has turned our whole lives into one continued sacrifice; and whether we eat or drink, whether we pray to God, or do any thing to man, it must all be done out of a love for, and knowledge of him who died and rose again, to render all, even our most ordinary deeds, acceptable in the sight of God.

If we live by this principle, if Christ be the Alpha and Omega of all our actions, then our least are acceptable sacrifices; but if this principle be wanting, our most pompous services avail nothing. We are but spiritual idolater; we sacrifice to our own net; we make an idol of ourselves, by making ourselves, and not Christ, the end of our actions: and, therefore, such actions are so far from being accepted by God, that, according to the language of one of the Articles of our Church, “We doubt not but they have the nature of sin, because they spring not from an experimental faith in, and knowledge of Jesus Christ.”

Were we not fallen creatures, we might then act, perhaps, from other principles; but since we are fallen from God in Adam, and are restored again only by the obedience and death of Jesus Christ, the face of things is entirely changed, and all we think, speak, or do, is only accepted in and through him.

Justly, therefore, may I, in the

Third and last place, exhort you to put the Apostle's resolution in practice, and beseech you, with him to determine, “Not to know any thing, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified.”

I say, determine; for unless you sit down first, and count the cost, and from a well-grounded conviction of the excellency of this above all other knowledge whatsoever, resolve to make this your chief study, your only end, your one thing needful, every frivolous temptation will draw you aside from the pursuit after it.

Your friends and carnal acquaintances, and, above all, your grand adversary the devil, will be persuading you to determine not to know any thing, but how to lay up goods for many years, and to get a knowledge and taste of the pomps and vanities of this wicked world; but do you determine not to follow, or be led by them; and the more they persuade you to know other things, the more do you “determine not to know any thing, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified.” For, this knowledge never faileth; but whether they be riches, they shall fail; whether they be pomps, they shall cease; whether they be vanities, they shall fade away: but the knowledge of Jesus Christ, and him crucified, abideth for ever.

Whatever, therefore, you are ignorant of, be not ignorant of this. If you know Christ, and him crucified, you know enough to make you happy, supposing you know nothing else; and without this, all your other knowledge cannot keep you from being everlastingly miserable.

Value not then, the contempt of friends, which you must necessarily meet with upon your open profession to act according to this determination. For your Master, whose you are, was despised before you; and all that will know nothing else but Jesus Christ, and him crucified, must, in some degree or other, suffer persecution.

It is necessary that offenses should come, to try what is in our hearts, and whether we will be faithful soldiers of Jesus Christ or not.

Dare ye then to confess our blessed Master before men, and to shine as lights in the world, amidst a crooked and perverse generation? Let us not be content with following him afar off; for then we shall, as Peter did, soon deny him; but let us be altogether Christians, and let our speech, and all our actions declare to the world

whose disciples we are, and that we have indeed “determined not to know any thing, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified.” Then, well will it be with us, and happy, unspeakably happy shall we be, even here; and what is infinitely better, when others that despised us, shall be calling for the mountains to fall on them, and the hills to cover them, we shall be exalted to sit down on the right-hand of God, and shine as the sun in the firmament, in the kingdom of our most adorable Redeemer, for ever and ever.

Which God of his infinite mercy grant, &c.