

## **There's Power in the Cross** **1 Corinthians 2:1-5**

**Broadcast Dates: April 12 & 15, 2024**  
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Our teaching series in 1 Corinthians continues this week with the Apostle Paul seeking to convince us that things are not as they appear. This began in 1:18 and the reality that the cross of Jesus is foolishness by the world's way of looking at things. The world values strength, the cross presents weakness. The world values human wisdom and success. The cross appears to be failure and defeat. The world values celebrity, nobility, and power. It admires the self-made and the VIPs. Jesus' death was gruesome and beneath the sensibilities of the VIPs of the world. It was true in Corinth. It's true today. It will be true until the day that Jesus returns and the definition of VIP changes to *Very In-trouble People*.

The reason God has done it this way is the same reason He does everything that He does, for His glory. If man can take credit for it, you can be sure God isn't in it. In Isaiah 48:11 He says, *My glory I will not give to another*. God has purposed the story of human history in such a way that mankind gets no glory.

We talked about this last week in terms of peacocks and roosters. Peacocks are birds who draw attention to themselves by showing what they can do. Roosters crow to put attention on something else; the sun is rising. The day is beginning. People are either peacocks or roosters. They are either living to draw attention to themselves or pointing praise to the Son. I heard from people this week about the peacock/rooster illustration and apparently it's one that worked. We get it. The gospel requires what peacocks will never naturally give – humility and faith. There are no peacocks in heaven. No one can stand before God and boast. Genuine saving faith produces Christians who are quite happy not to draw attention to themselves but to the Son. So man's pride and wisdom stumble on the very thing by which God offers salvation; the death of the Son of God. By the world's way of thinking, it's quaint religion, superstition, or failure, but in reality it is God's wisdom and salvation.

Paul moves from the apparent foolishness of the cross to another thing that makes the world shake its head and scoff, the way or manner God purposed to spread this saving message. The preaching of the gospel. If you were God, how would you do it? If God designed salvation so that no man can boast, wouldn't it follow that God would purpose the spreading of that message to be done in a way that men can't boast about it either? What should we think about preachers who preach Christ for their own glory? Wouldn't this be a total contradiction? Could there ever be a peacock in the pulpit?

*And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God. (1 Corinthians 2:1-5)*

### **How to Identify a Corinthian/Peacock in the Pulpit**

Remember who he is writing to. The Corinthians loved philosophy and oratory. There were no TVs or internet. If you wanted to hear the latest topic or news, you would go and listen to some well-known speaker. The Greek world had its own celebrity orators who would

speak in large assemblies. They were famous for their ability to hold the audience in rapt attention with eloquent speech and emotional appeal. This is the way it was. The closest thing we have to this would perhaps be popular TV and radio talk shows. They are hosted by people who talk really well and can talk about anything and everything and millions of people listen to them.

You don't host a popular talk show without being able to talk well and to say words that are pleasing and humorous; the kind of words that people like to listen to. Do that and you'll be applauded and admired and richly rewarded. Your words will make you a big deal.

The words of the gospel do the opposite. All men are sinners and have fallen short of the glory of God. There is none righteous, no not one. The gospel doesn't make us a big deal, it humbles us. So why would you speak the gospel in a way that lifts you up? In a way that makes people think you are really special? How would you know if someone was doing that? Paul was deeply concerned that the Corinthians might mistake the man for the message.

So how would you know if there was a peacock in the pulpit? Or, how you know if there were Corinthians in the pew enamored with the man but not the message? Paul reminds them of how he came to them....

*And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. (1 Corinthians 2:1)*

He didn't come like a Corinthian. He didn't play their game or talk their lingo. He could have. Remember, Paul was flat brilliant and trained in the finest schools of the day. He could have come to impress them with his wisdom but he didn't. What he didn't do are two characteristics of pastors and leaders who are trying to glorify themselves.

### **Oratory without humility**

Paul didn't come with lofty speech or eloquent words intended to impress those in his audience. This would seem to be a characteristic of Paul that he was criticized for.

*For they say, "His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account." (2 Corinthians 10:10)*

The Corinthians wanted impressive human rhetoric. There is nothing inherently wrong with being a good communicator. The problem is when the gospel or the Bible is preached with great oratory and no humility. When I preach for my glory or so that you might be impressed with me, that's oratory without humility. Preaching yourself. Magnifying yourself.

What does humility look like? *The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. (1 Timothy 1:15)*

When the pastor thinks he's the worst sinner in the room, there's a guy to listen to. I hate to burst your bubble, but pastors and Apostles are sinners just as much as the next guy. Churches need to realize that and pastors need to realize that too. So it is a kind of blasphemy for a preacher to preach the gospel without humility and for people to listen without perspective. God's plan is for sinners to preach the gospel to sinners so that nobody thinks they are anything more than a sinner saved by grace. This is a great irony – a sinner preaching to sinners. If the preacher exalts himself in his preaching, then God isn't glorified by it. If the people listening exalt the sinful preacher, then God isn't in it either.

The way it is supposed to work is that the minister preaches as best he can, while being aware that he is preaching something way more glorious than he deserves. The church hears a glorious message and revels in the message, not the messenger.

Too often it is the reverse of that. The preacher preaches in a way that glorifies himself and the church glories in the preaching or the oratory and misses the whole point entirely. The sermon becomes a show. The pastor is the entertainer. The congregation is the audience. A nice experience is the goal.

It is so common around us that I wonder if we even notice. For example, along the interstates of Northwest Indiana and Chicago are billboards for a Chicago Christian TV station. They advertise themselves as the Inspiration Station. Have you seen these? On the billboard are a couple pictures of celebrity pastors who preach on their station. The Inspiration Station. And where does the inspiration apparently come from? Men like these.

I was recently in Dallas visiting my sister. I really enjoy walking around the colossal church structures they have down there just to gawk. I was in one particularly famous church and noticed a large painted portrait of the Senior Pastor. His image and name were all over the building.

I have visited another church with a well-known TV pastor. As I drove in I saw different wings of the building with big letters naming the various wings. All of the names were the same last name as the famous pastor of the church, presumably his family members. I walked into the reception area of the church and the walls were covered with photos of this pastor and famous people he had met. The guy's got great oratory, but what might be missing from his ministry? Who is he promoting? Peacock or Rooster?

Any church or ministry that makes more of a man than the message is not a biblical church. There are too many Corinthians in the pulpit and too many Corinthians in the pews. This whole celebrity Christian thing is way off.

I should know. I have been guilty of both. I remember when I candidated here for this position. I was 29 years old. I wanted to impress you. I wanted to show you what I could do. How I could preach. I have done that way too many times since. I am sorry and would ask you to forgive me. Oratory without humility is blasphemy and God won't bless it. Paul knew that. He didn't come to Corinth to impress them.

### **Content without the cross**

*For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.*  
(1 Corinthians 2:2)

Paul didn't come with the expected philosophical reasoning. He didn't try to win them with his own ability. He came among them and had one thing to say, Jesus Christ and Him crucified. Paul was a rooster, not a peacock. He was deflecting attention to something else. He preached Christ, not Paul. Why he did this, he'll say in a moment.

Let's just pause and consider what it would mean for a church to know nothing but Jesus Christ and Him crucified. This doesn't mean that every message was the same and nothing was spoken of except the cross. What it does mean is that the cross is the reference point for everything else. Like C.S. Lewis said, "I believe in Christianity like I believe in the Sun. Not only do I see it, but by it I see everything else." The cross is the wisdom of God. The

cross defines who we are, who God is, who Christ is, how we are saved, our purpose in this world, our futures. It redemptively defines every dimension of life so that marriage and family and health and money and work and recreation and suffering and pleasure all find their meaning by the reference point of the cross. The cross is the wisdom of God so all wisdom for all that matters in life relates to Christ and Him crucified. We could rightly say that the Christian life is a cross-centered life because through the grid of the cross, everything else finds its proper place.

1 Corinthians is a great model of this. In this letter Paul is going to speak to many different subjects from love to marriage to spiritual gifts to interpersonal relationships, but all of them find their reference point in the cross. He is urging cross-centered living, and here, cross-centered churches, cross-centered pastors, and cross-centered preaching.

We should really grieve how far preaching has fallen from this. Pastors in your average church will philosophize about this, that and the other. They'll comment on contemporary issues. They'll give helpful advice on how to live well. But in the end, there is no suffering Savior for sin and if there is no cross, there is no redemptive transformation. They are just words assuring people on the road to hell. What do people really need? They need Christ and Him crucified!

How are we doing? Who are we making much of? Who are really all about? Where do we find our identity? What are we proud of? What makes us happy? Is it Christ and Him crucified?

## **Ministry/Life to the Glory of Christ**

### **"Feeling" our weakness and inability**

*I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom... (1 Corinthians 2:3-4)*

If there was anyone who didn't have to be this way, it would be Paul, an Apostle commissioned by Christ Himself. He was designated as the Apostle to the Gentiles. If there was ever a man who deserved to have his face on the Inspiration Station billboard in Corinth, it was Paul. Yet how did he come to them? Weakness. Fear. Trembling. These are not qualities most churches admire in a pastoral candidate, but Paul was this way because of the immense reverence he had for the privilege to proclaim Christ and Him crucified. Paul didn't want any of Paul to get in the way of them clearly seeing the glory of Christ. His confidence was in the gospel itself; it is the power of God for salvation (Romans 1:16).

I have found a great way to measure how much I think I need God - by how much I feel the need to pray. Prayer is a measure of how we feel our weakness. When we charge into our day without getting vertical in prayer, we're saying something about who we think can do it. When we show up for worship with little prayer or consideration, then we are depending on the worship team or the pastor or whatever to do something for us. We do NOTHING. He does EVERYTHING. When we feel weakness and fear and trembling, then we are perfectly positioned for God to show up because when we are weak, He is strong (2 Corinthians 12:10).

### **Dependence on the Spirit of God and His power**

*...and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power... (1 Corinthians 2:4)*

What “demonstrations” Paul is referring to isn’t clear. It may have been the miraculous works like tongues and healing he discusses in later chapters. He doesn’t enumerate them because they are not the point. The issue is, where does empowerment for ministry and salvation come from? Eloquent words and oratory? Rational arguments? The celebrity of the pastor? It doesn’t come from man at all. Empowerment for ministry comes from God, specifically from the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is his subject through the rest of this chapter so there is more to come. Do you get the point? As Spurgeon said, “It’s hard to at the same time show how clever you are and how great God is.”

The power that produces salvation comes from the Spirit, not from man. Man doesn’t make it happen. Only God does that. Since this is the case, where should our confidence be? Us? Our programs? Our organizational skills? Our leadership? Where does spiritual empowerment for life and ministry come from? What does Bethel Church need? Humility. Brokenness. Weakness. So that the Spirit can step in and do a great work in our midst for our good and His glory.

### **Faith in God not men**

*...that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.*  
(1 Corinthians 2:5)

Why is it a bad idea for your faith to rest in men? Men die. Men disappoint. Men fail. *The best of men are men at best.* When the leader fails or dies or moves away, does the church collapse? Does the attendance fall? If it does, why? People have put their faith in men just like the Corinthians did.

Paul came to Corinth in weakness so that when he went on to other places God had called him as a missionary to go, the Corinthian church would do just fine. Their faith wasn’t resting in Paul but in Christ who “never leaves us nor forsakes us.”

About 125 years ago there were two famous preachers in London – Charles Spurgeon and another guy. A tourist from America wanted to hear both of these famous pastors in London. When he got home a friend asked him, “What did you think of the two pastors?” He said, “When I left the one church I thought to myself, *what a great preacher they have.*” When I left Spurgeon’s church I thought, *what a great Savior I have.*”

What are you going to think today? Who did you come to hear today? Whose wisdom are you seeking? Certainly not mine I hope, I have none to offer. My words have nothing to offer you. I can crow like a rooster till I am hoarse and it won’t do one thing for you. What is needed is the Spirit of God to show up, through His Word and His gospel of Christ and Him crucified. When He comes and empowers the message, something happens. You can’t quite put your finger on it, but something happens inside. Sinners feel the glory of Christ and it humbles us in a way that moves us to change, to love Him and to serve Him faithfully this week. It blesses us. Has He? What is going on in your heart right now? Seriously, what’s happening? And who are you going to give the credit to?

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