

## "The Kind of Preaching That Matters" 1 Corinthians 1:18-25

### Introduction

- I have the awkward task this morning of preaching...about preaching. I kind of feel like a car salesman boasting about the cars he sells. He may be right, he may in fact sell the greatest cars in the world, but you're just not sure how to take him because he's saying things he's supposed to say. So right up front my advice to you is this. Listen to my appeals. Hear my passion. Pay attention to the words I say. But pay closer attention to the words of Scripture. I want you to hear what God says about preaching and the kind of preaching that matters.
- Let me begin by saying that I have an unshakable conviction that preaching matters. People's lives change because of the preached Word. That's why a majority of my week is spent on tasks related to preaching. It is, I believe, the most strategic thing I can do with my life. It's not the only way, but the primary way a pastor shepherds the flock. Congregations mature by the strong meat of winsome clear preaching of the Word or they starve and flounder for lack of it. Preaching, I believe, is indispensable and central to the plan of God in this world.
- And it's the hardest thing I've ever done. Miriam can confirm this; I regularly crumble under the weight of the responsibility. There are many weeks where I just break down and cry because the task is too hard, it's too humbling. It's beyond my skill, my intellect, my maturity. The pressure to be innovative, creative, and fresh week in and week out requires godliness, discipline and a prayer life that I don't yet have. In the words of [Richard Baxter](#), this is how I feel about preaching. "It is no small matter to stand up in the face of a congregation, and deliver a message of salvation or damnation, as from the living God, in the name of our Redeemer. It is no easy matter to speak so plain, that the ignorant may understand us; and so seriously that the deadest hearts may feel us; and so convincingly, that contradicting cavaliers may be silenced."<sup>1</sup>
- And you may not know this but preaching exhausts me. I kid you not, it is easier, less physically demanding to shovel dirt all day than to prepare and preach a sermon from the heart. I pour so much of myself into a message that after church I'm physically and emotionally spent. Most days we come home from church and I crash. Some weeks I don't fully recover until Tuesday. I chuckled when, fresh out of college, my pastor said that preaching one sermon was equivalent to an eight hour work day. He was right. For those who take it seriously preaching is hard work. And even though it's hard, preaching is one of the great joys of my life. There is nothing I'd rather do. If there is one word that describes how I feel on the inside when I have a chance to give away a message I know God has placed on my heart—it's the word charged. That's how I feel.
- So, do I believe preaching matters? Yes, with all my heart. And I realize that in saying this, I know I'm in the minority. At one point, preaching was central to life in our culture. But that's no longer the case. From the world's perspective there are more moving and evocative ways of communication. Movie theaters are the pulpits of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Preaching no

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, p. 117.

longer has any authority. It's even become a dirty word. "Boy, he sure sounds preachy." Or, "don't preach to me!"

- And even in the church Christians no longer come to hear a sermon. They come for the worship (which by the way isn't a bad thing). The two aren't in competition with one another. They need each other. You can't have real worship without preaching and you can't have real preaching without worship. But generally speaking, the observation made by an acquaintance of mine holds true. He said, "Protestants, for the most part, have lost their confidence in one of the greatest assets of their tradition: the mysterious, creative power of the Word of God proclaimed from the pulpit."<sup>2</sup>

### Transition

When we started this series from 1 Corinthians we talked about turtles in the road that churches hit; obstacles, roadblocks that stifle and stunt the maturity of a church. The Corinthian church is a case study of a failed church and one of the turtles they hit had to do with preaching. It matters a great deal as to the kind of preaching a church will tolerate. There is only one kind of preaching that really matters from God's perspective.

### Proposition

- **The only kind of preaching that matters is preaching the cross of Jesus Christ**
- Every other kind of preaching is foolishness. Listen again to what Paul says about the kind of preaching that really matters. There is only one kind. Starting in verse 18. *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 man? Where is the scholar? 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 miraculous 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 man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.*
- What kind of preaching matters? The preaching of the cross. Preaching without the cross is uselessly foolish. In fact, preaching that fails to touch on the cross isn't preaching. It's talking. It's rhetoric. It's words. It's gushing. Call a spade a spade. Preaching without the cross may be eloquent, it may be convincing but it is not preaching. There is something distinct about preaching that differentiates it from the words of the Hindu guru or the Jewish rabbi or the Muslim mullah. They speak but they don't preach. To preach is to do something that is distinctly Christian.<sup>3</sup> Jay Adams says it like this. "If you preach a sermon that would be acceptable to the members of a Jewish synagogue or a Unitarian congregation, there is something radically wrong with it. Preaching, when truly Christian, is *distinctive*. And what makes it distinctive is the all-pervading presence of a saving and sanctifying Christ. Jesus

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<sup>2</sup> Bruce Bickel, *Light and Heat*, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in Stott's, *Between Two Worlds*, p. 16.

Christ must be at the heart of every sermon [preached]."<sup>4</sup> The line of demarcation between preaching and other forms of speech is the cross of Christ.

### Transition

Let me describe for you the kind of preaching that the Corinthian church tolerated and elevated and exalted because I think it will help us get a handle on how to recognize preaching that really matters.

### Background

- In the Greek culture of Paul's day there were public speakers, trained orators called Sophists. Their name doesn't really matter. Their behavior and their methodology as it relates to public speaking does. The Sophists were characterized by a kind of polished speaking, trained oration that attracted public admiration and students to their schools. They prided themselves on the turn of a phrase, their wordsmithing, and their ability to espouse different philosophies. They thought themselves the purveyors of wisdom.<sup>5</sup> And the Corinthian church just ate this stuff up.
- It's hard to come up with a modern day parallel. I think Paul has in mind here the kind of preaching that tries to captivate you with eloquence of words and catchy PowerPoint outlines and rhetorical flourishes and the manipulation of tears. That kind of preaching actually detracts from the eloquence of the cross.<sup>6</sup> In other words, it's impossible to "at the same time show that Christ is wonderful--and you are clever."<sup>7</sup> You can't do it. It goes against the very nature of the wisdom of the cross. Preaching that matters is not about being clever and showy it's about the foolish wisdom of the cross.

### Transition

This morning I want to share with you from 1 Corinthians 1:18-25...

### Organizational Sentence

- **Two benefits of preaching the cross of Christ**

### Transition

The upsides to preaching the cross are huge. The downsides are disastrous. [The first benefit. Preaching the cross is powerful.](#)

### Main Points

- There simply is nothing more powerful in this world than the simple message of Christ crucified to free people from the darkness of sin. And yet, to those with highly cultivated modern sensibilities this message of a damned malefactor, as one of my mentors put it, is ludicrous.<sup>8</sup> Slaughterhouse religion. The gospel of gore.<sup>9</sup> How can there be anything worthwhile and redeeming and good in the foolish and brutal death of a tortured man dying

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<sup>4</sup> Jay Adams, *Preaching with Purpose*, p. 147.

<sup>5</sup> Carson, Moo and Morris.

<sup>6</sup> Carson Class notes.

<sup>7</sup> Principal Denny of Scotland. *Leadership*, Vol. 7, no. 1.

<sup>8</sup> Carson class notes.

<sup>9</sup> Larsen, *Telling the Old Old Story*, p. 184.

on a cross? Paul says it's scandalous and foolishness. That word foolish, it sounds like this—Mwriwa. We get the English word moron from it. The message of the cross and the content of Christian preaching is moronic.

- Just think about this for a second. When someone from the pulpit faithfully proclaims, week in and week out, the simple message of Christ crucified it has the appearance of being a great time waster. And this is key. Because of the foolish nature of the content of Christian preaching there will always be a temptation to want to add something to it, to change it, to somehow cultivate it, to make it more couth, more sophisticated. We feel like we've got to make preaching better. And so what do we do, in order to be culturally relevant, we diminish the cross because who wants to hear about that. But here's the rub. The moment you rob the cross from preaching you rob preaching of its power. To those who are perishing in their sins God has ordained that the announcement of the message of the cross through preaching is the means by which people are delivered from their sins. People who are lost in sin are spiritually dead and unable to escape on their own. They need a complete transformation to bring them out of their spiritually dead and ruined state.<sup>10</sup> And Christian preaching of the cross of Christ is the only thing that brings about that kind of changed life.
- I think the real reason for the demise of the sermon is not because somehow the delivery system is flawed. There is nothing wrong with preaching. The reason we have lost confidence in the sermon is because we've lost sight of the cross. There is too little true Christian preaching of the cross of Christ nowadays. We tolerate too much fluff from the pulpit, and that includes my sermons. Too many sermons don't do the hard work of connecting the words of Scripture and the events of life to the cross. Too many sermons are reduced to platitudes and clichés and trite moralisms and self-help and five points to this seven steps to that. That's the kind of preaching that puts people to sleep because there's nothing distinct about it. You can get that kind of stuff anywhere in countless magazines and on countless TV shows. But where do you go to get the cross? If in your mind and heart the sermon has died, if sermons are powerless, if you leave church and say the sermon did nothing, if preaching routinely falls flat or has become irrelevant it's not because preaching is out of date it's because your preacher has neglected the cross. The moment you rob preaching of the cross you see preaching for what it is, a waste of time.
- We've got to remember what God says his word is like. The word of God is not merely powerful it is without peer. It creates, it controls, it persuades, it fulfills, it overrides human motives. It's light to those in darkness. It's water to those who thirst. It's life to those who are dying. God's word is like a hammer that breaks rock. And his purpose is that by the word of the cross he saves those who believe. There is no human wisdom in this whatsoever. It is foolishness. But if you want to see the power of God then preach Christ crucified. *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.* True Christian preaching is the power and wisdom of God. We need more Christian preaching not less of it.

### Transition

Do you want to know what the second benefit of preaching the cross of Christ is? It's this. [God delights in the preaching of the cross.](#) Look at verse 21.

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<sup>10</sup> Reinecker, p. 387.

- *God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe.* God was pleased. Anytime in scripture you read that God is pleased with something you should perk up and take notice. That word *pleased* refers to God's free and sovereign choice to do something as he pleases.<sup>11</sup> God could have chosen any number of means to get across his message of salvation through Christ. Think about it. He could have written messages in the sky. He could have used burning bushes or something much more efficient like email or instant messaging. But it pleased God to elevate the foolishness of preaching as the means by which he saves those who believe. Why do we give such an inordinate amount of time in our services here to the ministry of the word? It's certainly not because I like to hear myself speak. Why? Because it pleases God. God delights in the preaching of the cross. And he delights in churches that preach the cross. And he delights in individuals who submit themselves to the authority of the preaching of the cross.

### **Conclusion**

- As we think about moving forward as a church one of questions that will need to be asked and answered regularly, at each interval of growth and development, is the role and significance that preaching will play. As this church grows and ministries expand and as new people are involved in leadership the question will be asked, do we really need this thing called preaching? Couldn't we use that huge chunk of time in the service more effectively? From my humble perspective, as I read scripture, there is nothing more strategic and effective than preaching the cross of Christ. If you want to do what's wise in God's eyes, if you want to see the power of God, if you want his delight then preserve and uphold and maintain the foolish practice of preaching—in season and out of season—when its fashionable and when its not. There simply are no downsides to preaching Christ. Knowing what Paul knew I understand why he could say *woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!*<sup>12</sup> May it be said of us as a church, woe to us if we do not preach the gospel. Let's pray.

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<sup>11</sup> Morris, p. 44.

<sup>12</sup> 1 Corinthians 9:6