

"The Kind of Preacher that Matters" 1 Corinthians 2:1-5

Introduction

- When I was a kid I had this magnifying glass. Not a cheap plastic thing but the kind you'd see in one of those old detective movies. It had a heavy metal handle, it was about this big, and it had a real glass lens. And I remember sitting on the patio behind our house in the middle of summer working to adjust that lens to perfectly catch the sun's rays. Once I was able to ignite a bundled newspaper. I kinda got in trouble for that. Mostly I would just fry ants. I was able to fine tune that lens so perfectly the moment that magnified light hit the ant it would pop and smolder—instantly fried by my homemade laser.
- You need to know right up front that, for me, the passage we are going to look at this morning makes me feel like an ant under the magnifying glass. Two weeks ago I had the challenge of preaching about preaching. This morning is even harder. I have the awkward task of preaching...about preachers. When I read Paul's words here, in light of my preaching, in light of my delivery, in light of my preparation process—this passage makes me squirm like an ant. Do you know what its like as a preacher to preach about preachers? It's like the career .240 hitter teaching others how to hit .400. It's like the TV dinner, Mac and Cheese cook giving lessons on how to create culinary masterpieces like Emeril Lagasse. Every fiber in my being wants to be the kind of preacher I'm going to tell you about but have not yet become. And I don't say this with some kind of self-deprecating false-humility. Nor do I think I'm being too critical or too hard on myself. I have looked in the mirror and preached this passage to myself and just found myself lacking.
- The key question I think this passage tries to answer is this, "what kind of preacher matters?" Why is this question even important? Isn't this a subject for seminary preaching classes? Forget all the theological and spiritual reasons for it. Just think about it practically for a second and I think you'll see the value in trying to understand the importance of kind of preacher behind the message. At 30 minutes per sermon per week that's twenty-six hours a year listening to sermons. If you come to Christ early in life, and statistics say that probably is the case; that means for roughly 62 to 66 years of your life you're of sermon listening age. Over the course of your life you may hear upwards of 100,000 minutes of sermons. That's over 40 weeks of your life spent just listening to sermons. Preachers have the incredible potential to waste your time. It matters greatly as to the kind of preacher you're listening to.

Transition

You know, I think the main thing I came away with from my time in God's word about the kind of preacher that matters is this...

Proposition

- **The only kind of preacher that matters is the one who knows he doesn't matter**

Transition

The only kind of preacher that matters is the one who knows he doesn't matter. I think from 1 Corinthians 2:1-5 there are...

Organizational Sentence

- **Two characteristics of the preacher who knows he doesn't matter**

Transition

And I want to spend your time this morning trying to develop those characteristics for you so that, even though you might never preach, you'll at least know how to pray for those who stand before you and declare "thus saith the Lord."

Background

- It's interesting. When you think about the Corinthian church as a failed church; it didn't fail because the church gave up on preaching. They didn't have a low view of preaching. Just the opposite. They deeply valued preaching. They just valued the wrong kind of preaching. And even worse; they valued the wrong kind of preacher. As we go through these verses ask yourself, "what kind of preaching do I value? What kind of preacher do I value?" Listen again to what God says about the kind of preacher that matters. 1 Corinthians 2:1-5. Follow along.
- *When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.*

Transition

The first I want you to notice is this. From verses 1-2. [Preachers that matter know their words don't matter as much as Christ crucified.](#)

Main Points

- From the perspective of the audience that might not seem like that big a deal or even that great of a revelation. You need to know this about preachers. For those us who have the responsibility of speaking week in and week out, it's so easy to fall into the trap and think that our words matter, that sermon effectiveness depends upon the way we say something or our delivery or our pulpit presence. Paul says the opposite. When Paul came to the Corinthians what characterized him as a preacher? He says he wasn't eloquent, verse 1. He didn't dazzle the crowds with his superior intellect or *superior wisdom* as the text says. His preaching wasn't characterized by his wordy cleverness.¹
- But you know what? It is so easy for it to become that. There are many times when a turn of the phrase or a catchy way of saying something will come to mind as I'm preparing and I'll think, "oh, that'll wow 'em this week." And I've even found myself slipping something into the sermon, fishing for a compliment, in a backhanded, round-a-bout kind of way. You know what? A wise man once told me the desire to preach a fine sermon is a sin. God has really had to work with me about that.
- Paul is not saying in these verses that preachers can never speak eloquently or that they can never speak with wisely crafted words. Some of the best preaching, the most powerful Spirit-filled, convicting messages I've ever heard have been eloquently delivered with a great mastery of language. What Paul is against here are the crafty phrases, the demonstrations of

¹ Reinecker, p. 390.

superior wisdom, the look how much I know attitudes. Those things must not be the prominent things within a sermon. If a persons' first thought after a sermon is "kudos for the speaker." That's a huge problem. The goal of good Christian preaching is not kudos for the preacher but kudos for the Savior. What Paul is decidedly against in this passage is a style of communication and the kind of preacher who is out to win applause for himself. If you ever hear me or sense in your Spirit that I'm preaching in a way that leads people to say "What a marvelous preacher!" instead of "what a marvelous Savior" you challenge me on it and you remind me of this passage.² As one commentator put it, "attempts to credit the gospel in a worldly show of wisdom actually discredit the gospel."³ It's not about me. **The only kind of preacher that matters is the one who knows he doesn't matter.** Pompous speech that elevates the virtuosity of the preacher is self-defeating. That is not true Christian preaching. It's a waste of your time and mine.

- What matters is Christ crucified. Look at [verse 2](#). *For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.* Preachers who work to make the crucified Christ the linchpin of their preaching are worth their weight in gold. **Preachers that matter know their words don't matter as much as Christ crucified.** Why? Because your life won't change because of my wisdom or my words. But your life will change when Christ crucified is preached. When a preacher is able to dip into your life and apply Christ crucified to your situation your life will change. Jesus the Savior changes lives.
- Billy Graham now at the end of his ministry was asked what he wished he knew at the beginning what he knows now. He said he wished he preached more of the cross of Christ and the blood of Christ. *For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.* What you and I need this Palm Sunday, more than anything else, is a crucified and resurrected Christ the King who takes the slop of our lives, the sin that weighs us down, and nails it to his cross. That's what changes lives.
- Case in point. [Gordon McDonald](#) tells the story of several management types who were at the Jordan River as the crowds came to John to be baptized. They decided they needed to get things organized. So they set up tables and began to give tags to those coming for repentance. On each tag is written the person's name and chief sin. A guy named Bob walks up to the table. The organizers write his name on the tag and then ask, "What's your most awful sin, Bob?" "I stole some money from the boss." The person at the table takes a marker and writes EMBEZZLER and slap it on Bob's chest. The next person comes forward. "Name?" "Mary." "Mary, what's your most awful sin?" "I gossiped about some people. It wasn't very much, but I didn't like those people." The organizers write MARY—SLANDERER, and slap it on her. A man walks up to the table. "Name?" "George." "George, what's your most awful sin?" "I've thought about how nice it would be to have my neighbor's Corvette." GEORGE—COVETER. Another man approaches the table. "What's your name?" he is asked. "Gordon." "What's your sin?" "I've had an affair." The organizer writes GORDON—ADULTERER and slaps the sticker on his chest. Lastly a guy named Eric shows up. "What's your name?" "Eric." "And your sin?" "I want to preach fine sermons." His tag reads ERIC—POMPOUS FOOL. Then Christ comes to be baptized. He walks down

² Carson, D. A. *The Cross & Christian Ministry: An Exposition of Passages from 1 Corinthians*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, and Leicester, England: InterVarsity Press, 1993, p. 35.

³ Garland, p. 81.

the line of those waiting to be baptized and asks them for their sin tags. One by one, he takes those tags off the people and sticks them on his own body. He goes to John, and as he is baptized, the river washes away the ink from each name tag he bears."⁴

- Christ crucified is the wisdom and power of God. He is what changes lives. And it's the testimony about his Son that matters, verse 1. As [Leon Morris](#) says, "Preaching the gospel is not delivering edifying discourses, beautifully put together. It is bearing witness to what God has done in Christ for our salvation."⁵ Preachers must witness to that. Preachers who know that matter. Preachers who don't aren't worth a hill of beans. Again, this is important for you, even if you will never preach, because your pastors need your prayers. And we need you to understand and cultivate a taste for the kind of preaching that matters and then help cultivate with your prayers the kind of preachers that make a difference.

Transition

Remember, the **only kind of preacher that matters is the one who knows he doesn't matter**. In this passage there are two characteristics of preachers who know they don't matter. One, **preachers that matter know their words don't matter as much as Christ crucified**. And, two, from verses 3-5. **Preachers that matter know their wisdom doesn't matter as much as the Holy Spirit's power**. Follow along. Verses 3-5. *I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power.*

- George Whitefield was in my estimation the greatest preacher in the English language. [H.W. Brands](#) in his biography of Benjamin Franklin describes one occasion when Franklin heard Whitefield in person and decided to validate the rumors he had heard about Whitefield's preaching. "One evening [Whitefield] spoke from the top of the steps of the Philadelphia courthouse, in the middle of Market Street on the west side of Second. "I had the curiosity to learn how far he could be heard," Franklin wrote. Franklin was already at the rear of the crowd; he walked slowly backward in the direction of the river. He could hear Whitefield's 'loud and clear voice' distinctly until he came to Front Street, where some street noise obscured it. Taking the distance from Front Street to Second as a radius, he mentally constructed a semicircle and filled it with listeners, allowing two square feet to each. In this way [Franklin] calculated Whitefield might be heard by an audience of more than thirty thousand without amplification. Franklin says, "This reconciled to me the newspaper accounts of his having preached to 25,000 people in the fields."⁶ You know what was most remarkable about Whitefield? Not his booming; mesmerizing voice or the power of his persuasion. It was the demonstrations of the Spirit's power through his preaching.
- One of Whitefield's mission fields was the colliers, the coal miners of Kingswood—a people notorious for their brutality—described by some as "a pitiful, neglected people." Whitefield's biographer [Arnold Dallimore](#) says this. "Imagine the scene—green countryside, the piles of coal, the squalid huts and the deep semi-circle of unwashed faces." And then he quotes Whitefield's journal. "Having no righteousness of their own to renounce, they were glad to

⁴ The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching, p. 118-19.

⁵ Morris, p. 50.

⁶ H.W. Brands, *The First American*, p. 148.

hear of a Jesus who was a friend of publicans, and came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. The first discovery of their being affected was to see the white gutters made by their tears which plentifully fell down their black cheeks, as they came out of their coal pits. Hundreds and hundreds of them were soon brought under deep conviction."⁷

- That kind of preaching that brought the hardest hearts to conviction and repentance was par for the course for Whitefield. I think that kind of preaching is what every Christian preacher longs for; this demonstration of the Holy Spirit's power through the meager words of the preacher. Paul is very clear about something. That kind of power can't happen; it won't happen when the emphasis is on the *wise and persuasive words* of the preacher. Clever reasoning and persuasive speech might build a faith but it won't be a faith that lasts. When a better argument, when more persuasive words come along, that kind of faith crumbles—tossed too and fro by the waves.⁸ But messages wedded to the Spirit's power bring about lasting transformation. Paul says, *so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power*.
- How does that happen? Why isn't more preaching transformational? Why isn't more preaching anointed? Part of it has to do with the inner life of the preacher. And part of it has to do with the listener. Let me start with the preacher.
- The way to powerful, Spirit-filled, anointed preaching, from the preacher's perspective, is through brokenness. The kind of preacher that matters is broken on the inside, stripped of all self-reliance, forced to rely on the Holy Spirit to add life to his words. Paul says in verse 3, that he came to the Corinthians in *weakness and trembling*. He's broken. He realized his own insufficiency for the task at hand. I think Paul trembled at the awesome task of preaching. It's kind of like what Peter says in 1 Peter 4:11. *Whoever speaks, [is to do so] as one who is speaking the utterances of God*. I think Paul shook in his boots at the infinite importance of his appointed task of preaching.⁹ And in this condition of weakness and trembling, by the power of God, lives changed through Paul's preaching. I'm already acutely aware of my own weaknesses as a preacher. The thing I need to guard against is allowing those weaknesses to cripple my faith that God can and will speak through a weak, broken jar of clay. I have to trust that if God can speak through the mouth of an ass, Balaam's donkey, then he can speak through me.
- One of the best things you can do, something that will have a direct impact on your spiritual life, is to pray for me or any other pastor you know, that God would humble us. By the way, if you didn't already know, it's not your job to humble the pastor. God's perfectly capable of doing that on his own. But you can pray, Lord, strip our pastor of everything that he's relying on so that he can rely on your Spirit. Lord, remind our pastor that apart from Christ he can do nothing. Lord, may our pastor find your power in his weakness. Lord, may our pastor depend upon your Spirit's power to add life to his words. Lord, help our pastor to rest in knowing that "the truth of Your word has been preached to the best of his ability, in the power of the Spirit, for the glory of your name."¹⁰
- Now for your part as listeners. I'm convinced part of the reason there is a crisis of preaching is because Christians have forgotten how to listen to sermons. A sermon is not a lecture. It

⁷ Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield*, vol. 1, p. 263.

⁸ Morris, p. 52.

⁹ Reinecker, p. 390.

¹⁰ Piper, p. 44-46.

is different from all other forms of communication. Preaching expects a response from the listener. That means, if you're a Christian you come to church expecting God to speak. And that means you've gotta prepare yourself to hear and respond to his voice. If you don't expect God to speak, what makes you think he will? Assuming your schedule permits, you've got to get to bed early enough so that you're alert during the service.¹¹ It means preparing to worship with the right attitude, "Lord speak to me, your servant is listening." It means opening your Bible, following along, carefully noting what is said. It doesn't mean coming up to me after the service and saying, "good sermon pastor." It means coming up to me and telling me how you are going to apply those words and how your life is going to change because of those words.

Conclusion

- If preaching has failed you, it certainly may be because of the preacher, as this passage points out. But it also may be because the soil of your heart, which once was tilled and able to receive the word implanted, has become so hard packed with sin that you're resistant to the word of God.
- If that's the case, the field can be tilled again. That's what the Easter season is all about. There is no soil; there is no heart that is so hard packed the cross can't break it up. Let the cross of Christ do its work. Right now. Close your eyes. Think of Christ. His sacrifice for your sins. Ask God to break up the soil of your heart to hear and receive his word with fresh ears. Get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent by allowing Jesus to nail it to the cross, and humbly accept the Word planted in you, which can save you. Let me pray for you.

¹¹ White, p. 58.