*The Message Preached*

1 Corinthians 1:18-25

6/11/23

Today we are taking the second of three looks at the place God’s word has in the life of the church. My desire in this short series is two-fold: 1) to remind us why God’s word is central in our corporate services; and 2) to cultivate a renewed desire to seek the word of God. I have chosen three passages of Scripture that are foundational to this subject. As we go through them, we will see an overlap in their content. Yet each text has a unique feature that I want to highlight.

Last time we looked at Ezekiel 37, where I tried to show how the Spirit must be active in both the preacher and the listener if any good is to come from it. Today, in 1 Corinthians 1, we are going to focus on the message we preach. Next week, we will consider how we approach the preaching of God’s word.

As we turn our attention to 1 Corinthians 1, we see what the primary focus of our preaching is to be the fulness of who Christ is and what He has done. Being a Christian means that Christ is the center of everything we believe and do. In 1 Corinthians, we find Paul reminding the church of this principle. This congregation had many problems. They were disunified. There was sin being celebrated rather than corrected. There was immorality outside of marriage and misunderstanding of the roles and responsibilities of men and women in marriage and in the church. The Lord’s Table was abused. Spiritual gifts were misunderstood and misused as people sought to elevate themselves rather than to serve one another. The church was a mess.

Paul has one solution to all their problems: focus on Christ. Our text introduces this theme that solves every problem creating disunity in the church. The theme is shown in two places in the text. In vs. 18 he identifies the message of Christ as the word of the cross. Then in vs. 23 he says that we preach Christ crucified. In 2:2 Paul said *for I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.* Moving away from that message created all kinds of problems in the church. Paul found it necessary to draw them back to this first principle.

The message of God’s Son entering the world to provide salvation from sin through His sinless life, sacrificial death, and glorious resurrection is the main theme of the Bible. The OT looks forward to Christ’s ministry by explaining the problem of sin, God’s promise to provide salvation, and describing who that Savior would be and what He would do. The gospels tell us how Jesus fulfilled of the OT picture of the Messiah, while the rest of the NT explains what He has done and how we are to live because of it. The Bible centers on the person and work of Jesus Christ. This is why Paul summarized his message in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4 in this way: *For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.* This is the main theme of the Bible.

Now having Christ-centered focus does not mean that every sermon must unfold the glories of Christ manifested in His death and resurrection. Genesis 1 says nothing about the cross of Christ, and it would be an abuse of Scripture to force it into that text. Yet a Christ-ward focus will cause us to consider why God created, how sin corrupted creation, and most importantly how Christ redeemed it through the cross. The same would be true of a text on parenting. A text of that nature does not explicitly lend to preaching Calvary. Yet a parent knows that their responsibility is not to modify their child’s behavior, but to point them to the Savior who is the solution to their sin problem. Christ is the Sun around which the universe of God’s revelation orbits.

So, we preach Christ, and Him crucified. He is our identity, our focus, our first love, our consuming passion, our all in all. Our text gives four implications that will flow from Christ-centered preaching. Implication one is that *the message of Christ is foolishness to the world, but salvation to God’s people* (vs. 18). There is always a two-fold response to the preaching of the gospel. Some people view it as foolishness. The message of a lowly Savior dying as a criminal on a cross is foolish to the world. Even more offensive is how the Savior acts as our substitute, doing what we could never do ourselves. Many are fine with a savior aiding our salvation, but people loath the notion that we do not participate in it. Yet the gospel tells us that salvation is a gracious work of God done entirely independent of us.

Every world view except Christianity, holds to one of two basic premises. 1) there is a god, and the way to be right with him is to placate him through your actions. Whether that be through good works, sacrifices, or whatever, every major religion in the world holds to a form of works-based salvation. 2) the second premise, which dominates the humanism of our culture, is that we are god, and purpose is found by pursuing whatever brings inner satisfaction. This is the driving force behind the theology of pleasure that compels most American’s actions: if it feels good or gives a sense of meaning/significance, then it is my truth. To these worldviews, preaching the cross of Christ is the height of foolishness.

Yet *to us who are being saved it* *is the power of God.* Last time, we saw how the Spirit of God raises the spiritually dead through the preaching of God’s word. The message of Christ is a message of God’s power displayed in overcoming our spiritual death through His Son. The world despises the message of the cross, but the Christian glories in it, for it is how they are saved. Much more could be said on this verse, but what I want us to see is how preaching the gospel always bears fruit. It either hardens people towards God by calcifying them in their sin; or it draws them to God that their sin might be dealt with by Christ. Both are fruits of gospel preaching.

Next, see how preaching the gospel reveals the foolishness of the world’s thinking (vs. 19-21). We already mentioned how people either views themselves as God or believe they can merit a right standing with God through their actions or intrinsic goodness. The gospel exposes the foolishness of both worldviews by revealing who God is, why He created us, the extent of our sin problem, our inability to do anything about it, and the greatness of God’s goodness, grace, and love in providing salvation through His Son. Men devise elaborate schemes to earn their way to God or explain away His existence. Yet in all their purported wisdom, they cannot know God through their schemes. When we preach the gospel, it exposes the foolishness of their attempts to reach God on their own. The bible says that the fool says in their heart there is no God. Preaching the gospel exposes this foolishness. Now our goal is not to make people feel foolish. It is to point them to the wisdom and power of God expressed in Jesus Christ. But in order for them to understand this, they must first understand the foolishness of their former way of life.

This leads to the third implication. We preach Christ because it is the ‘foolish’ means by which God works salvation. God is *well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe.* The Bible tells us that creation reveals that there is a powerful God whose perfect character requires us to worship Him (see Ps. 19, Ro. 1). Yet, creation cannot tell sinners how they can be right with God. That information must be revealed through God’s word. Because we believe that God will save anyone who believes the gospel; and because we believe that no one can be saved unless they hear the gospel, it is both our privilege and our responsibility to proclaim the gospel to all creation. Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word concerning Christ. We sow the seed of the gospel because God is well-pleased to save those who believe.

Now there is a word play going on here. In all their self-made wisdom, people reject the simplicity of the gospel. Both the message and the means of communicating it are folly to the world. Yet, it is through the foolishness of preaching that God choses to work. The certainty of success causes us to boldly proclaim the gospel. Yes, there will be those who reject us and our message as foolishness; but we preach anyway because we know that the Spirit will cause people to be born again to a living hope through the proclamation of Christ.

This implication sets up the final one: even though people prefer a different message and method, faithful churches are unflinching in their commitment to preach the gospel from the whole counsel of God. Vs. 22-25 expand on the foolishness of the world’s wisdom and the wisdom of God displayed in the foolishness of preaching. These verses tell us that people have an appetite for something other than the gospel, but that should not deter us from preaching it.

In vs. 21, Paul identifies the two competing worldviews in Corinth. There were the Jews who desired signs to be the basis of their faith. A great example of this desire is expressed in John 6, where the Jews respond to Jesus’ invitation to believe in Him by saying *what then do You do for a sign, that we may believe You? What work do you perform?* The irony of that question was the on the previous day, Jesus had fed 5000 of them with five loaves and two fish. They were demanding that Jesus feed them daily if he wanted them to believe Him. This is why Jesus said on a different occassion *an evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign; and a sign will not be given it, except the sign of Jonah*, which referenced His resurrection (Mt. 16:4). Yet even the resurrection would not convince them to believe. Signs stir people’s emotions, but they do not produce faith, for faith is not based on sight. Faith is the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen. Faith is trusting the promises of God.

While Jews sought to experience the sensational, Greeks sought wisdom. To this day, we study the great Greek philosophers and thinkers; yet despite their purported wisdom, they did not come to know God through their wisdom. For all their logic and ability to observe the created order, these great minds remained foolish towards what truly matters: a relationship with God.

So, the Jews sought experience, while Greeks sought to unlock the universe through philosophy. To both groups, the message of the cross did not satisfy. What was Paul’s response to their desires? He did not give them what they wanted, but he did give them what they needed: the message of Christ crucified as the only means of salvation. The church today has a defect in their thinking. We think that in order to reach the world, we need to appeal to the world’s desires. Many churches copy the world’s methods and mirror their thinking hoping to make the gospel more relevant. Yet the gospel does not need us to make it relevant. It is always relevant, which is why Paul determined to know nothing among them except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. Paul worked many miracles in his life, and his mental capacity and training to go toe to toe with the greatest thinkers of his day. He could easily meet their desires, yet he refused to do so because he wanted them to have a genuine faith that comes only from hearing the word concerning Christ.

What was the result of his preaching? Well, it put a stumbling block before the Jews, just as Isaiah 8:14 said it would. To the Gentiles, it was foolishness. Paul was an idle babbler to them. So why did he persist in preaching if this was people’s response? Because *to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ [is] the power of God and the wisdom of God.* He knew that it was through the foolishness of preaching Christ that God is well-pleased to save those who believe. He knew that gospel preaching bears two kinds of fruit: rejection and belief. He would not allow the disappointment of some rejecting the gospel keep him from preaching Christ, for if he failed to preach Christ no one would be saved. We preach Christ because to *the called* Christ is the power and wisdom of God. There is a certainty to our preaching because God will call people to salvation. Therefore, we recognize that the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. So, preach Christ and allow the Spirit to do His Ezekiel 37 work.

So what does all of this have to do with us? Well, this text provides us with a litmus test for our own faith. Is what draws us together each week the greatness and glory of Christ? Or are we like the Jews and Greeks…desiring something else? Through the years I have heard various forms of this sentiment: *I need church to fill me up so I can make it through another week.* Yet notice how this shifts the focus from Christ to us and our felt needs. When the church fails to satisfy our felt needs, we get disappointed, critical, and ultimately leave because the church failed to supply us with the signs or wisdom we desired.

Now, do not misunderstand me. The gathering of God’s people for worship should encourage and strengthen our faith. But that happens best when our focus is on Christ, who is our all in all. The preaching of Christ should always thrill our souls, for it is God’s power and God’s wisdom. When the excellencies of Christ are unfolded, we feed on the grace of God, are strengthened in our faith, and equipped for His service. The vision of His greatness makes us desire that He, not we, sit on the throne of our lives.

I saw this principle of this text worked out when I was preaching through John’s gospel several years ago. John was a wonderful study that focused on who Christ is and the glory of the salvation He accomplished. But as the series stretched on, a few people in the church began to complain. They wanted to talk about prophecy, current world events, politics, or whatever. I even had one person tell me that they wish I would move on to *deeper things*. They were bored with John’s gospel.

Now, what I just described was limited to a select few people. The greater reality was that over the three years it took us to work through John’s gospel, several people came to a saving knowledge of Christ and were baptized. Many people expressed a growing knowledge and greater love for Christ. Two men particularly expressed the positive principle found in this text. Frank was around 60 when he had his wife began attending the church. He had spent most of his adult life in shallow, quasi liberal churches that were weak in their handling of the gospel. About halfway through the series he said to me: *you preach nothing but Christ, and Him crucified. It has been water to the desert of my weary soul.* I do not think I have ever received a greater compliment in ministry. The other man was the chair of the elders’ team. I have met very few men with a greater knowledge of God’s word or well-developed theology than Paul. He is a gifted teacher and mature saint. Every Sunday, he was like a little kid in a candy shop. The more Christ-centered the sermon, the more thrilled he was, because Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God to those who are the called of God. It is people like Frank and Paul and many of you who make the preaching of the gospel such a joy.

As we draw our time in the word to a close, we need to ask ourselves if we are individually and corporately, a Christ-centered people thrilled with the greatness and goodness of who He is? Are we committed to making His glory known through the foolishness of preaching His cross? Satan will do everything he can to pull us away from this first principle. We must be careful, lest like the Corinthian church, we shift our focus from Christ, for it will cause all manner of problems in our midst. May we guard against the notion that there are better ways to reach people than with the simple preaching of the gospel. Rather, let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfector of faith, and run the race He has set before us because we have found Him to be our all in all.