

## The Power of the Cross

the town church • 1 corinthians 1:18-2:5 • 2/23/2020

When I was a young Christian, just learning how to follow Jesus & growing in my faith, one of the first ways I served in ministry was with a youth group at a church in Fortuna. At 19, I was helping lead music, small groups, & preached my first sermon out of Hebrews 13. The youth pastor I served under was the same age as me. Though he was young, he was a dynamic leader & speaker and I learned a lot from him. That's why I was surprised when he called me one night in tears, sobbing as he told me how inadequate and weak he felt as a leader, that he felt like a failure. I remember how surprised I was in that moment. How could someone who seemed like a such a strong leader could sound so unsure of themselves, could feel like he felt? After 20 years of ministry since that time of my life, I completely identify with the confession of my friend. I have experienced those same feelings many times.

But here's the amazing thing about sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ: *the power is not in the messenger*. The power is not in the *way* the message is communicated. The power of preaching or telling others about Jesus is not in the amount of preparation, the effectiveness of the illustrations, or how practical it might seem to you. All of those things are important and any good preacher should work hard to use those tools. But the power of the good news of Jesus *is* the message itself. The simple truth that God sent His Son into the world to live a perfect life, die on a cross for our sin, and be raised from death on the third day...it's the announcement that *this is true* ... that is the power of God.

It's this confidence and conviction that is driving the Apostle Paul as he writes the NT letter we have been studying, 1 Corinthians. In this letter to a young Christian community that has been birthed by God in the midst of a Roman city consumed with ambition, success, money, power, sex, and pleasure, we see Paul push all his chips in on the gospel, the message of who Jesus is and what he has done. As we saw last week, Paul said that his whole reason in coming to Corinth was to “...to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.” (1 Cor. 1:17). In the following verses, which we're looking at today, Paul explains how the church community in the city of Corinth can guard against “emptying the cross of it's power.” We face the same temptation today, to strip the Christian faith of it's true power in order to make it more appealing or more acceptable in our culture. Another danger we face is our feelings of inadequacy & weakness, that God could never use *us* to do his work. Still yet, we face the danger of pride, seeing God use us and deceiving ourselves that it was *our* own ability, *our* work, that is having such a powerful effect on others, and then seeking to build our own reputation. How do we guard against these dangers? The answer is the same: By keeping the cross of Jesus as the center of our faith. Paul shows us this by pointing to 1) The Word of the Cross 2) the Way of the Cross, and 3) The Witness of the Cross. **1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5 (#952)**

## The Word of the Cross (vs. 18-25)

As we've seen in the introduction and opening passages of this letter, the church community in Corinth is struggling to walk in the new identity that they have been given in Jesus as his holy, set-apart people. This identity crisis has led them to fall back to their old way of thinking, the way they lived and believed *before* Jesus called them into his family. They've begun to live in ways that are threatening their unity. One of the ways this is happening is that factions have formed within the community of the church, each faction picking a leader in the early church to align themselves with, essentially picking a "team" that they were on. Just like the culture of the Corinth, they were looking for their identity in which leader they followed, which teacher they aligned themselves with, which philosophy was most impressive. It's here that Paul reminds them that the reason they are following Jesus is *not* because of how good the presentation was, or how polished a public speaker he was. No, he says...remember that the message I taught you is *the word of the cross*. He goes on to say that *all wisdom and power ultimately lead back to the cross of Jesus*.

This wording is very important for us to see. The words "wisdom" and "power," along with their opposites ("folly/foolishness" and "weakness"), are used by Paul around twenty times in this short section (1:18–2:16). This is obviously something that Paul is doing intentionally. He is touching a nerve. These issues of wisdom and power are at the heart of the issues the Corinthian Christians are facing.<sup>1</sup> Why is this? Because in Corinth, seeking and attaining "wisdom" was a means of achieving power or influence. In Corinth, power, status, and position were not something you inherited, but something you had to achieve and win for yourself.<sup>2</sup> So much of your life revolved around trying to win power through attaining wisdom. In the same way we find meaning through followers and likes on social media, the Corinthians sought after wisdom through different philosophies and teachers.

Here's the problem: the message of Jesus is antithetical to the wisdom of the day. Why? Because, as Paul says in vs. 18, it is the word, the message of *the cross*. We tend to forget this because we are so far removed from it, but execution by crucifixion was an extremely offensive subject in Greco-Roman culture. It was a disgusting and humiliating way for a person to die was reserved for the worst and lowest forms of criminals. To die by crucifixion was to be stripped of all your dignity, to make sure that people knew that you had been utterly forsaken and cast aside. And yet, Paul says, the Son of God, the promised Messiah, dying on the cross is the power of God on full display.

It is this message, this word, that is absolute foolishness to the human mind, to the concept of human wisdom. How can *this* be the power and wisdom of God? How can this *loss* be the way to salvation, to victory?

If what you are looking for is a sophisticated philosophical ideology, the cross seems like a crude drawing on the refrigerator, something childish and plain. And yet the cross is God's wisdom, God's power, God's plan. In the cross, God is making it plain that we don't *think* our way to him, we don't *debate* our way into his presence, we don't attain standing with him on the basis on our intellect or our great human wisdom. In the cross, God shows the foolishness of every human effort to impress or gain favor with him.

This message is offensive. It's offensive to *everyone*. For the Jewish people, the idea of God's Messiah being weak and humiliated on a cross was a stumbling block, something they tripped over. They were looking for a strong, conquering king who would restore the kingdom of Israel to its former glories. Similarly, to non-Jews, the message of a god who would be crucified was something weak & simple, not even worth considering. Stephen Um: *From the perspective of human power-grasping, God's power can be called nothing other than weakness. There is no power in being crucified; that is the ultimate display of weakness, vulnerability, and frailty. God's "weak" power is a declaration of man's ultimate powerlessness as it relates to his relationship with God. Power is giving up one's own power—and if power is the ultimate cultural value, then this is nothing short of a scandal.*<sup>3</sup>

We face the same challenge today as the church in Corinth. We struggle with the reality of the word of the cross, with the message of Jesus. The cross is a daily confrontation that we could not save ourselves, that we had to be rescued from our sinful rebellion against God. We would prefer a way to God that we could earn, something we could attain through discipline and hard work, something we could point at and say "Look what I have done!" Grace is offensive and foolish to all of us.

So ask yourself: *what is the power you trust in?* Is it what Jesus has done for you on the cross or what you have done for yourself? *What provides meaning for your life*—what moments or acts do you feel bring ultimate significance to you? *How will you be saved?* If your answer is anything other than *the cross of Jesus*, you are in danger of destruction. This is the power and wisdom of God—the word of the cross.

### **The Way of the Cross**

Next, the Apostle Paul points to the way of the cross by calling the church community of Corinth to look at themselves. He says: *Look in the mirror. You yourselves are a display of the wisdom and power of God.* He's reminding them of something we all need to hear sometimes: *You are just not that impressive.* By human standards, he says, you're not wise, powerful, influential, admired, or respected. You're a bunch of nobodies! According to your own standards, there is no reason why God would want you. ***But God does want you***, he says. God sovereignly chose you, called you into his family. And because he has called and chosen you, you can stop measuring yourself by any other standard.

Hasn't this been the way of God all along? Look at the OT: look at the lives and stories of Abraham, Moses, Gideon, Ruth, Hannah, David, Elijah, Isaiah, Esther...none of them were impressive or admired. They were overlooked, cast aside, despised, ignored, mocked, disrespected, forgotten, devalued. They were nobodies. And yet God loved them. He chose them. He called them into his family and into his story. And all of them were used mightily by God. Each one of these nobodies was pointing the way to Somebody—to Jesus. All of them were preparing us for the way of the cross.

*How do you think about yourself? Do you wish you could be a better person so that God could use you more powerfully? Do you wish you hadn't made some of those mistakes, that you could go back and rewrite some chapters in order to be useful to God? Do you sometimes wonder what your life would be like if you hadn't been overlooked or forgotten or devalued? If some opportunity had come your way? I want to say that God takes no pleasure in your pain...but the pain of the path you have walked does not disqualify you from God's love. Your pain, your experiences, even your sin—they don't make you ineligible for living in the way of the cross. You are welcomed in. God is calling you in, beckoning you, inviting you to find your place in Jesus.*

In Jesus, God chose what is low and despised in the world. He chose you. And in Jesus, you receive something that no one and nothing else can give you. Look at vs. 30:..*because of [God] you are in [in union with, joined closely to] Christ Jesus, who became [took the place, entered the condition of] to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption. The wisdom and power-grasping of the world won't make you right with God. The wisdom and power of the world isn't making you holy, transforming and changing you in a good, pure way. There is no power and wisdom in the world that redeems you, that pays the penalty for your sin and sets you loose into a life of freedom and victory. Only Jesus can do that.*

What does this lead to? It leads to worship. It leads to a life of boasting in Jesus. No longer do we boast in the latest podcast or book or self-help guru or class that we took. No longer do we boast in our own ability, our own influence, our own willpower, our own accomplishments. We boast in Jesus because he has done what no one else would or could do—he gave himself on the cross for us. This is our boast, our joy, our delight, our hope.

### **The Witness of the Cross**

We have learned of the word of the cross, that God's power and wisdom is most clearly displayed in a way that appears weak and insignificant. We have learned of the way of the cross, that God chooses weak and insignificant people to be a display of his power and wisdom. Finally, let's look at *the witness of the cross*.

Here, Paul points to himself. He says “Look at the way I came to you.” He knew what the Corinthians were expecting when a new teacher would come to town to talk about some new philosophy, a novel ideology. They were looking for polish, for charisma, for a force of personality, something impressive and dignified. Today, we watch TED talks, where experts give a concise and powerful presentation of their ideas, their “gospel.” Here are some titles of the top 25 most popular TED talks<sup>4</sup>: *What makes a good life. How great leaders inspire action. How to talk so people listen. The happy secret to better work. How to make stress your friend. 10 things you didn't know about orgasm. Your elusive creative genius.* Some of these have over 50 million views. Why? Because they are powerful, exciting, dramatic presentations of core ideas about who we are, who we want to be, and what brings significance and meaning to our lives. So whether it's a TED talk or a teacher in 1<sup>st</sup> century Corinth, we're all looking for the same thing.

And Paul knows this. So when he came and started publicly speaking about the way of Jesus, what method did he use? [1] *And I, when I came to you, brothers and sisters, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom.* Something to know about Paul is that he was extremely educated and intelligent. He could hold his own in a debate. If you know the chronology of Paul's life, you remember that Paul just before he came to Corinth, he had visited the city of Athens. There in the center of Greek and Roman philosophy, he had skillfully engaged with the top thinkers of that time period. Paul is not some hick who dropped out of school and has spelling errors on his resume.

This means that Paul's decision to publicly talk about Jesus in a simple, straightforward manner was intentional. He says this in 1 Cor. 2:2: *I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.* This was Paul's resolution, his intentional decision—that he wouldn't lean on his own ability to teach people about Jesus. In order to be an effective witness for Jesus, he humbled himself. He continues in vs. 3: *I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, [4] and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power.* If we want to be effective witnesses for Jesus, it will require us to humble ourselves. Our reputation might take a hit. We probably won't impress anyone. We will experience the pain of rejection and humiliation. And we will want to lean on our power, our own ability, our own personality. But if we want to be a witness of the cross, if we want to show people the way of Jesus, we must lay those things down and submit our lives—all of our lives—to him.

But it's here in the surrender that God displays himself most powerfully, a demonstration of the Spirit of God in us, so that people don't see us so much as they see the one who has called us and is calling them: [5] *so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.*

- 1 Um, S. T. (2015). 1 Corinthians: The Word of the Cross. (R. K. Hughes, Ed.) (p. 32). Wheaton, IL: Crossway.
- 2 Ibid, p. 33
- 3 Ibid, p. 40
- 4 [https://www.ted.com/playlists/171/the\\_most\\_popular\\_talks\\_of\\_all](https://www.ted.com/playlists/171/the_most_popular_talks_of_all)