

"We Preach Christ Crucified"

Last Sunday I talked about how important it is for our church ministry to be an ordinary means of grace ministry. I attempted to show from Scripture, that we must do ministry using the means of grace ordained by God. I spoke on how the Great Commission pointed to engaging in ministry using the tools Christ has given us. The goal of course, is that I want us all to be doing ministry biblically. We must figure out how to reach Novato for Christ according to God's Word. What we do in ministry must be first and foremost those things ordained by God in the Bible.

Last week we talked about the three primary means of God's grace: the Word, the Sacraments, and Prayer. And I said my next 3 weeks of sermons would look at each of these means of grace individually. And so today we'll look at the "Word", the Bible, as a means of his grace. Now the Word of God, as a means of God's grace, is in some sense, the ultimate means of God's grace. The Sacraments are never to be administered apart from God's word. And we cannot pray properly without the instruction given to us in God's word. And so as we consider this morning the Word as a means of grace, we have a noble task before us. So much so, that I've picked just a specific, yet critical aspect to consider today. There are many ways in which God's Word serves to be a means of God's grace to us. Yet, what I'd like to spend this morning considering is how the *preaching* of God's word, particularly the preaching of Christ and the cross, is *especially* a way used by God to administer his grace. The WSC makes this claim about preaching as well in question 89, when it asks, "How is the Word made effectual to salvation?" A: The Spirit of God maketh the reading, but especially the preaching of the Word, an effectual means of convincing and converting sinners, and of building them up in holiness and comfort, through faith, unto salvation.

And so the preaching of God's word, especially the preaching of Christ and the cross, is central to the way in which God works his grace in the lives of believers. I'm sure then you can quickly see why then we are studying this passage in 1 Corinthians today. This passage tells us about the true wisdom and power of God which he gives to his saints. In this passage, Paul tells us that this wisdom and power that comes from God is identified as none other than Jesus Christ, who was crucified for us. And though this passage talks about how the Holy Spirit ultimately works faith in us to believe in Christ, this passage shows how God does that through preaching. Preaching Christ crucified is the means God has ordained to give us grace and salvation. So, this passage in 1 Corinthians shows us the wisdom and power in preaching Christ crucified, compared to the futile wisdom and power of the world.

And so looking first at the context of this passage in 1 Corinthians - this letter to the Corinthians begins with Paul dealing with reports of quarreling among the Corinthians (1:11). Evidently divisions arose among the Corinthians over questions of leadership. According to chapter 1, verse 12, it seems that the Christians at Corinth were taking up sides with their preferred leaders, creating factions among the church. Some said they follow Paul, some said they follow Apollos, and some said they follow Cephas, who was the Apostle Peter. Others said they follow "Christ". Of course the irony in this disagreement among the Corinthians is that we have no reason to believe that there was any disunity among any of these leaders themselves. As far as we can tell in Scripture, Peter, Paul, and Apollos all were united followers of the same Christ, and all were teaching the same gospel. There may have been differences in leadership style. We might even assume that Paul's

preaching style was not as ornate in terms of rhetoric as others, based on some of the comments in this chapter. But these leaders, Peter, Paul, and Apollos, all were united in following the same Christ and proclaiming the same gospel. That is even the answer Paul initially gives the Corinthians in 1:13. Paul asks, "Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized into the name of Paul?" Paul says that we all ultimately must follow Christ. Christ is the one who was crucified for us, and Christ is the one in whose name we are baptized. Paul says that Christ is not divided, and thus Christ's church must not be divided. Instead our unity must be found in Christ.

That is why Paul then in our passage, beginning in verse 18, begins to talk about the preaching of Christ crucified. Paul, having emphasized that Christ is not divided, then delves into illustrating what truly unites us. Paul shows how we find our unity in Christ who died for us on the cross, that we might be redeemed, and made holy and righteous in God's sight. In verse 18, Paul says that this unity in Christ is the power of God unto salvation.

And Paul talks about this unity by comparing us with the rest of the world. In chapter 1, verse 18, Paul says that Christ and the cross, the very thing that unites us as a church, is the very thing that separates us from the world. To Christians, the message of the cross is a message of salvation; it is the wisdom and power of God for our salvation; but to the rest of the world the message of the cross is a message of foolishness. Consequently Paul describes Christians as those who are being saved and the rest of the world as those who are perishing.

And so Paul combats the internal divisions in the Corinthian church by showing them their unity in Christ. He then shows them that there should be division; not internal division, but division between them and the world. The members in the Corinthian church, and all God's saints, have a common commitment, power, and wisdom, that is not of this age, but of the age to come. We too, as Christ church, share in the power and wisdom of God that is described here in this passage, and summarized by the preaching of Christ crucified.

In other words, this passage describes an antithesis between believers and the rest of the world. We see this antithesis described throughout this passage, largely contrasting the wisdom and power of God versus the wisdom and power of the world. Listen to some of these contrasts in this passage:

Chapter 1, verse 18 contrasts us who are being saved with those who are perishing. Verses 20-21 contrasts the wisdom of God with the wisdom of the world. Verses 23-24 contrasts the perspective of the cross: to those called, it is the power and wisdom of God, to everyone else it is either a stumbling block or foolishness. Verse 25 compares the supremacy of God's wisdom and strength with man's inferior wisdom and strength. Chapter 2:7 talks about our glory as believers, compared to the world and its shame mentioned in chapter 1 verse 27. Chapter 2 verse 6 talks about the wisdom of those in this age as something that is passing away, compared to the true wisdom which God gives us, belonging to the age to come.

In other words, this passage is chock-full of statements that talk about the antithesis between believers and the rest of the world. And in this passage, Paul keeps bringing these differences back to wisdom and power, in contrast to foolishness and weakness. Ultimately, the antithesis described here are two different perspectives: God's perspective and the world's perspective. From God's perspective, his wisdom is true wisdom, and the world's wisdom is foolishness. On the other hand, from the world's perspective, their wisdom is true wisdom, and God's wisdom is foolishness. Along the same lines, what God's considers strong, the world thinks is weak, and what the world thinks is strong, God sees as weak.

This difference in perspective is representative of man's sinfulness and man's continual rebellion against God. And this difference in perspective culminates around Christ and the cross.

You see Christ and the cross is the climactic event in human history. Ever since mankind fell into sin in the Garden of Eden, by eating the forbidden fruit, mankind was in need of Christ to come and die on the cross for us. By Adam eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, he disregarded God's wisdom and power, and listened to Satan's lies, thinking that by eating of the fruit he himself could be wise like God. Since then, all mankind has shown that our wisdom falls short of God's wisdom, and yet we continually live out our total depravity and in various ways rebel against God. We try to acquire wisdom and power in every way possible, and in various ways we try to exalt ourselves above God, all awhile the Lord sits enthroned in heaven, unthreatened by our futile rebellion. Though the Lord should merely laugh at us all for our sinful ways and then unleash his unending wrath, he has taken compassion on us. He has sent his son into this world, to die on the cross in the place of sinners, so that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.

And so God ordained that he would save sinners by the way of the cross. He ordained that the sacrifice of his only begotten son would be the way of forgiveness and redemption. Paul sees God's ordaining this means of salvation as both God's wisdom and power. And yet the world does not agree. In verses 22-23, Paul says "For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God."

Paul places the unbelievers' response to Christ and the cross into two camps: Jews and Greeks. The Jews he says reject Christ and the cross because they request a sign but instead see the cross of Christ as a stumbling block. The Gospels testify to this fact, that the Jews, during Jesus' ministry requested signs from him in order to prove he was the Messiah. The irony of course, is that Jesus did provide many signs, and yet they still were not satisfied. One of the themes in the Gospel of John is that the miracles Jesus performed testified to who he was. And yet we see the Jews still asking for signs. John 2:18-22 records this saying, "So the Jews said to him, 'What sign do you show us for doing these things?'" 19 Jesus answered them, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." 20 The Jews then said, "It has taken forty-six years to build this temple, and will you raise it up in three days?" 21 But he was speaking about the temple of his body. 22 When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this, and they believed the Scripture and the word that Jesus had spoken." This quote from John fits nicely with what we were talking about. When the Jews asked Jesus for a sign, he ultimately pointed to the cross and to his resurrection. The cross and the resurrection was the ultimate sign of who Jesus is, and yet for the Jews, the cross was the ultimate stumbling block for them.

This is because the Jews saw the fact that Jesus died on a cross as an offense. And that was actually a biblical notion. Deuteronomy 21:23 says that a criminal who is hung to death on a tree is cursed by God. So think about how that might sound at first to a Jew. Jesus, who died a cursed death, a death cursed by God, is supposed to be the Messiah and the Son of God? This cursed man is supposed to be the savior of the world? That makes no sense, they would say. It seemed foolish to the Jews that Jesus Christ, crucified, could be the Savior and Messiah, but God chose "what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong." For, as Paul tells us in Gal 3:13, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us - for it is

written, 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree'." In other words, the very fact that Jesus was cursed, was essential to him being the Messiah. This is how God shows that his wisdom transcends our wisdom. The simplistic wisdom of the Jews said that Jesus was merely a criminal cursed by God. God's wisdom said that we were all criminals, rebels against God, who were saved by Jesus taking our curse upon himself.

As for the Greeks, Paul says that they reject Christ and the cross because they seek after wisdom, but instead see the cross of Christ as foolishness. Anyone who has taken a basic philosophy course can affirm that the Greeks sought after wisdom. Greek philosophers like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle have been foundational to modern philosophy. In fact, the word "philosopher" actually means "lover of wisdom". Indeed, the Greeks loved wisdom and sought after it. And as the Greeks invested themselves in trying to understand the world around them, they developed the art of rhetoric in order to more elegantly communicate their ideas. And yet it seems that the Greeks found no wisdom in the preaching of Christ crucified. They could not see any wisdom in how a man condemned to death, and who died in the manner reserved only for slaves and the worst of criminals, could be anyone important. That makes no sense, they would say. It seemed foolish to the Gentiles that Jesus Christ crucified could be the exalted Son of God, but God chose "what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong." For as Paul tells us in 1 Cor 15, Christ did not only die for us, but he was also raised up for us, so that death no longer holds any power over us. Though Christ humbled himself on the cross for our sake, he was exalted in his resurrection, that we too would join in the resurrection along with him!

And so to unbelievers, to Jews and Greeks, preaching Christ crucified is of no value. Yet Paul says to us who are called, that it is the very wisdom and power of God. And so I'd like to ask: what's the difference? How come we see Christ and the cross differently? Is it because we are smarter and wiser? No. That's one thing that's very clear in this text. Our salvation in Christ crucified is not based on human wisdom or power. But instead notice that our perspective on Christ crucified is a result of the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Chapter 1 verse 24 says that it is us who are "called" that recognize Christ crucified as something valuable. That means that the Jews and Greeks who reject Christ are *not* called, at least not in the same internal way. Clearly this calling is talking about the inward call of the Holy Spirit that makes the message of the cross effective in our lives. This is what chapter 2 verses 4-5 talk about it. Paul says, "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." It is the Spirit of God that makes the preaching of Christ crucified attractive in our hearts and minds. This is clear when we see how the world thinks that the cross is foolishness and an illustration of weakness, but we believe the cross to be so much more. We as Christians recognize the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus. We recognize that the cross of Christ means our very salvation and life. Clearly this is a work of the Spirit in us. Clearly this faith we have in Christ crucified is a result of the Spirit making the message of the cross mean something more to us than it does to the rest of the world. Our faith in what appears to the world as foolish is a testimony of the Spirit's power at work inside us!

And so the Holy Spirit makes the message of Christ crucified effective in our lives. The result of the work of the Holy Spirit means that some are saved and others are left to their sin to perish. It means that boasting is done away with, except for boasting in the Lord. It means that we see the Christ is the one who is our righteousness, who sanctifies us, and who has redeemed us. It means that even our faith in Christ is reliant on the Spirit working it in us.

Clearly any man-made wisdom or strength fails to grab hold of the wisdom and power of God which he has revealed in Christ. Instead the revelation of Christ means that foolishness is wisdom and weakness is strength. God has made what the world considers foolish, and shown it to be the true wisdom. God has taken what the world considers weak, and shown it to be the true power. Paul even illustrates this by pointing to the Corinthian believers' own lives. In 1:26 Paul reminds the Corinthians that not many of them would be considered wise or powerful according to the world's standards, and yet God chose them to be recipients of the salvation and grace that comes from Christ. God's choice of the humble Corinthians to be saved shows that God takes the lowly and exalts it, he takes the unexpected, and does great things. God's wisdom and power is greater than anything the world has to offer.

And so let me summarize a few things we've observed this morning from the text so far, and then move into the final point that I'd like you to see this morning. First, this text shows us that Christ crucified is the true wisdom and the true power. Christ crucified alone has power to save us according to God's wise plan. Second, this text shows us that salvation is applied to us by the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit that powerfully works faith in our hearts and gives wisdom to our minds, that we might know Christ and see how precious he is to us. But if we stop there, we miss an important truth; and so here's my final point. According to this text, what is the means by which the Holy Spirit applies Christ crucified to us? It is preaching. That is abundantly clear in this text. The Spirit works this salvation in us by preaching, by proclamation, by speaking forth the words of the cross.

This emphasis on preaching is found throughout this text. Chapter 1:18 talks about the "words of the cross". Verse 23 talks about the preaching of Christ crucified. In chapter 2 verse 1 Paul says that that he was declaring the testimony of God to the Corinthians, knowing only Christ and him crucified. In 2:4 he talks about his speech and his preaching being done, not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and power.

I hope you are beginning to see how profound this is emphasis on preaching is. This text clearly emphasizes the power that comes from both Christ and the Spirit. That's understandable. But what's especially amazing, is that the act of preaching is described in terms of power as well. 1:18 said that the "words of the cross" are the power of God. 2:4 referred to Paul's preaching as a demonstration of power. This humble act of preaching done by humble and frail human beings is the means to deliver God's power to the saints. Now clearly the power doesn't come from the preacher. And it doesn't come from just the act of preaching in and of itself - it's not just uttering words that are powerful. The power comes from the object of the preaching, that is, Christ crucified; and it's made effective by the inward work of Holy Spirit. And so the true source of the power in preaching is from Christ and his Spirit. Yet, that doesn't take away from the amazing fact that God has ordained the means for this power to go forth by the ministry of preaching. And of course what is equally amazing is that God has entrusted that ministry of preaching to the church.

And so I hope that this passage has begun to show you how the Word of God is a means of grace. Now this passage has not shown us every way in which the Word is a means of grace. There are plenty other passages I could show you to give you a fuller picture. We heard some of those in the other Scripture passages we read earlier in the service. The entire Word of God is a means of grace. It is a means of grace even when anyone might randomly pick up the Bible and read something. It is a means of grace in your personal devotions, and when someone speaks a verse to

another in passing. A bible verse might be quoted on brochure, or a business card, or on a web site. God's Word goes forth into the world, by speech, or in print. It goes forth in radio waves and in binary computer code as it travels the Internet. I'm sure it goes forth even in Braille. Sometimes the Bible goes forth completely, all 66 books, Old and New Testaments together, and sometimes just a small snippet or two. And so the Bible goes forth in different ways, and in different amounts. And in all these various ways, God can be using his Word as a means of his grace.

But this morning I wanted to preach on this text because it really shows us the best of what it means for the Word of God to be a means of grace. This passage hones in on a specific way in which the Word is communicated, that is preaching, and it hones in on a specific part of the entire Word of God, that is the message of Christ, and him crucified.

As the WSC rightly observes, God uses *especially* the *preaching* of his Word as a means of grace. Time and time in Scripture we see that God uses the preaching and proclamation of his Word to do wonderful things in the lives of his people. Paul testifies to that in our passage today. And Paul says that the content of his preaching was especially focused on preaching Christ and him crucified. In some sense, preaching Christ and him crucified is inclusive of the entire Word of God. Jesus, in Luke 24 says that all the Scriptures testify about him. And yet, Paul's message of Christ, and him crucified, here in 1 Corinthians, in the most specific sense, is more than just a summary of the whole Bible. Rather it is a climax of the whole message of Scripture. The message of Christ crucified brings to fulfillment all the Scriptures. The whole Word of God finds its yes and amen in Christ and him crucified!

We have seen today in this passage the wisdom and power of God's word. This is true of the Word of God in general, but its especially true of the preaching of Christ crucified. And so Saints of God, this is such a key, central, task that has been committed to us. We must use the Word of God as the primary means of God's grace. And our use of this must especially come forth by the preaching of Christ. The world will think this is foolish. The world will think this is a waste of time. Even other churches have begun to think that preaching Christ is outdated and have tried to find more so-called relevant ways to reach people. But Paul tells us here that this is nothing new. Even from the start of the New Testament church, people in the world thought preaching Christ crucified was foolish. Maybe this is even some of the opposition that Paul was facing at the Corinthian church. Maybe some wanted to grow the church through ways that would be more palatable to the elites in the Greco-Roman society. But Paul said "no"! Preaching Christ crucified was the way God ordained to save people, so he would keep on preaching! Though the world called it foolishness and weakness, God called it wisdom and power.

And so Saints of God in closing, I'd like to spend a few minutes applying this specifically to us. This passage calls us to consider what we desire and value. Do you evaluate things according to the world's standards? Do you let the world tell you what is wise and powerful? Or do you seek God's perspective? If you seek God's perspective, then you will recognize the power and wisdom of preaching Christ crucified. This perspective means that you won't be content with anything less than the preaching which preaches Christ. You will demand this of your pastor - and I am eager to do so.

And this sort of preaching must then characterize our ministry here at Trinity. It never ceases to amaze me when I see churches trying to do everything they can to make their Sunday worship service more palatable to society, when God tells us here

in 1 Corinthians that a biblical ministry will be one that is either offensive or foolish to the world. If we preach and proclaim the gospel and nobody thinks it is foolishness, then maybe we need to reevaluate how and what we are teaching! Paul has told us today that preaching Christ is foolishness to the world! Sure, we don't pray that our preaching ministry will only come to deaf ears, to people who reject the message. We pray that God would use our preaching to work faith in people, that they too could see the beauty of Christ crucified. And yet, that doesn't mean that we have the liberty to change how the message is communicated, or even worse, to change the message itself. If we change the means or the message, then we are disregarding 1 Corinthians. Paul has told us that God uses the means of preaching and the message of Christ, to show that when people do believe, it is *only* because the Spirit has worked powerfully inside them. Don't we rob the cross of its true power and wisdom when we try to change the means or the message?

How can the church appeal to the strength promised in the Great Commission, that Christ would be with the church in ministry, if it ignores the very teaching of Christ crucified? How can we ask God for wisdom in reaching the community if we ignore the true wisdom he has given us in Christ? How can we look for God to work powerfully in our ministry if we disregard the power he has set before us? This is what so many churches nowadays do in the name of being seeker sensitive or evangelistic. They have replaced the wisdom and power of the cross with mere human wisdom and power, which is really foolishness and weakness comparatively before God.

And so that is why I have been making an appeal that our church ministry be an ordinary means of grace ministry. We must use the means ordained by God to grow his church. That means of grace, includes the Word, and it especially includes the preaching of the Word, and of Christ crucified.

And as you each individually represent this church, this is something that you can ask people you encounter. Some of you know friends who go to churches that no longer teach the Bible. You can help them by pointing out this passage to them and helping them to evaluate the ministry of their church. And some of you know friends and family members who are opposed to Christianity. You may be ridiculed by them because they think what we believe is foolish. In the same way, some that you encounter in Marin might at first think it's nice that you belong to a church. Many people think "religion" is a good thing, especially for those of us "who need it", in order to live moral lives, so they might say. But people who think of religion only as something good to promote morality, are typically outraged when they hear of the exclusivity of the cross. When they hear that we believe salvation is only through faith in Christ crucified, they label us as intolerant and fanatics. In those cases, may this passage in 1 Corinthians remind you that this is to be expected by those doing biblical church ministry.

As we engage in biblical church ministry, we will face persecution. But be encouraged. The power and wisdom of this world is passing away. It's days are numbered. But we have been given the wisdom and power of the age to come. We have been saved from the rest of the world that is passing away because of their rebellion against God. On that last day, we who have trusted in Christ, will be vindicated before all the world, as God will have the final word. Praise be to God, and may we strive to preach and exalt Christ crucified in all the ministry of this church. Amen.

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