

## The Message of the Cross | 1 Corinthians 1:17-25; 2:1-5

Paul says V17-18; **“For Christ did not send me to baptise, but to preach the gospel – not with wisdom and eloquence, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. 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.”**

Let me quickly point out two things from these two verses and then we’ll look at each of them more closely. *Firstly* Paul defines his main role as preaching the gospel and another name he gives the gospel is **“the message of the cross.”** That is what the gospel primarily is: The message of the cross... Paul says in Romans 1:16 that the gospel... **“It is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes.”** *Secondly* let me point out that human wisdom can get in the way of the message of the cross and potentially empty it of its power.

### 1. *Paul seen his main role as preaching the cross & so must we*

In verse 17 Paul defines his main role as preaching the gospel. Out of all the things Paul was and did he viewed himself primarily as a preacher of the gospel. In Romans 1:15 he says **“I am so eager to preach the gospel”**. In 1 Corinthians 9:12 he says **“I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel.”** In the same chapter he highlights

he is even prepared to surrender his personal rights to preach the gospel free of charge... In Galatians 1:15 after reminding the Galatians of the origin of the gospel... he says; **“God who set me apart from my mother’s womb and called be by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles.”** He tells young pastor Timothy in 2 Timothy 1:8 to join him in suffering for the gospel, and a few verses after declares **“And of this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and teacher.”** Note in this verse he puts first that he is a herald of the gospel...

This emphasis echo’s throughout his letters and ought to be evident in the life of every true minister and church of Christ. The primary reason God has us here is to herald the gospel, to proclaim the message of the cross – the good news of Jesus Christ.

What is the message of the cross? What is the gospel? Well, on one level Paul could explain the gospel as simply and concisely as **“Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.”** But on another level after 11 chapters of unpacking the gospel in Romans all he could say is; **“Oh, the depths of the riches of the wisdom and**

**knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgements, and his paths beyond tracing out.**” So we learn from this that the gospel is both something that can be simply and concisely explained while at the same time being something of unsearchable depth. It is something that can be shared with anyone on the street, but it is also something which can always be understood more fully...

One person has called the cross *“the great jewel of the Christian faith”* and like every great jewel it has many precious facets that are each worthy of examining for their brilliance and beauty. This is part of the unsearchable depth of the cross. We cannot exhaust the message of the cross this Sunday, or even in a billion Sundays. In fact we will spend eternity marvelling at the wonder of the cross since we know we’ll be singing **“Worthy is the Lamb...”** in heaven (Rev 5:12).

But at the very centre of the message of the cross is the simple idea that **“Christ died for our sin...”** Meaning he died to take the blame and pay the punishment for our sin. 2 Corinthians 5:21 puts it this way; **“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”** Galatians 3:13 says; **“Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse**

**for us.”** 1 John 4:10 says; **“This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.”**

Note in these verses that they all talk of Jesus becoming something for us. - becoming sin for us, a curse for us, an atoning sacrifice for our sin. Note the language of substitution... Jesus became our substitute who took our sin upon himself, stood in our place and suffered the just punishment we deserved. Of course the message of the cross only makes sense to the person who sees themselves as a sinner, it is foolishness otherwise. How can a brutal crucifixion be Good News? Romans 5:8 declares; **“But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were yet sinners Christ died for us.”**

I pointed out before that the cross has many facets, but let me also point out that it has two primary sides. One side reveals God’s ferocious wrath at our sin and the other his great love for sinners. Romans 5:9 says; **“Since we have been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God’s wrath through him.”** The cross gives us a picture of what we are saved from – ultimately the wrath of God – as much as it gives us a picture of God’s love for us. It gives us a picture of what we would have had to face ourselves if Christ had not taken our place and became our substitute. It gives a person

a glimpse of what they will face for all eternity if they reject Christ... It takes a more courageous love to tell someone this truth than to simply say 'Jesus loves you'. This is how Jesus demonstrated his love: He absorbed the wrath of God at your sin so you don't have to... That should fill your heart with eternal gratitude.

One side of the cross reveals his mercy and grace while the other reveals his justice and holiness. And if we do not preach both sides then we misrepresent God and empty the cross of its power... A person cannot truly understand the greatness of God's grace unless they grasp something of his absolute holiness. Nor can they grasp the magnitude of his mercy without knowing something of his perfect justice.

The cross displays the perfect harmony of the attributes of God more than anything. This is why Paul calls the message of Christ Crucified **"the testimony about God"** (1 Cor. 2:1). Nowhere is the character of God more clearly displayed than in the cross of Christ. Therefore to mess with the message of the cross is to misrepresent the very nature of God. This is why Paul warned in Galatians 1:8 **"But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let them be under God's curse!"**

If we are to see people truly come to know God then like Paul we must resolve as a church **"to know nothing... except Jesus Christ and him crucified"** by heralding the full message of the cross. This is the message that will reveal and meet a person's greatest need... and reveal the character and nature of God to them more than anything.

## *2. Human wisdom will empty the cross of its power*

Do you know that we preach a scandalous message when we preach Christ Crucified? But at the same time we preach the power of God that brings salvation! We don't see people being crucified today as Paul's first listeners did, so the impact is somewhat lost on us. But Paul knew what he was up against. That's why he said; V18, 22-23 **"For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing... Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles."**

To both Greeks and Romans, the stigma of crucifixion made the whole idea of the gospel ridiculous. Crucifixion was a repugnant, demeaning kind of execution reserved for the scum of society. The idea of someone dying on a cross being a Saviour-God was absurd to them... It was complete foolishness.

If the Gentile attitude was bad, the Jewish was worse and even more hostile. They detested the practice and scorned it more than anyone. In their view, anybody who ever ended up on a cross fulfilled Deut 21:23 which says; **“His body shall not remain overnight on the tree... for he who is hung on a tree is under God’s curse.”** A Messiah cursed by God would have been absolutely unthinkable to the Jewish mind... It was a major stumbling block.

No wonder the Gentiles and Jews hated Paul’s message. It was a message that defied all the worldviews surrounding him. And in the face of it, all he ever talked about was the cross! No seeker-friendly or PC message was heard from Paul’s lips, only the foolishness of the cross... It takes much more faith to preach a message that contradicts the culture around you than it does to preach one conditioned by it. You need to depend on God a lot more because if God doesn’t show up and demonstrate his power in people’s hearts, you’re in big trouble.

The truth is the message of the cross will always clash with human wisdom. There’s nothing about the message of the cross that sits well with the world or sits comfortably with how a person views themselves. In fact in order to truly accept it a person often has to

completely change their view of themselves, life and God. People are by nature proud, but to accept the message of the cross a person needs to humble themselves and be taught by God...

We live in a time when so many books are written on mission, church and ministry, probably more than ever before. I’ve tried to implement some of what I’ve read in my time in ministry but to be honest the effects have never been that great. Now I find myself asking: How much of what is written is human wisdom and how much is the wisdom of God? Paul said V20-21;

**“Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what we preach to save those who believe...”**

How much of the wisdom, teaching and philosophy floating around the church today is simply getting in the way of the message of the cross and emptying Christianity of its power? God’s says V19 **‘I will frustrate the wisdom of the wise; the intelligent I will frustrate.’** I fear that the church in the west has, in large part, become too wise for the foolishness of God, and in doing so the cross of Christ has been

emptied of its power. We need to get back to the message of Christ Crucified as it is revealed in Scripture. God is not looking for people with wise ideas he is looking for people foolish enough to preach Christ Crucified! The wisest thing we can ever do is preach the most foolish message in the world... **“Christ the power and wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is [and always will be] wiser than human wisdom!”**

Also, the message of the cross will always divide people into two camps; those who are perishing and us who are being saved. Those who see it as foolishness and those who see it as the power of God... Therefore the message of the cross is a life and death, heaven or hell message. For this reason it is an eternally important message since the wellbeing of people’s souls depends on how they view the Cross of Christ! How do you view the message of the cross; as foolishness or as the power of God? Which camp are you set up in? The camp of human wisdom or the camp of **“fools for Christ”** (1 Cor. 4:10), the camp of the perishing or those being saved? **“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”** Paul says!

Paul said in 1 Cor. 2:2-5; **“For I resolved to know nothing while I was**

**with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.”** He did not adapt the message of the cross one bit. He did not condition it to make it more suitable for the surrounding culture. In fact he did the opposite. Instead of choosing human wisdom and eloquence to reach a culture in which these things were very highly esteemed, he resolved to know nothing but Jesus Christ and him crucified. Of course he was prepared to sacrifice his rights and preferences as chapter 9 makes clear, but he refused to water down the message or use human wisdom. His reason being that... **“Faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God’s power?”** How different Paul’s thinking was with a lot of what you hear today... He says **“I came to you in weakness with fear and trembling.”**

See when you step out, choosing not to depend on human wisdom or the thinking of the culture around you, you put yourself in a very scary place. You are naked, weak and vulnerable before people. You have nothing of your own to rely on... and if God doesn’t move in hearts things will not go well. To truly preach Christ Crucified as it is laid out in Scripture you have to rest completely on God’s power. The message of the cross clashes with every culture and with how a person views themselves, but at the same time you know deep down that it is the only hope they have – to you it is the power of God! So when you feel

like shrinking back, when you are in the place of weakness, fear and trembling you tell yourself again; **“I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes.”** And you preach it for all your worth so that **“your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God’s power.”**

Paul said; V4 **“My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power.”**

Now there are many ways in which the Spirit can demonstrate his power... but the greatest **“demonstration of the Spirit's power”** is a new heart & a transformed life! His greatest demonstration of power is the lives he saves through the message of the cross. No other message has the power to melt the hardest of human hearts... When the Holy Spirit hears the message of Christ Crucified truly heralded he delights in demonstrating his power by changing hearts and lives because he knows **“faith will not rest on human wisdom, nut on God’s power.”**

If we want to see true and lasting demonstrations of the Spirit’s power then we must preach the scandal of the cross!