

"We Preach Christ Crucified" | 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5

Trinity Presbyterian Church | Reverend Steve Johnson

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Please turn in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5 (p. 952-953). Last week Pastor Chris preached on the problem of divisions in the Corinthian church and this week we'll look at one essential solution to divisions – unity in the word of the cross. I'll actually start reading from verse 17 since that verse leads into our passage for today.

1 Corinthians 1:17-2:5 (ESV)

¹⁷ For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

¹⁸ For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹ For it is written,

**"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart."**

²⁰ Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹ For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. ²² For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

²⁶ For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ 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; ²⁸ God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, ²⁹ so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. ³⁰ And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, ³¹ so that, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."

2 And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. ² For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. ³ And 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, ⁵ so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

It's been a little under two years since we installed the "Vessels of Grace" artwork in the foyer, the art and pottery by our brother Eric Van Wyk, and I continue to find fresh encouragement from it. If you're new to Trinity, you may not know some of the story behind it. Eric's father does pottery and a while back his barn burned down with so many of his pottery pieces inside, breaking many of the pots. Instead of seeing garbage, Eric saw an opportunity to create something very meaningful. He used the Japanese artform *kintsugi* to mend his father's broken pottery with a lacquer mixed with powdered gold. He restored the pottery to an even greater beauty than it originally had, with lines of gold shining where there were once broken pieces. There are many gospel themes in this pottery, but I am especially reminded today of one in particular, and it comes from 2 Corinthians 4:7, **"But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us."** Paul is calling us fragile jars of clay, and the treasure in us is the gospel of Jesus Christ. There's a stark contrast between the infinitely valuable treasure and the fragile, common vessel that holds it. And that contrast exists so that it can be clearly seen that the surpassing power of the gospel belongs to God and not to us. We are weak, but the message we share has a power far beyond us. That's the point of our passage today in 1 Corinthians. The message of the cross is powerful and its power is not diminished by us, its weak messengers, but God has chosen to use those who are weak so that his glory and wisdom would shine forth all the brighter.

So as we walk through this passage, we'll first see The Powerful Message, then we'll consider The Weak Messengers, and then we'll end with a call to each of us to proclaim Christ.

I. The Powerful Message (1 Cor. 1:17-25)

1. Its content (vv. 17-18)

First, let's consider the powerful message and its content. In verse 17, Paul says that Christ commissioned him to preaching the gospel and to make preaching his #1 priority. It was more important than baptizing people or anything else. And Christ didn't commission Paul to preach because he was a great public speaker, but it sounds as if he commissioned Paul because he *wasn't* an eloquent speaker, so that it would be clearly seen that the power of the cross comes not from the messenger, but from the message itself.

So before we consider the power of this message - what is its content? We see in verses 17 and 18 that the content is the gospel, the good news of what Christ accomplished on the cross. Simply put, the good news of the gospel is, that **“Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners”** – that’s a quote from the Apostle Paul in 1 Timothy 1:15. Jesus had to come to reconcile man with God, because we’ve sinned against God, we’ve rebelled against him. And because it would be unjust for God to sweep our sin under the rug and not deal with it, there needed to be a just punishment for our sin, and so Jesus took our place and died on the cross, so that the punishment for our sins would be fully paid for and we would be forgiven and reconciled to God forever. The gospel is the story of the greatest love, the greatest sacrifice, and the greatest victory. It’s the best news. But it’s disturbing. It involves a cross, a wicked tool of the ancient Romans to not simply execute, but to torture. That makes us uncomfortable. And the gospel is also offensive to many. We don’t want to be told that we’re wrong and we deserve punishment. That’s the message of the cross. It’s good news to some, but disturbing and offensive to others.

2. Its judgment of the wise (vv. 18-21)

Let’s look now at verses 18-21 and see how the message of the cross brings judgment to the wise. **¹⁸ For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹ For it is written,**

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,

and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”

²⁰ Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹ For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.

People respond very, very differently to the gospel, don’t they? Some receive it with joy and are saved while others think it’s ridiculous, like it’s an old recycled myth. Why do some people think the word of the cross is folly? For some they find it ridiculous that God could become a man. Miracles like the virgin birth, Jesus’ healings, or the resurrection are impossible and belong to myths and fairy tales. Many people think the story of the cross is implausible, because if Jesus was truly God, he could have survived the cross, or at least he

could have chosen a different, less humiliating, less painful death. They question Jesus just as those who witnessed Jesus' crucifixion mocked him saying, "**He saved others; he cannot save himself... let him come down now from the cross**" (Matt. 27:42). I've also heard some say that the cross, if true, was just divine child abuse. When people are offended by the truth, when they don't want the gospel to be true, they'll come up with all sorts of reasons why they think it's ridiculous.

What someone thinks of the cross determines their eternal destiny. The cross is the fork in the road between perishing forever in hell, and enjoying eternal life with God in heaven. The cross brings judgment to those who think it's folly. A day of judgment is coming, when all will stand before God and give an account, and on that day, God will destroy the wisdom of the wise, those were wise only according to worldly standards. In verse 20 I think Paul might be picturing that judgment day and pointing out that on that day none of the worldly wise will be able to stand before God. "²⁰**Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?**" On the judgment day, where are the intellectuals who had all sorts of arguments against God? Why aren't they speaking up? Stephen Hawking and Christopher Hitchens will be speechless on that day. Mohammed, Confucius, and Buddha will have no reply. Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, will have no rebuttal. Freud and Nietzsche, Marx and Darwin, Hume and Voltaire will all be disgraced. Post-modernism, the belief that truth and morality is relative, will be as a candle to a hurricane on the day of the Lord. God will destroy the wisdom of the wise. Their works will be exposed as foolish and they and their ideas will be forgotten.

3. Its power and wisdom to save (vv. 22-25)

The word of the cross brings judgment to those who think it's ridiculous, but to those who believe it, it has the power to save. "²²**For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom,** ²³**but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles,** ²⁴**but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.** ²⁵**For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.**" In the gospel of John, the Jews asked Jesus for a sign a couple of times, looking for something miraculous, probably more to be amazed by

the miraculous than to put their doubts about Jesus at ease. Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, and we all have our gold-standard for testing if something is true. What's yours? Do you determine what's true based on your feelings and intuition? The Mormons will tell you to do that, that if you have a burning in your bosom when you read the Book of Mormon, that will be a confirmation from God that it's true.

We need something more than miracles, worldly wisdom, feelings and intuition. We need revelation from God. We need the word of the cross. The word of the cross has the power to call, to convince, and to convert a sinner. And although Jews and all kinds of Gentiles reject the message of the cross, verse 24 says that God calls many Jews and Gentiles to saving faith. There is no religion, no philosophy, that can resist the saving call of God. They are all powerless, as useless as walls of paper in defending the castle of the mind against the power of the word of the cross. Satanists, witches, pagans, Islamic extremists, Marxists, hedonists, evolutionists, nihilists, homosexuals, gang bangers, drug addicts, there is no way of thinking that cannot be converted with the message of the cross by the power of the Spirit! We often think "Oh that person would never listen to me about Jesus" as if there are certain kinds of sinners more likely to be saved. But when we think that, are we doubting the power of the cross?

And so we preach Christ crucified. It is the message of the cross that saves and not any other message. All preaching should be centered on the proclamation of Christ crucified for sinners, and any preaching that is missing that is missing the very power and wisdom of God for salvation. The English Puritan, John Trapp said this about preaching Christ, "We not only preach *of* Christ, but we *preach* Christ; we give what we preach.¹" That's a very important insight. When we preach Christ, we give Christ. When you hear us preach about Jesus, you can receive Jesus himself, Jesus the person, not just Jesus the idea. Through faith in the word of Christ, you receive the whole person of Christ. And... he receives you with open arms. Through gospel preaching and through faith, Christ is given to you and you to Christ.

¹ Scott M. Manetsch, Timothy George, and David W. McNutt, eds., *1 Corinthians: New Testament*, vol. IXa, Reformation Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017), 26.

And so here at Trinity, we are firmly committed to preaching Christ crucified each and every Sunday. Christ crucified is our cornerstone and no other. In every service you should hear the gospel at least three times: during the assurance of God's grace as we remember the gospel promise of our sins being forgiving, during the sermon (no matter what text we're preaching from we will always point to Jesus), and then finally during the Lord's Supper as we see a visible display of Christ crucified. If you've been getting bored by hearing the gospel again and again each week, check yourself and remember that it is the power and wisdom of God for salvation. It is a precious treasure. We need to remind ourselves of that.

The state of preaching in churches around the world leaves much to be desired. While there has been a moderate revival of expository, Christ-centered preaching among evangelicals over the past 30 years, there are many pulpits where Christ crucified is not the main thing or is even rarely mentioned. So what are they preaching if not Christ crucified? Here's a list:

- There's legal preaching, where the focus of the whole message is on what to do or what not to do. It's all about obedience, on being a good Christian, but it never or rarely points the hearer to Christ who has perfectly fulfilled the law and provided forgiveness for how we've failed to be obedient.
- There's prosperity preaching, where the focus of the message is having enough faith to claim the health and wealth that God wants you to have. Jesus is a means to get worldly possessions and success and status. It's all about blessing and not about the curse that Jesus bore so that we might have everlasting blessings in the life to come. Prosperity preaching does not have the power of God to save.
- Then there's therapy preaching, where the preacher is effectively trying to do group counseling, using the philosophies of secular counseling to help people overcome their fears and their feelings of inadequacy and their past hurts. You can become a better and happier person, if you get your emotional and relational needs met.
- There's TED Talk preaching, where the sermon is a smooth presentation of quotable soundbites of the preacher's thoughts about relevant topics, with a Bible verse or two thrown in for good measure. It's not too serious and not too long.

- And then there's social gospel preaching and political preaching. These kinds of preaching focus on changing the culture through social and political action. It's all about rousing people to vote a certain way, to protest at certain events, to show up at certain causes, to solve homelessness or poverty, or to fight racism or sexism or homophobia. It frames Jesus as a supporter of their social or political movement. They use Jesus as a means to build a certain utopia in this country. This preaching is absent of the power and wisdom of God.
- There's also tradition preaching, where the teachings and traditions of men are the substance of the message. Sometimes the sacraments are given priority over the preached word. Christ crucified isn't enough; obedience to the traditions of men is added for salvation or for assurance of salvation.

I could keep critiquing the pulpits of others, but lest we boast in ourselves, how does our preaching in our presbyterian and reformed circles fall short? I think our preaching, including my own, often lacks prayer. There can be such a trust in theological education, commentaries, and reformed priorities in preaching, that we do not pray as much or as fervently as is needed to be truly dependent on God as we preach. In our reformed circles we can also preach too eloquently or too intellectually. We sound smart, but people don't understand what we're saying. And maybe they don't want to voice that they didn't understand us, because they'd feel dumb or they don't want to criticize. But preachers need to know if they're not preaching clearly.²

II. The Weak Messengers (1 Cor. 1:26-2:5)

1. The Corinthians' weakness (1:26-31)
 - a. Who God chose (v. 26)

That's the powerful message we are to proclaim. Now let's consider our second point, the weak messengers. In verses 26-31, we hear of the Corinthians' weaknesses. We'll see who God chose, why God chose them, and why we boast in Christ alone. **"²⁶ For**

² I also think sometimes reformed preachers try to preach Calvinism as if converting people to a reformed perspective is what's most important. Now I obviously think it's important to have a reformed perspective of Scripture, because I have found no other approach to Scripture that gives me more of Christ and him crucified. But we must first and foremost preach Christ crucified.

consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth.” Paul calls the Corinthians, and us, to reflect on how we measure up to the world’s standards. Our church, like the Corinthian church, is a mishmash of people with different backgrounds, upbringings, and education, all called and chosen by God. The world isn’t very impressed by many of us. But here we all are – united together by the cross of Christ. Last week we heard about the divisions in the Corinthian church, how people were dividing over which Christian leaders they were following. But here we see that the cross of Christ can unite a divided and diverse church. The highly educated and the uneducated, the young and the old, those of notable birth and the nobodies, people from various ethnicities and economic statuses – all brought together by the cross of Christ. We may disagree about secondary and tertiary doctrines and ministry philosophies, but we share one faith in one Lord united together by the same Spirit. And that is what is most important.

b. Why God chose them (vv. 27-29)

God has chosen a diverse church, but why did he do that? Why did God choose those who were weak? Paul answers this in verses 27-29, **“²⁷ 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; ²⁸ God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, ²⁹ so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.”** Throughout Scripture we see this pattern of God choosing the weak to do his will. He chose the small and weak nation of Israel to be his treasured possession, his beacon to the world (Deut. 7). He chose Moses who wasn’t eloquent in speech. He chose Jeremiah in his youth (Jer. 1:6). He chose Mary, a poor teenager. He chose uneducated fishermen, many who were likely teens or young adults, to be his apostles and preachers (Matt. 4:18-22). He chose a boy with five loaves and bread and two fish (John 6:9). And why does God choose the lowly and the weak? To expose the foolishness of the world’s standards of power and to display most clearly the power and glory of God. No one will boast in the presence of God on the day of judgment. No one will boast in their intelligence or their parents or their family line or their good works. Because the word of the cross is

the power of God for salvation, all the praise will go to God. As God declared in Isaiah 42:8, **“my glory I give to no other....”**

Our weaknesses often make us feel very limited or even useless, don't they? We look at our lack of skills, our lack of training, our lack of eloquence and influence, our lack of health or time or energy, and we put God in a box and assume that he couldn't work through us. But remember, dear Christian, God chose the weak to shame the strong. Our weakness is an opportunity for God's power to shine forth, for God alone to be praised. We might be ordinary, but God and the word of the cross are extraordinary. We are mere jars of clay, but the word of the cross that God has given us is a powerful treasure. And so share the gospel and expect it to have power even though it's coming from you.

c. Why we boast in Christ alone (vv. 30-31)

God chose to save and commission the weak in order to display his glory. Now in verses 30-31, we see more reasons to boast in Christ alone. ³⁰ **And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption,** ³¹ **so that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.”** God has united us to Jesus Christ, a permanent union where we partake in his life and receive all the benefits of being connected to him. Christ is our wisdom. All of it. Christ is our righteousness. All of it. Christ is our sanctification. All of it. Christ is our redemption. All of it. Christ is our everything! We do not add to him nor do we need to. Christ is sufficient. And so we boast in Christ and in Christ alone.

2. Paul's weakness (2:1-5)

a. Paul's lack of eloquence (v. 1)

That brings us to the 2nd chapter of 1st Corinthians. After Paul highlights how the Corinthians are weak messengers, he includes himself and says that he too is weak. Prior to becoming a Christian, Paul, may have been admired in the eyes of the world: he was wise by worldly standards, he was likely born in an upper-class family given his high level of education, and he had a degree of power and influence as a top pharisee. But God still chose him and humbled him through much suffering, showing him how weak and dependent he was so that God would get all the glory in his life. The Corinthians likely looked up to Paul,

so Paul shows some transparency here about his weaknesses, to point their confidence away from him and onto God. Look at chapter 2 verse 1, **“And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom.”** Here Paul tells the Corinthians to remember back when he was with them and how unimpressive he was by worldly standards. He lacked eloquence as a speaker. He didn’t share the high class wisdom of the philosophers. Now Paul likely was educated in the Greek philosophers, so probably could have schooled them all in Greek thought. But Paul didn’t flex his brains around the Corinthians. He didn’t want to make them think that the power of the gospel was in the power of any mere man.

b. Paul’s intentionally simple message (v. 2)

And so if Paul didn’t speak with lofty speech or worldly wisdom, what did he teach? **“² For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.”** Certainly Paul is exaggerating here to make his point. When Paul was with the Corinthian church, everything he taught was connected to the cross of Christ. Without the cross, there’s no aspect of the Christian life that makes sense. Christianity without the cross isn’t Christianity at all. It is like a soulless wax sculpture, like at wax museums, it has the general appearance of Christianity, but it has no power or life. All of our preaching, all of our doctrine, all of our worship, must rest on Christ crucified.

c. Paul’s fear (v. 3)

In verse 3 Paul goes on to share his weaknesses, **“³ And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling....”** Even though he was an apostle, a man commissioned through a vision of Jesus himself, Paul was still susceptible to fear and trembling. In another passage Paul spoke of his anxiety for the churches.³ He had endured so many life-threatening situations and threats, he struggled and suffered with fear. Paul struggled with fear, just like us.

³ 2 Cor. 11:28, “And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.”

d. Paul's dependence on the Spirit's power (v. 4)

Paul goes on in verse 4, **“⁴and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power,”**. Paul didn't put his hope in how great his presentation of the gospel was, instead he hoped in and depended on the Spirit to demonstrate his power through the message of the cross. We too should have this hope and dependence when we share the gospel with others. Although we may bumble our words or be stumped by some questions, the power is not in us to save, but it belongs to the Spirit alone. That's all the reason we need to be confident in sharing the gospel. Don't look at your weaknesses, remember the power of the Spirit.

e. Why God used Paul in his weakness (v. 5)

In verse 5, Paul gets to the purpose for why God used him in his weaknesses, **“⁵so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.”** Where does your faith rest? Put no confidence in man or in yourself and your abilities. God alone has all the power.

III. A Call for Weak Messengers to Proclaim Christ

God uses weak messengers to share his powerful message. And so God wants you proclaim Christ. Yes, you. Children and teens included. God wants you, with all your inadequacies, all of your weaknesses, to represent him and share Jesus with those you know. And maybe even with some people you don't. Ask people if they know who Jesus is. And start a conversation. Don't wait to evangelize until you know everything and you're 100% confident. That won't ever happen. God uses the weak. His message has all the power. God is calling all of us to proclaim Christ in our spheres of influence.

Now I could end there. But I believe God might be calling some here to future full-time ministry. We need Christians in all sorts of vocations. But it is the church's sole responsibility to train up future preachers Future pastors and elders, chaplains and missionaries, evangelists and church planters. You might be child, a teenager, someone who's in their career or even retired, and God might be calling you to fulltime ministry. With the Boomer generation retiring, there is a growing need for pastors to fill empty pulpits. And there is such a need for new churches here in southeast Minnesota and

beyond. A church planting movement has begun in our presbytery. Hundreds of thousands of dollars are being raised. Relationships are being built with seminaries so that men can get affordable online seminary training while staying in Minnesota. And the needs for more missionaries all around the world are really endless. God calls some to stay and support, but is God calling you to explore a call to missions? Pray about it. Don't be afraid. You might by the world's standards be too young or too old or not smart enough or not eloquent enough. But God has chosen the weak to share his powerful message. Is God calling you to full-time ministry?

Let's pray.