

THE MESSAGE OF THE CROSS

I. “To Know Nothing Except Jesus Christ and Him Crucified”

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1 Cor. 1:10-2:5

TEXT: *For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you*

INTRODUCTION

If you were asked to summarize the Gospel in two or three words, what would you say? Could you focus the essence of it all in just a couple of words? Our text leaves no question on how Paul would respond. His response wouldn't be, “God is love,” or “love your neighbor,” or “obey God.” It would be “Jesus crucified.” The phrase, “Jesus crucified,” as my brother notes,

- is not a reduction but a concentration,
- not a blurring of reality but a focusing,
- not a watering down but a distillation.

The Cross is certainly the main symbol of our Christian faith. And we all know the Cross is about the forgiveness of our sins through Christ's death. Yet, it is far more than that. It defines the way of the Gospel and the “how” of its working in our lives. In the Cross we see the very essence of the Gospel.

For this Lenten season, I'm preaching a short series about the Cross of Christ. My concern is, that in all our teaching about the Christian faith, we don't lose the centrality of the Cross. There are many ways the Gospel is being packaged to be more attractive to people. Some of these “evangelistic” attempts are well-meaning and may have a place. The Christian message is variously “sold” as:

- therapeutic— healing our depression, anxieties, and low self-esteem;
- giving us purpose and meaning in life;
- helping us succeed in life;
- meeting our needs;
- etc., etc.

Certainly there is truth in all of this. And it is not wrong to begin with our “felt needs.” That's where Jesus often began. But, in all this making the Gospel appealing and relevant to our needs, sometimes the Cross of Christ gets displaced as the centerpiece it really is. As theologian N. T. Wright says,

“If you simply address the God-shaped blank that people think they've got, the God you end up with is the God shaped by the blank.”

Charles Colson tells of visiting a megachurch that had acquired an enormous new facility. In the sanctuary (which they referred to as an auditorium) where the pastor preaches to thousands every Saturday and Sunday, Colson said he could find no cross. He asked a member about it. This member replied, “I don't know why it's not there. Maybe the cross is just, you know, too much

of a downer.” In similar vein, Colson says that Denver’s Full Gospel Chapel changed its name to the Happy Church. “It draws people,” said the pastor.

Certainly most churches have the Cross displayed prominently. Hopefully it is the central focus of the place of worship. This has been true throughout the history of the church. The ancient cathedrals were even built in the shape of the Cross. I appreciate the architecture of our church which puts the cross front and center before us as we worship. Also, exact replicas of this cross are mounted outside the building at each end. And on the roof is another cross. So, we literally have the cross before us, behind us, and over us as we gather in worship. But that is no guarantee that it remains the center of our faith. This morning we’re looking at Paul’s startling proclamation of the message of the Cross. In the Cross, we see the wisdom and power of God. Thus, Paul proclaims in our text:

For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you

The context and message that brings this radical defining of the Gospel is one that also speaks to us.

READ: 1 Cor. 1:10-2:5

THE CROSS: THE WISDOM AND POWER OF GOD

The main theme running through this section is that in the cross we see (and receive) both the wisdom and power of God.

First of all wisdom. Who could have guessed that this is how salvation would come, with God himself coming to us in Christ and dying on a cross for our sins? But in it we see the wisdom of God, for only He understands our human condition and need. Thus only He knows how we can be saved. We can never be saved by human effort because that is exactly how the human race went wrong. Adam and Eve decided to do it their way, not God’s way. And all effort rooted in ourselves merely compounds the problem for it puts us more in charge and more in control of ourselves. It cannot correct the root problem of all our sin— self and rebellion against God.

And the cross is the power of God, for on it, Jesus defeated the powers of darkness that held us captive. We began our worship with a call to worship from Col 2:13-15, beginning with The Message and ending with the NIV:

When you were stuck in your old sin-dead life, you were incapable of responding to God. God brought you alive — right along with Christ! Think of it! All sins forgiven, the slate wiped clean, that old arrest warrant canceled and nailed to Christ's Cross. And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

Not only are we freed from our sins, but delivered from the powers of all the other ugly stuff sin brought into the world. Just as Jesus in His earthly ministry healed, performed miracles, and delivered people from bondage, He continues to do so. The Cross brings salvation in the biggest sense of the word— right now in our struggles as well as eternally. There is supernatural power here, actually releasing us from our sins, from the guilt of sin, and giving us the glorious assurance that they will never be held against us. We are born again through the Spirit. It is real

except .

and it is the miracle of miracles in what happens inside. And we continue to experience His divine help and power to live like Jesus lived.

It all starts with the Cross of Christ. It means accepting the fact that we cannot save ourselves. It means letting go of our way, and accepting His forgiveness of our sins. It means making Him Lord of all our lives. It means transferring our trust from ourselves to Him. In short, it is total relinquishment of our lives to God. In doing that, we experience the power of God. It is the beginning, the middle, and the end of the Christian life.

I can give personal testimony that all the many turning points in my faith journey have been as a result of coming back to the Cross of Christ in surrender. I drift, I lose focus, and my priorities can get misplaced. Whenever that happens, I need to return to the foot of the Cross in surrender and receive again the life Jesus offers. Then, I experience afresh the wisdom and power of God that is there. But I need to keep relearning this. I need to hear Paul's clarity of focus on the Cross.

Paul warns of the ever present tendency to rob the Cross of its power.

EMPTYING THE CROSS OF ITS POWER (17)

This letter was written quite early, before any of the Gospels. And, there are already serious problems in this church at Corinth. Paul was with them 18 months establishing the church and setting it on a good foundation, yet they quickly drifted from the centrality of the Cross. And, because of that, they were divided. They were getting centered in the personalities of some of the early church leaders who had apparently visited and the nuances of their teachings. So, there were the followers of Paul, Apollos, Cephas, (Aramaic for Peter), and Christ. Now we aren't told about the issues. We would assume they all were teaching the message about Christ accurately, since Paul raises no objection with any of them. The problem is the Corinthians. They were beginning to shape their Christianity around how they thought those teachers would teach about the issues at hand. Paul appeals to them to be *perfectly united in mind and thought* (10). When we start following the messenger instead of Christ, divisions result. A party spirit is cultivated so we feel we are right and they are wrong, leading to arguments and division. We begin to trust our human wisdom and reasoning, which leads to self-confidence and pride. In so doing, Paul warns, we empty the Cross of its power. Paul states his calling from Christ was

to preach the gospel — not with words of human wisdom, lest the Cross of Christ be emptied of its power. (17)

It has been well said, the ground at the foot of the Cross is level. It is a place of humility. We are all hopeless sinners. None of us can save ourselves. We all need Jesus as our Savior. We are all recipients of a common grace that is beyond any human reckoning. And, the community of the church is based upon the reality that whom Christ has received and welcomed, we also must receive and welcome. And in Christ, we are all one.

Now, Paul moves on to address the tendency to make the message more palatable.

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. (18)

The word “perishing” in the Greek expresses an ongoing process— that is perishing day by day by the way they live, the choices they make, and not knowing the source of Life. They are dying bit by bit. The word “foolishness” is deliberately chosen. It was a favorite putdown in that day where people engaged in the sport of debating. We catch the flavor of that in Paul’s famous debate on Mars Hill in Athens. If the presenters arguments didn’t come fully together philosophically in the listeners mind, Greeks would dismiss it as “foolishness”— a serious put-down.

Paul is warning these Corinthians against a marketing strategy that tries to water-down the message of the Cross to “make sense” to the natural mind. It never will. It only can be received by those in whom the Spirit of God is at work, opening their hearts and minds to receive. Salvation is not something we are persuaded into by good arguments. It is God’s doing from beginning to end. He must open our hearts and minds through the convicting power of the Holy Spirit.

There are two categories of people mentioned that resist the message: Jews and Greeks. That pretty well covers the residents of Corinth. The Jews, in their natural thinking could not buy into a faith that started with a crucified Savior. The Old Testament law said, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree” (Deut 21:23). The worst argument you could use with a Jewish intellectual was to start with the Cross. That God would save us through someone the law declared cursed was incomprehensible to them.

And, for the Greeks (and Romans as well), the worst thing you could do would be to talk about a Savior who was God and had entered the world to suffer. Greek gods never suffered, never entered into the human condition with all its frailty and put to death, to all appearances, a helpless victim. The gods remained apart from us, strong, heroic figures. This was alien thinking to the culture of that day.

Today, we could add some other categories. The New Age spirituality is eclectic, loosely defined as almost anything inside that makes you feel spiritual. To speak of one way of salvation through the Cross seems narrow and unenlightened. Modernity’s denial of objective truth makes the One who claimed to be The Truth as seeming to be terribly misguided. To those making all truth measured by themselves, they think, “How can anyone else define your truth?” Then there is the general feeling rampant in our world that every religion leads to the same place. To that way of thinking, it is highly intolerant to claim Christianity is the only way. Certainly sincere people in other faiths are not going to be lost, they think. To them, the Cross of Christ is nice, but not necessary.

All of this can be rather intimidating, causing us to pull our punches regarding the centrality of the Cross. But, in so doing, Paul warns, we lose the power of God to transform lives.

What seems to make sense to everyone in their humanistic thinking is self-help religion. In essence it says our salvation depends upon doing more good than bad with a little help from “god-as-we-understand him.” And, the good and bad we do is also defined “as-we-understand-

it.” Every single world religion, except Christianity, is based upon doing enough good— a system of works— in order to be saved. Only Christianity says you cannot ever do enough. So God in His mercy has done it for us on the Cross of Christ. It makes no sense to the natural mind. No one ever came up with a religion like that in all the thousands of world religions. Christianity stands alone. That should tell us something. It is not thought up by human reason, but given to us, revealed to us by God in Christ.

The only ones to whom the Cross will make sense are those at the end of their ropes— those who know they need saving and cannot save themselves. It is the broken, hurting, wounded people who will begin to understand. For these are the ones humble enough to question our human reasoning and in whom the Holy Spirit can awaken a heart to receive what Christ offers on the Cross.

So it is that Paul movingly describes the way God has saved us. It is not because we figured it out or got our act together. It is not because we are disciplined or brilliant in our thinking. It is not because we are good people or strong, self-disciplined people. Listen again to vs. 1:26- 2:5.

26 Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. 27 But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. 28 He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things — and the things that are not — to nullify the things that are, 29 so that no one may boast before him. 30 God has united you with Christ Jesus. For our benefit God made him to be wisdom itself. Christ made us right with God; he made us pure and holy, and he freed us from sin. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God — that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. 31 Therefore, as it is written: "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord."

2:1 When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. 2 For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. 3 I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling. 4 My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, 5 so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power. (NIV, except vs. 30, NLT)

Paul’s own testimony shows how clearly he understood this. He was among the most learned and brilliant minds of his day. Even today we stand in awe of his letters and the theology he develops. But, Paul was determined to not get in the way of this. Therefore he says,

I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. (1 Cor. 2:2)

“I resolved” reflects a deliberate choice. “Resolved” is a strong word, not like “I decided.” There is force behind this decision to hold to that course and that alone. The Greek word for “know here indicates “giving full attention to.” So Paul’s ministry is marked by a strong determination to let nothing distract him from complete attention to “Jesus Christ and Him crucified.” When he speaks of weakness and fear and much trembling, he is speaking of his human vessel. But,

because he was willing to not trust in himself and his considerable ability to persuade people, the power of God was able to be manifested. That is how the Cross works– God doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves.

CONCLUSION

Charles Spurgeon was one of the great preachers of the late 19th century. He reflects what Paul is saying in our Scripture in that Spurgeon said he determined that whatever his text, he must get cross-country as quickly as possible to the Cross of Christ. He knew from his own experience that that is where the transforming power of God is made available to us. And that's what he offered week after week to his London congregation.

Yes, our troubles and needs are many and diverse. Yet human wisdom, effort, and means will always come short. Whether in counseling, from the pulpit, or in my own life– I want to listen and discern what is going on and accurately apply the teachings of Christ. But, in the end, it all involves getting cross-country to the Cross of Christ in surrender to Him. Therein is the wisdom and power of God.