

Text: I Corinthians 2:1-5

Title: “The Way of the Cross”

INTRODUCTION

We’re making progress. We’ve talking about the importance of the Gospel, the message of the Cross. And this year’s presentation of the Passion will proclaim the message of the Cross. Would you take this matter to heart? Invite family members and friends to each of the performances? Bring them with you on Easter Sunday morning for worship.

Open your Bibles to I Corinthians 2. We’ve seen how the power of God resides in the Gospel. The power of God is released when the Gospel is proclaimed. And the power of God results in lives being changed.

ILLUSTRATION – This past week I received an email from a young man who has attended our church in the past, but has gone on to be a pastor.

After an initial greeting he shared this:

“I have been praying for 20 years for the salvation of my brother. Well on 3/5 in the parking lot of Travis while you were in Sunday night activity, he came to know the Lord. All glory goes to God and His providence.

“We were actually going to check out another church but I could not get together with my brother on Saturday so he suggested that we meet for church on Sunday(3/5). His idea was to meet at Travis for the 11am service. I said that would be fine so we came to Travis. Your text that morning was 1Cor. 1 as you began your series on the cross and shared the gospel in clear terms. Quite frankly, from my perspective it was pretty easy at that point. I spent the afternoon with my brother and had left the car I was driving in the Travis lot so that I could ride with him(he's driving a Mercedes it wasn't a hard decision). It gave us that time together and your sermon gave me a platform to follow up on what God was already doing in his life.”

This friend went on to thank me for the ministry of our church in his life. But this is the way it happens so often. Bringing people with you to church is a great way to build a spiritual relationship with another person.

Read text.

The “way of the Cross” is the most powerful way to relate to others so that they can experience real transformation in their lives. When we talk about “the way of the Cross,” we’re talking about the way a person is saved. We’re talking about the message we proclaim as a church through all that we do.

Now it all starts with ...

I. THE AIM

“That your faith might not rest on men’s wisdom, but on God’s power” (v.5).

My goal, my aim, for you, my dear church family, is summed up in the words of Paul in v.5: “...your faith might not rest on men’s wisdom, but on God’s power.” That’s what I want to happen for us all. I want you to live your life by faith in God’s power ... to learn to live your life totally sustained by God.

Now the alternative is to live your life by faith in what Paul calls in v.5 “men’s wisdom.” And what exactly is that? It is ...

- **Self-sufficient** - It focuses purely on what man can do by himself, without any help from God. So the secret is to get educated, get healthy, get beautiful, get rich, and life’s all good.
- **Self-indulgent** - It focuses on sensual things. It’s concerned with making you happy, making you feel good.
- **Self-righteous** - The wisdom of man even has a religious component to it, and it takes the form of a works-based religion, that you are made right with God by doing good things for other people.

And many people try to make life work by putting their faith in this man-centered wisdom. But the only problem is that it doesn’t work. So that’s why our aim is that your faith would not be in men’s wisdom, but in God’s power.

And that leads to ...

II. THE APPROACH (v.1-4)

Your aim will determine your approach.

ILLUSTRATION – Mom’s suppose you are trying to teach your children how to help out around the house and clean the carpet. Now your aim is for them not to just pick up some of the trash on the carpet. If that’s your aim, then your approach would be to teach them how to go around the house and look for pieces of paper or potato chips on the carpet and to pick it up. Now that approach would work in your son’s dorm room, but you know that will not be sufficient for your home. So your aim is for them to really get the carpet clean, even from the stuff that they cannot see. So you introduce them to something called a vacuum cleaner. But they must understand that just rolling that vacuum cleaner over the carpet won’t get the job done. It has to be turned on. And even then it won’t work unless it’s plugged into the electrical outlet. So you teach them, “This is a plug. The plug goes into that outlet there on the wall. The reason it has to be done this way is that there is power in there that is necessary to run this vacuum cleaner.”

So it is spiritually. If our aim is for people to put their faith in man’s wisdom, then they’ll get what man can accomplish. But if our aim is to connect them with God’s power, then they’ll see what God can accomplish.

So Paul says, “Since my aim is that your faith would not rest in man’s wisdom, but in God’s power, my approach is this...”

“I did not approach you ... “

1. “With eloquence or superior wisdom” (v.1)

1 Corinthians 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.

Now the reason this was an option for Paul is that it was the standard way of approaching Corinthian people (Greeks).

Historians tell us that the city of Corinth was a great center of pagan worship that included sexual immorality as an act of worship of the pagan goddess Aphrodite. It was a great cosmopolitan city that trafficked in business, art, music and architecture. But it was also a crossroads for ideas. Philosophers who were trained public speakers made a living by captivating audiences with the oratory skills.

ILLUSTRATION – Now my favorite part of the newspaper each week is the *Star Time* entertainment section that comes in the Friday newspaper. And you can see read about where the newest movies are showing, the best place to eat BBQ, or where to go to hear a great concert.

Well when the *Corinthian Star-Telegram* came out, they didn’t list the movies, or the restaurants, or the concert venues. They would list the philosophers (sophists, as they were sometimes called).

Culturally, these guys were the entertainers of their day. They might be equivalent to modern day rock or country music stars. There were no TV’s or movie theaters for entertainment, but there were coliseums and amphitheaters. These gifted public speakers were held in high regard, even idolized—not all that different than modern day musicians, stand-up comics, movie/TV stars, politicians, preachers, etc.

And they were good at what Paul talks about here in v.1 ... “eloquence and superior wisdom.”

“Eloquence” was the persuasive manner of speaking of the entertaining Greek orators. Oh, they could hold an audience in the palm of their hand, but for what ... man’s wisdom.

“Superior wisdom” was the philosophical notions that the Greeks like to stand around and discuss all day long, fed to them by these traveling entertainers.

The challenge comes at this point: In Corinth, eloquence and superior wisdom were what drew the crowds. The temptation would have been for Paul to employ an approach to get their attention. But he was unwilling to use these tools.

The sophist, the traveling entertainers, knew how to manipulate the crowds, how to move the crowds. And that's fine for entertainment. But when the Corinthian went home from the evening after the "show," was their life changed? Had it made a difference for eternity? No.

Now if Paul would have entered Corinth the way that he knew would really "wow" the Corinthians, put in terms we might understand, Paul would have flown into the Corinthian International Airport in his private plane, met by a limo that whisked him off to the Acropolis Plaza luxury hotel. At the appointed time his motorcade would deliver him to the great stadium where he stepped onto the platform and delivered his inspiring and entertaining speech, for which he is paid an enormous sum of money. Later his press agent would arrange private interviews with CNN (Corinthian News Network), and an intimate reception with some of the leading people of the city. Now that's what the Corinthians went in for!

The people in the church in Corinth may have been clamoring it as well. Church would be so much more entertaining and fun if the pastor would be like the entertainers. Wouldn't he get better results if he approached people like that?

Answer: Yes, if the aim is just to make people feel good and send them away. But if the aim is for people to connect with ... to put their trust in the power of God, then the approach has to be different. What a pastor or teacher must do, is not just to charge people up, but he/she has the noble task of pointing people to the power outlet, and helping them take the plug of their life and plugging it into the power outlet of God's truth, God's Word.

And if the ministry of the church doesn't help people do that, they may go away with a buzz, but not like it would be if they were actually plugged into the power of God.

"I did not approach you with eloquence or superior wisdom, nor did I approach you ..."

2. "With wise and persuasive words" (v.4)

1 Corinthians 2:4a - My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words,

Now this doesn't mean that Paul didn't try to communicate effectively. He did.

Acts 18:4 - Every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks.

So what does this mean? It means that he stuck to the message. The devices he employed in his preaching and teaching were just to explain what God has to say about life. His words were not wise because he was brilliant, they were wise because God's Word is wisdom. His message was not "persuasive" because Paul had this magnetic appeal about him, but that the Word of God empowered by the Spirit of God persuades hearts.

So if this was the way he didn't approach them, how *did* he approach them?

"BUT RATHER I APPROACHED YOU..."

1. “(Knowing) nothing ... except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (v.2)

1 Corinthians 2:2 - For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

In v.1 Paul said, “I proclaimed to you the testimony of God ... the message of God about Jesus Christ and Him crucified.”

And in v.2 it says that he “resolved,” that is, a pre-determination or decision. It was Paul’s decided strategy, and it must be ours.

I encourage you to go back and read the parallel accounts of Luke given in the book of Acts, describing what Paul was going through as he came to Corinth. He had been beaten, flogged, and harassed in virtually every city. He was assaulted by gangs and riots. In the Athens he was mocked and largely ignored.

With all that Paul had faced in the way of rejection in the other cities where he had proclaimed this message, Paul may have thought, “I’ve got to change my gig. This just isn’t working. It’s about to kill me.” Did he? No, absolutely not. Why? Because the Lord Jesus Christ had given him his orders, a mission. Deliver this message ... the way of the Cross.

Sure, it’s foolishness to most people who hear that message. How could the execution of one man 30 years ago for the Corinthian listeners (2000 years ago to today’s listeners) be that important? Foolishness!

So he came knowing nothing except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. He said, “I also came...”

2. “With weakness and fear, and with much trembling” (v.3)

1 Corinthians 2:3 - I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling.

This ought to be an encouragement to all of us who have felt the fear of witnessing. Even Paul was nervous about his own abilities when he walked into the culture of Corinth to try to be a witness there.

So into Corinth walks this strange little man. We’d not be surprised that he limps or moves gingerly from the injuries and ill treatment he’s received just about everywhere he’s been ... a pitiful specimen of a human being. Certainly nothing to compare with the caliber of speakers that frequent Corinth on a regular basis in terms of their oratory skills.

He came in ...

- “**weakness**” – that was as a result of the ill-treatment he had received. Compared to the robust, powerful speakers down at the amphitheater, he was a “lightweight.”
- “**fear ... much trembling**” – What was he afraid of? Being hurt? Being rejected? Yes, I think that was part of it. He had already yielded himself to suffer for Christ sake. He was use

to the ill-treatment by now. But no one likes being treated like that. In fact, there's some indication that Paul was ready to quit at some point. And God came to him one night in a vision.

Acts 18:9-10 - One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: "Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. 10 For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city."

But there's something else to this fear and trembling. What he may have feared most was this: He saw how great God's power is, and how much others need that power, and that God has chosen to communicate that power through him. And he must have thought, "God, don't let me mess this up. Don't let me stand in the way." The thing we fear, above all, is that somehow we might do something that would keep people from connecting with the outlet of God's power.

Now there's something else about his approach. It was ...

3. "With demonstration of the Spirit's power" (v.4)

1 Corinthians 2:4 - My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power,

Here is one of the great mysteries of ministry. There is a connection between suffering for Christ, and the power of Christ.

ILLUSTRATION – I shall never forget my dear friend Pastor Jacob, our primary contact in India. The day almost a year ago when our team had just received the anonymous call telling us that if we didn't leave the city by dark that a mob would assault our hotel and hurt us. We Americans, having never experienced anything quite like that, were stunned. Jacob was never ruffled. I worried and feared for Jacob when the police came to our hotel room to take our statements. The police were known for being sympathetic with the Hindu radicals who persecute Christians. They wanted Jacob to go with them to the police station to give his statement. I feared for Jacob, that tiny little man, as he walked out of the hotel that day. But there was such a quite peace and courage about him. He looked at me and said, "Michael, God is working all this together for good."

Church, the things that we run from in the way of suffering and hardship are the things that make us powerful. And the things we run after in the way of conveniences and comforts and leisure rob us of spiritual power.

You see, we and our brothers and sisters in other churches in the US today have the ability to pretty much hold our own with the world in terms of talent, excellence, influence, creativity, technology, even political and economic power.

ILLUSTRATION – Over here at the American Airlines Center in Dallas they can have Donald Trump one day and dazzle 20,000 business people, and the next night have a high profile preacher fill the same place and dazzle 20,000 people. And the next night have Paul McCartney dazzle

20,000 concert fans, and the next night a Christian musician can dazzle another audience of 20,000 Christian fans, with the same excitement and excellence. We can do that.

But has America seen a demonstration of the Spirit's power? Have they seen a demonstration like is evidence in places like China today where the people of God have been largely marginalized by economic and political persecution. They have no standing. In fact, Christian congregations are branded by the Chinese communists as "illegal cults." They have no massive church buildings, in fact, they meet mostly in homes, out of the sight of the authorities. They can muster no nationwide ad campaigns.

But China, with 1 million evangelicals in 1950, has seen growth to an estimated 80-100 million China's 960 million population. Current growth rates are estimated at 35,000 a day or over 12 million a year. And all of that is happening in a fierce atmosphere of persecution ... not just that they call them names, or don't let them have Bible studies in the schools. No, they harass and pursue them, hurt them and kill them.

The demonstration of the Spirit's power is not seen in the preacher or minister himself. We can listen to a person speak and say, "That's powerful." No, that's personality. Yes, God does cloth people with power to minister. But the demonstration of the Spirit's power is seen not in the preacher, but in the transformation that comes in the lives of those who hear him. That's the power we're looking for. The display is in the heart of a person. The Spirit of God brings the conviction and does the transformation.

Demonstration: Marriages being reconciled ... rebellious teenagers being changed ... addictions being broken ... people being saved ... hateful people being softened in love ... selfish people becoming servants ... that's the demonstration of the Spirit's power that we're to look for.

What was the demonstration of the Spirit's power? Lives were changed!

1 Corinthians 6:9-11 - Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders 10 nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. 11 And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

The miracle of the Spirit's manifestation of power was that sexually immoral people were radically changed. These may have been men and women who went to the pagan worship rituals that involved sexual immorality. Idolaters got saved. Adulterers got saved. Homosexuals came to Christ. Addicts and alcoholics were set free. Con men were coming to Christ.

v.11 And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

That's what happens when the power of God that resides in the Gospel, and is released when the Gospel is proclaimed ... it results in changed lives.

It doesn't matter so much that it's loud or soft, long or short. What matters is that it is the kind of ministry that God can take hold of and apply by His Spirit to a human heart to bring about deep spiritual change.

Do they come out saying, "Wow, what a speaker!" Or do they come out saying, "Wow, what a Savior." Do they go away saying, "Wow, what a singer!" Or do they go away saying, "Wow, what a Savior!"

CONCLUSION

INVITATION – Church, will you join me in begging God that we might always be the kind of vessels that God can use to accomplish a demonstration of His Spirit's power ... that the faith of others would rest solidly upon the power, promise and grace of God. Only God's power can bring the change that needs to come over this city ... over the pockets of darkness that exist in our city ...

Let me show you the difference that it makes. You can put your faith in man's wisdom, but not in the power of God, and never be changed. You can go to church because you think that's a good religious thing to do. It makes you feel good. It supports your family. And that's good as far as it goes. But in spite of all that, you know deep down in your heart that you haven't really changed anything but your schedule on Sunday mornings. That's a good first step. But your language hasn't changed. Your attitudes haven't changed. Your business ethics haven't changed. Your family commitment has changed. And most tragically, if that has changed is your Sunday morning schedule, then and that's as far as it goes, you're still on a very dangerous, deadly path that will end up in eternity separated from God because your faith has been in that little religious system you've developed, but not in the power of God to change you from the inside out.

So we're back to the AIM.

"That your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power" (v.5).