

“PREACHING THAT DESERVES YOUR ATTENTION”

I Corinthians 2:1-5

THEME: The power of the Spirit in preaching

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Preaching has drawn both acclaim and disdain throughout the Christian era.

In 1666 King Charles II caustically prescribed listening to sermons as an unfailing cure for insomnia.

A Yale University historian estimates that the average New Englander during the Puritan era heard 7,000 sermons in a lifetime—about 15,000 hours of concentrated listening to preachers.

H.L. Mencken called church a place in which clergymen who have never been to heaven preach about it to people who will never get there.

So preaching has always been good for a wise crack or two.

- Way back in the earliest years of the church preaching had become controversial and divisive.

It was happening in the church at Corinth at about the time Paul wrote his first letter to them.

Some people said, “What this church needs is the Apostle Paul to come back.” Others were saying, “No. We need a man like Apollos—now there’s a gifted preacher!” (See 3:4)

- You must understand that at that time in that part of the world Greek philosophers and orators were heroes on a par with their great athletes.

So you can appreciate why the Corinthian church admired preachers who were orators.

- Preaching or declaring the good news of Jesus Christ is supposed to be a church’s most important responsibility.

The Apostle Paul wrote, *Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.* (Romans 10:17)

- Paul had founded the church at Corinth and was its first pastor. When Paul moved on, Apollos came to Corinth from Ephesus. He was an extraordinarily gifted preacher. He could debate opponents of the gospel, and from the Scriptures demolish their arguments. (Acts 18:28)

Some people were so enamored with Apollos as a preacher that they focused on the messenger instead of the message. This led to divisions and quarrels in the church.

Others felt compelled to defend their founder, the Apostle Paul. Some favored the Apostle Peter. Some tried a bit of spiritual one-upmanship by saying they only followed Christ.

- The first letter Paul wrote to the Corinthians was to a very troubled church. At the time of its writing Apollos was with him (16:12). Paul had urged Apollos to go back to Corinth, but Apollos was hesitant. Evidently he didn’t want to go back and stir up the mess even more.

In his letter Paul emphasized the importance of preaching, or proclaiming the word of God. The word he used for preaching had the root meaning of serving as a herald, or official messenger.

That’s what a preacher is—God’s messenger who declares God’s word.

- That’s the theme of our text this morning, 1 Corinthians 2:1-5.

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.*

Religious people have a lot to say about preachers—some of it is actually quite good. Some preachers are said to be scholarly teachers, or persuasive apologists, or entertaining orators, or compelling motivators.

Most preachers wish they had some of those skills. But those things are all secondary.

The apostle Paul told the young pastor Timothy how to preach. He said, *‘Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage-- with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear.’* (2 Timothy 4:2-3)

When I was a kid in Africa we had a preacher in our denomination whose name was Reverend Owen Scratch. I was young at the time. But I have since wondered if Reverend Scratch was a favorite of people with itching ears.

- A preacher is first and foremost a messenger—God’s messenger. That’s what makes preaching worthy of your attention. .

You can know that preaching is worthy of your undivided attention if you see the following three **characteristics** in the preacher, or messenger. I find these **characteristics** in Paul here in 1 Corinthians 2.

I. THE MESSENGER ACKNOWLEDGES HIS OWN WEAKNESS (2:1, 3, 4a)

The apostle Paul did not have strong speaking skills. He said he didn’t speak with words of human wisdom (1:17). He admitted he wasn’t a trained speaker (2 Corinthians 11:6).

In his second letter to the Corinthian church he told what some people said about him: *‘Some say his letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing.’* (2 Corinthians 10:10).

It seems that some people in that proud city had disdain for Paul as a preacher because he wasn’t an orator.

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.*

D.L. Moody was an effective preacher/evangelist whom God used as his messenger to bring thousands to faith in Christ. He once said, *“We have too many orators. I am tired and sick of your ‘silver-tongued orators.’ I used to mourn because I couldn’t be an orator. I thought, Oh, if I could only have the gift of speech like some men.”*

The apostle Paul was passionate and intense about his calling to be God’s messenger. But he couldn’t do it with poise and *savoir faire*.

³ *I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling.*

You’ve heard the expression about the importance of making the right first impression, *‘Never let them see you sweat.’*

Paul said, “You saw me sweat. I couldn’t hide my nervousness from you. You saw me in my weakness.”

- The city of Corinth could be an intimidating place. The Roman emperors loved to visit it. It was notorious as a place of wealth and indulgence. To ‘live as a Corinthian’ meant to live in luxury and immorality.

Paul didn’t feel comfortable in Corinth. It was so opposite to everything he was and everything he believed. He felt overwhelmed. It was too much for him.

So this wasn’t false humility on Paul’s part. He had struggled visibly in his ministry there.

Now in retrospect he could say, “That’s okay. It doesn’t really matter. The effectiveness of preaching doesn’t depend on the preacher’s poise and command of the situation.” It’s all in the message, but the messenger must also be authentic—sincere and humble.

^{4a} *My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words,*

When Paul preached God’s word there was power in it. People were moved to repentance and faith; Christians matured in their faith—even though Paul was not a gifted speaker.

That old down-to-earth country preacher Vance Havner used to say, *‘The gospel is for lifeboats, not showboats. A preacher must make up his mind what boat he is going to operate.’*

- Paul had one great advantage. When he saw people respond to the message of the gospel of Christ as he preached it, he was never tempted to think it was because of his superb communication or persuasive skills. He didn’t really have any. The effectiveness came from God’s word, not from the messenger.

Nobody knows for sure how many people have new life in Christ because of Billy Graham’s preaching. He is an effective communicator, but he is not considered a great orator or mesmerizing speaker. He preaches a simple message about who God is, what the Bible says, and what people need to do. I don’t know anyone who accuses Billy Graham of being proud. He has always been a humble messenger of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Whenever he speaks that simple message, thousands give him their undivided attention.

Don’t waste your time listening to preachers who are showboats. Humble preachers of God’s word are the ones worth listening to. Paul proved that.

[2nd characteristic of preaching that is worthy of your undivided attention]

II. THE MESSENGER EMPHASIZES CHRIST CRUCIFIED (2:2)

The good news of Jesus Christ must be prominent in effective preaching.

I don't mean that every message a pastor preaches to the same congregation week after week should be a modified Easter sermon. But a responsible preacher of the gospel will regularly expound and explain the atoning death of Jesus Christ on the cross for the sins of the world.

- In Acts chapter 18 we read that Paul spent a year and a half with the church at Corinth, preaching the gospel of Christ.

Here in verse 2 Paul reminds them, *'I determined from the start that my message in Corinth was all about Jesus Christ and his atoning death for our sins.'* No razzmatazz, no hot topic *du jour*. Nothing must overshadow the message of Christ crucified.¹

² *For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.*

To 'know nothing except Jesus Christ' was an idiom. It doesn't mean that Paul became ignorant of anything else that was going on in Corinth. It meant that Paul refused to get embroiled in side issues that did not point people to Jesus Christ.

Does that mean his preaching was tired and hum-drum, the same old stuff day after day, month after month?

If you take time to read Paul's letter to the Romans, his major doctrinal treatise, you see it's all Jesus Christ and him crucified. But Paul showed how the gospel of Jesus Christ impacts the home, our relationships, morality, generosity, relating to a fallen sinful world, missions, service in the name of Christ, death, and eternity. And it was all Christ crucified at the core of his preaching.

In the regular preaching program of a church there is the need to address a variety of issues. But if you go there two weeks, three weeks, four weeks, and the good news of Jesus Christ is never woven into the message, it doesn't deserve your attention.

It may be interesting, but it won't do what God wants his word to do.

- Think of a nice pizza with the works. Let's use this as an analogy for a message or a sermon. If a preacher stays out just on the outer edge and serves up only the crust—dealing with peripheral issues, with an occasional stray mushroom or a wayward pepperoni from God's word, that's not going to nourish people's souls much at all. Preaching worthy of your attention goes to the center and serves up a whole slice or wedge. It goes from the center of Christ's atoning death on the cross to the circumference of life where people live and work and struggle. That's deep dish preaching!

Preachers are first and foremost messengers—messengers of Christ.

W. Graham Scroggie was a well-known British preacher. Speaking at the famous Keswick Conference in England in 1942 he said, "I wanted to be a preacher, and the Voice came to me on this day, *'Do you want to be a preacher, or do you want to be My messenger?'* They are not necessarily the same. A man can be a preacher without being God's messenger; and he can be God's messenger without being much of a preacher."

By his own admission the Apostle Paul was not an eloquent preacher. But he was an effective messenger for God, worth listening to.

[3rd characteristic of preaching that is worthy of your undivided attention]

III. THE MESSENGER RELIES ON THE SPIRIT'S POWER (2:4-5)

Preaching worthy of your attention doesn't massage people's emotions with warm platitudes.

A critic's review of a certain play said: *'Like chicken soup, it goes down easily, but it's not a meal to remember.'*

A sermon may go down easily because of the wit and charisma of the preacher, but have no lasting effect in your life.

- Whose influence made the biggest difference in you spiritually? Probably not some famous preacher (for a few people this may be true, and we thank God for them). But more likely it was a humble messenger of Christ in your own family, or the humble preacher of your church, or your humble Sunday School teacher, or a humble and sincere room mate at college.

They got through to you with a message you heard, and your life is different.

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.*

The word demonstration in verse 4 is its only occurrence in the New Testament. It's a word that has to do with evidence or proof.

There was proof of the Holy Spirit’s power in Paul’s preaching.

What was the proof? Most likely many of the people who received this letter were the proof. Their lives had been changed by God’s power through Paul’s preaching when he had been there.

In chapter 1:6 Paul wrote, *‘Our testimony about Christ was confirmed in you.’*

- Only the Holy Spirit can make preaching powerful. Not eloquence, not humor, not tear-jerking stories. Only the Holy Spirit.

The most important thing you can do for me as a preacher is pray with me that the Holy Spirit will take God’s truth and make it powerful in our lives.

It was reported that when the great reformer John Calvin climbed the stairs to the pulpit in the church in Geneva, those who were close enough could hear him praying, *‘Come, Holy Spirit, Come; Come, Holy Spirit, Come.’*

Every Sunday my greatest fear is that I might waste people’s time by relying on my own preparation or whatever skills I may have.

I prepare well, I pray for God’s guidance. But I know there will be no lasting benefit in anyone’s life unless the Holy Spirit takes God’s truth and makes it powerful in your life.

Why did I choose to preach a message about preaching today?

First, because we all need to remember that the good news of Jesus Christ is at the heart of who we are as a church.

It should be obvious very quickly whether that is our passion.

It’s not enough just to see it in the pulpit. It must characterize the church.

It’s not about our style of worship or music, or about trying to have an image of being cool or current.

Second, lots of people these days are looking for a church where they can plug in and belong. What should they look for? There are many characteristics that can make a church appealing or unappealing. Look for the right ones.

Third, and most important—has the power of the message of Christ crucified made an impact on your life?

Did you know deep in your soul that God’s Spirit was drawing you to Christ? Did you respond by sincerely confessing your sin and asking for God’s forgiveness because Christ Jesus paid the penalty for all your sins?

Did you put your trust in Jesus Christ alone as your Savior?

That’s not a religious formula. It’s the way of life—new life, eternal life. It’s real.