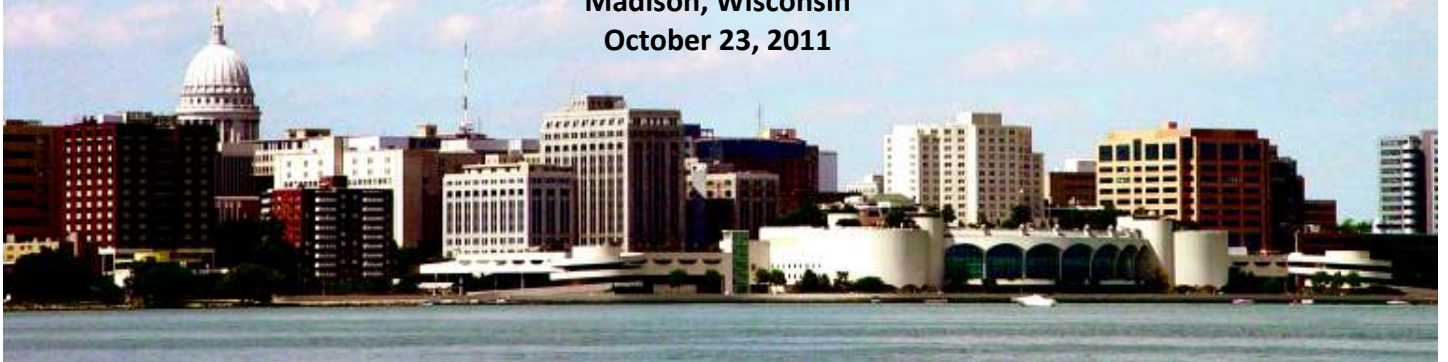


# ***“Preaching Christ and Him Crucified”***

**1 CORINTHIANS 2:1-5**

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As we begin, I would like to read a list of names and invite you to consider what all of these people have in common: Bill Clinton, Sarah Palin, Tony Blair, Sir Richard Branson, Rudi Giuliani, Alan Greenspan, Donald Trump, Lance Armstrong, Al Gore, and Larry Summers. You probably realize that most, but not all of these individuals are involved in politics. What these individuals have in common, however, is that they rank in the top ten when it comes to the fees that they are paid when giving a speech. Bill Clinton is right up there at the top, and the figures show that Mr. Clinton has earned more than \$40 million in speaking fees since leaving office. Of course, some of that has been used to pay off some legal bills, but it shows that Mr. Clinton is certainly in demand as a public speaker. According to one source, Mr. Tony Blair, the former Prime Minister of Britain, earns roughly \$8,600 per minute for every speech that he gives. At that rate, I could have paid off our house in the time that I have been standing here this morning—just amazing! Al Gore charges around \$100,000 for an hour-long presentation (usually on global warming). Sarah Palin’s fee is about the same, at around \$100,000. All of these individuals are certainly in demand and I am sure that all of them would give quite an entertaining and motivational presentation.

This morning, however, in contrast to some of these presentations being given by some of this world’s greatest and most powerful communicators, I would like for us to spend several minutes focusing on the simplicity of the gospel. On one hand, we have powerful politicians, and business leaders, and sports heroes, with all of their speeches about how to be successful, and so on. But then on the other hand we see a stark contrast when we consider the simplicity of the gospel. We thank God that being saved does not depend on listening to a powerful speaker.

As we look at what God’s word has to say on this issue, I would encourage you to turn with me to the New Testament book of 1 Corinthians, as our lesson will be from 1 Corinthians 2. I certainly understand that you did not come here today to hear my opinion on anything. So, as our custom is, we will be looking directly at a single paragraph from the word of God, and I hope we can leave this morning having learned something of what God wants us to learn. You might remember that the book of 1 Corinthians was written (obviously) to the church in Corinth, located roughly 50 miles almost straight west of the city of Athens. As you might remember, the city of Corinth was located on an isthmus, somewhat similar to the city of Madison. However, unlike the city where many of us now live, the population of ancient Corinth was roughly three times that of the city of Madison at roughly 600,000 people. It was a large city, and there were many people coming and

going. It was a seaport, and the population was rather unstable. Like Madison, people would move in, and then they would move out. There were a lot of transfers, a lot of moving, a lot of visitors.

Well, as you can imagine, all of this led to some interesting struggles within the congregation. In fact, the book of 1 Corinthians reads almost like a how-to manual concerning how to overcome trouble in a congregation. And the first problem that had to be dealt with was the problem of division. Starting in 1 Corinthians 1:10, Paul said,

***Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment. For I have been informed concerning you, my brethren, by Chloe's people, that there are quarrels among you. Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, "I am of Paul," and "I of Apollos," and "I of Cephas," and "I of Christ."***

In other words, the church was divided based on the popularity of certain preachers. Some were following Christ (as they should have done), but others were saying, "Oooo, well Apollos is my guy—he is an eloquent man. We had him for a gospel meeting back at my home congregation, and he could really fire up an audience," and others were saying, "No, I would much rather listen to Peter. Peter is one of the original twelve apostles. He actually worked with the Lord Himself. Peter is my preacher," and others were saying, "No, Paul started this congregation, and my loyalties are with Paul." And so the church was divided among several very popular preachers. Paul then deals with this problem in the rest of Chapter 1. But then, when we get to 1 Corinthians 2, Paul goes back and reminds the congregation what his preaching was like when he first came to Corinth, and this will be our text today. I would invite you, then, to look with me at 1 Corinthians 2:1-5 and to keep your Bibles open as we study. The words of Paul in 1 Corinthians 2,

***<sup>1</sup> And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. <sup>2</sup> For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. <sup>3</sup> I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling, <sup>4</sup> and my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, <sup>5</sup> so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God.***

This morning, as we look back over Paul's words here, I would like for us to consider two very basic ideas concerning the preaching that Paul did in Corinth, and as we study, I would like for us to apply those ideas to our situation here in Madison, a city with quite a bit in common with ancient Corinth.

- I. **As we look back over these five verses, one of the first very basic ideas we notice is that Paul had the very clear understanding that GOSPEL PREACHING IS NOT ABOUT THE PREACHER.**

As Paul said in verse 1, ***"...when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God."*** We find here that Paul was not interested in entertaining his listeners. He was not there to tell funny stories. He did not travel halfway around the known world at that time to share some kind of worldly wisdom or something that he just made up on his own. He was not there just to give a speech. He was not there to imitate or compete with the popular speakers of his day. In fact, we know from other passages that Paul was not really a good speaker at all. Over in 2 Corinthians 10:10, Paul repeated something that was being said by his critics there in Corinth. They were saying, ***"His letters are weighty and strong, but his personal presence is unimpressive and his speech contemptible."*** Paul, therefore,

had good arguments, Paul had a solid message, but the presentation left something to be desired, and that is probably an understatement. His personal presence was ***“unimpressive.”*** In other words, when you looked at Paul, there was nothing about his physical appearance that said, “Hey, I need to listen to this guy.” In fact, we have an interesting statement that was written down at some point during the Second Century. Apparently there was some kind of tradition that had been handed down from those who had seen Paul in person. The tradition says that Paul was “a man small of stature, with a bald head and crooked legs, in a good state of body, with eyebrows meeting and nose somewhat hooked.” Interesting! We might say that Paul was no Brian Williams! Paul was no Tom Brokaw or Scott Pelley. But rather, he was most likely a short bald guy with a crooked nose! We might even say that Paul was not “easy on the eyes.” After all, Paul repeated the accusation himself and did not argue with that part of it. His personal presence was ***“unimpressive.”*** That is in the Bible!

And then from a public speaking point of view, it would also be safe to say that Paul was not a talented individual. His speech was ***“contemptible.”*** Paul, then, is not someone who ever would have been paid \$8,600 per minute of speaking. As a speaker, Paul was not “in demand.” As a speaker, he was not easy to listen to. Sitting in the audience, it might have even been a little bit awkward. His speech was ***“contemptible.”*** Again, that also is in the Bible. His letters were good. I mean, if you wanted a message from Paul, you would prefer that he wrote it down! I can almost imagine a church writing to Paul, “Hey Paul, we need a few things clarified over here, but please just stay home! We don’t need a gospel meeting or a seminar, we don’t need a weekend of preaching or anything, but we would just prefer that you wrote it down!” It is hard for us to imagine that someone might say that about the apostle Paul, and yet that is basically the way it was, ***“His letters are weighty and strong, but his personal appearance is unimpressive and his speech contemptible.”***

Paul, therefore, when he did speak, said to the church in Corinth, ***“...when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom.”*** When he said that, he was saying: Thank God that the message I preach does not depend on the preacher! Paul, then, was not there to impress anybody with his amazing speaking ability, he was not there to win any kind of popularity contest, and he was certainly not there to share any of his personal opinions.

Well, most of this we understand, but then we come to verse 3 as Paul adds to all of this and says, ***“I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling.”*** And so as if there is any doubt about the fact that the preacher himself is nothing, Paul basically says: I was scared to death when I preached to you people! I don’t know if you remember this, but back when Paul was actually in Corinth, the Lord had to appear to him in a vision, and the Lord said (in Acts 18:9-10), ***“Do not be afraid any longer, but go on speaking and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no man will attack you in order to harm you, for I have many people in this city.”*** And he settled there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.” I don’t know about you, but when I read a passage where the Lord comes to the great apostle Paul and says, “Stop being afraid,” that means that Paul was afraid. Paul had to be told, then, not to be afraid. Paul had to be encouraged to keep on preaching in spite of being nervous for some reason.

We get this thing clarified a little bit in the next verse, as Paul talks about persuasion (in 1 Corinthians 2:4), ***“...my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power.”*** We tie that in to a verse we just looked at last week (2 Corinthians 5:11), ***“Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men....”*** Paul, then, was not necessarily afraid of the act of giving a speech, but he was afraid when he considered the gravity of the situation. He was afraid when he realized what was truly on the line, when he considered the awesome responsibility. He wasn’t there just to give a speech, but the words that he spoke had some eternal consequences. Paul, therefore, was with them ***“in weakness and in fear and in much trembling,”*** knowing the importance of what he was doing. In his

preaching, then, Paul did not depend on complex logical arguments, he did not depend on theatrics, he did not depend on the latest persuasive theories of the day. He was aware of those techniques (he was a well-educated man). In his former life, he was referred to as “Saul of Tarsus.” Tarsus was a center of learning. Today we might refer to him as “Saul of Harvard” or “Saul of Yale.” He certainly knew the latest techniques and theories of public speaking. He was familiar with the popular poets and philosophers of the day (we know this because he did quote them from time to time), but the message that Paul delivered in Corinth was not about the preacher. The message did not depend on the power of the delivery or the brilliant mind of the speaker, but on the power of the message itself.

Now, this does not mean that Paul’s words were unintelligent. As we know, a person can be extremely intelligent and deliver a message that can be understood by some very simple people. That’s what Jesus did, and that is what Paul was doing! He was not trying to impress people with his education, or his big words, or his eloquence, or the size of his huge brain, but he was simply trying to communicate the gospel message in a way that everybody could understand it. The gospel is not about the preacher. Paul did not want people jumping on the bandwagon saying, “Wow, this guy is smart! This guy must know what he’s talking about, so let’s go with him!” That is not what Paul wanted. But that is what was happening. Various members of the congregation were splitting off following various preachers, and I believe that explains what Paul said at the very end of verse 5; he spoke in simple words, “**...so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men.**” In other words, if their faith was based on some kind of good public speaker, then their faith would be tossed aside when some other more dynamic speaker came along. Paul, then, had to remind them: It is not about the preacher.

And yet even when good things happened as the result of Paul’s preaching, we learn something from the fact that Paul maintained a spirit of humility. Notice in verse 4, his message and his preaching were “**in demonstration of the Spirit and of power.**” I am reminded of the woodpecker who flew up to a tree to peck at it just as a huge lightning bolt came down and just shattered the tree into a million flaming toothpicks. The woodpecker woke up a little dazed and confused and then called his woodpecker friends over and said, “Hey, hey, hey! Look what I did!” But that is not what Paul did, is it? Instead, Paul understood that the success of the gospel message has very little to do with the preacher, but it has everything to do with the gospel. So first of all, then, it’s not about the preacher.

**II. There is a second very important idea in this little paragraph, and that is: THE GOSPEL MESSAGE HAS EVERYTHING TO DO WITH JESUS CHRIST.**

And this is where we focus in on verse 2, “**For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.**” Crucifixion, of course, was the ultimate humiliation, the ultimate horror in the ancient Roman world. I don’t know whether people truly realize this today. Today, we see crosses on top of steeples, we see crosses on church websites, we have crosses on the ends of each of our pews here, we even see beautiful golden crosses being used as jewelry. Most of us, then, are in danger of failing to truly understand how horrible the cross really was. Tacitus, the Roman historian, referred to crucifixion as “a torture only fit for slaves.” In fact, my understanding is that it was illegal to crucify a Roman citizen. It was that bad. You might have murdered a hundred people, you might have committed treason, but if you were a Roman citizen, crucifixion was not an option. It was that bad. They might chop your head off with a sword, but crucifixion was off the table as a form of capital punishment. Crucifixion was barbaric. It was inhumane. Ancient sources tell us that the victim was often naked and left to hang there for days, even to the point where birds and wild animals would come along and help dispose of the body. It was painful. Our word “excruciating,” by the way, literally means “out of the cross.” And so even today, when we need to explain the worst kind of pain we can

imagine, the most intense word we have refers to the cross, whether we realize that or not. Sometimes we sing about the old rugged cross, “the emblem of suffering and shame.” The cross was shameful.

My understanding is that one of the earliest drawings of the crucifixion dates from the early Third Century. It is an ancient graffiti in Rome, and it makes fun of the Christian faith. The graffiti depicts a man with the head of a donkey being crucified. In the foreground there is the image of a man worshiping with one of his hands lifted up, and the caption says, “Alexmenos worships his god.” You see, people in the ancient world looked at the Christian faith and severely ridiculed them for worshiping a God that had been crucified. To them, it was ridiculous! To them, no sane person would ever admit that he was part of any kind of religious movement whose leader had been crucified. Crucifixion was worse than a dishonor, it was embarrassing, it was absurd.

But then we come to Paul. Roughly twenty years after the crucifixion, Paul would write in Galatians 6:14, ***“But may it never be that I would boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.”*** Of course we know that the power is not in the cross itself, but the power is in the sacrifice that was made on that cross as the Son of God came to this earth to suffer and give His life as a payment for our sins.

For this reason, Paul made the decision that his preaching would focus on Jesus and what He did for us on the cross. This does not mean that Paul just went around saying the word “cross,” but it means that the cross was a crucial part of Paul’s message. The word “crucial,” by the way, also goes back to a root word referring to the cross. When we say that something is “crucial,” we are saying that it is important, just as the cross is important. And so when we look at the writing done by the apostle Paul, it is hard to find one or two sentences strung together that fail to mention Jesus in some way or another. Everything Paul said and did was in some way tied to Jesus and what He did for us on the cross.

And so today, when we preach Jesus and the cross, we preach that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). When we preach Jesus and the cross, we preach baptism for the forgiveness of sins; because, when we preach baptism, we are not preaching an empty religious ritual, but we are saying that all people must be buried with Christ through baptism into His death (Romans 6:4). In a sense, we are baptized into the cross, we are baptized into the Lord’s death. When we preach the cross, we are affirming that our old self must be crucified with Him (Romans 6:6). When we preach Christ and the crucifixion, we are also preaching about the church. After all, it was Paul who referred to the church as having been purchased with the blood of Christ, with blood that had been shed on the cross (Acts 20:28).

### **Conclusion:**

This morning we have learned something about what it means to preach the gospel. We have learned that it is not about the preacher; but rather, it is all about Jesus Christ and what He did for us on the cross. The gospel message is incredibly simple: Jesus, the Son of God, came into this world to save us from the penalty of sin. He lived a perfect life and was then murdered on the cross. He was buried, and then He was raised from the dead on the third day. We accept God’s offer of salvation by believing in Jesus, by turning away from sin, and by allowing ourselves to be briefly dipped in water for the forgiveness of sins. There is nothing we can do to improve on that message.

For those of us who are Christians, I would suggest that perhaps the most important application of this passage can be conveyed in the form of a question, and the question is: As Christians, have we passed this on to someone this week? Have we told someone about this lately? Do we look for opportunities for telling the

people around us about the cross of Jesus Christ? If so, that is great! But if not, we are here today to encourage each other to have courage, the courage and wisdom we need to pass it on as we should. What Jesus did for us on the cross is the greatest message this world has ever heard.

And then if you are here this morning and have not yet obeyed the good news, is there something holding you back? Is there some question we can answer? Is there some challenge we can help you overcome? If you have any questions or concerns, please let us know. I realize that nobody who ever preaches at this congregation will ever have the charisma of Bill Clinton, no preacher I know of will never have the celebrity status of Lance Armstrong, I don't know of anyone in my life who has the persuasive power of Donald Trump, but as we learned this morning, it is not about the preacher. It's not about us. And so, if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, it is completely up to you; it is between you and God. You can let us know about your decision as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

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