

# The Power of the Cross

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## **Text:**

I Corinthians 1:10-2:5

Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and *that* there be no divisions among you; but *that* ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment. For it hath been declared unto me of you, my brethren, by them *which are of the house* of Chloe, that there are contentions among you. Now this I say, that every one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ. Is Christ divided? was Paul crucified for you? or were ye baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you, but Crispus and Gaius; Lest any should say that I had baptized in mine own name. And I baptized also the household of Stephanas: besides, I know not whether I baptized any other. For Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel: not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect.

For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God. For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent. Where *is* the wise? where *is* the scribe? where *is* the disputer of this world? hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe. For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom: But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness; But unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men; and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, *are called*: But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, *yea*, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: That no flesh should glory in his presence. But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption: That, according as it is written, He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord.

And I, brethren, when I came to you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know anything among you,

save Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching *was* not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power: That your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God.

### **Sermon:**

Once again we have arrived at that time of year when we, as Christians, remember why we exist. As the text we have read reminds us, the Church is not the product of human wisdom and speculation, but the fruit of God's intervention in human history. We exist because Christ came; because he lived, because he was "crucified under Pontius Pilate", and "the third day he rose again from the dead." Without Good Friday, Easter, and Pentecost there would be no Church. We exist because of what Paul calls in this passage the "word of the cross", and what he calls elsewhere the "gospel". In chapter 15 of the Epistle from which we have read he tells the Corinthians, and us, in much the same way that he does in the text that we read, that what he did when he came to Corinth (and everywhere else he went) was to deliver the good news (gospel) that he, himself had received, as he had received it. That "word of the cross" or "good news" he defines in chapter 15 in clear, precise, easy to understand terms. This is what he says:

"For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received,

how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures;

And that he was buried,

and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures:

And that he was seen of Cephas, then of the twelve: After that, he was seen of above five hundred brethren at once; of whom the greater part remain unto this present, but some are fallen asleep. After that, he was seen of James; then of all the apostles. And last of all he was seen of me also, as of one born out of due time" (I Corinthians 15: 4-8).

This message of God's good news, the gospel, is what we remember at the Easter season. As Paul says, it is the only thing in the world that has the power to save us. It is in believing this message of the cross of Christ, in believing the good news that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, was buried, and rose again the third day according to the Scriptures that we have the hope of eternal life. We must never forget that. We must remind ourselves of it

constantly. It is also good that we set aside a part of each year when the Church worldwide reflects upon God's great saving intervention in human history.

The passage we have read as our text gives us one of the primary reasons why it is so important for us to be regularly reminded of God's saving message. The human heart being, as Calvin well said, is an idol factory, there is a constant tendency for humans to transform the gospel into something other than what it is to make it more palatable to human taste. The problem is that when we do we destroy its power to save us and to transform us. This is the reason Paul said that he did everything in his power to let the message stand on its own, to not cloud it up with human wisdom or eloquence. He understood that the power to save is in the message and not in the messenger. So he says to the Corinthians that he had announced it to them in the simplest terms possible so that their faith might be grounded in the powerful act that God had performed in Jesus Christ and not in the wisdom or the eloquence of his words.

Paul, being a Jew and at the same time being the Apostle to the Gentiles, understood the two major tendencies of the human heart in regards to religion. He sums this up in 1:22 when he says: "The Jews seek after a sign, and the Greeks after wisdom." Signs and wisdom summarize the two major forms of idolatry. Later he says Christ is both the power of God and the wisdom of God. God has manifested both his power and his wisdom in Jesus Christ, but he has done it in a way that seems foolish and weak. So Paul says that when he preaches Christ crucified, the message is a stumbling block for the Jews and insanity for the Greeks. Two thousand years removed from the events of which we are speaking, we have a hard time realizing just how true this was.

The Jews were looking for God to act powerfully on their behalf; to intervene by sending the Messiah to deliver them from their enemies and to reestablish the throne of David. They had visions of glory, of victory, of a golden age of peace and prosperity. They represent those who see the power of God as the essence of religion, who seek someone who will give them what they have dreamed of. To such people a crucified Messiah made no sense. The cross for them was a sign of weakness, and they were looking for power.

The Greeks personified wisdom. They were the inventors of philosophy. If the Jews divided the world into Jews and Gentiles, that is, pure and impure, they divided the world into Greeks and barbarians, that is, civilized and uncivilized. They took great pride in their learning, their wisdom, their ability to solve their own problems. By the first century the wisest among them had begun to substitute philosophy and learning for their traditional gods. To them the message of a crucified God was nonsensical. It was insanity, madness. Lucien of Samosate a 2<sup>nd</sup> century philosopher mocked the Christian saying: "They venerate as God this ridiculous impaled sophist."

Now these two impediments to faith, these two sources of false religion did not disappear with the passing of the apostolic age. They remain fixed in the human heart. There are still those who seek after power, who look for signs, who want God to give them what they want, as there are those who must pass all things by the screen of human wisdom accepting only that which they find acceptable and rejecting the rest. To both God says: "beware, salvation is only available on my terms". God has acted decisively for our salvation, and he offers that salvation to us as a gracious gift, but the gift must be received on his terms. When it is, it becomes both the power and the wisdom that we seek, that we cannot find elsewhere. Power because it puts an end to our greatest enemies, sin and death. Power because it alone can transform our hearts and make us into the person that we desire to be, but are unable to become. Wisdom because it gives to life and existence a meaning that is otherwise undreamed of. We instinctively feel that we are connected to eternity, that our lives have meaning beyond our few days on earth, but in reality life often seems insignificant. There seems to be little sense to it other than day to day survival. Christ brings us into relationship with God. He opens our eyes to the purpose for which we were created and shows us our true place in God's universe. Our puny efforts at trying to make sense of our own existence pale into oblivion when compared to the wisdom that his salvation brings.

Experience has taught me that as simple and as clear as the message of the cross, the gospel, is it is often misunderstood even among those who are making an attempt to live the Christian life. This is the reason that it is so important for us to really pay attention to the meaning of the events of this season of the year that we are now celebrating.

I have found in speaking with many people about their faith, and their hope of salvation, that their thinking is often foggy and unclear. While they are familiar with the story of Jesus and the facts of the gospel as we have laid them out this morning, they are unclear as to how those facts relate to them. It is not unusual to have a conversation that runs something like this. I might ask someone what he or she knows about Jesus Christ and what he accomplished for us, and they might reply something like this: "well he came to earth, and was born in a manger, and lived and taught good things and did miracles; then he was crucified, and he rose again on Easter." I am abbreviating. They might give more details, but they seem to know and accept as true the basic facts of the life of Jesus. Having established this, I then might ask a second question: "Are yourself saved? Do you have the hope of eternal life? What is your relationship with Jesus Christ?" To this sort of question it is not unusual to receive very vague answers, things like: "I go to church sometimes." "I read the Bible sometimes." Or the classic, "I do the best I can." In such cases there seems to be a disconnect between what the person seems to know about the facts of the Christian faith, and their own action towards it. They seem to have intellectually grasped the story of Jesus, but they have never personally exercised faith in the message of salvation, the gospel.

To such a person I would say that the power of the cross is real. Christ died for your sins, and he rose again that you might have eternal life. There is nothing you can add to that. All he asks of you is to believe in what he has done for you, to accept his gracious gift of salvation.