

1 Corinthians 1:26-2:5 AM

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- [0 : 0 0] 1 Corinthians 1, starting in verse 26, our passage this morning teaches us that if we don't understand the cross of Jesus Christ, we won't understand the church or its leaders.
- And this matters, because there's a lot of misunderstanding about the church and its leaders, both inside the church and outside. And a lot of it has to do with power.
- On my days off, I love perusing the little library boxes in my neighborhood. You guys know what I'm talking about? You know those little things that are scattered throughout? Because I love knowing what people are reading and thinking about in my neighborhood.
- What is it that they're filling their minds with and pondering? And this last week, I came across a little book entitled *The 38 Laws of Power*. It's caught my attention, so I took it home and started reading. And the basic premise of the book is that the feeling of having no power over people or over the events in our lives generally is not a good feeling for us. When we feel helpless, we feel miserable. No one wants less power. Most people want more power. But there's a catch. We live in a society where everything needs to be fair and decent. So it's not good to seem too power-hungry.
- So, this book says it's been written to help people gain more power in a subtle way. It's about polite power games. It's fascinating. In chapter 13, it said that the cornerstone of power, if you were to figure out what does it all rest on, is one thing, its reputation. Making and maintaining your reputation in the face of others and in community is everything. So it suggests it's best to become known for one quality that will make you respectable and valuable in the eyes of others.
- [1 : 5 5] So choose wit or social graces or cleverness or influence or education or pedigree or whatever you want to name it. Choose one thing, become known for it, and leverage it for your own advantage, and this will become the key to gaining more power in life.
- Now, you think that's just something external to the church, maybe. But I want to submit to you that the same subtle dynamic and desire can be found in the church as well. I have a friend who attends, attended a large Anglican church in downtown London, and I asked him why he went to that church, and he replied, it had a reputation in the city as the church of the intellectuals and the influentials. It became the place where all the young people gathered as they were beginning their careers post-university, and it was the place where you had opportunity for social networking and professional self-promotion. It was about being upwardly mobile.
- The main point that Paul is making in the opening chapter of his letter to the Corinthians is that the cross looks like foolishness in a world where power is used to climb the ladder.
- Heaven comes down. God stoops low to wash feet. Power chooses weakness and humility, and in a world where the cross looks like foolishness, the church and its leaders are going to look like foolishness too.

And this is where Paul's taking us this morning. Chapter 1, verses 26 to 31, it's the way in which the church mirrors the cross. And then chapter 2, verses 1 to 5, it's the way in which the messenger of the cross mirrors the message. So the way in which the church mirrors the cross. In the verses before our passage, verse 18 to 25, Paul's been talking about how when the cross comes into the power dynamics of the world, it confounds and confronts the logic of the world and creates a power reversal.

[3 : 54] In verse 26 to 31, Paul shows us that this power reversal is also being revealed in the way that God is building his church. The church that is founded on the cross will reveal the same logic of the cross.

And so Paul tells us right away, God is not choosing to build his team with people the world considers wise and influential and impressive and worth listening to. God is choosing the foolish and the weak and the low and the despised in the world's eyes. Because God has a point to make about where true power lies.

Verse 26, for consider your calling, brothers and sisters. This just isn't your personal vocational calling, this is your personal conversion to Christ. Consider your calling. Not many of you were wise. He has three not many's. Not many of you were powerful. Not many of you were noble. And then he contrasts that with three God, three renditions of God's choice. God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise.

God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. And God chose what is low and despised in the world, even the things that are not, to bring to nothing the things that are. It's a bit like team captains picking people for their soccer team on the playground. Any of you had that experience?

Really? Nobody? I had that experience. The honor of being chosen first and the shame of being chosen last is felt by all. Normally because it says something about your relative skill and value as a player.

[5 : 33] Paul is explicitly telling the church in Corinth that God does not play that game. God chooses first those the world would choose last. And then Paul goes on to juxtapose what this means for people. What does it mean that God chooses the last? It means that he blesses them, as we said at the beginning of our service, with every spiritual blessing in Christ Jesus.

And so in verse 30, and from him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God. God's giving us true knowledge of who he is and who we are and how the world works in light of that.

Jesus Christ became righteousness for us. God is declaring that we are accepted by him in Christ. He became sanctification for us. God is showing that we are set apart for him and his Holy Spirit indwells us. We're going to discover this in a few chapters. And Christ became for us redemption.

God setting us free to love and serve him. And so you can get the sense that Paul's just starting to get carried away. He's so excited about what's happening in Jesus Christ, he's just starting to get carried away and he has to bring himself back to what the main point of what he's trying to say in chapter 1 is, and it's about our boasting. Notice in verse 29, the point of God's choice is so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. And the point of God's gifts and blessings in Jesus Christ, verse 31, the point is so that as it is written, let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.

Why is Paul driving this point home? Because the ways, I believe, in which the church buys into the logic of the world has to be confronted.

[7 : 20] The way in which we buy into the logic of the world has to be confronted if we are going to live out the unity that God has called us to live out together. Remember that all of chapter 1 comes under Paul's initial appeal in verse 5, I mean in verse 10. All this comes under verse 10. I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and in the same judgment. So I think Paul is making this connection between divisions and fighting and biting in the church and what we are boasting in, who we are boasting in. Now we'll get back to that in a moment, but first I want to show you how Paul not only says that the church of Jesus Christ and how it's being built by God reveals the power and the weakness of the cross, but also the way in which Paul himself is enacting his ministry reveals the weakness of the cross. So the way the messenger mirrors the message.

This is really significant for Paul. Look in verse 1 of chapter 2. So what is Paul doing? Paul saying that even when I visited you, friends, my message was nothing but Christ and him crucified. I tried not to hold anything else before you as central for your life and your salvation. But he says more than that. It's not only what I said to you, but it is how I said it.

I did not come proclaiming this in lofty speech or wisdom. I came to you, brothers and sisters, just in the demonstration of the Spirit and power. So it's not only what he said, but it's how he has said it that Paul says is really significant. But Paul goes on and says more than that. In verses 3 and 4, he says, I was with you in weakness and in fear and in trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but were in demonstration of the Spirit of power. Not just what he said, not just how he said it, but his personal persona and physical presence as he was saying it.

This is important. In the first century, the sophists, the popular teachers of those days, they would gather a following around themselves, not only with the way they were eloquent with words and they were brilliant orators and they could wow people with their wisdom and knowledge, but they would gather a following around themselves by being a dynamic physical presence.

So disciples would imitate their teachers, not only in what they said and how they said it, but disciples would imitate how their teachers dressed, how they walked, how they comported themselves in public, and even their teachers' mannerisms. And so Paul is very intentionally pointing out to the Corinthians when he says, I came in weakness and fear and trembling.

[10 : 31] And not fear of the Corinthians, fear of his responsibility before God to proclaim the word. But what he's saying to them is he's saying, when I visited you, I intentionally conformed the content of my speech, the manner of my speech, and the manner of my physical presence and persona, so that it would show forth nothing but the way in which the power of God works through human weakness.

Because that is precisely what the cross is about. In Regent College, in my days of going to Regent, seems like a while ago now, there was a marvelous sculpture at the top of the stairs on the wall of a preacher crucified in his pulpit.

It's Vancouver sculptor David Robinson's chalk-white piece, who is Harry Robinson's son. And the preacher is pathetically thin. He's apparently naked, for all intents and purposes.

And he's boxed in by a pulpit, which turns out is a cross. It has two cross beams. And the piece is entitled, Speak. Speak. An old professor at Regent called Maxine Hancock gave it the title, So You Want to Be a Preacher?

But that is just so striking in that sculpture, how the messenger is conformed to the cruciform message. Why?

[12 : 02] Why is Paul so concerned with saying the church, the very way of the church's life and how God's building it, it reveals the logic of the cross. And even the way in which I'm ministering is all to point you to the logic of the cross.

Verse 5, it all comes to a head. So that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God.

Brothers and sisters, every one of us has come here today wanting to know where our faith and life should rest. And this brings us to the final and ultimate purpose for everything that Paul is saying.

He leaves no doubt in our minds. If you look back in verse 29, he gives a purpose statement, so that no human being will boast in the presence of God. In verse 31, another purpose statement, so that as it is written, let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.

And then here, the third purpose statement, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God. Why is the church conformed to the cross? Why is the messenger conformed to the message?

[13 : 04] It is to undercut our boasting before God so that we actually boast in God. It is so that our faith does not rest on human wisdom, but on the power of God.

And this is where the application question comes right away. This is where we have to wrestle. What is the connection between where our faith rests and what we're boasting in?

What is the connection between where our faith rests and what we're boasting in? Because boasting was a major cultural value in Corinth. It was the city in which, as I mentioned earlier, reputation mattered a great deal because reputation was a cornerstone of power and privilege.

How other people perceive me and what other people think of me, this is the measure of my worth and my significance. I have a friend who has lived in four different North American cities, one here in Canada, three in the U.S., and he once remarked to me in a conversation how each city defines itself slightly differently.

And you can tell how they define themselves by what people talk about in the first conversation you have with them. In Boston, he said, when I lived in Boston, it was education. It was, people were dropping their, this is where I went to university, slipping in some way in their first conversation with people.

[14 : 25] In Washington, D.C., it was power. It was all about mentioning, dropping names, who you know and who you're linked to. In Los Angeles, it was money. It was all about finding subtle or not-so-subtle ways to let people know how much you make or how much you have.

And in Vancouver, he said, I think it was beauty. Who you are is linked, the beauty of your experiences, and to some extent, the beauty of the place you live.

And the point is that what you boast in reveals where your faith rests. So it's like a nifty little diagnostic test for the health of the human soul.

The thing that you feel a swelling sense of pride in, the thing that you derive a sense of security from or deep comfort in, or that you're most eager to share with other people, that is likely to be the thing that your faith rests on.

And the application of this passage cuts in two directions. The first is it puts me in the docket. On the one hand, it exposes, this is especially in verses in chapter two, it exposes and warns against the minister's temptation to be impressive in front of the people that he leads.

[15 : 43] It exposes my temptation to look powerful and wise and intelligent in your eyes. It's easy for us ministers to get wrapped up in how other people think of us, just like anyone else.

How are people going to like my sermon? Are they going to agree with my decision? Are they going to affirm my hard work and selfless sacrifice? Are they going to follow my lead?

And living for the praises of others just bends the human soul out of shape. And it leaves us withered in the presence of Almighty God. But it cuts in the other direction, too, because on the other hand, this passage exposes and warns against another temptation.

It's the congregation, the people wanting an impressive leader. And this shows up already. Paul's named it in chapter one, verses 12 and 13.

Paul has already made it clear that there are people in the church who eagerly gravitate towards these impressive types of leaders. Those who exude confidence and strength.

[16 : 48] Those who are eloquent with their words and sharp with their minds. Those who have bold vision and are uncompromising in their pursuit of it. Those who are clever and attractive and impressive. There is something in our nature that gravitates towards showy leaders.

And I think in some weird sense, this is because we are actually designed deep down for boasting. God made us this way.

With a deep hunger to be part of something that is bigger than ourselves. I think this is the impetus, ultimately, behind all our worship and discipleship and evangelism.

We are designed to behold and boast in God's goodness and his glory and his grace. And yet, this desire in us, which is God-given, gets so easily distorted and distracted and misdirected.

And so we end up gravitating towards the showy leaders whose vision and verve give us a sense of being a part of something bigger than ourselves. And it's one of the reasons why so many prideful and arrogant and mean people can end up with massive followings and influential platforms.

[18 : 04] Not simply because they grab power, but because we give them power. It begs the question, what sort of leader do you value? And it begs the question, what sort of leader do I want to be?

Someone like Paul? Fear? Weakness? Trembling? Proclaiming nothing but the cross of Christ? Or something different?

I had the privilege of going to dinner a few months ago with the grade 12 girls. It was great. Their leader said, they're graduating in two weeks, can you come have dinner with them?

They have a lot of questions about preparing to go off to university all over the world, and they want to know what you should look for in a church. By the way, they have a few questions about Anglicanism, and they want to know why the church matters for their personal faith as well.

I was like, oh great, this is going to be a good evening. We'll just cover all the topics. And I remember halfway through the evening, one of the wonderful, I mean very sharp, grade 12 girls said, so what should I look for in a church?

[19 : 16] Like really practically, what am I doing? And I said a few things, and she kind of kept pressing me. And I found myself saying this really weird sentence. I said, you should go to a church that has a pastor that cares more about pleasing Christ than pleasing you.

They said, well what does that look like? And a whole conversation ensued. See, in every age, in every generation, in every nation and denomination, there's a temptation for the church and its leaders to want to look more impressive than the cross.

Lord, help us. Lord, help us that that never happened. Lord, help us that we never become more wise than you. Lord, help us that we never become more powerful than you.

Lord, help us that we never become more powerful than you. This is part of the reason why I love being at St. John's. Because I think your favorite hymn, my brothers and sisters, is lift high the cross.

The love of Christ proclaim till all the world adore his sacred name. My brothers and sisters, I speak these things to you. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

[20 : 29] Amen.