

The Cross and the Pulpit

Pillar of Truth Conference

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Bible Verse: 1 Corinthians 1:18-25

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I invite you to turn to the book of 1 Corinthians 1 as we open our time together this evening as we come to a text that shows us the centrality of the theology of the cross in a ministry of a Christian pulpit, and this is a most instructive text, one that I've loved over the years and feel privileged to be able to bring to you here this evening. 1 Corinthians 1, beginning in verse 18, reading through verse 25.

18 For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. 19 For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." 20 Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? 21 For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. 22 For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, 23 but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, 24 but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25 For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

If we're going to consider and contemplate the theology of the cross, it seems to me that we want to know something fundamental about what the cross meant in the first century. That's kind of a starting point for coming to grips with it, is having a bit of a historical context to it all and tonight's message is like a 40 minute introduction followed by 15 minutes of exposition on the text that I just read.

Now, if you think about it, we even sang one of these hymns last night, many of the great hymns of the faith emphasize the cross of Jesus Christ. You may remember these lyrics, "Beneath the cross of Jesus, I fain would take my stand. The shadow of a mighty Rock within a weary land." And we sang last night, "When I survey the wondrous cross on which the Prince of glory died, my richest gain I count but loss and pour contempt on all my pride." And so the old hymnwriters saw something in the cross that needed to be celebrated and sung about and emphasized in the poetic music that they brought to the people of God, and so it's right and understandable where we would sing that we cherish

the old rugged cross. We cherish it because it was the instrument that brought us justification, as we saw last night, that the price of our redemption was paid in the atoning death of Jesus Christ on the cross of Calvary. That's where our sin debt was paid and so we cherish the cross but, beloved, to really understand the theology of the cross, as we're discussing it this weekend, you need to enter into that historical reality that the cross was not always cherished. In fact, as we read in this text here today, the cross and the fact that Christ was crucified was actually an impediment, humanly speaking, to the gospel. There was a reproach to the cross, to crucifixion that made hearers turn away both Jews and Gentiles. And so why would that be? And what did the cross mean in the day of Jesus? And what does that mean for the way that we conduct a ministry of the pulpit today? It's directly relevant. It's directly determinative of the way that we think and the way that we contemplate what we do and our awareness of the impact that it has, and what we do with the objections to a cross-based ministry. So the answer of what the cross meant in Jesus' day has a guiding, determinative impact for a philosophy of pulpit ministry today.

So I want to just take you back into the first century and even further back, take you back almost 2,500 years as we do this little bit of historical survey, and I just want to tell you upfront that what you're going to hear over the next several minutes is not for the faint of heart and we need to consider these details; they're essential for our study, but it's also just essential to see how deeply rooted the significance of the cross is in Christian ministry and how that bleeds over, no pun intended, bleeds over into a pulpit ministry. And so as we do this historical review, I just want to tell you first of all that crucifixion was common in ancient history. It was common in ancient history. It's been over a thousand years since crucifixion was indiscriminately practiced, and so for us, especially if you walk in off the street and are relatively new to the church, there's not really a modern context to understand crucifixion and what the cross might mean and what its implications might be. That was not the case at all in the first century. Crucifixion was common.

Now crucifixion, just to give you a simple definition of it, it was a method of capital punishment, it was a method of execution in which the reigning officials, military or governmental leaders would attach a victim to a wooden cross and then just leave him there to die. They would just nail him or tie him to a cross and leave him there to die over a period of, you know, could be days, as we'll see in a little bit. The origin of it seems to have developed about 600 years before the time of Christ during the reign of the Persians, and there are just a few historical markers to just show the continuity of the practice that I want to take you through. Crucifixion would be used individually to execute one criminal, it would be used in mass executions.

So about 600 BC, there was a Persian ruler named Astyages who put his advisors to the stake for giving him bad advice, and then about 200 years later, Alexander the Great crucified 2,000 people at the same time after a military conquest. And one historian records that event in this way, he says, "The anger of the king offered a sad spectacle to the victors. Two thousand persons for whose killing the general madness had spent itself hung fixed to crosses over a huge stretch of the shore." If you can imagine being at a beach someplace, a long stretch of open sand, and you just look down as far as you can

see to the left, people hanging, groaning, suffering on a cross, down to the right, same thing. That maybe gives you a little bit of a picture of how vast the mass execution was at that time. About another 200 years later, a leader in Palestine named Alexander Jannaeus took vengeance on his opponents. He crucified 800 men at the same time, and in an added measure of sadism, he brought their wives and children out while they were hanging on the cross, slaughtered the wives and children before their eyes so that their dying vision was that of their loved ones being executed in front of their eyes, all of this leading up to the time of Christ and the execution of Christ.

So this was a very broad, long-established historical practice. You know, that covers 600 years in, you know, kind of a highlight fashion or a low-light fashion, I guess you could say, and you think about the history of our country, coming up on 250 years, double that, add 100 years to it, and you have something of how deeply ingrained this was in ancient culture. The Romans, after the time of Christ, continued this practice. The wicked Emperor Nero encased Christians in wax, crucified them, and then set them on fire as human candles to light his garden in 64 AD. And then subsequent leaders carried out crucifixions as well, and it wasn't until the early 300s when the famous Emperor Constantine, and he supposedly converted to Christianity, he ended the practice of crucifixion once and for all in the early 300s, nearly 1,000 years after it was first instituted by the Persians. My point is that the crucifixion as a means of execution was not unique, and immediately you're given a sense of perspective of what Christ submitted himself to and what he did. This was not a spectacular death that he died. It wasn't a glorious martyr's death that he suffered. He suffered just like tens of thousands of people had suffered before him. His identity with humanity and the extent to which he obeyed to death, even death on a cross, as it says in Philippians 2, gives us a sense of how lowly and how much he condescended in order to identify with us and to accomplish our redemption.

So it was common in ancient history. Now secondly, again, just all of this informing the environment for the way that we receive and understand everything in this conference this weekend. Crucifixion was a sign of disgrace. It was a sign of disgrace. Now, military leaders, political leaders, they used crucifixion to maintain public order or to take vengeance on their defeated foes, and it was not indiscriminately practiced, at least by the Romans for the Romans, if you were a citizen of Rome, you were exempt from being crucified; it was a privilege, a negative privilege of citizenship that you would not be subject to crucifixion, even if you were to be executed for capital punishment. No, crucifixion was used on criminals, on military enemies, on rebellious slaves, those that had set themselves in opposition to the government, in opposition to leadership, those that had established themselves as the dregs of society, and what crucifixion did as it humiliated and tortured the victims, it was a public manifestation of Roman supremacy over those who resisted the empire. You rebel, you incite insurrection against the empire, against the emperor, you go to the cross and publicly you are seen suffering, disgraced, and you are identified with the bad element of society.

A cross disgraced its victim and put him with those who were social outcasts at best, and so it was common. It was a sign of disgrace. And crucifixion, thirdly, was sadistic and

sadistic is the word that I best know how to use to describe it. And here's what we want to see, and this is a place where we have to forcibly eject ourselves from our modern society and our modern way of thinking and project ourselves back 2,000 years into the way that they thought at the time, if we're going to actually understand the cross, because the way that they handled capital punishment, the way that they handled execution is completely different than what we do, at least here in America, where we have Constitutional protections against cruel and unusual punishment. That was not the case back then and so we have to step back into their way of thinking and what they did and how they used it. And this manner of execution was brutal beyond anything that we have ever seen in our lifetimes, perhaps excepting the way Islamic radicals will execute their enemies. Back in the first century, there were preliminaries to the cross, to the crucifixion. The victim would be flogged with a leather whip, and not just with a leather whip, but with leather that was studded with bone and metal so that it would dig into the flesh and then tear it out of his back as it was withdrawn and struck again, and so before he was ever crucified, the victim had his back turned into throbbing ribbons of exposed flesh. That was the starting point and then what they would do after that preliminary flogging, they would force the condemned to carry the crossbar to his execution site with a placard around his neck that indicated the crime that he had committed. And so he's being marched through public streets having already been sadistically tortured, carrying the instrument of his own execution with a sign around his neck indicating why he was being crucified. Completely, utterly demeaning. There were no 14th Amendment protections. There was no right to counsel. There were no Miranda warnings that you were entitled to. There was nothing protecting them at all. They were at the mercy of their executioners.

And so, their outstretched arms, when they reached the execution site, would be tied or nailed to that crossbar, and then the executioners would hoist that crossbar up, fasten it to the vertical post, and then they would be hanging there. There was usually a peg driven into the vertical post where they would somewhat sit to support their weight. And after all of that, beloved, then the real agony began and they just allowed the victim to die of suffocation or exhaustion; you can find multiple articles online that describe the medical aspects of crucifixion. Some of those men would suffer for several days before death came to them. And unlike, and here's where we kind of have to step out of our modern context, what do we do in the relatively rare instances when capital punishment is practiced here in America today? How is it done? Behind penitentiary walls. No media coverage, Very few witnesses. Very sterile environment, usually, especially if it's death by lethal injection, you know, you've got a doctor there and intravenous and the guy's fed a final meal before he dies. But it's so sanitized. It's so beyond public view that we never even really think about it. Well, the Romans had a completely diametrically opposed view and philosophy of these things. They wanted it to be of maximum exposure because of the public deterrent effect that it would have. You see someone being crucified and you read what he did, you immediately are taught you don't do that and it strikes fear in the public eye, satisfies their thirst simultaneously for justice, and becomes an instrument of maintaining public order, and so it was made as public as possible in exact opposition to the way that we do it here in America today. Completely different mindset. And so what Romans would do is they would hang people, they would crucify people on the

busiest roads to maximize the exposure of those who were passing by. Men would see the indignity and learn not to repeat the crime.

Now at this point, I'd invite you to turn to the gospel of John because you see a hint of this in the accounts of the crucifixion of Christ in John 19. John 19, and let's pick it up because we have so much time here this evening, let's pick it up a little earlier in the context and pick it up in John 19:15. The crowd manipulating Pilate who was compromised politically, the crowd cried out,

15 ...Away with him, away with him, crucify him!" Pilate said to them, "Shall I crucify your King?" The chief priests answered, "We have no king but Caesar." 16 So he delivered him over to them to be crucified. So they took Jesus, 17 and he went out, bearing his own cross, to the place called The Place of a Skull, which in Aramaic is called Golgotha. 18 There they crucified him, and with him two others, one on either side, and Jesus between them. 19 Pilate also wrote an inscription and put it on the cross. It read, "Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews."

And then look in verse 20. You see this public aspect of it just incidentally alluded to by the gospel writer John; he could incidentally allude to this because it was such common knowledge in the first century and he says there in verse 20,

20 Many of the Jews read this inscription, for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city, and it was written in Aramaic, in Latin, and in Greek.

So you see the placard, you see the charges, the public charges against Jesus, he was the king of the Jews. You see that it was in a public place where many people saw it and saw him hanging there crucified. You see it written in multiple languages to maximize the exposure of the crime and the reason that Jesus was being crucified. All of this, beloved, all of this setting up for our understanding that when a man was crucified like that, it indicated that the victim was helpless at the hands of the invincible Romans. "There is nothing you can do to stop our power and our power is executed against you and there is nothing you can do about it." And the ultimate indignity for many men who were crucified is that at times they would leave the corpse to hang even after the man was dead and his corpse would just be left for birds or animals to come along and to eat so that even after death there was further indignity inflicted upon them.

What I want you to see is there's no real analogy to this to what we know in modern life. I mean, my daughter and I were talking about this not long ago, she's a hospice admissions nurse, and even for the normal dying process, that's so often hidden from us. So many people don't have any acquaintance with the dying process. Well here, the whole aspect of it was completely reversed, and the sadistic dying process of crucifixion was on public display for everyone to see. And so there was an utter contempt attached to the crucified victim. There was utter suffering. And in the first century mindset, this showed how

mighty the empire was, this showed the glory of the empire to crucify men and teach them not to do what they had just done.

Now, fourth point here. We've seen the crucifixion was common in ancient history. It was a sign of disgrace. It was sadistic. And now we dig even deeper into the spiritual connections that it has and the lessons that it has for us here and let me just preface it by saying this, I would venture to say that for most of you, as you hear this and you contemplate and identify with the men who are being crucified, that there's an element of sympathy that you have for them. Say, "What a terrible way to die. I feel so bad that people died like that and they suffered like that and they were humiliated like that." And there's a sense of sympathy that we have for them, and perhaps rightly so. Whether that's right or wrong doesn't matter for our discussion here tonight, what I want you to know is that in the first century, for crucified men, there was not a sense of sympathy for them. These men were despised and rejected and they were not pitied. The men who were crucified were viewed with utter contempt and so this fourth aspect of our historical review, crucified men were despised by the culture, not sympathized with. They were despised and there is enough indication in historical writings to give us a pretty good picture.

Now, Gentiles and Jews, scorned, despised these men, but they despised them for different reasons, and that's critical for the exposition that's still yet to come. They'd scorn them for different reasons. For Gentiles, non-Jews in other words, crucifixion was a virtual obscenity, even the word, crucifixion was a virtual obscenity that was not to be discussed in polite company which is kind of an interesting juxtaposition. They do it publicly, but in polite company, you would not talk about that at all and you can see this in their own words. There was a criminal defense attorney in Rome named Cicero, maybe you've heard of his name if you've studied classical literature at all. And Cicero was defending a Roman citizen against a capital murder charge, capital simply meaning he was exposed to the possibility of the penalty of execution as a result of the murder charge. (I like these little legal drama things here, so you'll have to excuse me.) The prosecutor in that case was seeking the death penalty, but not just the death penalty, he wanted this man to be executed by crucifixion, and so whatever the guy had done, whoever he had killed, however he had done it, the prosecutor viewed it to be such a heinous crime that he deserved to die by crucifixion. Now Cicero, being a skilled defense attorney, sought to discredit the prosecution. "You can't trust the prosecution," is part of his trial strategy here and here was his argument, he's saying the prosecutor is overzealous and here is what Cicero argued to the jury as recorded by the historian who was reporting it at the time. Cicero, speaking to the jury, perhaps in his closing argument, said this. He said, "The very word cross should be far removed, not only from the person of a Roman citizen, but from his thoughts, his eyes, and his ears." He said a Roman citizen should never be subjected to crucifixion, and good Romans shouldn't even think this way. They shouldn't see this. They shouldn't hear this. And so obviously, he was appealing to a common cultural understanding and sentiment that this was so terrible that it should not be imposed upon a Roman citizen and Cicero banked his trial strategy on that argument.

Now going further, Gentiles mocked the Christian gospel when it began to be preached because at the center of it was a crucified man, a crucified Savior no more, and so in the environment as the apostles and others began to preach, beloved, there was no possible way that the gospel was a means to profit, prestige, and glory as they did that, as they highlighted in that culture that despised crucified men and despised the very idea of a cross, they highlighted, lifted high the cross of Christ, and a great cultural collision was taking place. And Gentiles mocked it and one Christian apologist in his writings summarized the Gentile attack on the gospel in this way. He said, "They proclaim our madness to consist of this, that we give to a crucified man a place second to the unchangeable and eternal God, the Creator of all." Now in human wisdom, the Gentile critique makes perfect sense. "We've been seeing men crucified by that point for six centuries. We despise these men. They're weak, defeated men at the hands of the empire. And now you come preaching and telling me," it's laughable from the Gentile perspective, "you come and tell me that a crucified man is God and Savior and the only Redeemer of mankind. Right. What have you been smoking? What is so distorted in your head that you would say something like that?"

Another illustration of the Gentile attitudes is this, archaeologists have found a graffiti near Rome. It's a crude picture, you can find representations of it in Christian background books. And in this graffiti, this crude art picture is something like this. It shows the head of a donkey on the body of a man that is hanging on a cross, and in the picture, there is another man who is kneeling before this half donkey, half man, lifting up his hand to the crucified victim and the inscription, the line on the graffiti says, and it's a mocking, it's a mocking inscription that says, "Alexamenos," man's name, "Alexamenos worships his God," says, "Look at what you're doing," and you'll pardon the language, but I have to use this in order to give the full effect of what is being said. He says, "Look at what you're doing, Alex. You are worshiping a crucified ass. How ridiculous is that? What is wrong with you? What kind of mental incapacity do you have to worship someone who has been crucified?" The drawing mocks the worship of Christ as something that is crude, stupid, and disgraceful. All of this, beloved, deeply ingrained on social consciousness at the time. As much as the assassination of Abraham Lincoln is imprinted on our collective American consciousness, multiply that by maybe a factor of 50 or 500 and understand that the attitudes that I've been describing here, that's how deeply ingrained it was on social consciousness in the first century.

Those were the Gentile attitudes. What about the Jews? Well, turn in your Bibles to Deuteronomy 21. Deuteronomy 21. What about the Jews? For all that I've said about the Gentiles, the Jews held crucified men in even greater contempt than what I've already described about the Gentiles, greater contempt with biblical reason. The Jews believed that crucified men were cursed by God. Look at verses 22 and 23 of Deuteronomy 21. Moses writes,

22 ... if a man has committed a crime punishable by death and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, 23 his body shall not remain all night on the tree, but you shall bury him the same day, for a hanged man is

cursed by God. You shall not defile your land that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance.

You see a hanged man, by biblical inspired definition, that man is cursed in the Old Testament economy, and what Jews would do, Jews would hang corpses on a cross to humiliate the victims. They just put them up briefly to show that they were cursed and then bring them down quickly so the men were already dead, and they would use that sign of contempt, especially for blasphemers and idolaters, and so the crucifixion signified judgment against that deceased person. And a second century Jewish writing says this, he says, "Why is this one hanged? Because he cursed the Name and the Name of heaven was found defiled." So Jews say he's cursed. We humiliate him in order to vindicate the holiness of God, you could say, and this happened to him because the Name of heaven was defiled by who he was and what he did.

And so you have the Gentile contempt, a mocking, scorning contempt, you have Jews viewing these crucified victims as those under the curse of God, and that's comprehensive of the world in the first century. You've got Jews, you've got Gentiles, that covers everyone and there is this universal rejection of crucified men in light of that. It demands us to ask, how then did the gospel ever advance in a society like that, in a culture like that? A gospel that features a crucified man, that says that this crucified man is God and Lord, that he is the only Savior of mankind, and he is raised from the dead, and you need to repent and believe and receive this crucified man as Lord of your life and submit to him and entrust your eternal destiny to him. This is madness viewed from a human perspective. "This is utter madness. How could he be Lord and God and not deliver himself from crucifixion? He's going to deliver me, but he couldn't deliver himself?" That was the argument that the Pharisees made as they mocked him on the cross.

Well, that brings us to our text tonight, and if you want to make this your fifth point, the cross is the power of God. The cross is the power of God. Beloved, as Travis set it up for us so well last night, distinguishing the theology of glory with the theology of the cross, and the modern idea being come to Jesus and have a glorious life, you hear football coaches after a big win giving glory to Jesus in victory as if, you know, and it's just the theology of glory coming out in boasting of a victory. "Jesus was good to me." Nothing like that would have been possible in the first century. This is a direct, in the first century, this was a direct cultural collision of most fundamental consequence and as you go back to 1 Corinthians now, now you've got a background to grasp something of the magnitude of what Paul is saying in 1 Corinthians 1 when he says in verse 18, he says, "The word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing." Well, yeah, it is. It was utter folly to them for all of the reasons that I've outlined to you here. He says but there's a contrast to the elect, there's a contrast to the people of God, "to us it is the power of God." What the world despises, we embrace. And Paul, here's where it gets so instructive for our philosophy of ministry and the way and the content of what we preach, Paul did not evade that cultural collision.

By the way, let me take a little bit of a time out and go on a little tangent here. Beloved, a point of discernment for you as you're trying, as you listen to different teachers and try to

decide who's teaching you the truth and who you should follow and who you should not. You cannot simply go by what men say. You have to be listening and know enough Scripture to understand what they're not saying and what the theologians of glory do is they'll talk about victory and blessing and all of that, but they don't want to talk to you about the wrath of God. They don't want to talk to you about judgment. They won't talk to you about hell. They won't call you to repentance. They won't call you to submit to Christ as Lord, or they'll explain all of that stuff away. They'll either explain it away or they'll just be silent on it and in that, they deceive you by saying a portion of what Scripture says, and they count on you in your Christian grace and wanting to think the best about everybody, they're counting on you to think that they believe the other stuff too, they're just not talking about it. Beloved, let me tell you, without fear of contradiction, if a man who has a pulpit of any kind, any kind of teaching ministry, if he believes in the wrath of God, if he believes that men are in danger of eternal judgment, if he believes that Christ is the only Savior and that you must repent and receive him or you will be eternally lost, if he believes that, he will say it! He will proclaim it because he won't want to risk the possibility that you would miss the warnings of the gospel. He wouldn't want you to realize that if you turn away from Christ, there is an eternal consequence to your everlasting destruction. If he believes it, he would say it. And so when so many men are silent on these points, they are proclaiming loudly by their silence that they don't believe what Scripture says and whatever they're teaching and why-ever they're doing it, they're doing it for reasons that are other than the good of your soul. They speak by their silence and by what they don't say.

So, that said, coming back to 1 Corinthians 1 and the way that this ties in, you know, they don't want to say that because they're afraid that people will walk away, they'll go someplace else that'll tickle their ears and not make them uncomfortable or challenge their sinful lifestyles. They won't tell you that you need to forsake your sins. Well, that cowardly, dastardly, morally culpable approach to preaching is the exact 180 degree opposite of what the Apostle Paul did. Paul did not cater to what he thought the audience wanted. He gave them directly what he knew in their natural minds they could only reject.

Look at verse 21 of 1 Corinthians 1, where he says, "For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe." The world thought it was folly. Gentiles, Jews, they thought it was folly what Paul had to say and what Paul says is that the theology of the cross is what pleases God so that what men reject and say is foolish is what God is pleased to use to save souls and bring men into his kingdom.

And then look at the core text here of what we'll consider in the remaining time. Verse 22, "For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." What Paul is saying here is that when Jews came for preaching, they wanted a display of miraculous wonders. They wanted signs to verify a messianic claim. Gentiles wanted verbal eloquence. They wanted rhetoric and you can see this, Paul, in Acts 17 and how they would gather together just to

hear something new. Gentiles wanted verbal eloquence to gratify their intellect, "So give us a sign from heaven. Give us an eloquent display of rhetoric and maybe we'll listen to you." Paul was having none of it. He preaches Christ crucified to them. He preached a crucified man as the God of the universe and the only Savior of mankind and humanly speaking, it was something that they could only impulsively, by a knee-jerk reaction, automatically reject in their natural minds. "A crucified man God and Savior? That's absurd. I'm out of here."

Look at verse 23. Paul says, "we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews." A stumbling block. The Greek word skandalon means a temptation to sin or an enticement to apostasy and unbelief. Paul says, "The very content of what I preach tempts people to apostasy and turning away." To the Jews, it was an oxymoron. The Messiah could not be cursed, and the offense of Paul's message caused Jews to turn away, apart from a work of the Holy Spirit in their hearts. To Gentiles, you read it there in verse 23, it was folly to them. That word folly in the original language, moria, it's the word that we get moron from. To Gentiles to say a crucified man was king was stupid, it was moronic, and they'd just throw up their hands, reject it, and walk away. Paul, not preaching a seeker-sensitive message, Paul, not preaching a message designed to bring in the multitudes, Paul preaching a message designed to bring in the elect of God under the power of the Holy Spirit.

Contemporary writers variously called Christianity a pernicious superstition, a sick delusion, a perverse and extravagant superstition. The gospel contradicted all prevailing thought. One modern historian, says this, he says that "to believe that the one pre-existent Son of the one true God, the mediator at creation and the Redeemer of the world, had appeared in very recent times in out of the way Galilee, as a member of the obscure people of the Jews, and even worse, had died the death of a common criminal on the cross, could only be regarded as a sign of madness." And yet, beloved, in the midst of a society like that, you read the gospel of Acts, you know anything about early church history, the gospel flourished. The gospel spread like wildfire in a dehydrated forest, point being, God uses what the world despises to achieve his purpose, to advance the gospel.

The shame of crucifixion from the first century to now, that has been lost in the haze of time. It doesn't strike our ears like it did in the first century and so crucifixion, *per se*, is not the stumbling block or the foolishness that it would seem to be that it was in the first century. It's not the immediate stumbling block directly. But here's what we need to see for this weekend. The apostolic example of preaching the cross in the face and in the teeth of a culture and a philosophical system that was diametrically and unalterably opposed to it, that is our pattern for pulpit ministry here today. Beloved, culture and philosophy will always reject the true gospel and our postmodern society rejects it for different reasons. It rejects the very concept of absolute truth. People appeal to feelings to validate what's true for them. "All ways lead to God. We must respect other opinions," and all of that. And the message of Scripture is, no, there is absolute truth. There is only one way to God, the way, the truth, the life; no one comes to the Father except through me. And any opinions that contradict the gospel, contradict biblical truth, are false and

sinful by definition. A greater cultural collision in the 21st century cannot be imagined, just as preaching a crucified man in the first century could not create a greater cultural collision could be imagined.

You see, beloved, and this is all so very foundational and fundamental to everything that we do, the message of Christ crucified tells us how to minister in this age. Whatever else we do, whatever we may do on secondary matters of how we structure a church or what we do with ministry, what unites true preachers of the word of God is this, is that we do not ever yield to cultural demands. We do not ever yield to cultural presuppositions in order to accommodate the message so that people will not reject it. We do not seek to accommodate our preaching to men at all. We go to Scripture, we study it, we see what God has to say, what God has revealed, we understand that, and then we preach it regardless of the consequences, regardless of how men reject it, regardless of what other false teachers are doing. We have a vertical responsibility before a holy God to whom we will one day give an account and for those who teach and preach the word of God, that is the single and only, ultimately, controlling motivation that determines what we do. And so we go out into this culture, this postmodern culture that mocks Christianity in a similar way to what it was done in the first century, and without apology, without fear, without currying the favor of men, we insist on the principle of absolute truth. We insist on the exclusivity of the gospel. And look, beloved, we understand as we do that that this will not bring us glory with men. We understand that this will not give us platforms with the cultural elite and we could not possibly care less about that. What we care about is that God honors his word, that his word goes forth and it doesn't return void. What we care about, what I care about, is that the message that I preach, biblical message, it's what saved my soul. I'm not going to give that up to anybody and I know that it's the message that saves other souls and I need to love them enough to be true to the message regardless of the rejection it might bring to me, and this is the way all men of God, true men of God, think. See, this type of preaching will be blessed with power, not as measured by attendance, not as measured by inflated book sales that are artificially ginned up by marketing strategies. This is the message, this is the preaching, this is the pulpit that is anointed by God the Holy Spirit with true spiritual authority and the true man of God wants nothing else than that. Whether he's preaching to an empty room or whether he's preaching to thousands, it makes no difference. You're loyal to the message, you're loyal to the God of the message, and you let him do what he will with those who hear.

Iain Murray says this, and it's so helpful. He says, "To make the Christian message acceptable to unregenerate men," in other words, to take out that which is offensive and make it intelligible, "to do that is to deny it. The nature of Christian truth is such that it requires a new birth in order to receive it because man by nature is a hater of God." We cannot, we cannot, we cannot, we cannot take the true gospel and accommodate it and make it something that men like. The natural man rejects the things of God. 1 Corinthians 2:14, "The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned." As soon as you try to make it something that's appealing to the unregenerate man, you have denied the message altogether and so, we preach the word whether the world likes it or not, and those of you, younger men, maybe contemplating,

should I go into ministry, should I preach the word of God, God bless you, God give you wisdom. Understand, understand that if you are to approach a Christian pulpit, you do it with an unalterable, unshakable commitment that says, "I will be loyal to Christ. I will be loyal to Scripture regardless of what men say about me, regardless of how men respond."

Charles Spurgeon in a quote I've often used over the years, Charles Spurgeon said this, and with this I close. He says, "This talking about Christ crucified is said to be archaic and not at all suitable to the refinement of this wonderful age. But our mind is made up and our foot is put down. If it be foolish to preach up atonement by blood, we will be fools; and if it be madness to stick to the old truth just as Paul delivered it, we mean to stick to it, for we are persuaded that the cross of Christ which stumbles so many and is ridiculed by so many more, is still the power of God and the wisdom of God. Yes, just the old fashioned truth, if you believe you shall be saved, that we will stick to and may God send his blessing upon it according to his own eternal purpose."

Let's pray together.

God, send your blessing upon every true pulpit throughout the world, throughout our country, throughout this state, and send your blessing on the men that preach it now and the men that you have prepared for a pulpit ministry in the future that are living now and one day, Father, those that are still yet to be born, we pray for them that as they will no doubt enter into a darker culture than what we know now. Father, may you flame their hearts with a commitment to truth and an understanding of truth and such a vibrant love for Christ that the idea of compromising the message would be anathema to them. Bless your word as it goes forth, and may it always be to the eternal glory of our blessed Lord Jesus. We pray in his name. Amen.

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