

The Weakness of the Cross

1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5

It's been said that basketball fans have the Final Four. Football fans have the Super Bowl. Baseball fans have the World Series. And Christians have Easter. I fully agree. Next Sunday followers of Christ all over the world will gather and celebrate the resurrection. But the resurrection, of course, needs to be seen in light of the crucifixion. The glory of the resurrection is proportional to the humiliation of the cross. And so this morning and on Good Friday we will focus our attention on the crucifixion of Christ in preparation for our worship on Easter.

Today I want us to ponder a very specific aspect of the cross: the weakness of the cross. In today's passage Paul acknowledges that the people of his day viewed the cross as ***weakness***. It makes sense, right? If you were condemned as a criminal and then executed, you were weak; you had no power; you were at the mercy of others. Paul acknowledges this perspective and then argues that for those who believe, the cross is actually the ***power of God***. The cross demonstrates ***power through weakness***. As a matter of fact, Paul will argue that the Christian life involves experiencing power through weakness. From first to last the Christian life is about power through weakness.

What are your weaknesses or limitations? What are two or three things you'd change about yourself or your life if you could? Maybe you feel like you've never measured up to others physically or mentally. Maybe you're relationally challenged – relationships are just plain hard for you. Maybe you “have a past” that you just can't seem to shake. Whatever your weakness, the tendency is to view your weakness as your greatest enemy, as something that holds you back in your relationship with God.

I hope that you are convinced here today that your weaknesses aren't a curse. Your weaknesses don't disqualify you from experiencing God's best. As a matter of fact, the place where you are the weakest (and the most vulnerable and helpless) is the place where God wants to demonstrate His power the most fully. You may have always thought that the goal of the Christian life is to become so strong and competent and “together” that you no longer have weaknesses and limitations. But the reality is that His “power is perfected in [our] weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9). It turns out that maturity involves accepting that God wants to demonstrate His power through our weaknesses.

Be encouraged as we consider 1 Corinthians 1:18 through 2:5. Paul says that the very message of the cross illustrates the power of weakness; the Corinthians themselves are an example of weakness; and Paul as a messenger of God was an example of the power of weakness. Christianity is about the power of weakness from first to last. We'll see that this perspective gives us humility toward God and toward each other.

We see the power of weakness in:

The message of the cross. (1:18-25) Verse 18 describes two very different ways of experiencing the “message of the cross.”

18 For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

Every single person is either “perishing” or “being saved.” To those who are perishing, the message about Jesus dying on the cross for sin is foolishness (more on this later). But to those who are being saved (a category that included Paul and the Corinthians), the message of the cross is “the power of God.” The word of the cross isn’t merely good, helpful information; it is the power of God. Those who understand and accept the message about Jesus experience God’s power over the guilt and bondage of sin; they experience God’s power to be joyful and fruitful – even in the toughest of circumstances.

Beginning in verse 19 Paul argues that God’s power and wisdom have always been different from human power and wisdom. Paul quotes from Isaiah 29:14 to make his point.

19 For it is written, "I WILL DESTROY THE WISDOM OF THE WISE, AND THE CLEVERNESS OF THE CLEVER I WILL SET ASIDE."

In Isaiah’s day, the people of Israel had moved away from God’s wisdom; they were ignoring His word/truth. In a very dangerous form of pride, they turned to their own wisdom and their own cleverness. Since God is opposed to the proud, He vowed to destroy their wisdom and set aside their cleverness.

Throughout this chapter, “the wisdom of the wise” or the “wisdom of the world” is a reference to human ideas about goodness and salvation. Paul is arguing against people who think they know better than God what it means to be good and what a relationship with Him is all about.

20 Where is the wise man? 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 through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe.

Paul is making the simple point that nobody has been successful in finding God through human wisdom. Paul says that this was by God’s design. God wanted to expose “the wisdom of the world” as foolish and demonstrate the message of the cross as wise. He explains more in the following verses.

22 For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; 23 but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, 24 but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

The message of the cross met with different types of resistance. As we know from

reading the gospels, the Jews wanted signs – miraculous evidence that the message was valid. Most were never satisfied with the miracles Jesus performed, whether healing the paralytic (and pronouncing his sins forgiven) or multiplying loaves and fish for 5,000 people. When Paul “preached Christ crucified,” the Jews thought it was scandalous. It didn’t matter how many miracles Jesus had done, being crucified (or to use the terminology of Deuteronomy 21:22-23, “hung on a tree”) meant that He was cursed. To them it was scandalous (“stumbling block” = *scandalon*) that a crucified man would be proclaimed as the Savior.

The Greeks, on the other hand, searched for wisdom. As Paul found when he went to Athens (Acts 17) and Corinth, they loved nothing better than debating the latest philosophy. They listened politely to Paul, but on the whole, they thought it simply foolish that a man who’d been crucified as a criminal in Palestine might have anything to do with their salvation. It was just foolishness to them.

But there was a third category of people: “those who are called” (earlier “those who believe”). To them, whether they were Jews or Greeks, Christ was “the power of God and the wisdom of God.” They experienced a type of wisdom and power that came only from God. In a rather shocking statement, Paul writes:

25 Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

He’s not saying, of course, that God is foolish and weak. He’s saying that the things about God that people **deem** to be foolish and weak (like the cross!) are actually wiser and stronger than anything they can produce. Paul is saying, “Fine. Call the cross foolishness if you’d like, but it puts your wisdom to shame. Say that Jesus was weak for being crucified, but the cross has the power to save.” The power of weakness can be seen in the message of the cross is itself.

We enter the Christian faith (and the body of Christ) through a message that most people consider to be foolishness and weakness. I can remember a conversation many years ago with someone I really cared about who told me, “I don’t need a Savior. I don’t need to be saved from anything.” To him the idea that somebody who died 2,000 years ago had paid for his sin was laughable. It was foolishness to him. A Christian is someone who looks at Jesus on the cross and says, “The foolishness of God is wiser than men.”

You may have talked with people who have said that Christianity is just a crutch (i.e., it just props up weak, lame people who can’t stand on their own two feet). “If you were a stronger person you wouldn’t need church and prayer and all this ‘God talk.’” A believer is someone who looks at the cross and says, “I can’t stand on my own two feet; I am not whole and strong and self-sufficient. And the weakness of God is stronger than men.”

We see the power of weakness in the message of the cross.

We see the power of weakness in:

Those who respond to the message of the cross. (1:26-31) In a rather masterful move, Paul has the Corinthians look in the mirror. If they evaluated their own experience, they would conclude that they were a shining example of God's power in spite of their weakness. They were not personally wise and powerful and influential.

26 For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble;

Paul is making the case that the Corinthians weren't very impressive when measured even by human standards. They were largely "nobodies" by human standards. Not many were "wise according to the flesh"; they didn't come from the "Greek intellectual or philosopher class" (Mare, p. 196). As well, not many of them were "mighty" – they didn't have political power. Finally, not many came from nobility. Some did, but not many.

This has been largely true throughout the history of Christianity. For example, George Whitfield was one of the greatest preachers of the 18th century. He was instrumental in the revivals in New England which are called the Great Awakening. He saw thousands of common people come to Christ in cities such as Philadelphia. There Benjamin Franklin (who would fall in the category of "wise according to the flesh," mighty and noble) became a close friend, admiring Whitfield's speaking abilities; but he never believed. He considered the cross to be foolishness.

Why does God largely choose "nobodies"?

27 but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, 28 and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, 29 so that no man may boast before God.

Those who are wise and strong and "somebodies" in this world have no advantage with God. They may be able to negotiate within the kingdoms of this world better than others, but not the kingdom of God. God is neither influenced nor impressed by their wisdom and power. To the contrary, he shames and nullifies such people so that "no one may boast before God." Think about how shamed and nullified Pilate was when he interrogated Jesus before His crucifixion. Pilate walked away mystified because Jesus wouldn't answer his questions.

The Corinthian church was comprised mostly of people from the lower classes of society. That was part of God's design. That realization should have made the Corinthians understand that their only legitimate "boast" was in Jesus Christ.

30 But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, 31 so that, just as it is written, "LET HIM WHO BOASTS, BOAST IN THE LORD."

Paul quotes here from Jeremiah 9:23-24 in which the prophet warns against boasting in

wisdom and might and riches. Jeremiah says that if you **have** to boast, you should boast in the Lord – that you know Him. He's not, of course, advocating spiritual pride; people who really know God are humble to the core (see Isaiah 6, Revelation 1, etc.).

The implication is that if **we** look in the mirror, we too will see God's power through our weakness. You may be a somebody in some limited sphere of influence. But none of us came to God and said, "This is Your lucky day. I've decided to be on Your team. I'm your MVP. The body of Christ is getting quite an upgrade now that I'm on board. The Kingdom of God has a fighting chance now that You've got me. . . ." Since none of us can boast before God, neither should we boast before each other. We are shining examples of the power of weakness.

We see the power of weakness in:

Those who share the message of the cross. (2:1-5) In these verses Paul reminds the Corinthians that his presentation of the Christian faith was an expression of the power of weakness. Paul didn't come to them as a "somebody" exhibiting human power and wisdom.

1 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. 2 For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.

Paul didn't try to compete with the great orators of his day. He just wasn't playing that game. Paul understood that **the gospel** was the power of God, not great oratorical skills. And so Paul "determined" (it was his settled resolve) to emphasize first and foremost "Jesus Christ, and Him crucified." Paul didn't abandon the cross even though it was foolishness to the Greeks and scandalous to the Jews. As a matter of fact, his personal condition reflected the message of the cross:

3 I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling, 4 and my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, 5 so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God.

Acts 18 confirms that when Paul was in Corinth, he was fearful to the point of leaving. But God gave him a vision one night that gave him courage and strength to continue telling people about Christ (see Acts 18:9-10). He had no confidence in his own personal strength or ability to persuade people. Paul came to understand that this condition of weakness was actually an asset. Paul was content with his weakness because he didn't want the Corinthians' faith to rest on him; he wanted them to experience the Spirit and power of God.

In 2 Corinthians 12 Paul will reflect on this topic and conclude, "When I am weak, I am strong" (12:10). Consequently, people didn't go away thinking, "Wow, that Paul is one persuasive, wise, powerful person!" No, those who responded to the gospel experienced the Spirit and power of God.

In the larger context of 1 Corinthians, Paul is saying that those who viewed him as the leader of their faction (“I am of Paul”) were badly misguided. There was no reason for them to put him in the place that only Christ should occupy. He was an example of the power of weakness – God’s power through human weakness.

In the same way, we should never elevate a teacher or pastor or Christian leader to the place that only Jesus should occupy. We should remember that the people who have influenced us the most are those who exhibit God’s power in the midst of their weakness. As I think back to the people who led me to Christ and helped me learn to walk with God, it strikes me that they were very normal, flawed people. I wasn’t “wowed” by their personal power and wisdom; they were simply real people who experienced God’s grace in everyday life. I concluded that if **they** can walk with Christ I can too. Again, boasting in our strength and knowledge and goodness is really foolish when God’s power is shown in our weakness.

This should encourage us as we seek to share Christ with others. Perry Downs, one of my seminary professors used to say that “People don’t need to see perfection. They need to see redemption.” Every weakness and limitation can be redeemed; every failure and defeat we experience can be redeemed. God can buy them back for His purposes. Our weaknesses and limitations don’t disqualify us from having an influence in the lives of others; they provide an opportunity for us to exhibit the Spirit and power of God.