

Jason Upchurch - 1 Corinthians 2:1-16 - Trusting God To Save His People

I want to encourage you again this morning, as I have for the last few weeks, that the gospel message that we have is powerful. It has the power to transform lives, to raise the dead, to reconcile filthy sinners to a holy God. It has the ability to make rebels into sons and Gentiles and Jews into one new man. It is the power of God unto salvation as Paul says in **Rom. 1:16**.

The gospel is also the power of God unto sanctification. It's the same gospel message that sanctifies us - makes us more like Jesus. We are constantly in need to remember that we are not justified by our own works or righteousness but that every good thing we have is because of what Christ has done in us.

We probably all know that, mentally, but the danger is always that we forget that. And we substitute the powerful message of Jesus Christ crucified for sinners for something else. This is the danger in every generation. In every generation there is some new thing - new teaching, new technique, new church growth guru, evangelism curriculum - that, in the name of Jesus, actually undermines Jesus because what it tries to do is soften the message of the gospel.

"Don't talk about sin just yet. Don't talk about a bloody cross or a crucified Messiah. Don't talk about taking up your cross and crucifying yourself. We'll get to that, just not yet." And the core tenants of our faith are put on the back burner in the name of bringing people to faith.

What Paul says here in chapter 2 goes against every church growth book ever written. It goes against almost every youth group mentality. It goes against so many of the popular missions philosophies and evangelism strategies. Because here's the bottom line with Paul in Chapter 2: No matter what unbelievers tell you they want, what they **need** is to believe the simple gospel message of Jesus Christ and him crucified.

This is so important. Our unbelieving family, our unbelieving friends and neighbors, they don't need a better handle on their finances, they don't need a philosophy to live by. They don't need to have a better understanding gender roles. All those are important and we can help them in those discussions. But all of those are secondary to their real need: to see and love the beautiful, bloody gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. And Paul says that right here.

Here's where we're at with Paul: Since the gospel message is foolishness to the unbelieving world (1:18-25), and God usually chooses losers because that's how he gets glory (1:26-31), then we should simply trust the Spirit to work through preaching the simple gospel message. We don't need to fluff it up, we don't need to water it down. We don't need to bait and switch. We don't get sidetracked by unimportant stuff. We simply preach the gospel.

What we're going to do this morning is actually just walk through most of chapter 2. We're not in a rush, but I think it's going to be helpful for us to follow the whole flow of what Paul is trying to say here.

We've built a pretty solid foundation in chapter 1, so I think the flow of chapter 2 will make more sense if we approach it from a higher level overview. So here we go.

Since the gospel is foolishness to the world and since God saves losers:

1) God doesn't need fancy preachers. Read 1-5

So the first point is that God doesn't need fancy preachers. Now, that might seem obvious since Paul just mentioned that God doesn't usually save the worldly wise or the noble or the influential people. He saves the nobodies to shame the cultural elite. So it's usually nobodies who are preaching the gospel. So if you feel like a nobody, if you feel completely not equipped to tell people about Jesus, that's because God's got you right where he wants you.

But what's a little odd about what Paul says here is that Paul wasn't a nobody. Paul was a rising star in Judaism. He was young and polished and educated. He could speak eloquently and rival the wisdom of the philosophers.

So you'd think that when he comes across the worldly people who are always looking for wisdom or miracles it'd be on. Oh you want wisdom? Paul, give 'em wisdom. And we'd sit back waiting for him to blow them all away with his staggering intellect. He'd baffle their minds with history and theology and discourse and leave their jaws on the floor.

But that's not what he did, was it? He says when I came to you, I didn't preach the gospel with lofty speech or wisdom. He didn't give grand speeches. He gave them Jesus. **Read 2:2**

So here's the apostle Paul - arguably the most well-trained Jewish theologian and preacher in Rome and he basically says "I'm not playing your game of who's smartest. You want to talk about wisdom and philosophy all day. No dice. I'm just going to talk to you about Jesus." He wasn't going to play their games.

Now, when he says I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified he doesn't mean that he played dumb about other matters. We know from other letters that Paul was very well-versed in Greek philosophy and all kinds of theology. What he means is he never ventured too far from the simple gospel message.

And that's what he means by Jesus Christ and him crucified. He didn't just repeat "Jesus Christ and him crucified" over and over like some mantra. That phrase is just shorthand for the gospel message.

Look back at Acts 18. We've looked at this chapter several times and by the time we're done here hopefully you'll have memorized that **Acts 18** is Paul in Corinth. But we need to come here often to help us understand the context of what Paul is saying. **Read 1-11**

So it's not like Paul went to the synagogue every Saturday and just repeated "Jesus Christ and him crucified." No, what he was doing was going through the OT showing these Jews who Jesus was. Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ. Christ is the Greek word, Messiah is the Hebrew word but they both mean the same thing: someone anointed by God, chosen for a specific purpose.

When we say Jesus Christ what we are saying is Jesus Messiah. Messiah Jesus. The Jews were waiting for someone who was appointed by God to deliver them. What Paul was doing every Saturday was showing them that Jesus's life and death and resurrection were part of the plan. So in **Vs. 5, 11: Read**

The Christ, the Messiah, is Jesus. He's the one, you guys. And he had to be crucified. Why? For sins. This was incomprehensible to the Jews.

And this is also what he did with the Greeks. Look back up in chapter 17 when he's in Athens talking to them. Notice how fast he goes from their pagan religions to Jesus. He gets there in about 30 seconds. **Read 17:32**

No, obviously this isn't the whole sermon, this is probably just a summary. But Paul doesn't spend a whole lot of time talking about vain philosophy or whatever. He gets to Jesus asap.

I mean, if we were there, we'd be thinking Paul would dazzle them with his intellect. Paul says, no. It's Jesus Christ and him crucified. Whether Jews or Greeks, it's the simple gospel message.

It's not dietary laws. It's not morality, per se. It's not politics or social causes. We can talk about those things. But at the end of the day they all take a back seat to Jesus Christ and him crucified. That a person's biggest need is to be saved from the wrath of God by believing in Jesus.

See the unbelieving world thinks they know what they need. They think they know what they want. They don't.

Whenever I hear Bono singing that he still hasn't found what he's looking for, I just want to yell at him: I know what you're looking for! You know what he's looking for. I think Bono claims to be a Christian - if he is, he should write a sequel that entitled "I found it."

Turn back to **1 Cor. 2** again, and while you turn let me just balance this a little bit. It is actually okay to preach the gospel with eloquence. If you read Paul's letters, he's actually very polished and logical and persuasive. He speaks and writes very well. I think we should be able to tell someone our testimony or the basics of the gospel message in a quick interchange that's smooth and understandable.

And although Paul was a physical trainwreck, it's okay to be an attractive person who tells someone about Jesus. That's not a bad thing.

The problem is that when unbelievers are demanding that we be a certain way, we can't give in to their sinful demands. Paul decided not to be eloquent because what the people he preached to wanted more than anything was eloquence. They wanted a persuasive speech, they wanted a powerful speaker. Paul's point is that the power we have is all in the message itself, not in the person preaching the message. **Read 3-4**

Paul was not the missionary we'd probably give a lot of money to. He intentionally didn't preach in a lofty way. He didn't come off as very confident - he had been beaten and stoned and ran out of who knows how many towns - so he was with them in fear and trembling: Phobos and tromos in the Greek where we get phobia and trauma. If you've ever been around a dog that was beaten and is scared to come up to you - that's the idea.

And just imagine the most disjointed sermon you've ever heard. Was the gospel in there? Sure. Was it pretty? No. That was Paul in Corinth.

But here's Paul's point: Were people saved? And the answer is yes! Here's an apostle who is broken and can barely get the gospel out in intelligible words and what happens is the unimaginable: people come to faith in Jesus anyway! How is that possible? **Read 4-5**

It's possible because Paul is nothing and the gospel message is everything. This has been his point the whole time, hasn't it? Apollos is nothing. Cephas is nothing. Paul is nothing. Jason is nothing. The gospel is everything. And when you preach the gospel, you choke it out in fear and trembling and it's kind of a jumbled mess and someone comes to faith in Jesus you know what it shows? That the Holy Spirit is at work and that it is God who has the power to save.

The ESV says that when they came to faith it was a demonstration of the Spirit and of power. The idea is more a demonstration of the Spirit's power. Why does God do this? **Read 5**

Listen, this is one of the most encouraging passages for evangelism ever. Because I don't know about you but I often wonder if I'm doing evangelism right. Did I say everything just so? Oh man, I forgot that part - that would have been good to say. Okay, I totally forgot to mention that the Holy Spirit is God and that Jesus was born of a virgin.

You know what? God uses our messed up attempts to spit out the gospel and he saves people anyway. I know that the guy who told me the gospel didn't tell me every little bit of theology possible. All I knew was in a heap of eternal trouble but that God loved me because Jesus died for my sins. I believed that and God saved me through that.

Could we add a little more to that? Sure. We always could. But God uses simple, broken people, spitting out a gospel message that is anything but persuasive and he saves people with it. **So that - Vs. 5** - so that we know that the power is not in us but in the Spirit and in the gospel.

Imagine you had a syringe that was filled with a liquid that could instantly cure someone's terminal disease. And you're thinking "I've never given anyone a shot before in my life, how do I do this? What if I mess it up? What if the needle breaks off in their arm?!" It doesn't have to be pretty or smooth. All you've got to do is plunge the needle in because the power is in the syringe, not in your ability. If they're cured it's not because you're a great nurse, it's because the serum was powerful.

That's what Paul says about the gospel. God uses weak nobodys to preach to weak nobodys to show that when they are saved they know that the power is from God.

So when you're talking to your friends and family or campers or whoever about the gospel, stop beating yourself up for not being more polished or better at telling the gospel. Could we always do a better job? Sure. But there's nothing you can add to the gospel to make it any more glorious anyway.

God uses you and me and Paul and Apollos - all broken vessels - to preach the power of God in Jesus Christ.

God doesn't need fancy preachers, he prefers the messed up ones.

2) This is God's eternal plan. Read 6-9

So this section is a side note to a side note. But it's important. Paul's been saying that he doesn't speak in words of eloquent wisdom. Then he says in **Vs. 6** that he does impart wisdom to those who are mature. Well, which is it? Does he give out wisdom or not? Well, it's a play on concepts here.

The world thinks what he's speaking is foolishness. But to those who are mature - as in Christians - what he speaks is wisdom. This comes back to **1:25. Read**

Christianity is completely upside down to the world. The world thinks Christians are dumb and immature. But actually those who believe the gospel message are the wise and discerning. What we believe, Paul says is not anything the world would come up with.

But it's something that God came up with before the world began. **Read 7**

This is something we need to understand: the gospel we believe is not something God made up on the fly. He wasn't doing some kind of social experiment when he made Adam and Eve in the Garden. And he wasn't watching Adam and Eve in the Garden hoping against hope they'd just not eat the fruit. He wasn't looking at Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane wondering how he was going to make the whole crucifixion thing turn out. He had planned it all.

And listen, it's not just that God **knows** the future - although he does. God knew Adam and Eve would eat. And he knew that they would fall and die. And he knew humanity would be guilty and that he'd have to send his Son, Jesus, to save us. But, get this: God didn't just know it. He planned it that way. **Read 7**

All of creation, from Adam and Eve to Jesus, to the New Heavens and New earth are decreed by God. They are planned by God. It's not just that he knew what was going to happen and nudged things along. No this is the grand design of God.

The NIV says God destined it for our glory before time began. This was the eternal plan that God is bringing to pass. God in eternity past thinking "I'm going to save a whole people by sending my Son to die for them." God didn't just know this would happen, he planned it. So when he's talking about this secret and hidden wisdom it's not some sort of weird super secret theology. It's just the truths of the gospel that the unbelieving world can't wrap their mind around.

None of the worldly people got it. If they had understood it they wouldn't have killed Jesus. **Read 8-9**

Verse 9 is sort of a loose quote of **Isaiah 64:4** where God brings about an unlikely salvation for his people. That's what we have in Jesus: an unlikely salvation. The world wouldn't have come up with this message, but this was God's plan all along.

So God doesn't need fancy preachers. And this gospel of Jesus Christ and him crucified was God's plan all along. So we have to ask: How is it that we come to know and believe in Jesus? Why do we believe in Jesus? Why did you believe in Jesus?

The answer is the third point:

3) The reason we believe is because of the Spirit.

I'll read the passage here in just a moment. But you have to understand that every single person who has ever come to faith in Jesus has done so because God the Holy Spirit, by his own power, has taken the gospel message and implanted it into our hearts.

So there's this list here of things that the Spirit has done for us in salvation that we'll go through. But the big takeaway is that the reason anyone believes in the gospel is because the Spirit gives them life. **Read 10-16**

So no one knows what God's plan is except the Spirit. And so what the Spirit does is takes God eternal plan of salvation through Jesus and he causes us to love Jesus. It's not just that we know the information of the gospel - it's that he changes our desires and affections. In theology this is called regeneration - the work of the Spirit to make us new creatures.

When I was at Master's College other colleges teased us because most of the students at Master's didn't believe in the charismatic spiritual gifts. So they would joke that we thought the Trinity was the Father, Son, and the Holy Bible. Haha.

The reality is that that couldn't be further from the truth. When we understand salvation rightly, we realize that the greatest work the Spirit does in our lives is that he grants us faith in Jesus. The Holy Spirit is the only reason you and I believe and love and cherish the gospel message of Jesus. **Read 10**

God has revealed the beauty of the gospel truths to his people through his Spirit.

So when camp time rolls around and you've got 2 campers who both hear the same gospel message. Both hear the same truths about Jesus. Why does one believe and the other does not? Because the Spirit reveals these treasures to one and not the other.

Maybe he'll reveal it to the other person later. But even then, it still has to be him. **Look back at John 6:60-65.**

This is where Jesus is talking to the massive crowd of 5,000 plus women and children. And he's throwing hard truth after hard truth at them. Finally he says that you have to eat his flesh and drink his blood to have eternal life. They are very upset about that because that sounds disgusting. He's really just talking about believing in him, but they miss that.

But here's what Jesus says. **Read 60-65**

Jesus says look, these are hard truths. Here's another hard one: I'm going back to heaven. The only way you'll have life is if the Spirit gives you life. You can do nothing. Unless the Father has granted it, the Spirit won't give life.

Wow. That's pretty radical. Well, not really for Jesus. **Look back at John 3.** This is the famous middle-of-the-night conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. Talking about spiritual birth, Jesus says the Spirit just does whatever he's going to do. **Read 3:1-8**

Did you get that? You've got to be born of the water and the Spirit - I think that's two ways of saying the same thing. You have to have a spiritual rebirth, a cleansing. How does that happen? By the will of the Spirit. The wind blows around wherever it wants and we don't control it. That's exactly how it is with the Spirit.

So it's up to the Spirit who receives life. And then you know what Jesus says? So you better believe in the Son of God. **Read 9-15**

Wait a minute, Jesus. You just said it's up to the Spirit and now you're telling me that anyone who believes has eternal life? Yep.

This is how this works. We go preach the gospel and tell people to repent and believe. But at the same time it's the Spirit by his own sovereign will who gives life. How do we harmonize all that? I have no idea. But those are the twin truths we see over and over. You have to believe, but it's the Spirit who gives you the ability to believe.

This is why when we're preaching the gospel it's okay to call someone to repent and believe and at the same time tell them, "Hey, I'm praying that God will give you understanding of this." It's not that they're stupid, it's that they will never believe in their own flesh. It has to be a work of God.

That's what Paul is getting at back in **1 Cor. 2**. The Spirit has revealed these truths of the gospel to us. He has made us know them and love them and believe them.

So watch this. In **Vs. 10** the Spirit revealed these truths to us. So here's what happens at salvation: the Spirit takes the truths of the mystery of the gospel which only God understands, and he imparts those truths to us.

Read 10-13

So only the Holy Spirit fully comprehends God, because the Holy Spirit is God. And what happened at salvation, according to Vs. 12 is that we received the Spirit. And because we have him we can know the what God is up to in salvation.

Imagine a friend takes you to a movie theatre. And he takes you to the movie called *God's Plan for the Whole World*. And you're thinking, well that's a pretty ambitious title, but we'll give it a shot. And you get in there and the whole thing is in Polish. You can see the actors, you get a sense for the plot line, but because you don't know Polish the whole thing is really lost on you. Why would anyone go spend money on this film?

But what if your friend spoke Polish and could interpret the movie for you. So you see the actors and you hear the words but you also understand what's going on with the whole movie? You have an interpreter. That's exactly what the Spirit does according to **Vs. 13. Read**

This can sound really confusing and difficult but all this means is that the Holy Spirit is your translator friend. For those who are saved, they're watching the movie called *God's Plan for the Whole World* with the Holy Spirit who is interpreting these truths into their heart.

If you have believed the gospel it's because the Spirit interpreted it for you in a way that you could love it. He has taken these eternal decrees that God in his wisdom put forth and helped us to make sense of them. We couldn't do it, he did it for us.

Praise be to the Spirit. And when you preach the gospel and someone hears it with understanding and joy. You know why they do? Because of the Spirit. It's not because of you; it's because of him.

The Spirit gets all the glory when a sinner comes to faith in Jesus because he's the one doing the work. He takes our feeble attempts at explaining the gospel and injects eternal life into the nobodys and nothings for whom Jesus died.

Pray