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I Corinthians 1:17b-25; 2:1, 4, 5 “How to Share the Gospel with Modern Man”

Intro. The prophet Isaiah asked, “Who has believed our report?” (Isa. 53:1). That was spoken in the context of the prophecy of the crucifixion of Jesus. Isaiah anticipated that many would not believe the good news of God’s offer of forgiveness through the suffering and death of His Son, Jesus Christ.

Unbelief continues to be a problem today. Many people do not share their faith because they anticipate this reaction. No one likes rejection. The fact is, rejection hurts, plain and simple. In one study, researchers measured brain activity with an MRI machine and found that the pain people felt after a snub is nearly identical to physical stomach pain.¹

The apostle Paul certainly faced rejection by both Jews and Greeks. In v.18 he says, “For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing....” Paul quickly discovered that the Greeks considered the message of salvation by a Jew who died on a Roman cross to be foolishness. In v.23 he says, “we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling,....” By in large the Jews also rejected Paul’s gospel. They stumbled over a message of a crucified Messiah. Even Peter, the leader of the apostles, did not understand the cross when he first heard Jesus speak of it. In fact Peter took Jesus “aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, ‘God forbid it Lord! This shall never happen to You’” (Mt. 16:22). As Paul anticipated the rejection of so many, perhaps that is why he said in 2:3, “I was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling.” Paul is just being honest here. If you have ever tried to share your faith, or gone knocking on doors for the Lord, you probably know the same feeling!

Now don’t let it bother you that the world laughs at us, and considers us and our message foolish. Notice in v.18 who considers the message of the cross foolishness. It is “those who are perishing.” Why listen to people who are on the road to perdition? If a doctor has a proven and effective cure, and a patient considers it foolishness, who is actually foolish?

This morning I want to share with you Paul’s secret for overcoming the rejection of the gospel that is so common. I will show you how you can turn rejection into acceptance. Paul’s approach may surprise you. I want to equip you to share your faith, and not be deterred by the rejection you may face. And my message today is not just for preachers like myself. The phrase “preach the gospel” in v.17 actually simply means “to share the good news.” We all should do that. Jesus said in Acts 1:8, “But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” Vance Havner said, "The Gospel isn't something we come to church to hear; it's something we go from church to tell" So my message today is for all who are willing to share your faith with someone. Aren’t you glad that someone shared the gospel with you? Shouldn’t you want to share it with others?

So how should we overcome the rejection of the gospel? Well I want to share with you 4 steps, 2 concerning what you should not do, and 2 concerning what you should do. First:

¹ Lisa Miller Fields, *Reader's Digest*, Feb. 04, Page 224.

I. DON'T CHANGE THE GOSPEL

One approach is to modify the message of the church to minimize the world's rejection. After experiencing widespread rejection in Athens, Greece, Paul may have been tempted to try a new approach in Corinth. Perhaps he thought to himself: "Should I leave out the part of the gospel that the Greeks find foolish? Should I focus instead on the wisdom of God?"

Throughout much of church history Christians have modified the Christian message to make it more appealing and acceptable to the world. Today, those of us who preach and try to propagate the gospel are sometimes tempted to make the gospel appealing to the modern mind. We assume we must tantalize the intellects of men, and accommodate ourselves to the modern theories of the so-called intellectuals. Many ministers try to substitute the modern philosophies of positive thinking and so forth. The end result is that believers go to church and hear preachers who rarely mention the Lord Jesus, never mention the blood of the Savior, and never mention that Jesus had to die on the cross to save us. Many ministers openly mock the so-called slaughterhouse religion they accuse us of preaching.

Many within the church have set their own reason and judgment above God's Word, the Bible. They have been influenced by the anti-supernatural bias of modern science. An influential theologian, Rudolph Bultmann, decided to "demythologize" the Bible. He decided in advance what God's Word could and could not say. He decided that parts of the Bible, such as the stories of miracles, were not really true. They are just myths told to get across some spiritual lesson. This type of thinking has plagued many a theological institution. And Martyn Lloyd-Jones has said, "The whole drift toward modernism has blighted the church of God and nearly destroyed its living gospel." We must not cut from our message the only cure for a sin-sick world.

When David was 4 years old, he was having problems with his asthma. So the Doctor prescribed a nebulizer machine. It uses forced air to produce a mist that contains the medicine. David would have to wear a mask to help him breathe in the medicine. Well, David didn't want any part of it. We said, "David, if you don't take this, you are going to get even sicker." Then David said, "I want to be sick!" Imagine that. At the moment the cure seemed worse than the sickness. Even so, many people have a spiritual sickness called sin, and yet they don't like the Gospel cure. They would rather be sick. And the answer is not to give them candy in place of the real cure.

But friend, it's not the gospel that needs to be changed. Sinful man is what needs changing! The apostle Paul came to realize that you must not avoid rejection by changing the gospel. He said in 2:2, "For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified." Not even in one slight point does he accommodate himself to the world's wisdom. Instead, he runs directly against it. He realized that he dare not change or leave out the core of the Gospel, just to avoid rejection.

So we must not minimize rejection by changing or modifying the Gospel. Secondly:

II. DON'T RELY UPON WORLDLY METHODS OF PERSUASION

You have to remember that right before Paul went to Corinth, he preached the gospel in Athens, the intellectual center of the ancient world. And as you look at his message to the men of Athens in Acts 17, he seems to try to appeal to their wisdom. But he got nowhere. There were very few converts from his preaching in Athens, but he was pretty much laughed out of the city.

So notice what we read in 2:1, "And I, brethren, when I came to you, did not come with excellence of speech (*λογου*) or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God." Then v.4 says, "And my speech (*λογος*) and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom...." In that culture, they magnified the great orators. They made heroes of philosophers who spouted

wisdom. But Paul did not use philosophical or oratorical language. He was not out to impress anyone with his words.

Sometime preachers earn a Ph.D., and they use \$50 words, and it appears that they are trying to impress people with their lofty language. But we are not to win people to Jesus by convincing them of how smart *we* are. We are to convince people of how great and loving *God* is. Especially when it comes to evangelism, don't try to win someone to Christ by making them think that you are so smart, and thus they should accept Christ as well.

Paul gives at least 2 reasons why he refused to employ Greek oratorical skill & wisdom in sharing the gospel. First, in v.17 he said, "For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of no effect." That probably should be translated "not in wisdom of speech" (οὐκ ἐν σοφίᾳ λόγου). When you rely upon the world's methods of intellectual persuasion, Paul says the cross of Christ is "made of no effect." It become empty and void; it doesn't benefit the listener. Why? Because the focus needs to be on the cross, not the skill of the speaker.

Furthermore, in v.5 Paul explains why he did not use worldly methods like skillful oration. He says, "that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God." We should not try to get people to put their faith in us, but in God. Any use of these means would have exalted them above the gospel, and the Corinthians might have been attracted by the messenger rather than by the message. Also, to do so would mean that only the highly intelligent could be saved, because only they could understand such lofty language.

Now the particular worldly method of overcoming rejection that was addressed here was oratorical skill and debate. But we may be tempted to employ other worldly methods to advance the gospel. If the method simply transmits the gospel better, like radio or TV, then we should use it. But any worldly method that calls attention to the speaker or singer rather than the gospel is to be rejected.

Another application is this: we ought to present the gospel in such a way that a child can understand. The gospel is for "whosoever." Therefore, it ought to be presented in such a way that whosoever may understand it, and be saved.

We have talked about 2 ways we should not use when sharing the Gospel. What then should we do to win others to Jesus Christ?

III. STAY TRUE TO THE GOSPEL

We are to stay with the Gospel, which Jude, the brother of Jesus said "was once for all delivered to the saints" (1:3). As v.21b says, God saves people by the foolishness of the message of salvation that is preached. "The foolishness of preaching" is not a good translation. It is translated in the NKJV "the foolishness of the message preached." It does not refer to the *act of declaring* a message but to the *content* of the message, which is foolish to the world. But it is by that message, & that message only, that God saves the lost. That is why Paul said in 2:2, "For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified." That is because there is no gospel apart from the substitutionary death of Christ. God saves by the message of Christ crucified, and by no other message. The cross of Christ is the very heart of the gospel. On the cross Christ died for our sins, and in His death we have atonement for sin and guilt, reconciliation, forgiveness and peace with God.

Suppose you are sick with some infection. You're running a high fever. It is great to be able to go to a very knowledgeable, highly educated doctor. But what you really need is a good antibiotic. You don't need him to impress you with his diplomas, and his ability to use big medical terms. You just need the cure. Well, the cure to the human problem of sin is the cross of Christ. We

must never stop preaching and sharing the cross of Christ!

Friend, you don't need eloquence. You don't need to be sensational. Just share the simple good news of Christ. And be sure that the message of the cross of Christ is at the very heart of the gospel story. That's clearly the case with the Bible. There is a scarlet thread of redemption that runs from Genesis to Revelation. All of the Bible either points forward to the cross of Christ, presents the story of the cross, or points back to the cross of Christ. Paul stated in simple and clear terms the gospel later in this epistle. In chapter 15:3-4 he said, "For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures." The cross is what saved us. The story of the cross is what touches our heart. Proclaim the cross of Christ!

Finally, after you share the gospel story:

IV. PRAY AND TRUST GOD TO BRING RESULTS

All we need is to be convinced of the power of the Gospel. Paul said in v.18, "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." Paul states that the saving power of God will accompany the message of the cross of Christ. Now look down to vv. 23-24, "but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." And in v.24 the words "of God" are emphatic. This power is God's power, infinitely above everything that is merely human. Furthermore, Rom. 1:16 says, "I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes...."

The story is told about a traveling preacher who was passing through the security check at an airport. It was before the days of electronic scanning, and the security official was rummaging about in his brief-case. He came across the black cardboard box which contained the preacher's Bible, and was curious to discover its contents. 'What's in that box?' he asked suspiciously, and received the startling reply 'Dynamite!' I wouldn't say that today! Yet to believe in the explosive power of God's Word should be enough in itself to make an effective preacher or witness out of every Christian.²

Yes, many of us have found power in the gospel of Jesus Christ. He can turn a sinner into a saint. He can give light where there is darkness. He can give life where there is death. He can give hope in the midst of despair. It is worth the rejection we face, just to see lives transformed by the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Now if the gospel is so powerful, why are we so hesitant to share it? Too many people do not share the gospel because they lack good speaking skills, or they feel they lack a powerful, sensational testimony. Listen people are not saved by the excellency of your words but by the power of the Gospel. Again, notice what Paul himself said in v.3, "I was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling." That sound like most people who are about to do public speaking, or who attempt to share their faith. But as we see in v.4, Paul did not deal with his fear by working on his oratorical skills, but by relying upon the power of the Gospel, and the power of the Holy Spirit. He later said in 3:6, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase." Our job is just to plant gospel seeds in the hearts and minds of people, and then pray and trust God to impart new life, and to save souls.

While we must trust God to do only what He can do in saving souls, we must never remove

² John R. W. Stott, *Between Two Worlds: The Art of Preaching in the Twentieth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 109.

human responsibility from the equation. The dumbest thing a farmer can do is spend thousands of dollars and hundreds of hours preparing a field, then pull a planter around all day with no seeds in it. The second dumbest thing he can do is expect a crop to grow. If we do not plant seeds during the week, how can God bless a harvest on Sunday morning? We are cultivating barren ground.³

God vindicated the approach of the apostle Paul. When he preached Christ crucified, many believed and were saved in Corinth, a very unlikely city for the Christian message. Paul realized that the gospel of Christ is the only gospel that saves.

So when people make a decision in this church, I don't want it to be the result of manipulation, but the power of God in their lives. True salvation takes place when the gospel is shared, when the Spirit of God convicts, and when people respond in faith. So just be obedient in sharing the gospel, and pray that God's Spirit will work mightily in the lives of people.

Conclusion: Friend, you can make an eternal difference in the lives of people. You don't need to be skillful in speaking. All you need to do is to be willing to share what Jesus did to save us. Just share the gospel story, and trust God to use your words and your testimony to save souls. The Holy Spirit will help you. Just plant seeds, and in due time you will see people come to know Jesus as their Savior.

When I was in High School, some of my Christian friends started to witness to me, and invite me to their church. At first I ridiculed much of what they believed. But I was impressed by their passion and enthusiasm for Christ. Eventually, I started going to their church. The preacher, Dr. Jerry Vines, just preached the Bible in a simple, but powerful way. Eventually God used the power of His Word to convince me that I needed to follow Christ. And here I am today preaching the Gospel, and hundreds have been saved through my ministry. And it all was made possible because of the witness of some Christian young people.

I wonder if there are some here today who have not yet believed the gospel? Will you trust in Jesus Christ today? He died for you on the cross. That is the only way you can be saved from your sin problem. Will you accept the cure? Or will you remain in your sin? Come to Christ today. Believe the Gospel. You will not regret it.

Sources: J. Herbert Kane, *The Christian World Mission: Today and Tomorrow* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1981, 27A.3); R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1937); John F. MacArthur, Jr., *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: I Corinthians* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 5 (Pasadena: Thru The Bible Radio, 1983); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [CD-ROM] (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); Jerry Vines, *God Speaks Today: A Study of I Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979); Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

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