

Sermon outline and notes prepared by:
Pastor Stephen Felker
Swift Creek Baptist Church, 18510 Branders Bridge Rd., Colonial Heights, VA 23834
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I Corinthians 2:1-2 “The Essence of the Christian Faith”

Intro. I am afraid that the church of modern America has lost its message. In an effort to grow bigger churches (and bigger budgets?), many popular pastors and churches are discarding what is offensive about the Christian message. One large evangelical church in the Chicago area does not display crosses. Many leading pastors avoid preaching about hell, sin, and death. They only preach about practical day to day living. Perhaps the most popular modern form of preaching today is a mix of Bible & secular psychology, telling people “How to Have Your Best Life.” Even unbelievers are happy to hear a talk about how to have a good marriage, or how to have a good family. They will gladly hear principles of success, and how to overcome adversity. All that really matters to such churches is that they get more and more people in the door.

Some evangelicals are well-meaning. They feel that if you can just get unbelievers in the door with practical talks and entertainment, then you can win them to Jesus in Bible study, or in personal witnessing. That may be true in some cases. But what I’m concerned about is gutting our core Christian message just to get people to come to church. And what the church is doing is not dealing with the fundamental problems of men, but only window dressing. They are helping people look good, and feel better about themselves, but too often they are not dealing with the fundamental issues of life.

I once heard Dr. Adrian Rogers say something that has really stuck with me. He said, “We only have 3 basic problems: sin, sorrow, and death.” Much of modern preaching deals with the subject of overcoming sorrow. They will give you strategies for overcoming the problems of life. But too often they are not dealing with the sin problem, and they are not talking about death, and the real possibility of an eternity in hell following death.

Now if the apostle Paul were following the strategy of the modern popular church, he would preach what people would want to hear. Paul was a Jewish Rabbi, and so he could have talked to the Jews in a way that would have appealed to them. He was even well educated in Greek philosophy and in the Greek classics. In 1:22 Paul said, “Greeks seek after wisdom.” He could have talked about God in philosophical terms, and many would have gladly heard him. But notice from our text what he said in v.1, “And I, brethren, when I came to you, did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God.” He decided that he would not try to use Greek rhetoric and wisdom to try to lure an audience. He felt that it was not for him to argue with philosophers, or to attempt to compete with the professional orators. Not only that, but he determined to preach about the cross of Jesus Christ, for he said in v.2, “For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.” This is amazing in light of the fact that back in 1:23 he said that the Greeks considered the message of the cross foolishness. How would you like to go as a missionary to another country and preach a message that the average man on the street considers foolishness!

So what should be our strategy for ministry in modern America? I believe that Paul's example should lead us to believe that we must not abandon the core aspects of the gospel of Jesus Christ in order to gain an audience. What, then, is the basic Christian message that we must continue to proclaim? What is the very essence of Christianity?

I. WE MUST PROCLAIM THE PERSON OF JESUS

Christianity *is* Christ. The heart and soul - the very essence - of the Gospel message was Jesus Christ - crucified, buried, risen, and seated at the right hand of God the Father. He is God the Son who ever lives to make intercession for His people. And some day He is coming again as King of kings, and Lord of lords.

In many other religions you can accept the teaching, and ignore the teacher. But you cannot do that with Christianity. Jesus said in John 14:6, "I (emphatic) am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except by me." You can't substitute anything else and still have Christianity. That is why Paul said in v.2, "For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ...."

You know, I have several keys in my pocket. But only one key will open the door to my house. Even so, there is only one way into heaven. In fact, Jesus said in Rev. 1:18, "I have the keys of death...." Our greatest problem is death, and only Jesus has the key to get out of the grip of death, and into the glory of heaven. If this is true about Jesus, then no wonder Paul said in v.2, "For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ...."

In contrast, you can go to many churches Sunday after Sunday and you will hardly hear any mention of Jesus. They will talk about God, but Jesus is by no means the focus of their message, or the focus of their worship. Furthermore, the message of many churches does not focus on God or Jesus, but man: *our* problems, *our* feelings, and *our* physical needs and wants. So many preachers today preach self-help psychology with a little bit of Bible sprinkled in. Other preach mainly a social gospel, a do good religion that addresses only the physical & social needs and wants of people. I believe in practical Christianity, but only in its place, not as a substitute for Christ.

Then you have some churches that focus on their own moral standards, all the way from a strict legalism to the tree hugging environmentalism. That becomes the focus of their message. The legalist preaches against sin, and then adds a bunch of sins to what's in the Bible! But it is useless to preach against sin unless you also preach Christ, for He is the answer to the sin problem. Furthermore, only Christ can enable us to live moral lives that are truly pleasing to God.

There are several applications that I want to make based on this truth. If Jesus is the only proper focus of Christianity, then:

1. We must believe in Jesus. Do you believe that He is the Son of God? Do you believe that He is the only Savior?

2. We must preach Jesus. We must sing about Jesus. That is the sweetest name I know. Jesus is the name that is above every name. And certainly do not teach about yourself. As Paul said in 2 Cor.4:5, "We preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord."

II. WE MUST PROCLAIM THE PASSION OF JESUS

Paul said in v.2, “For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.” In a city that wanted anything other than a crucified Savior, he would give them nothing but a crucified Savior.

On the other hand, if he said, “I’ve come to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ as a great moral teacher,” Paul might have found a place along the philosophers there. Had he declared Christ as a prophet, he would have been well received. You could go to a Moslem country and preach about Jesus as a prophet. Even Islam recognizes Jesus as a prophet. But they’ll cut your throat for preaching Christ crucified! Had he preached only about the great & profound wisdom of Christ, he could have found a place with Socrates or Plato, or Aristotle. But he not only preached Jesus Christ, but he also preach “and Him crucified.” Our urban culture is very happy to hear a word of good advice about how to live the good life, or how to have a good family, or how to be successful in your career. But Paul did not focus on such things. He preached Christ crucified.

Jesus made it clear that the cross was to be the focus of Christianity.

Paul recognized the cross of Jesus Christ was not an afterthought in God’s mind; it was the goal of God from all eternity. Rev. 13:8 speaks of Jesus Christ as “the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.”

Oh, let me tell you the story of the cross. 6 months before He died the Bible says that He set His face toward Jerusalem. He was determined to go all the way to the cross. When Peter tried to deter Him, He said, “Get behind me, Satan.” He knew His Father’s will. Then, the time finally arrived. He knew He was to die at Passover. And when He instituted the last Supper, He told His disciples that He was to be remembered by the bread and fruit of the vine. The bread symbolizes His body in which He suffered, and the wine symbolizes His shed blood. Christ knew that His cross was to be the focus of Christianity. Then He went out to Gethsemane. There He began to struggle with the thoughts of what would happen the next day. He prayed, “Father, if it be thy will, let this cup pass from me.” His humanity must have recoiled at the thought of such intense suffering and humiliation. His deity must have recoiled at the thought of bearing upon Himself the sin of the world. But He God the Father made it clear to Him that there was no other way for us to be saved from our sin. So He fully accepted God’s will for His life, and went out to face Judas and the arresting mob. He allowed them to arrest Him. He face a mock trial. He never resisted and tried to refute the lies that were said about Him. He stood by silently while He was condemned to death by the Jewish Council. He spent the rest of the night in a dungeon. Early the next morning He was taken to Pilate, the Governor. Once again, Jesus did not seek to defend Himself against the false charges. He knew He had to die for us. He stood silently by while the mob cried out, “Crucify him! Crucify him!” In an effort to avoid condemning an innocent man to death, Pilate ordered that Jesus be scourged, hoping that would pacify the crowd. The soldiers took that dreaded whip, and with every blow more of his flesh would be ripped away, and more blood shed. And with every whip Jesus could have thought of the prophecy, “By His stripes, we are healed” (Isa. 53:5). He patiently bore every lash for you and for me that we may be saved. When Pilate presented Jesus to the crowd, all bloodied and bruised, they still called for His execution. Pilate relented, and ordered that He be crucified. Jesus

bore His cross, and at last the soldiers drove those spikes into His hands and feet. He was lifted up on that cross. He patiently bore the shame and ridicule. They said, "He saved others; Himself He cannot save. If He is the King of Israel, let Him now come down from the cross, and we will believe Him" (Mt 27:42). But He knew that He could not save Himself, and save us as well. So He remained on the cross. He suffered incredibly. And when darkness fell over the earth for 3 hours, I believe He fully bore the wrath of God against sin. Finally, when sin had been fully paid for, He cried from the cross, "It is finished!" Our salvation had been accomplished!

Oh, the love of Jesus for you and for me! What other motive would compel them to suffer so? If he was willing to suffer and to die for you, shouldn't you be willing to put your trust in Him as your Savior? And shouldn't you be willing to follow Him with your whole heart? He said in Mt. 16:24, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me."

III. WE MUST PROCLAIM THE SAVING POWER OF JESUS

Now the story of the cross is a touching narrative, but it alone is no gospel. We must go beyond just the story of His death and understand the *meaning* of His death on the Cross. Why did Jesus die on the cross? Why did He suffer so? When worldly wisdom looks at the picture of Jesus dying on the cross, it does not perceive any meaning to it. Some consider it a failure on the part of Jesus. Others consider it a mere martyrdom of a good man for his convictions. Or at best the world considers it an attempt to win our hearts with an appeal of love. Surely there must be more. Surely that is not the real meaning of His death.

Why, then, did He die? The Bible makes it clear that He voluntarily went to the cross and laid down His life to be our Savior. That's the meaning of the name "Jesus". And for Him to be Savior, He needed to die for our sin. And because He died for our sin, there is power in the blood of Jesus. Notice v.5. Paul preached Christ crucified, "that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God." And so in closing, I want to share with you 3 ways the saving power of Jesus can impact your life:

A. To Bring Forgiveness to Sinners – Sin is our most fundamental problem we face. Until you solve the problem of disobedience and rebellion against God, nothing else really matters. Sin is the root problem that leads to relationship problems, sorrow, pain, suffering, and death. Sin brought the curse. The Bible says, "The wages of sin is death." How can we be released from the condemning grip of sin? Jesus, the sinless substitute, had to die in our place. Jesus is the only one who was sinless, and who qualified to die in our place. And once Jesus bore the judgment of sin, the judgment of eternal death cannot touch the believer ever again.

I read several years ago of some men who were out in a prairie camping out, and a prairie fire came up. The wind was whipping the flames furiously toward these men, they realized that they could not possibly outrun the flames. The flames were moving closer and closer and they did not know what to do. One man said to the other, "we are going to die. There is nothing we can do." But one other man said, "Wait a minute. I have a plan." He reached in his pocket, took out a package of matches, struck a match and lit a fire at their very feet. His fire burned one way while the prairie fire was coming another way.

One of the men in the group said, “you fool! Now be are surrounded by fire. Now we will surely die! The man said, “Wait just a moment. I know what I am doing.” In a few moments He said, “Now step over here into the burned off place.” “Now we are all saved because the fire cannot come where the fire has already been.” Two thousand years ago the fire of God’s judgment fell on Christ at the cross of Calvary. That fire burned out a circle large enough for every person who has ever lived to enter in.

You say, how can the death of one man almost 2,000 years ago have any meaning or purpose for us today? Well, Paul certainly believed the cross had lasting impact. The word “crucified” is a perfect tense, which in the Greek language indicates that Paul believed that the crucifixion has abiding results. Yes, there is still power in the blood to forgive sin after almost 2000 years! The message of the cross takes men out of their sins and into salvation, and removes them from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of God’s dear Son. The story of the shed blood of Jesus Christ is the only message that brings cleansing from sin and salvation unto God.

B. To Impart New Life - Eph. 2:1 says, “And you *He made alive*, who were dead in trespasses and sins.” Because of sin we are spiritually dead. But Jesus died the death that you deserve that you might have His resurrection life. Oh, how we need new life. It is not enough to be born of flesh. Jesus said, “You must be born again.” You must also be born of the Spirit. And why is that? Jesus said in Mt 12:33, “... make the tree good and its fruit good...” Sin has corrupted us to the very core of our being. We sin because we have a sin nature. But Jesus can give you a new nature, a new heart, a new life.

Don’t you believe that the risen Christ can give you new life?

And so, when Jesus imparts new life, He has the power also:

C. To Change Lives – Christ does not just save us from the penalty of sin, but also from the power of sin. Here’s the problem. Indwelling sin is a powerful influence. So often you find yourself doing the very thing you don’t want to do. Furthermore, the world is full of temptation. As a result, people lie, they explode with anger, they gossip, they yield to sexual temptation. In spite of their best efforts, they fail in some moral and ethical way. What’s the answer? We need a greater power working in our lives than the power of sin. Even a believer in Christ still has to gain victory over the old sin nature. How is that possible?

Look back at 1:18, “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.” Notice the present tense in v.18, “being saved.” Often salvation is spoken of in the past tense, as a past completed act. Indeed, when it comes to receiving forgiveness and new life, that is something that is completed the moment you believe. But when it comes to overcoming sin, that aspect of salvation is an ongoing process. And to us who have been saved, the cross is a present transforming power in our lives as Christians. The message of the cross is the only message that has the dynamic power of God to change human lives.

Back when C. Everette Koop was Surgeon General, some educators from Switzerland came to him for an interview. They said, “Dr. Koop, it has been our experience that education alone has not changed the behavior of our youth. Has that been your experience as well?” Dr. Koop affirmed their findings. He said that education alone has little impact upon behavior. Folks, much of our teaching about the dangers of

smoking, drugs, alcohol, and premarital sex have had little impact upon the actual behavior of our youth. The only way to change people's behavior is to change their heart with the transforming power of the new birth. And once a person is truly saved, the Word of God is also living and powerful to change lives. But you must first lay the foundation, and that is faith in the sacrificial death of Christ.

Friend, you can't live the Christian life in your own strength. I feel sorry for people who try to live by the teachings of Christ without having Christ in their hearts. You can't live by the rules of the church until you have the Ruler, Jesus Christ, on the throne of your life. If you're frustrated with trying to live the Christian life, you need to make sure you that you have truly believed in the saving power of Jesus Christ! You need to be filled with the presence of Christ and let Him live His life through you (Gal. 2:20).

Again, we only have 3 basic problems: sin, sorrow, and death. Sin in the world leads to sorrow and death. Do you have any other message that deals with these basic issues? The only One I know who can deal with all 3 is Jesus Christ. He alone died for sin. He alone can forgive and cleans us from sin. He can turn your sorrows into joy. He can give victory over death like no other. Do you know of any other gospel that gives hope to the family that has lost a loved one? Do you know of any other religious leader who has conquered death? Jesus alone rose from the dead, attested by hundreds of witnesses.

Conclusion: In 1833 Charles Darwin, who wrote the *Origin of the Species*, and really popularized the theory of evolution in the world, visited the South Sea Islands looking for the missing link as he called it. He found a tribe of people who were so primitive and so backward and so base that he suggested he might have even found the civilization that was the link between the animal kingdom and man. He saw no hope they would be elevated for generations to come. Thirty-four years later Charles Darwin returned to those same South Sea Islands to see that same tribe of pagan people and he was absolutely astounded. On that island, among those people, he found schools and churches. He found those people clothed and gathering together and singing hymns. What happened? A missionary named John Patton came preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ and when those people came to Christ, they were made brand new creations in Jesus Christ.

Yes, there is power in the blood atonement of Christ to change lives. And He can save you as well. You can experience God's forgiveness. Your load of guilt can be lifted. You can receive new life. You can experience a wonderful transformation of life. All you must do is repent of your sin, and trust in Jesus Christ as your Savior. Will you do it today?

Sources: Oliver B. Greene, *The First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians* (Greenville: The Gospel Hour, Inc., 1965); Joel Gregory (transcript of his sermon on 2:1-5 dated 3/6/79); 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: 1 Corinthians* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984); Alexander Maclaren, *Expositions of Holy Scripture*, Vol. 14 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1977 reprint); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [CD-ROM] (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); Ravenhill, *Why Revival Tarries*, 51; Charles H. Spurgeon, *Spurgeon's Expository Encyclopedia*, Vol. 11 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House), 57-65; 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).