

Epiphany 5 / February 5, 2023

1 Corinthians 2:5

“That your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.”

Paul begins our text saying, “When I came to you brothers, I did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom, for I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.” In saying this Paul is making a distinction between what today would be called persuasive speech and simply presenting the facts and allowing them to speak for themselves. Persuasive speech begins with a conclusion and leads people to accept it. Rather than allowing the word to do its work and letting people come to their own conclusion.

Do you need a new car? Do I need a new car? Sales people use persuasive speech to convince us we need something we really don't need. Why do I need a new car? It's just 18 years old and only has 434,000 kilometers on it. But I bet a salesperson would try to persuade me to believe I need a new car. If she's persuasive enough, she might succeed. We are putty in the hands of a skilled speaker.

Which isn't to say persuasive speech doesn't have a place. Sometimes people need to be convinced by a strong argument and led to a conclusion with plausible words. But Paul wasn't talking about buying a new car. He was talking about the truth of the gospel, God's gift of salvation through Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. He wanted the Corinthians to believe the gospel of salvation through faith in Jesus' name, convinced by the word of the cross.

He wanted them to believe, but he didn't want them to believe because of his persuasion or on the basis of his words. He says “I did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom.” He wanted them to believe God's word. God's word is the power by which we believe in Christ. Paul wants us to be persuaded by the Holy Spirit through God's word in scripture. He wants us to believe on account of the word. Specifically, the word of the cross that Christ died for our sins and was raised for our eternal salvation. The word of the cross is the power of God for salvation in time and for eternity for all who believe.

The gospel readings for last Sunday, today and next Sunday, come from the “Sermon on the Mount.” Last Sunday we heard the ‘Beatitudes.’ The name beatitude comes from the Latin word ‘blessed.’ Although the word attitude is contained in the English word ‘beatitude,’ it is just a similarity in word construction. Beatitude has nothing to do with attitude. It simply means blessed. Furthermore, blessedness has nothing to do with our attitude. Rather than our attitude, blessing refers to God's attitude towards us in Christ Jesus, expressed most fully in the sacrifice of His cross.

Jesus said, “Blessed are those who mourn.” The blessing is not in the grief. Grief is caused by sin which brings death. The blessing is God's loving presence in our grief. God loves us and blesses us in every life situation, regardless of our attitude. We are blessed in every experience of life, because of God's attitude towards us in Christ. In Him, God blesses us with the riches of forgiveness in our spiritual poverty. He comforts us in our grief with the assurance of Christ's resurrection. He empowers us by the Holy Spirit to share His peace by sharing the gospel of Jesus with others. He blesses us with strength to endure hardship for the sake of Christ. No matter how bad our attitude or desperate our life situation, we are blessed because of God's attitude towards us in Christ Jesus.

In today's gospel Jesus speaks about two kinds of righteousness, God's righteousness and human righteousness. Human righteousness is based on obedience to laws. Jesus says in order to enter the kingdom of heaven, we need a different righteousness than that which is achieved through works of the law. He says we need a righteousness that exceeds that of the most works righteousness people in Israel, not in quantity, but in quality. We need God's righteousness received through faith, experienced as forgiveness.

When He says, “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven,” He's not telling us to be more self-righteous than the self-righteous. He's calling us to receive a different kind of righteousness. He's calling us to receive God's righteousness, not achieved through our works, but achieved by His work and received from Him through faith in His name. Jesus fulfilled the law in our place, was crucified for our sins and raised for our justification. That's the word of the cross!

The gospel next week will expose the depth and darkness of sin, so we see our sinful nature and sinful attitude towards God and our fellow human beings. Jesus doesn't say these things so we behave better and become better people. He speaks this way so we see our sin, the bleakness of our spiritual condition, our sinful attitude towards God and others. He speaks this way so that through the law which convicts us of sin, we see our need for Him to be our Saviour. He speaks this way so we hear His word of forgiveness. Jesus makes us better people inside and out by blessing us with His righteousness, received through faith in the word of His cross.

Jesus concludes the Sermon on the Mount, calling us to listen to His words and take them to heart. His word is the power of forgiveness. As Paul says his word is the power of salvation for all who believe. He warns us against building on any words other than His words, no matter how high sounding or persuasive. To build on human words and wisdom is to build on sinking sand. He says whoever builds on His words is a wise person who builds upon rock. God's word is the solid rock upon which faith is founded. As Paul says, the word is the power of God for our salvation. The power of the word is Christ crucified and raised for our justification. God's word is the power to persuade, create faith and bring faith to fulfillment in eternal life.

The difference between human wisdom and God's wisdom is seen in the teaching of justification. Justification is the means by which God makes us acceptable to Him. How do we become acceptable to God? The wisdom of the world is that we become acceptable to God by doing what God wants us to do. The wisdom of the world is that we make ourselves acceptable to God by our positive attitude and righteous actions. Righteous actions vary depending upon people's understanding of God and what He wants us to do, but human righteousness is always based on human action. How bad can that be? Well, the scribes and Pharisees rigorously sought to do what God commanded and condemned Jesus to death on the cross, thinking they were serving God. That's human wisdom and righteousness!

On the surface we might think that's what Jesus means when He says, "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." But He's not telling us to try harder and be more self-righteous. Just the opposite. He's saying we need a different kind of righteousness, not a righteousness of our works. We need His righteousness received through faith in Him, empowered by His fulfillment of the law in our place and the sacrifice of His cross for our forgiveness. In Philippians Paul the Pharisee, disavows his former human righteousness, clinging only to Jesus and His righteousness. He writes, "Not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness of God that depends on faith." Faith comes through the word of the cross. It is the righteousness of God for all to receive. It is the power of God for salvation to all who believe.

We don't need to dress the word of the cross in fancy clothes and make it palatable to sinful human reason. We don't need to make it respectable to fallen human wisdom, which is foolishness according to the wisdom of God. We don't need to adorn it with high sounding words and persuade people with fancy speech. In Jeremiah chapter 23 the Lord declares, "Is not my word like a fire...and like a hammer that breaks rock in pieces!" We don't need to add anything to the word, or embellish it in any way. We simply we need to hear the word, believe it and allow it to work in our hearts. Our faith rests on the power of God's word, expressed fully in Christ Jesus and empowered by the sacrifice of His cross. It is the power of God for our forgiveness in time and for our life in eternity.

The Holy Spirit open our ears to hear, open our hearts to believe and bring faith to fulfilment in Christ's resurrection to life everlasting. In Jesus' Name.