

The Grace of God in Preaching

1 Corinthians 1:17-31

20/09/09

Introduction

The message that I want to share with you this morning is called “The Grace of God in Preaching”. I guess that sounds like I’m being a bit full of myself – “Hey guys, you are so blessed to be able to listen to me preach”! That’s a bit of a turn-off isn’t it?

I actually want to speak on this topic for a number of reasons:

1. Because I get such a personal blessing from listening, watching and even reading good preaching. I get preaching from CD’s and DVD’s and the internet, and I find it a huge blessing in my own spiritual life and in every other area of life as God’s Word is explained and applied over and over and over again. I want to share some of those blessings with you today as we look at how we can experience them more fully in our lives.
2. Because I am concerned that we are being conditioned by the way our society works, as well as our own natural tendencies, to reject the preaching of God’s Word. How many of you struggle to sit through a sermon? How many struggle to concentrate all the way through? How many struggle to tell someone else what the sermon was about 5 minutes after it finishes? Sometimes I get glimpses from people that they haven’t really taken in as much as they should have from what I have preached – maybe because of stuff I’m seeing in their lives or questions they ask that have already been answered in sermons or whatever – and it has made me question my own effectiveness as a preacher and even the effectiveness of preaching itself. “Is there any point to it?” I’ve asked myself.
Preaching has become much more about how you get people’s attention and keep their attention – more about savvy communication rather than sound content, more about entertainment than edification. When people today talk about good preaching versus bad preaching they’re usually talking about how engaging the preacher is not how well the preacher engages us with the Bible.
So there’s some things I’m worried about and I want to pass a warning on to you today about some of those things.
3. Finally I want to talk about this topic because the Bible does, and I want to teach what the Bible teaches. We’re going to explore just a sampling of what the Bible says on the topic of preaching today.

The first thing we need to get straight is what it is we’re talking about when we talk about preaching. Now preaching is simply public proclamation. You can preach on any subject you like from any perspective you like from any authority you like. So as we talk about the grace of God in preaching we need to be clear about what Christian preaching is:

1) Christian Preaching is Christ-Centred

To qualify as Christian preaching, it must be centred on the person and work of Jesus Christ. It doesn’t matter whether you’re dealing with a passage in the Old Testament or the New, Jesus Christ must be central to the message. It doesn’t matter what particular topic you might be talking about, Jesus must be central in Christian preaching. If you look up all the Biblical references to preaching since Christ was revealed on Earth, you will discover this principle stated time and time again.

In **1 Corinthians 9** Paul tells us that he felt compelled to preach the gospel – the message about Jesus. He said “Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!”¹ (1 Cor 9:16). In **Ephesians 3:7-9** he says:

⁷ I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God’s grace given me through the working of his power. ⁸ Although I am less than the least of all God’s people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, ⁹ and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things.

Recognise from this passage that the preacher is never the point. The preacher is a servant of the gospel he preaches. The calling to preach is a measure of grace – preachers are not spiritual high-flyers who are therefore qualified to lecture others on how it is done! Paul describes himself as “less than the least of all God’s people”. He showed the humility which is needed in a preacher, because otherwise we make it about us and what we have to say and what we think people should believe and what they should do, and we miss the grace and power of God.

I don’t ever want to fall into the trap of trying to tell you what you should think and how you should live. My job is to receive from God – by His power and grace – the truth as it is revealed in the gospel, and to publicly proclaim it. To make plain to everyone the administration – the outworking - of the mystery of eternal life through Jesus Christ.

Let’s turn to our key text today:

1 Corinthians 1:17-31

¹⁷ For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

You might remember that one of the problems the Corinthian church had was people looking at the preacher instead of his message. You had people there who described themselves as followers of preachers: “I follow Paul”, “I follow Apollos”, “I follow Peter” or “I follow Christ”, as though these were all rival philosophers or preachers. “Paul’s too hard to understand” some might say “Peter’s a lot more down to earth”; or “Apollos – now there’s a guy who can debate. He could put anyone in their place”; or “I think Jesus pushed it a bit far with that whole sermon on the mount we’ve heard about. I’m not sure he was being that realistic.”

There is a real temptation in Christian preaching to try and be impressive. To sound intelligent and to present the message skillfully in order to have credibility and authority.

We had our annual Family Fun Night on Friday night, which is a games night and also a concert for our Kids Club. It has a real outreach focus. I had a devotion planned with lots of amazing information in it about the human body, and then a reflection on the temporary nature of life and the more wonderful life to come, capped off by a video I’d made of a very moving song with beautiful graphics behind it and the lyrics and bible verses displayed. It was pretty impressive.

However as the night flowed on it became clear that I wasn’t going to have time to do that impressive devotion. We had an unexpected presentation to Carolyn and myself as this was our final year of Kids Club, so I just followed that up by saying very briefly why it has been so important for us to do it, and sharing a couple of verses about how believing in Jesus is the only way to receive eternal life. Knowing some of the people in the audience I knew how foolish what I said would sound to them, and I had so much wanted to gain some credibility with my amazing facts first! But I really wasn’t worried, because as verse 18 goes on to say...

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.

¹All Scriptures from *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. 1996, c1984 Grand Rapids: Zondervan.

If God is working His salvation in someone's life, the foolish message of Jesus will be the power of God for salvation, regardless of what anyone else thinks. People are not saved by my cleverness, but through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

¹⁹ *For it is written:*

*“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise;
the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.”*

²⁰ *Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher 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 know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. ²² Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, ²⁴ but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.*

²⁶ *Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.*

²⁸ *He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, ²⁹ so that no one may boast before him. ³⁰ It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. ³¹ Therefore, as it is written: “Let him who boasts boast in the Lord.”*

I want you to pay special attention to verse 30. Not only is believing the foolish message of the gospel the only way to be saved, but for those of us who have been saved Jesus has become our wisdom from God – our righteousness, holiness and redemption.

Christian preaching is to point people to Jesus Christ “*in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge*” (**Col. 3:2**).

Christian preaching is based on the authority of the Lordship of Christ, not the qualifications of the preacher. Christian preaching makes plain the treasury of wisdom and knowledge which are found in Christ, not the human wisdom of the preacher. Christian preaching teaches us how to rely on the saving power of Christ, not the helpful advice of the preacher. Christian preaching informs us how to live to the glory of Christ, not to the satisfaction of the preacher.

Look back at verse 19. It is a quote from the book of Isaiah 29:14. I would like to read to you the verse immediately before the one quoted here by Paul.

Isaiah 29:13

¹³ *The Lord says:*

*“These people come near to me with their mouth
and honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.
Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men*

These are the people God is talking to when He describes how He is going to frustrate their wisdom and intelligence and work in ways completely unexpected by them and unfathomable to them.

I want to point this out because if we do not humble ourselves to accept the truth that has been given us in Christ – to “humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you” (James 1:21) – if we don't do that we become exactly what these people were. We become people who say we worship God, but really we're just doing what we think is best, or we're following someone else's rules. We become governed by tradition or by legalism or by lawlessness instead of by the Living Lord – Jesus Christ. Our hearts are to be close to Him, not far away. Christian Preaching helps us to remain in Christ and not to drift away from Him, because it is always centred on Jesus.

2) Christian Preaching is Biblical

2 Peter 1:12-21

¹² So I will always remind you of these things, even though you know them and are firmly established in the truth you now have. ¹³ I think it is right to refresh your memory as long as I live in the tent of this body, ¹⁴ because I know that I will soon put it aside, as our Lord Jesus Christ has made clear to me. ¹⁵ And I will make every effort to see that after my departure you will always be able to remember these things.

Do you remember the story of why the first Deacons were appointed in Acts 6? It was to protect the Apostles' time, so they could devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word. They had received the truth first hand from Jesus, and now their task was to pass that on faithfully and reliably to others. Now as Peter nears the end of his life he wants to keep reminding people of these truths, and he wants to make sure that even after he has gone that Christians will always be able to remember these things. By the grace of God we can pick up a Bible today and we can read the very truths that Peter spoke on the first occasion that he got up to preach about Jesus. We can read his letters and letters from other Apostles. We can read the stories that they told of the life of Jesus. God has preserved the message of Jesus – the Living Word – by giving to us His Written Word the Bible.

Peter goes on to say in verse 20...

²⁰ Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. ²¹ For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

Always remember that the Bible is exactly as God wanted it to be in order to tell us what He wanted us to know. It might not tell us everything we would like to know, but it does tell us exactly what God wants us to know and what we need to know.

Peter affirms this later on in chapter 3 when he says

2 Peter 3:15-16

¹⁵ Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. ¹⁶ He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction.

Christian Preaching gets its voice from the Bible. It says what the Bible says, it does not distort the Scriptures but clearly proclaims them. Peter acknowledges here that there are some things that are hard to understand. That is one reason that God provides teachers to the Church, so they can study the word of God with sufficient diligence and prayerfulness to make sure they are faithfully proclaiming it and not misrepresenting it in the way so many ignorant and unstable people do.

Psalm 119:89-93, 105

*⁸⁹ Your word, O LORD, is eternal;
it stands firm in the heavens.*

⁹⁰ Your faithfulness continues through all generations;

you established the earth, and it endures.
⁹¹ *Your laws endure to this day,
for all things serve you.*
⁹² *If your law had not been my delight,
I would have perished in my affliction.*
⁹³ *I will never forget your precepts,
for by them you have preserved my life.*

¹⁰⁵ *Your word is a lamp to my feet
and a light for my path.*

Hebrews 4:12

¹² *For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.*
¹³ *Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.*

2 Timothy 3:16-17

¹⁶ *All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness,* ¹⁷ *so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.*

If the Bible can do all this, why would we present people with anything else?

Quick Stats:

Our church is currently running a “Bibles for the Persecuted” campaign through the Bible League. Last year, on average, Bible League placed more than 34 Scriptures every minute, planted more than 16 churches every day, trained over 32 people per hour and over 1,314 people per day joined a church. That’s exciting isn’t it! It’s the power of God at work through His Word.

Last year the Bible Society distributed over 380 million items of Scripture, including 28M Bibles and 11M New Testaments. They are producing bible portions for small ethnic groups, bibles for the sight and hearing impaired and lots of other exciting projects to make sure that people in all sorts of situations have the opportunity to come into contact with the Scriptures. We hear so many stories of how God is changing lives for eternity through these efforts.

The Bible is powerful.

Christian Preaching is Centred on Christ and Sourced from Scripture.

There’s more we could say about what Christian Preaching is, but that covers it for today! The question now becomes:

So what are we to do about this?

I want you to receive the full blessing that comes through Christian preaching. I don’t want you to experience anything less than God’s best for you in this area. One thing that I can do as a preacher is to do my best to make sure that I am operating by the principles that we have talked about today. But what can you do?

I want to suggest 2 simple things for you to work on, and we can add some more later on!

1. Keep your eyes on Jesus

Remember that you are conditioned to be a self-centred observer, not a Christ-centred participant! You need to choose to be interested because your Lord wants you to be, not because the preacher is entertaining or engaging or has enough multimedia props to keep your attention. Don't be distracted by superficial things, focus on the truths of God's Word that are being proclaimed.

If Jesus were here in person giving instructions to His people would He find you slouched in your seat thinking about something else or wishing He would stop waving His hands around so much or some other silliness? No! You'd be switched on, paying attention, possibly writing things down to make sure you didn't forget what He said. That's the sort of attitude we need to have whenever the Bible is being preached.

Remember we don't have worship time then a sermon. Everything we do together is worship. The way we listen is as important as the way we sing or play or take communion or pray or serve or anything else that we do. In fact, you could say that the way we listen to God sets the tone for how we do all those other things. Keep your eyes on Jesus.

2. Make God's Word a Lamp to you Feet

In other words, when you hear the bible being preached engage your mind and think about how it applies to your life. Don't expect the preacher to tell you all the ways to obey it, that's what the Holy Spirit is for. Converse with God as you listen to the sermon, and let Him apply it to your life.

God intends for you to be different as a result of hearing His Word. He wants to transform you by the renewing of your mind, so that you will be able to discover His will for your life, follow it and discover that it really is wonderful! (Rom 12:1-3).

I sometimes hear people ask God to do things in certain areas of their lives, and I think "But God's told you what you need to do in this area, and if you did it you wouldn't be in the situation you're in right now." How can we ask God to do something when we haven't even tried to do what He's already told us to do? It's as though we think "OK God, that's your way, but it doesn't really work for me. How about you do this instead – I think that will work much better".

Here's what we need to do – receive the Word and do what it says! Then, as we allow the Word of God to show us how to live we'll discover the goodness of His ways. Until we do what it says we won't experience the blessing that comes from obedience.

I want you to understand this though – we don't obey in order to be blessed. We obey because Jesus is Lord and we live for His glory, no matter what the outcome is for us. I worry about preaching that uses blessing as motivation for obedience. It's just promoting selfishness, which is at the heart of sinfulness, which is at the heart of all our problems in the first place! It promotes a "What's in this for me?" sort of attitude that is inappropriate for people who have been bought with the precious blood of Jesus Christ.

We listen and we obey in order to bring glory to God and to do the good works He's prepared in advance for us to do, and in the process God - because of His goodness and grace - produces abundant blessings for us that are always far more satisfying than anything we could achieve for ourselves in all our selfish pursuits. Just don't chase the blessings, live for the glory of God and leave the blessings up to Him.

I hope today you've been reminded of some basic principles that will enrich you and bring God glory as we share His gift of Christian Preaching to the Church that He loves.