Preaching the Gospel Message (2007 Resolved Conference)
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Session 03

RICK: Well, I have the privilege of introducing my friend, father figure, my mentor. I've told my wife, told my friends, that when I think of one person in this world that I would want to most be like--my wife adds, "When I grow up"--it is my good friend John MacArthur. Let me read you a section of one of his books that turned my life upside down. It was several years ago, it's in several of his books, but most distinctly in *The Gospel According to the Apostles*, called *Faith Works* also, he says this, and I remember where I was sitting when I read this and it was like someone walked into a dark room, turned on the lights, and Christianity made sense to me. The gospel came into focus for me in a way it never had. He says, "There are only two kinds of religion in the world, every false religion ever devised by mankind or Satan is a religion of human merit, paganism, humanism, animism, even false Christianity all fall into this category. They focus on what people must do to attain righteousness or to please a deity. But, biblical Christianity alone is the religion of divine accomplishment. Other religions say, 'Do this,' Christianity says, 'It's done.' Other religions require that the devout person must supply some kind of merit to atone for his sin, appease the deity or otherwise attain the goal of acceptability. Scripture says 'Christ's merit is supplied on behalf of the believing sinner.' You know what that's called? Good news, very, very good news."

I could tell you how many books John MacArthur's written, how many places he's gone around the world. But I'd like to tell you is a simple fact that tells you everything you need to ever know about this man. He's been faithful in pastoring the same flock for four decades. You don't find that kind of faithfulness in very many places throughout all church history.

Ladies and gentlemen, you will grow up some day and tell your kids that you had the privilege of sitting and listening to John MacArthur. Let's welcome him together.

JOHN: Thank you…thank you.

I'm not used to this much energy before I get up to preach. Usually follow a mediocre soprano--this is a little hard to adjust to, actually. In fact, I could die up here from elevated heart rate. But it is fun to watch David Zimmer, isn't it? I'm telling you. And I'll tell you something else about him, he is a sophomore at the Master's College and didn't...couldn't...play at all when he arrived. No, he actually could play a little bit.

And speaking of that, I do have the privilege of being the president of The Master's College and Seminary and I just want to say a brief word about that. The Master's College is an amazing place, probably not as well known as the Master's Seminary. We have about a hundred-acre campus out in the Santa Clarita area--fifty-two major programs: everything you can image from pre-law, pre-med, the sciences, music, business, etcetera; English, history, education, theology, all of those kinds of areas. And pretty exciting to see what God has done out there. *U.S. News and World Report* this year rated The Master's College the second-leading college west of the Mississippi, and they don't care about the spiritual side--that's just how they view us academically. It's an amazing thing that the Lord has done, a really phenomenal faculty, flourishing academic environment, more importantly as the commitment to the Word of God into the Lord Jesus Christ. And people always ask me, What is the distinctive of The Master's College? And I hasten to say that I think the real distinctive of the college, and this will define it for you either for good or bad, the college teaches what I preach. That's basically it. So that's the beginning and the end, the top and the bottom of what goes on at The Master's College, and God has given us an incredible faculty to carry that on in all the various disciplines and it's an amazing place.

There's a little display over at the bookstore, and if you want to find out more information about The Master's College or even about the seminary. I know most of you are already in college, you've made a selection--not too late to get in the will of God, however--but some of you are thinking about seminary and you will definitely want to look in to The Master's Seminary; it's an amazing, amazing place.

We have heard some great preaching, last night and this morning, opening up the Word of God to us, two great portions: Romans 5 and Hebrews chapter 1. And we have heard unashamed, unabashed, unembarrassed, unrestrained, unmitigated proclamation of the glories of the Lord Jesus Christ. And you have sung, it seems to me at least, without any limitation, without any restraint, and without any embarrassment, the glories of God and you have sung the tributes of your heart to our Lord Jesus Christ. This cave here has literally run with the celebration of praise. And I'm struck by how exuberant it is. I'm struck again about how undiminished it is. We hold absolutely nothing back. In fact, it seems to me that many of you are singing at such a high volume that if we were only hearing you, it would be frightening because you have long since abandoned pitch and tone. I thought that was probably the case. Frankly, I can't hear you anyway because I'm up here and I only hear the instruments. But this is just an almost wild release of exuberant praise and joy, as it should be. We have exalted God; we have exalted the Son of God, the Lord Jesus Christ; we have extoled the cross; we have celebrated the gospel. This is pure worship aided by rhythm and glorious music and sound, and energized by one another. And it's so free and so unhindered and undiminished and unrestrained. I could only wish that our witnessing was the same.

What happens when we leave here? Why all of a sudden does mentioning the name of God become difficult? Why does the word *Jesus* cross our lips only with a great amount of effort and summoning up courage? What happens to us? How can we be so free and so unencumbered and so unembarrassed here and so embarrassed out there in our world?

Well, lest you feel like maybe I'm only indicting you, let me remind you of the words of the apostle Paul, Romans 1: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ." That's a bizarre thing to say, really a bizarre thing to say. Why in the world would you be ashamed of the gospel of Christ? You heard last night the glories of the gospel as related to the provision of Christ on the cross. You heard this morning the glories of the person of Christ in His utter and absolute supremacy. What is there to be embarrassed about? Why does Paul even say, "I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ?" Is this some noble statement? Does this elevate him above the rest of the hoi polloi among believers? Is this some badge of some kind of achievement? Is this a mark of maturity? By the way, the word "ashamed" means "embarrassed." He could have said it this way, and probably it would come across this way in the original language, "I am not embarrassed by the gospel of Christ." Why would anybody say that?

But on the other hand, you remember that he wrote two letters to Timothy, and in writing to Timothy in the second letter, he says in chapter 1, "Do not be embarrassed of the testimony of our Lord." Timothy was the best product Paul produced. Timothy was his protégé; Timothy was his son in the faith. It was Timothy who was going to pick up Paul's mantle. It was to Timothy that Paul would hand the baton of ministry. Paul is writing his last letter--Second Timothy is his last letter. He's a prisoner. Soon his head will be severed from his body by an axe and it will all be over. So much is at stake; so much invested up to that point. He knows that Timothy is to be his successor. Things aren't going well in Timothy's life. There is one great prevailing reality, and that is that Timothy is struggling with being embarrassed about the gospel. "Do not be embarrassed concerning the testimony of our Lord."

And, in fact, in that first chapter of 2 Timothy, Timothy's embarrassment had reached such a point that he needed to stir up the gift of God which was in him, affirmed by the laying on of hands of the presbytery. That is to say, to make no doubt about the fact that he was called and gifted and ordained, and yet he needed to stir up a gift that had fallen into disuse over embarrassment. Perhaps even was worse than that. Paul says to him, "Hold fast to sound doctrine."

When you get embarrassed, you tend to jettison your theology, you tend to remove whatever it is that offends. So here is Paul at the end of his life, a prisoner, waiting to have his head chopped off, passing the mantle to a young man who is manifesting signs of being embarrassed about the gospel, embarrassed about doctrine, and letting his gift fall into disuse because, frankly, it's too tough. Why would anyone be embarrassed by the gospel?

To come at it another way, if I had a cure for cancer--let's say I had developed a cure for cancer and knew exactly the protocol to provide this cure for anybody who was willing; this would guarantee the cure of cancer. You would find it virtually unbelievable if I were to say to you, "Well I do know the cure for cancer, but it's really embarrassing to let you know what it is. I'm really kind of ashamed to tell you." That's ludicrous; that's ridiculous.

If I, if I knew how to solve the problems in Iraq, in the Middle East, world conflict, heart disease, whatever, would I be embarrassed to tell you what the solution is? My sister, Julie, died a number of years ago from cancer. She was fighting cancer for about thirteen years of her life. She came to a critical point when various protocols had been exhausted and there wasn't much option left. And I got a phone call one day. I got a phone call from one of the leading evangelical personalities, writers, media personalities in America. You would know him. And he said, "John, I've got to tell you this. There is a cure for cancer, and I know your sister has cancer, and I just have to tell you this is it. I've seen it. I just need you to get your sister back to Tennessee" (my sister lived in Oregon).

I said, "You're going to have to tell me a little bit more; this sounds too good to be true." And he gave me a sort of layman's version of whatever the medical technology was supposed to do and accomplish. I said, "Well, I think I understand that had something to do with a certain kind of magnetic field and whatever. I confess to you that I'm very skeptical about things like that."

But he said, "Just do me one favor, please. Call your sister and tell her to give me a call." I said, "I'll do that." And because of his credibility, I called my sister Julie and I said this is the conversation I had and he would like you to call. He thinks this is the answer. He himself is suffering from cancer; he's gone through this treatment." And so my sister made the call and I left the choice with her at that level of desperation, and because he was so over the top and had a measure of credibility and proclaimed this cure with such zeal. She and her husband, along with my mom and dad, who were very old--they're both now with the Lord--went through the expensive and difficult trip from Oregon to Tennessee. They showed up at this supposed clinic. It was a funny little house. The whole operation was in a garage. Hanging over the garage were some Christmas lights, and somebody waved a hose over my sister. It was a farce. It was a joke. It was a sad, sad thing because all the hope and all the anticipation, and they came back understanding that they had been duped.

It's an amazing thing to me that somebody would not be ashamed who had been to that place to suggest to anybody in a terminal condition to go through that kind of trip for that kind of ridiculous enterprise.

Frankly, there are a lot of other things that people aren't ashamed to promote and ashamed to advocate. What in the world makes us so embarrassed about the gospel? Well, we get a little bit of a hint when we turn to 1 Corinthians. Open your Bible, if you will. First Corinthians 1 and 2. Now I want to just draw you down into chapter 2 and verse 2 and verse 3, again because this connects up with

the way I've been kind of directing your thoughts. First Corinthians chapter 2, and notice this: "For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling." Kind of nice to know that Paul has the same problem, right? He says, "Frankly, to come to you and to preach the gospel, to preach the cross of Jesus Christ, produces in me weakness, fear and much trembling." But he says, "I determined to do it." The word "determined" in the Greek, *krino*--guess what it means? "To resolve, I resolved"--a deliberate act of the will in the aorist tense. I made a fixed determination to rise above my natural embarrassment, to rise above my fear and my weakness and my trembling--and to give you Jesus Christ and Him crucified. Martyn Lloyd-Jones said this, "If you've never been tempted to be ashamed of the gospel, the reason is not that you are such an exceptional Christian but rather that your understanding of the gospel has never been clear." Anybody who has a clear understanding of the gospel understands why it's hard to proclaim it and it's easy to be embarrassed.

If you think that's true in this world, let me take you back to Paul's world. Paul lived in a shame/honor culture. It was Homer, the Greek writer, who said, "The chief good is to be well spoken of, the chief evil is to be badly spoken of by one's society." So what you do for honor, you avoid everything that brings shame. So Paul ministered in this shame/sensitive, honor/seeking culture, and he ministered with a message that was inherently shameful and brought upon the messenger public dishonor, scorn, rejection, persecution, and execution. It was such a shameful message that people died for giving it.

What is it about this message that causes shame? Let's go back in to chapter 1, verse 18, and let's begin with what I'll call the shameful sentence of the cross, the shameful sentence of the cross. And there are some very, very basic and foundational elements to the preaching of the cross here that will help us understand this inherent shame. Verse 18, "For the word of the cross"...that is the message of the cross..."is to those who are perishing foolishness, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God." Drop down to verse 21, middle of the verse, "God was well pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe."

Now we're introduced in these two verses to what we'll call the shameful sentence of the cross. Two words jump out of these verses. In verse 18 is the word "perishing," *apollumi;* it means "to utterly destroy." And then the word in verse 21, the word "save"; it means "to rescue," "to protect or preserve," safe and unharmed.

What we're talking about here when we proclaim the message of the cross, as we've already heard, is that people live in great danger. They are in danger of perishing, that is, of being destroyed by God, and they desperately need to be rescued. This language then pulls into our understanding all the realities of sin and judgment and death and hell. It is inescapable that the issue in the Christian gospel and the issue in the message of the cross is rescuing sinners from eternal damnation. Cross is not about psychological felt needs, not about self-esteem. It's not about feeling better about yourself.

It’s not about an increased level of happiness or success or well-being. It is about sin and hell and as we’ve heard, it is about being saved from the wrath of God.

An illustration of this I recently preached in our church. Go back to Luke 18. It’s a good illustration of the message of the cross related to the sentence, as opposed to felt needs--and I won’t develop a lot of it. But if you go back to the eighteenth chapter and pick it up at verse 18, it says, “A certain ruler questioned Him.” This is in Matthew, Mark and Luke, parallel accounts, Mark 10, Matthew 19; put all three together, you get the full picture. This is a ruler, this is a young ruler, this is a very rich young ruler--verse 23 says he was extremely rich. The only ruler in Jewish society under Roman occupation basically was a ruler of a synagogue. He’s young; he’s rich. The Jews assume that if you were Jewish and you were religious, and he must have been Jewish and religious and very religious. In fact he must have been esteemed above all his peers because he was made a ruler in the synagogue, which was an affirmation of one’s spiritual life. The conclusion was that if he was also rich, he was rich because God had blessed him. They had the same theology then that Job’s friends had with Job. If you have a lot, God is blessing you because you’re doing what you should. If you have nothing, God is chastening you because you’re in sin. It was the same kind of theology then. The poor are under the judgment of God, and the rich are under the blessing of God--this man had it all in their view. He comes to Jesus; he says, “Good teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” There’s a lot of components here: certain integrity and honesty in saying I know I don’t have eternal life; I have money; I have esteem; I have prestige; I have honor; I have a place in society; I have my religion; I have the respect of others--all of that. But one thing I don’t have is eternal life. And he’s not talking about a quantity of life; he’s talking about that life which belongs to the Eternal One. It’s another way of saying in the Jewish vocabulary, “I don’t know you. I don’t possess a knowledge of you, a relationship with you. I don’t have the life of God within me.”

I would say that this is the premier illustration of the quote/unquote seeker--he comes to the right person, he asks the right question, and it’s all based on felt need. If you put the gospels together, he runs, which means he’s eager. He kneels, which means he’s respectful. He says, “Good teacher.” Nowhere in any Jewish literature is good ever used as a description of any rabbi. Teacher--yes; good teacher--no, because to them God alone was good and Jesus comments on that immediately after. So he comes--he comes eagerly; he comes earnestly; he comes respectfully; he comes to the right person; asks the right question and even acknowledges that Jesus has some true connection with God.

Wow! You’d say, this is the perfect secret. When Jesus brought up the issue of his sin, he denied that he had any. When Jesus brought up the issue of obedience and submission to him as Lord, he was not interested. And you know the end of the story. He walked away because he was very rich and he wanted his money and he wanted to run his own life. He would not accept the sentence that the Scripture leveled at him as a sinner. He would not acknowledge the sin in his life. He would not acknowledge he had violated the law of God, was therefore under the wrath of God, perishing,

headed for judgment, needed to be rescued. The world is full of, and the church is full of, these kinds of psychological felt-need seekers who have never been confronted with the reality of a heart and soul of the initial message of the gospel, which is you're headed for eternal hell. This isn't about how you feel in this life; this is about where you spend the next life. In fact, I'll put it simply--the gospel ignores the superficialities of life. The gospel ignores your well-being. The gospel ignores how you feel about life, how you feel about your job, how you feel about your marriage, how you feel about your place in this world, how you feel about your station in life, your social experiences, your accomplishments. The gospel ignores all of those completely and goes right to the heart of the issue--you are perishing. It is a shameful sentence; it is a very shameful sentence.

I said before to this same group, I can't remember if it was last year or before, but when Jesus went to His hometown in Luke 4, preached one time in His home synagogue, to His extended family and His friends and everybody that grew up with Him. At the end of one sermon, they tried to throw him off a cliff and kill Him. What do you say to the people who know you, have known you all your life, that makes them want to kill you in one sermon? You identify them as sinners who are unwilling to admit their sin. That's why the gospel is such a hard message, because it confronts the wretchedness of the sinner.

So we begin then with the shamefulness of the cross and the shamefulness of the gospel by acknowledging the shameful sentence of the gospel. That's where it has to start. The sinner has to be told of his true condition before God.

The second, we see the shameful sentence of the cross here, as I introduced it, and then the shameful stigma of the cross. And this really kind of opens up the passage. The first was really sort of basic. This really kind of cracks open the magnificence of this text. Let's go back to verse 18, "For the word of the cross is to those who are perishing foolishness"-- *moria*, from which we get the word *moron*. It's a moronic message. It's an idiotic message, foolishness. If you go down into verse 23, "For indeed, Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom. But we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block, and to Gentiles, foolishness." And here he explains why this message is so ridiculous.

Now you're living in that ancient world and you're talking to Jews. Jews had a messianic expectation. Their messianic expectation was that when the Messiah came, there would be signs and wonders, supernatural signs and wonders. You say, "Well there were in the life of Jesus, there were healings and there were feedings of multitudes of people and the raising of the dead, etc., etc. Weren't those sufficient signs and wonders?" Those were not the signs and wonders the Jews were looking for. They were looking for the signs and wonders in the sky that had been spoken of by Isaiah and by Amos. They were--and by Joel--they were looking for the dramatic sky-wonders--supernatural wonders in the sky, massive, unmistakable acts of God's power. That's what they expected from their Messiah.

On the other hand, the Greeks or the Gentiles were looking for wisdom, transcendent, esoteric, complex knowledge, like their fifty or so extant philosophies that existed at that time. What does Jesus do? He comes along and those who preach the gospel after Him, and they present a scandalous message--a *skandalon,* a crucified Messiah. Rather than the Messiah producing wonders in the sky, the Messiah ends up on a cross, dead--bizarre, outrageous, offensive to the Jewish mind, even blasphemous. And the Greeks, they're expecting if the eternal creator of the universe did show up, He certainly wouldn't be crucified by men. That too is equally idiotic.

And this is exacerbated, of course, by crucifixion itself. The first-century Roman world--crucifixion was a popular form of execution. About thirty thousand people were crucified in and around Jerusalem during that period. It was very, very common. It was a very systematized event. It followed the same protocol--pretty much what you saw in the *Passion* movie. Not just Jesus suffered that way; tens of thousands of people suffered in that very same fashion. It originated in the Persian Empire. It was used for individuals. It was also used for groups. Darius, for example--the Mede--crucified three thousand Babylonians. Alexander the Great was furious with the citizens of Tyre who wouldn't assist him in his movements to the east, and so he crucified two thousand of them. A man named Alex Janus, who lived about 102 or so B.C., was famous in Jewish history. He crucified 800 Pharisees, and he did it in full view of their wives and children, which etched in the Jewish mind the horror of crucifixion. The Jews so despised crucifixion that they never crucified any living person. They did take heretics, idolaters and apostates, and hang them on crosses after they had been stoned to death, in order to fulfill Deuteronomy 21 which said, "Cursed is he who hangs on a tree."

Felix, the governor noted in the book of Acts, crucified many. Titus Vespasian, 70 A.D., the Roman general that conquered Jerusalem, crucified many, many people--many Jews. In fact, at one point historians say they ran out of trees because they made so many into crosses. It was about 337 A.D. that Constantine abolished this horrific form of execution in which, as you well know, someone is asphyxiated because they can no longer hold themselves up on their wounds, and they slump and they're lungs are depressed and collapse. It is the most horrible death imaginable. A Roman citizen couldn't be crucified unless he was guilty of high treason, because it was such an undignified way to die.

How could Jesus be God and die that way? How could Jesus be God and die at all, let alone die that way? Romans viewed anyone crucified as being contemptuous. Someone's crucifixion was so foul and so vile, such an obscenity that it was not to be discussed in public company. Cicero said the very word "cross" should be removed not only from the person of a Roman citizen, but from his thoughts, eyes, and ears. There's a little footnote to this. In history, the earliest emblem of Christianity was not a cross--even the early church had a hard time swallowing the horror of the cross. And if you go back to the earliest Christian art, you will find that the earliest symbol of Christianity comes from the shepherd's world. It's a picture of a shepherd with a sheep around his neck being led home, borrowed

from the parable of Luke 15. Only later was the cross introduced as a symbol of Christianity.

If you ever visit Rome, go to the Palatine Hill. I've done that a couple of times, and you will find there, tucked away, a crypt. And on it is an etching, and it's behind bars so that it will not be harmed any further than the years have already harmed it. It is the picture of a crucified man with the head of a jackass and a man kneeling down before this crucified man with a head of a jackass, and underneath it says, "Elixa Menos, worships his god." That was their view of the stupidity of a crucified God.

Justin's first apology in A.D. 152--he summarized the Gentile view: they proclaim our madness to consist in this, that we give to a crucified man a place equal to the unchangeable and eternal God the Creator of all. That is absolute nonsense to Gentiles--a massive obstacle to the proclamation of the message of salvation. In fact, if God, if God could have thought of the worst possible way to make a message marketable, this would be it. The Jewish attitude was worse because if you were hanged on a tree, you were cursed by God (Deuteronomy 21:23). Somebody on a cross is not only a social pariah, but a blasphemer of God. Only blasphemers and idolaters were crucified, as I said; the Mishnah in the second century says, but only after they were dead. The point is that a crucified God is insane, scandalous, impossible to believe, and yet that is the message they had to preach. First of all, they had to identify the person to whom they are preaching--it as a sinner under divine wrath headed for eternal hell--and then tell them the only hope was a crucified God. And to the Jews, they had to say that they had to turn for their salvation to one who was God and was at the same time smitten by God and afflicted. Hegel writes, "The idea that the Creator God appeared in Galilee to obscure Jews and was killed on a cross is absolute madness. To the Jews, God is immortal. To the Greeks, the gods were immortal. This is a perverse and extravagant superstition they said." No easy message, no friendly sharing. They collided with their culture, smashed headlong into their sensibilities with this kind of message.

Thirdly, the shameful simplicity of the cross. And the news tightens, verse 19, "For it is written," and here Paul borrows from Isaiah 29:14, "For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and the cleverness of the clever I will set aside. Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe?" This is sarcasm, this is mockery. "Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world, for since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached, to save those who believed."

The gospel makes--get this--absolutely no concession to human wisdom; no philosophy, no psychology, no human wisdom plays any part whatsoever in the gospel. It not only ignores human wisdom, it destroys it. And that leads to the sarcasm, So where is the wise man? What good is the wisest of all humans, or the collective wisdom of all the wisest of all humans? What about the scribes? The writers? All the great writers? What about the great debaters of human history? Collectively or individually they are useless when it comes to salvation. Everything they have to offer

is foolish.

This is a complete denunciation of all the accumulated insight and understanding wisdom of the elite. This is Romans 1:22, “Professing themselves to be wise, they became”...What?...“fools.” I had an interesting European, advanced European, philosophy when I was in my college days, and I took some classes in advanced European philosophy. I remember it was several classes that I took; only had two or three students because it was such a small interest. It was such a fascinating, fascinating study of absolute, utter futility to explain the meaning of life--origins and destinies without God. Paul mocks the world’s wisdom insofar as being any assistance to the necessity of salvation for sinners. It is utterly useless.

In fact, all the world’s ideologies, according to 2 Corinthians 10:35, need to be smashed. The ideologies of the world are the fortresses in which people are kept captive that become their tunes, and we take the truth of the gospel to smash those lying ideologies. Paul calls them all high things lifted up against the knowledge of God.

So what are we saying to the world? First of all, we’re pronouncing a shameful sentence on them. Then we’re pronouncing the glorious story of a shameful cross. And then we’re narrowing it down to a shameful simplicity. This is the only way. There is no other way, and all of human wisdom collectively offers us nothing. It’s a tough sell, absolutely tough sell. Abandon all your pride; abandon all your self-confidence; see yourself as a sinner; embrace a God who died in the most ignominious and shameful and stigmatized way that anyone could ever die in the ancient world. And there is no other, and that leads me to the fourth point--the shameful singularity of the cross, the shameful singularity of the cross.

Go back to verse 18 again. “For the word of the cross is to those who are perishing foolishness, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God.” Again it’s the word of the cross. Nothing else but the word of the cross that is the power of God to save. Verse 21b again, “It is the foolishness of the message preached that saves those who believe.” This is that shameful singularity of the cross. This is an absolute exclusivity. There is no wider mercy; there is no other way--the power of God saves only those who believe the gospel. This is a shameful thing to say.

In our world--our tolerant, eclectic, inclusive world--to say Jesus is the only way, the cross is the only way, all other ways lead directly to hell. That’s a tough sell today and it was a tough sell in a complex, philosophical world of the Greeks. It was even a ridiculous way in the complex, rabbinic teachings of old in which rabbis had devised all kinds of ways to interpret what it meant to know God. This is exclusivity. This is...there is no other way. There is no other name. I know we hear a lot today about the wider mercy view that, well, there are a number of ways in which it’s being espoused today. There are many who are saying if you’re sincere in your faith that will get you to heaven. There is one book that came out--I tried to help the author pull it off the shelf but he didn’t do it--in which he said that

people in the world who never hear the gospel can still get into heaven by being transpensationalized. That is, treated as if they were living in some other dispensation; don't need to know about God or Christ. This denies the most obvious reality of the New Testament, and that is that there is no salvation in any other than the name of Jesus Christ. You can't get there any other way. It is through the foolishness of the message preached that those who believe are saved. This is the shameful singularity of the gospel.

Now you know all those things. And I don't want to belabor the point. How do we overcome this? How did they overcome it? Here they were, the early apostles, going out to preach this impossible message, absolutely impossible. And the hostility was so fierce that they were persecuted. Peter even writes in 1 Peter 4:16 that if you suffer as a Christian, don't be ashamed--because it was inevitable. All those that live godly in this present age will suffer persecution, Paul said. To preach this message brings hostility. All those components generate that kind of hostility. It is a ludicrous, ridiculous, bizarre message. It is far too narrow, far too simple, far too damning and condemning.

Whatever difficulty there is in preaching it today in a sort of, I suppose, I guess we could say a post-Christian environment, will we remember a little bit about Christianity which mitigates the harshness of this message? Whatever it is to this society, it was far more difficult to preach in that early church.

So how does God overcome this? Well, if we were going to market this tough message, we might suggest that the Lord could make sure that He picks some really influential people to pull it off. That if the message is that difficult, man, you've got to be careful who the sales people are. If we can just get all the leading lights, all the great philosophers, all the great thinkers, all the great orators, all the great mathematicians, all the great minds of the ancient world--if we could just get all the great religious leaders, all the great theologians and convert all of them and then they would give some credibility to this otherwise unbelievable message.

I'll give you a little hint about the fact that the Lord doesn't do that, because when He chose the Twelve, He didn't choose one scholastic, He didn't choose one academician, He didn't choose one educated person, He didn't choose one professor, one orator, not one rabbi, not one Pharisee, not one scribe, not one ruler of a synagogue. He chose a bunch of fishermen--as many as seven possibly--and a bunch of other guys who worked with their hands, a tax collector, and a terrorist. This whole gospel thing could have happened in a Greek world, and God could have chosen all the elite minds of the Greek world and all the great philosophies--philosophers of Athens--and all the great leaders of the Roman Empire to pull off an otherwise unbelievable message. And the irony of all of that is that we move from these preliminary shameful things to a fifth.

When we think about the shame of the cross, we come to the shameful society of the cross, the shameful society of the cross. The sentence is shameful. The stigma of the cross is shameful, ridiculous, and unbelievable. The simplicity of it; it doesn't have the complexity; it doesn't go through

all the intellectual labyrinths that both Greeks and Hebrews loved. The shameful singularity of the cross, that it is the only way and there is no other way--and now we have the shameful society of the cross. This is the wonder of all wonders. He says, verse 23, “We preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block, to Gentiles foolishness. But to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.” And then this, “For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh [*sophe, sophos, sophistry*--“wisdom”], not many wise according to the flesh [“humanly brilliant, astute, erudite”], not many mighty [*dunatos,* “powerful, influential”; movers and shakers, world leaders], not many noble [*eugenes,* from which we get genetics, birth, aristocratic]. There aren’t many educated, wise; there aren’t many powerful and influential. There aren’t many high-born noble and aristocratic. In fact, Celsus in 178, in his diatribe against Christianity, said they are the vulgarist and the most uneducated of all people. In fact, if you want to go on the positive side, verse 27, “God has chosen the foolish to shame the wise.” God has chosen the weak (*asthenes*, “weak, without strength”) to shame the things which are strong. Verse 28, “And the base things” (*agenes;* the alpha privative in front of the word *genes* [“birth, genealogy, genetics”--*a* negates it]; the no births, the people of no birth, families of utter insignificance and the despised, the *exutheneo* [the considered as nothing, the no ones]). And it even goes lower--“the things that are not”; “the are nots.” Wow!--*ta ma onta*, “the no ones, the non-existing ones, the no beings,” in Greek.

This is absolutely ridiculous. You’ve got an absurd, unbelievable message, and you put it in the hands of a bunch of nobodies. And you disdain the wise and the powerful and the aristocratic, and you pick the foolish and the weak and the base and the despised, and the absolute nobodies? Why? Well, that’s clear: “To shame the wise”; to make it crystal clear that this gospel does not come by means of human wisdom, and “to shame the strong,” that it does not come by human power.

But how could such a group ever have an impact in the world? If you go over to the fourth chapter of 1 Corinthians, Paul gives us a little deeper insight into what it is to be among this group of foolish people. Go down to verse 9, God has exhibited us apostles, last of all, as men condemned to death. We’re like people led into an arena to be eaten by lions. We’re only there for sport. We’re there to be mocked. We’re there to be killed as entertainment for the people, condemned to death. We have become a spectacle to the world. That’s the language of the arena. We’re fools. Gets sarcastic there. To this hour, in verse 11 he says, we’re hungry and thirsty.

Go down to verse 13, well he says we’re poorly clothed, roughly treated, homeless. Verse 13, “we have become as the scum of the world, the dregs of all things.” You dig a little bit into those words; “scum” is what’s on the bottom of a pan after you’ve emptied the pan, after whatever’s in it has been cooked. The scum is what’s left on the bottom. When you scrape the scum off, the dregs are what’s still under the scum. If you’re looking for popularity, this isn’t where to get it. We’re the scum. We’re the scum below the scum--“the dregs of all things.”

Turn to 2 Corinthians chapter 4, and we're talking about Paul, this is his self-confession. Now verse 7, 2 Corinthians 4, "we have this treasure in earthen vessels." What treasure? The treasure of the gospel, the great gospel that is the theme of the prior verses. "We preach Christ Jesus as Lord, light shining out of darkness is the one who is shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." That's the incarnation of God in Christ; that's our message, our gospel. We have this gospel treasure, this shining, blazing, diamond truth in earthen vessels. I don't want to get too crass about talking about earthen vessels, but it's clay pots; that's us. We are the clay pots.

Now just what function did a clay pot have? Suffice it to say that the apostle Paul writing to Timothy said, "In a house there are vessels unto honor, and vessels unto dishonor." That's pretty easy to interpret that. A vessel unto honor was some kind of plate, or dish used to serve the food. A vessel unto dishonor was removing the waste from the family. Paul says, "You want to be a vessel unto honor, not a vessel unto dishonor." Clay pots were used for the most lowly, base functions in the house. They were ugly; they were replaceable; they were breakable. They were insignificant. Paul says, "The truth of the matter is, I'm a garbage bucket." It was Thomas More who was so infuriated--with the Catholics in England--with Martin Luther that he called Martin Luther a pretty pot. I don't think I need to exegete that for you. And Luther would have agreed. Really, in the eyes of the world, it's just amazing. You have a message that's virtually impossible to believe, both for Jew and Greek, and you give it to people who are nobodies, who are laughingstock.

Now all that leads to a final point. The shameful sovereignty of the cross. Back to chapter [1]. How is this going to work? If we are true to the shameful cross, its shameful sentence, stigma, simplicity, singularity, and we are this shameful society, what hope do we have? This is an impossible task. Yes, and Luke 18 tells us that with men it is impossible. Except for one monumental reality--follow this thought, okay?

Verse 21, "God was well-pleased to save those who believe." God was well—pleased in spite of the impossibility of the message and the unimpressiveness of the preachers, God was well-pleased to save those who believe. But who would believe? Answer? Verse 24, "But to those who are"...What's the next statement?..."the called." Every time you see the reference to a call in the epistles of the New Testament, it is the efficacious call unto salvation by the divine power of God that produces regeneration. It is not an invitation. It is the effectual call; those who believe are those who are the called. And that comes clear in verse 26, "So consider your calling, brethren," if you're a brother, you've been called.

Well okay. Those who believe are those who are called, who are those who are the called? Verse 27, "But God has"...What's the next word?..."chosen"..."but God has chosen the foolish"...middle of the verse..."God has chosen the weak"...verse 28..."the base, the despised." God has chosen--those who

believe are the called--the called are the chosen.

Wow! So we go out, not in our own strength, with an impossible message, with uninfluential lives, and we preach this message because God is well-pleased, finds delight and satisfaction in saving those who believe, who are those who are called because they are those he has chosen. No way around it. And at the end of it all, the whole enterprise, when it's complete, can be summed up this way, verse 29: "That no man should boast before God." Verse 30, this is one of the great verses in the New Testament, "By His doing you are in Christ Jesus." Is that unmistakably clear? "By His doing you are in Christ Jesus who became to us wisdom from God and righteousness and sanctification and redemption." The only way anybody will ever believe this message, the only way that it will ever do its mighty work is because God chooses, God calls, and God saves. It is by His doing.

So verse 31 repeats, "Just as it is written," this is nothing new. Jeremiah said it, "Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord." But, you know, this too is shameful. Even the sovereignty of the cross is shameful. Let me read you some things. These are from well-known evangelical leaders that are--I'll leave unnamed. Listen to this. Here's a very popular writer, maybe as well-known as any writer in the Christian world, says this: "To suggest that the merciful, long-suffering, gracious and loving God of the Bible would invent a dreadful doctrine like sovereign salvation, which would have us believe that it is an act of grace to select certain people for heaven and exclude others, comes perilously close to blasphemy." He calls the sovereignty of the cross a kind of blasphemy.

Another leader, "The flawed theology of election is an attempt to eliminate man's capacity to exercise his free will, which reduces God's sovereign love to the act of a mere dictator." Another one says, "Calvinism makes our heavenly Father look like the worst of despots." Another one, the president of a university, a Christian university says, "Such is this view of sovereignty and salvation the most unreasonable, incongruous, self-contradictory, man-belittling, God dishonoring scheme of theology that has ever appeared in Christian thought. No one can accept its contradictory, mutually exclusive propositions without intellectual self-debasement. It holds up a self-centered, selfish, heartless, remorseless tyrant for God and bids us to worship Him." Another, a pastor of a Calvary Chapel: "This view makes God a monster who eternally tortures innocent children, removes the hope of consolation from the gospel, limits the atoning work of Christ, resists evangelism, stirs up argumentation and division, promotes a small, angry, judgmental God rather than the large-hearted God of the Bible."

Finally, another well-known author: "This view of God has caused many to turn away from the God of the Bible as if turning from a monster."

Everything about the cross is a shameful thing, to some people, even the sovereignty of the cross. This is not an easy message because at the end of it all, you're also saying to the sinner what Jesus said, "With men, this is impossible." So all you can say to the sinner at the end of the day is, "I will tell you this, you must call upon God like the publican and ask Him to be merciful to you." That's all you

can tell the sinner to do, with the confidence that if he's truly prompted to do that, it is God doing the prompting, and him that comes to Him, that is, to Christ. He will never cast out.

So what do we have left to do? Let's go back to our text, chapter 2. "When I came to you, brethren, I didn't come with superiority of speech, wisdom." Why? That's foolish. I'm not trying to be clever, not trying to be cute, not trying to be funny, not trying to be slick, savvy, cool, culturally adept--I didn't come with any of that. I just came proclaiming to you the testimony of God, and as hard as it is because of all the embarrassing elements and all the shame attached to the whole deal, I had to determine, I had to make a *krino*--a judgment, a fixed judgment--that I would against all odds "know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified," even though I was weak and afraid and shaking. Still my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power so that in the end your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men but on the power of God. And the only way the power of God is ever released is when the truth is proclaimed.

The power of God rides the gospel truth. So we must be truthful at all costs, knowing that the whole enterprise of salvation is the work of God and God alone. People believe because they're called; they're called because they're chosen; and that disdains all human wisdom and all human manipulation and brings all the glory and all the honor to God. So when you preach the gospel, tell the truth, 'cause the only way anybody's ever going to be saved is when God does it, and His power rides the truth.

I close with a verse in Mark 12, verse 13. I guess of all the things that were said about Jesus, I could wish that this would be, I don't know, on my tombstone somewhere. Now Jesus had some enemies, but none hated Him more than the Pharisees and the Herodians, of course, as well. And so they came to trap Him--they did it all the time. But I want you to notice what they said to Him. Mark 12:14; these are His enemies, those who hate Him, those who want Him dead and eventually succeeded. This is what they said: "Teacher, we know that You are truthful and defer to no one; for You are not partial to any, but teach the way of God in truth." Wow! Is that an amazing thing? Now you know you've gotten your point across when that's what your enemies say about you. You're truthful. You don't play to the crowd. You're not a man-pleaser. You don't say what people want to hear. You're not partial. You teach the way of God in truth. That would be okay for my epitaph. He spoke the truth. He didn't defer to anybody, wasn't partial to anybody, but he taught the way of God in truth.

That's all we have, folks. And it's what God will use to do His work. Sure there's a natural embarrassment in this very difficult message. But let's be like the apostle Paul. Maybe the collective power of this event in these days can help us to lift ourselves up above the low level at which we often live and together affirm in our hearts that I will not be ashamed of the gospel, but I am determined at this point to render this fixed resolution--I will preach Christ and the full message of the cross, knowing that it is on that gospel truth that God sends the saving power.

Lord, we are grateful again for a wonderful morning and opportunity to think through the greatness of Your Word--it’s inexhaustible; it is convicting; at the same time it is refreshing. It is a satisfying meal, at the same time it is a cutting sword that splits us open and makes us dissatisfied with who we are and how we live. Confirm to our hearts the truths we have heard. May we find occasion today to talk about them, to meditate on them so that they might find their way deeper and deeper into our thinking and manifest themselves in our living. We give You the praise in Christ’s name. Amen.

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