

A PASTOR'S THEME

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Rich and Famous

Poor and Faithful

It is Better to be Faithful Than to be Famous



Buddy Dano, Pastor

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Many of you are aware that I have been the only pastor for the past 15 years at Houston Bible Church. Some may not know that I have been a pastor and assistant pastor to other churches since 1961, and therefore for the past 28 years I have been in the pulpit. We as a church, and me as a pastor, have been privileged to come under the principle of learning something of the heart of God.

We are a small church, and much to the dismay of most of you, and on occasion sometimes to myself, we wished and prayed that our church would be larger. But that request and that desire and that prayer has never been answered by the Lord.

So we understand and come to know that as He was rejected while He was here on Earth, so we who communicate and assemble to hear His Word are also rejected in our unique ministry of trying to emphasize the importance of the Word of God and the matchless GRACE of our Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Lord, in His way, has protected us, simply because nowhere in Scripture are we told to be famous. Fame has its problems, as we can see, with some so-called famous churches and ministries in the 20th century. So we realize, before the Lord, the most unusual and unique ministry that the Lord has for us is the same when He cried out, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often would I have gathered you, even as a hen gathers her chickens under her wings, and you would not!"

So we find ourselves in the same position. Our consolation and the pastor's theme is that "**It is better to be faithful than to be famous.**"

I have hesitated through out the years to intrude with personal references while I was in the pulpit, and looking back over the years of our ministry, there are many thoughts that cannot be spoken publicly. But there is one thing that I can say, that I am grateful to the Lord, and to those of you who through the

years have been my dear friends, and for the unbroken harmony, confidence and affection, and forbearance by which you have brightened and lightened my work in the Lord. Of course, I cannot judge before the Lord your worth to me in this manner, but I can only, before the Lord, take these gracious words of our text as expressive, not instead of my attainments, but of my aims.

Notice this verse, and the pastor's theme, or the apostle's theme: "I determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ, and Him crucified." One of my very first messages as a novice pastor was in Florida. The message there was "We Preach Christ and Him Crucified." As I look back today and venture to say that the noble words of this text have been, however, imperfectly followed, my guiding light.

Note the pastor's theme: "Jesus Christ and Him Crucified." The apostle in this context, gives us a little autobiographical glimpse which is singularly and interestingly confirmed by some slight incidental notices in the book of Acts. He said, in the context, that he was with the Corinthians "in weakness and in fear and in much trembling."

If we turn to the narrative we find that a singular period of silence, apparent abandonment of his word and dejection, seems to have synchronized with his coming to the great city of Corinth. The reasons were very plain. He had recently come into Europe for the first time and had had to front a new condition of things very different from what he had found in Palestine or in Asia Minor. His experience had not been encouraging. He had been imprisoned in Philippi, he had been smuggled away by night from Thessalonica, he had been hounded from Berea, he had all but wholly failed to make any impression in Athens, and in his solitude he came to Corinth and lay quiet, and took stock of his adversaries.

He came to the conclusion, which we all must come to, our text here, he felt it was not for him to argue with the philosophers, or to attempt to vie with sophists and professional orators, but that his only way to meet Greek civilization, Greek philosophy, Greek eloquence, Greek self-conceit, was to teach "Christ and Him crucified." The determination was not come to in the ignorance of the conditions which were fronting him. He knew Corinth, its wealth, its wickedness, its culture, and knowing these he said, "I have made up my mind that I will know nothing amongst you, save Jesus and Him crucified."

So then the apostle, the pastor's conception of his theme was, the biography of a Man, with special emphasis laid on one act in His history, His death. **Christianity is Christ and Christ is Christianity.** His relation to the Truth that He taught, and to the Truths that may be deducible from the story of His life and death, is altogether different from the relation of any other founder of a religion to the truth that he has proclaimed. For in these you can accept the teaching and ignore the teacher.

But you cannot do that with Christianity. Christianity is "I am the way, and the Truth, and the Life, and no one cometh unto the Father but by Me." And in that revealing biography, which is the pastor's theme, the palpitating heart and center is the death upon the cross. So whatever else Christianity comes to be, and it comes to be a great deal else, the principle of its true growth, and the seed which must vitalize the whole, lie in the personality and the death of Jesus Christ.

That is not all. **The history of the life and the death want something more to make them a Gospel.** There is here far more underground than above ground. But unless along with, involved in, and deducible from, but capable of being stated separately from, the external facts, there is a certain commentary or explanation of them. The history is a history, the biography is a biography, the story of the cross is a touching narrative, but it is no Gospel.

What was Paul's commentary which lifted the bare facts upon into a higher region? This, as for the Person, Jesus Christ, de-

clared to be the Son of God with power, as for the fact of the death, "Died for our sins according to the Scripture."

Let the light shine in on these two conceptions of the fact, and they are the necessary explanation and presupposition of the facts, the incarnation and the sacrifice and then you get what Paul says, "my Gospel" not because it was his invention, but because it was the trust committed to him. He, Paul, personally received Jesus Christ as His personal Saviour. That is the Gospel which alone answers to the fact which he deals with, and that is the Gospel which God helping me, I have for 28 years tried to teach.

Paul, as you know, for years as a Judaizer and Pharisee of Pharisees had accepted the fact that Jesus Christ existed, and in fact, Paul killed Christians because of the fact that they were followers of Jesus Christ. But he never received Him as his personal Saviour and believed on Him as his Redeemer until years later. Jesus Christ appeared to him on the road to Damascus.

So Paul knew of Christ and accepted the fact that He was a person in history, but he later received Him as his personal Saviour and took, as it were, a part of history, a Person from history, and received Him as his personal Saviour. **Many people accept the idea that Christ existed, but that is not salvation.** That is not my Gospel. When you receive Christ as your personal Saviour, that makes the Gospel of Jesus Christ your Gospel, and that is why Paul called it "my Gospel."

Now in our day we hear people saying they are going back to what they call the "Christ of the Gospels," meaning Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. In this way they exclude the epistles, but in the epistles Christ is the Christ of the Gospel, too.

Many times theologians get wrapped upon into theological cobwebs round the gracious figure of Christ, with disastrous results. For it is perfectly possible to know the things that are said about Him and accept them, and not to know Him about whom these things are said. But the mistake into which the present generation is far more likely to fall than

that of substituting theology for Christ, is the converse one, that of substituting an undefined Christ for the Christ of the Gospel and the epistles, the incarnate Son of God who died for our salvation. And that is a more disastrous mistake than the other, for you can know nothing about Him and He can be nothing to you, except as you grasp the apostolic explanation of the bare facts, seeing in Him the Word who became flesh, the Son who died that we might receive the adoption of sons. "Jesus Christ came unto His own, but his own received him not, but as many as received Him, to them gave He the power, the authority, to become the sons of God."

The apostle says in the passage which is parallel to the present one, in the previous chapter, "We preach Christ crucified," with a strong emphasis on the Word "preach." "The Jews required a sign," they wanted a man who would do something. "The Greeks seek wisdom," they wanted a man who would perorate and argue and dissertate. Paul says "No, no." We have nothing to do. We have not come to philosophize and to argue. We come with a message of fact that has occurred of a Person that lived. And, as most of you know, the Word which he uses means in its fullest signification, "to proclaim as a herald does."

If our ministry were to establish a set of principles, theological or otherwise, then argumentation would be our weapon, proofs would be my means, and my success would be that I should win your credence, your intellectual consent and conviction.

If I were here to proclaim simply a morality, then the thing that I would aim to secure would be obedience, and the method of securing it would be to enforce the authority and reasonableness of the command. But seeing that my function then is to proclaim a living Person and a historical fact, then the way to do it is to do as the herald does when in the market place he stands, trumpet in one hand, the king's message in the other, proclaim it loudly, confidently, not with bated breath and whispering humblenesses, as if apologizing, nor too much concerned to butter it up with argumentation out of his own head, but to

say, "Thus saith the Lord." And to what the Lord saith, the conscience says "Amen."

We need far more in all our pulpits of that unhesitating confidence in the plain, simple proclamation, stripped as far as possible of human additions and accretions, of the great fact and the great Person on whom all our salvation depends.

Notice also in this pastor's theme the exclusiveness which this theme demands.

"Nothing but," says Paul. Now this exclusiveness is to be manifested in one very difficult direction, and that is the herald shall efface himself. We have to hold up this picture. Like a man in a gallery who is displaying some masterpiece, to the eyes of the beholders we have to keep ourselves well behind it, and it will be wise if not even a finger tip is allowed to steal in front and come into sight.

One condition, I believe, of real power in the ministration of the Word is that people shall be convinced that the pastor is thinking not at all about himself, but altogether about his message. You remember that wonderfully pathetic utterance from John the Baptist's stern lips which derives much additional pathos and tenderness from the character of the man from whom it came, when they asked him, "Who art thou?" His answer was "I am a voice." I am a voice. That is all, and that is the example. "We preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus as Lord." We must efface ourselves if we would proclaim Christ.

And there is another direction of exclusiveness here. And that goes back to the previous chapter, where in the parallel portion to the words of our text, we find the apostle very clearly conscious of the two great streams of expectation and wish which he deliberately thwarted and set at nought. "The Jews require a sign, but we preach Christ crucified." "The Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified."

Now take these two. They are representations, in a very emphatic way, of two sets of desires and mental characteristics, which divide the world between them. On the one hand, there is the sensuous tendency that wants something done for it, something to

see, something that sense can grasp. And so, as it fancies, work itself upwards into a higher region.

"The Jews require a sign." That is not merely a miracle, but something to look at. He wants a visible sacrifice. He wants a priest. **He wants religion to consist largely in the doing of certain acts which may be supposed to bring, in some magical fashion, spiritual blessings.**

And Paul opposes to that. **"We preach Christ crucified."** The tendency is strong to-day, not only in those parts of American communion, where sacramentarian theories are in favor, but amongst all sections of the Christian Church, in where there is obviously a drift towards more ornate ritual, and asthetic services, as means of attracting to church or chapel, and as more important than proclaiming Christ.

I think that possibly some of us, with Puritan upbringing and tendency too much disregard that side of human nature, possibly it is so. **But for all that I believe that if Christianity is to be strong, it must have a very, very small infusion of these external aids to spiritual worship, and that few things more weaken the power of the Gospel.** Then Paul preached than the lowering of the flag in conformity with the desires of men of sense, and substituting for the simple glory of the preached Word the meretricious, and in time impotent, and always corrupting, attractions of a sensuous worship.

Further, **"The Greeks seek after wisdom."** They wanted demonstration, abstract principles, systematized philosophies, and the like. Paul comes again with his, **"We preach Christ and Him crucified."** The wisdom is there. **Christ is the wisdom of God unto salvation.** But the form that it takes is directly antagonistic to the wishes of these wisdom-seeking Greeks. The same thing in modern guise besets us today. We are called upon, on all sides, to bring into the pulpit what they call an ethical gospel. Putting it into plain English it means to preach morality and to leave Christ out. We are called upon on all sides, to preach an applied Christianity, a social Gos-

pel, that is to say, largely to turn the pulpit into a Sunday supplement to the daily newspapers. We are asked to deal with the intellectual difficulties which spring from the collision of science, true or false, with Christianity and the like. And that is right enough.

But I believe from my heart that the thing to do is to copy Paul's example, and **"to preach Christ and Him crucified."** You may think I am right or you may think that I am wrong. But here and now, at this point in my life, after some 28 years, I would like to say I have for the most part ignored that class of subjects deliberately and of set purpose and with a profound conviction from the Lord. Be it erroneous or not, that a ministry which listens much to the cry for "wisdom" in its modern forms has departed from the true perspective of Christian teaching, and will weaken the churches which depend upon it. Let those who will turn the pulpit into a professor's chair, or a lecturer's platform, or a concert room stage, or a politician's platform. I for one determine to know nothing among you, **"save Jesus Christ and Him crucified."**

Observe all the sufficient comprehensive-ness which this theme secures. Paul says, **"Nothing but."** He might have said, "Everything in." For **"Jesus Christ and Him crucified,"** covers all the ground of man's needs. Many will say here we go again with that old-fashioned narrowness and this is out of date for this generation. There are two ways of adapting one's ministry to the times. One is falling in with the requirements of the times, and the others is going dead against them. And both of these methods have to be pursued by us.

But the exclusiveness of which I have been speaking is no narrow exclusiveness. **Paul felt that if he was to give the Corinthians what they needed, he must refuse to give them what they wanted, and that while he crossed their wishes he was consulting their necessities.** That is still true, for the preaching that bases itself upon the life and death of Jesus Christ, conceived as Paul had learned from Jesus Christ as Christ conceived them, that Gospel, while it brushes aside men's superficial wishes, goes straight to the heart of their deep lying universal necessities.

For what the Jews need most is not a sign, and what the Greeks most need is not wisdom, but what they both need most is deliverance from guilt and power of sin. And we all, scholars and fools, poets and commonplace people, artists and plowmen, all of us, in all conditions of life, in all varieties of culture, in all stages of intellectual development, in all diversities of occupation and of mental bias, what we all have in common is that the human soul in which sin abides, and what we all need most to have is that evil drop squeezed out of it, and our souls delivered from the burden and bondage.

Therefore any man that comes with a sign and does not deal with the sin of the human soul, and any man that comes with a philosophical system of wisdom, and does not deal with sin, does not bring a Gospel that will meet the necessities even of the people to whose cravings he has been aiming to adapt his message.

But beyond that, in this message of Christ and Him crucified, there lies a seed, the satisfaction of all that is legitimate in these desires that at first sight it seems to thwart. "Jews seek a sign." Yes, and where is there power like the power that dwells in Christ, who is the incarnate Might of omnipotence? "Greeks seek wisdom." Yea, and where is there wisdom except in Christ, in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge?

Let the Jew come to the cross and in the weak man hanging there, he will find a mightier revelation of the power of God than anywhere else. Let the Greek come to the cross, and there he will find wisdom and righteousness, sanctification and redemption. The bases of all social, economical, political reform and well being lie in the understanding and the application of social and national life, of the principles that are wrapped in and are deduced from, the incarnation and the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

We have not learned them all yet. They have not all been applied to national and individual life till yet. I plead for no narrowness of exclusiveness, **but for one consistent with the widest application of Christianity to all life.** Paul determined to know nothing but Je-

sus Christ and to know everything in Christ Jesus and Jesus Christ is truly everything.

Do not begin your building at the second floor window. Put in your foundation first. And be sure that it is well laid. Let the sacrifice of Christ, in its application to the individual and his sins, be ever the basis of all that you say. And then when the foundation is laid, exhibit to your heart's content the applications of Christianity and its social aspects. But be sure that the beginning of them all is the work of Christ for the individual sinful soul and the acceptance of that work by personal faith.

Ours has been a long, happy union, but it is a very solemn one. My responsibilities are great. And yours are not small. Let me ask you to ask yourself if, with all your kindness to me, you have given heed to this verse. **Have you passed beyond the voice that speaks to Him of whom it speaks?** Have you taken the Truth, veiled and weakened as I know it has been by my words, but yet in them, for what it is, the Word of the living God?

My occupancy of this pulpit must some day come to a close, but the message which I have brought to you will survive all changes in the voice that speaks here, because "all flesh is grass." "But the Word of the Lord endureth for ever." And so after many years of teaching the Word of God, some of you have listened most lovingly and most forbearingly, I leave this with you, which are again the Lord's words: "I judge you not, the Word which I have spoken unto you, the same shall judge you in the last day." "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved."

"Jesus Christ: the wisdom and the power of God." **You may have accepted Christ as a figure in history, that He existed. But have you received Him personally as your personal Saviour?** John 1:12, "But as many as received Him, to them gave He power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on His Name."

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