



Let me start this morning by asking you a question: What impresses you? What makes you go “Wow!”? If someone makes a lasting impression on you, why is it? What is it about them that’s so impressive?

Many of us are impressed with athletic ability. We look at a guy like Tim Lincecum and we see what he’s able to do in creating torque so that a baseball torpedoes out of his 170-pound body and into the catcher’s mitt with pinpoint accuracy at 95 miles per hour. That’s impressive!

Others of us are impressed with intellect. Smart people impress us. People like Kim Ung-Yong. His IQ is 210, the highest in the world. He began speaking at 4 months, could converse fluently by 6 months, and was able to read Japanese, Korean, German, and English by his second birthday. At the age of 4 he was doing calculus problems on TV and studied physics at Hanyang University. When he was 8 he was invited to NASA to do research work. That’s a smart guy. That’s impressive.

Still others of us are impressed with artists. It might be in music or writing or painting. I have to admit that when I’m reading a great novel I’m impressed. I can’t imagine having the ability to write like that. Or think of a guy like Leonardo da Vinci. Besides being a sculptor, architect, musician and writer, he was one of the greatest painters of all time. Two of his works, the *Mona Lisa* and *The Last Supper* are still the best.

One more area that might really impress you: virtue. Virtue is moral excellence. The four classic Western Cardinal virtues which can be traced all the way back to Plato are temperance, prudence, fortitude and justice. You see someone who embodies those qualities and that’s impressive.

All of those things that impress us have one thing in common: they’re all based on some form of human competence. Now if you were living in the city of Corinth in the first century the thing that would impress you the most was wisdom. That’s what the Corinthians valued more than anything else. All their celebrities were famous for their wisdom. But what that meant to them was a bit different than what it means to us. To them it meant the ability to speak persuasively. It didn’t even matter that the thing they were trying to persuade you of was true. As a matter of fact, how much more impressive to persuade you that something might be true when you know it isn’t! It’s kind of like in advertising today. Advertising is all about using persuasive words and images to get us to buy things we probably don’t need and

might not even be good for us. That’s the kind of thing that impressed the Corinthians. And what people in the Corinthian church were doing is they were bickering over which one of their leaders had the most wisdom. Some lined up behind Paul, others Apollos, and still others Peter.

So Paul writes them this letter and he confronts this issue. Last week we saw that he called them to unity; unity that was centered not on man but on Christ. Today we’ll see he continues to confront this issue but now he goes after their whole concept of wisdom. The problem with their concept of wisdom is it produced pride. And one of the things about pride we need to understand is God hates it. Did you know that? Proverbs 6 says, *“There are six things the LORD hates, seven that are detestable to him...”* It reminds me of something Jesus once said, *“What is highly valued among men is detestable in God’s sight”* (Lk 16:15). All those areas of human competence we’re so impressed by, God’s not impressed. Why? Because they produce pride.

Do you know why God hates pride? He hates it because he loves us. God’s hatred is always in the service of love. When something threatens or damages that which he loves, he hates it. God hates pride because pride keeps us from experiencing all the wonderful things God has prepared for us. Pride keeps us away from the very thing we need the most. Do you know what that is? It’s the cross. That’s right, the cross. Pride keeps us away from the cross because the cross strips us of all pride. This is Paul’s point in 1:18-2:5 and he gives three reasons for it.

The kind of message God gives: contrary to worldly wisdom

For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. 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? 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 believe. 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, 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 (verses 18–25).

The first reason is the kind of message God gives. Paul is contrasting the wisdom of the world with the wisdom of God. He says this message of the cross is totally contrary to the human wisdom the Corinthians were so taken by. He says *“the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing.”*

The point is when Paul came into a pagan city that prided itself on intellectual and cultural life and stood up to speak about Jesus, who had been crucified by the Romans but raised from the dead, and who was now the Lord of the world, he knew what the wise men would think. This is the craziest message anybody could imagine: salvation through an executed criminal from a despised race. To the Greeks, this wasn't a smart new philosophy, it was foolishness.

Nor would the Jews appreciate it. Paul knew it would be a “stumbling block” to them. Their own Scripture said *“Cursed is any man who hangs on a tree”* (Deut. 21:23). They wanted a powerful sign. No Jew expected a Messiah who would be executed by Rome. The Messiah ought to be defeating the pagans, not being killed by them! Paul had no illusions, then, about the message of the cross. Simply to tell the story of Jesus and his cross was to invite people to mock.

But Paul also writes about a different group. He says *“to those who are being saved it is the power of God.”* Later he describes this group this way: *“To those who are called both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.”* So when Paul stood up in the synagogue or the marketplace, he didn't use clever words to persuade people. The message of the cross did its own work. Just telling the story releases a power that transforms lives. Human hearts change. Situations change. New communities come into being. People fall in love with the God who has rescued them through Jesus. They give him their supreme loyalty. That's the power Paul has in mind. That's as true today as in Paul's day.

You can see how this message strips us of pride. So after speaking of those two groups, Paul concludes: God's folly is wiser than human wisdom and God's weakness is stronger than human strength! The message of the cross is all about the true God confronting the world of posturing, power and prestige, and overthrowing to set up his own kingdom, a kingdom in which the weak and the foolish are welcome.

Even today this message doesn't sit well. Mark Galli writes, “One day during my undergraduate years, I was sitting by the college library reading when two students walked by talking about the crucifixion of Christ. Naturally, my ears perked up. They were deeply critical of the whole idea. One of them summed up the

nature of their complaint by exclaiming: ‘Dying on a cross for the sins of the world—that is so sick!’

He continues, “This was one of many moments at the UC Santa Cruz campus when the ‘scandal of the Cross’ was evident. We Christians on campus spent a fair bit of time and energy trying to show our fellow students that Christians were not as stupid, irrelevant, and hypercritical as everyone had been led to believe. I've discovered all that damage control was for naught: After living another 35 years as a Christian, I've come to see that like my fellow believers, I really am stupid, irrelevant, and hypercritical, and that Jesus' death on a cross for sin is just one of many ‘sick’ things I believe.”

There are times when we're tempted to somehow try to make this message just a little more palatable to the people today. Maybe we focus more on self improvement than the cross. “Let's not talk about the cross, let's talk about how to manage your money or how to win over depression or how to have a successful marriage.” Or maybe we try to prove the existence of God or the scientific credibility of the Bible. Those things may have their place, but when we divert from the message of the cross we also lose the power of God. We might attract more people but we lose the power to change lives.

The kind of people God calls: foolish, weak and despised

For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, so that no man may boast before God. But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, so that, just as it is written, “LET HIM WHO BOASTS, BOAST IN THE LORD” (verses 26–31).

The second reason the cross strips us of all pride is the kind of people God calls. Paul wants them to reflect on their own calling. Not many of them were “wise.” In other words, there weren't a lot of famous philosophers among them; not a whole lot of what we might call intellectuals. There were not many “mighty.” That's talking about people with clout; the “movers and the shakers.” And there were not many “noble.” That's talking about people who were born into important and well-connected families. This of it this way: in the world's eyes there are “somebodies” and there are “nobodies.” Paul says, “Think of who you were when God called you; most of you were ‘nobodies.’” That's not very flattering. “Gee, thanks Paul.” But it was true and it's still true.

I guess God thinks differently than we do. We love it when a "somebody" becomes a Christian. When a famous athlete or a billionaire or a well-known actor becomes a Christian we think we've finally arrived! We think the best thing for the Christian cause is for God to recruit a few "somebodies" into our ranks. We think that's how the world will really come to respect us. That's how we're going to get some credibility! So we put them up front in our churches and sell tickets.

But Paul says that's not how God works. He says, "Listen, look at yourselves. Not many of you were "somebodies" but most of you were "nobodies." You weren't wise, you were foolish. You weren't mighty, you were weak. You weren't noble, you were among the base and despised. Again, not very flattering, but true. It's still true!

The question is why does God work that way? He tells us right here. He chooses "nobodies" to shame the "somebodies." Remember, God hates pride. He says it in v.29, ***"that no man should boast before God."*** "Somebodies" tend to have a lot of pride. So God says he'll take these "nobodies" and make them "somebodies." Through the cross he'll give them ***"wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption."*** Wow! That's "somebody" in God's eyes. That's what he means in v.30 when he says ***"By his doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption."*** And do we boast about that? No! Why? Because it was "by his doing" not our own. So "let him who boasts, boast in the Lord."

Why then do we look down on others we think are "nobodies"? Have you ever been bumped up to first class? Isn't it the best? Great food, hot coffee, plenty of legroom. When that happens to me I like to play a little game. I try to guess who else doesn't belong in first class. There's always somebody, right? He pads around the cabin in his socks, he samples all the magazines, can't figure out the remote, plays with but never actually uses the in-flight phones, tucks his linen napkin into his collar as a bib. I just love to watch these guys. At least I know how to act in first class. What I fail to remember is I don't belong there any more than he does! But we do this at church as well. We see someone who we think doesn't belong here; people who might even embarrass us; people who make us feel superior. The truth is we don't belong there any more than they do. The same thing is true for all of us: "By his doing you are in Christ Jesus..." Whether we came in as "somebodies" or "nobodies" the cross strips us all of all pride.

The kind of ministry God blesses: weakness, fear, much trembling

And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. I was with you in

weakness and in fear and in much trembling, and my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God (2:1–5).

Here is one more reason for that. The cross strip us of human pride because of the kind of ministry God uses. Paul says "Okay, you considered your own calling, now I want you to consider the ministry I had when I was with you. I didn't come and show off my oratorical skills. I didn't prance around like some kind of celebrity trying to form a fan club. I came in simplicity."

His message was simple in two ways. First, its content. He says, "I just gave you the testimony of God. I focused solely on Christ and him crucified." That's a simple message. Again, by focusing on the cross, Paul ensured that nobody could mistake this message for a crowd-pleasing rhetorical stunt, convincing at the time but making no lasting impression. Crucifixion was regarded in the ancient world as so horrible, so revolting, so degrading you didn't mention it in polite society. It's like someone at a fashionable dinner party going on in a loud voice about how he'd seen rats eating the body of a dead dog in the street; that's the kind of impression you'd make by standing up in public and talking about a crucifixion. No self-respecting wise man would dream of doing it. But this is what Paul did.

Second, his manner. He says ***"I was with you in weakness and fear and much trembling."*** Well, that's not very impressive. Imagine inviting Paul in as a guest preacher here at CPC. You're so excited, the great apostle Paul is coming to your church! Then he comes and when he gets up to speak instead of strength you see weakness; instead of confidence you see fear. He kind of stammers and stutters and doesn't say anything you haven't heard before.

We actually know something of why he was so afraid when he was in Corinth. Acts 18 describes his time there and even though he saw many of the Corinthians come to Christ he also stirred up the authorities and they threatened to kill him. Paul was scared. I know that because Luke tells that one night God came to Paul in Corinth and spoke to him in a vision and said, ***"Do not be afraid any longer, but go on speaking and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no man will attack you in order to harm you, for I have many people in this city"*** (Acts 18:9-10). And Paul did just that. But he did it with his knees knocking.

And what happened? Paul says in v.4, there was ***"a demonstration of the Spirit and of power."*** In other words, lives were changed. God used a weak and trembling man so that ***"your faith doesn't rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God."*** Oh, how we need to hear this message today. When you look at the kind of ministry God uses you can see once again that the cross strips us of all pride. Many of you are involved in ministry of one form

or another. Remember what Paul says here the next time you feel so broken and weak and defeated that you just don't see how you can do it. When you feel that know that you're in a very good place because God loves to do powerful things through weak and broken people so that *"your faith doesn't rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God."*

In the year he was elected president, Jimmy Carter was one of three men invited to speak to the 17,000 delegates at the Southern Baptist Convention. Each had a five-minute time limit.

The first of the three presenters was Billy Graham. The last was Jimmy Carter. In between was a truck driver. He wasn't well educated. Sitting beside the next U.S. President he confessed he had never given a speech in his life. He told Carter, "I don't think I can do it."

After Billy Graham gave his powerful talk, the truck driver rose to speak and stood silently before the audience. Taking a glass of water handed to him, he mumbled into the microphone. "I was always drunk, and didn't have any friends. The only people I knew were men like me who hung around the bars in the town where I lived."

He went on to describe how someone told him about Christ. Once becoming a Christian, he wanted to tell others about

the Lord. Since he felt comfortable in bars, he talked to people there. The bartender wasn't sympathetic, telling him he was bad for business. But he kept on with his mission, and in time the people at the bar began asking questions. He said, "At first they treated me like a joke, but I kept up with the questions and when I couldn't answer one, I went and got the answer and came back with it. Fourteen of my friends became Christians."

Carter writes, "The truck driver's speech, of course, was the highlight of the convention. I don't believe anyone who was there will ever forget that five-minute fumbling statement—or remember what I or even Billy Graham had to say."

Conclusion

I started this morning by asking you what you're impressed by. Let me now ask you a slightly different question: What impresses you about **you**? Your successful career? Your golf game? Your bank statement? The schools your kids got into? Your virtue? None of those are bad things, but when they become a source of pride they keep us from the power of the cross. Pride keeps us away from the cross because the cross strips us of all pride. Today will you let go of all that and simply embrace the cross? Will you stop leaning on your own competence and start trusting in his?

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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