1 Timothy 4:13 says, “give attention to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, and to teaching.” We do this every Sunday. We read the scriptures followed by the preaching of the word which is meant to teach (unfolding the meaning of the text) and to exhort (to call us to respond by applying the text). I hope we won’t begin to think of the Scripture reading as a warm up, or a prelude to the message. In fact, it is the purest form of communication we receive from the Lord on a given Sunday. The reality is that if he is not careful the preacher can actually get in the way or become a distraction if he is not careful about how he teaches and exhorts.

Those who preach and teach the word of God have a tremendous privilege and responsibility to help people understand the meaning of God’s revelation. Yet one of the occupational hazards in public ministry is the temptation and danger of drawing attention to ourselves rather than being a spotlight that turns people’s attention to Christ.

In today’s passage the apostle Paul is using the modesty of his own public ministry as an example for us. In essence Paul is saying, “I didn’t come to you in a personally impressive way but rather in human weakness so that you would not trust in human abilities but in the power of God.”

Here’s the point: If the aim of the gospel is to turn us from trusting in human wisdom to trusting in God, then the manner in which we proclaim the gospel should not promote the human messenger but rather point to Christ. In the words of John the Baptist, “He (Jesus) must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30).

What I’d like to do this morning is walk you through 4 key points that Paul is making in these verses and then I want to set these verses into the larger context of what Paul I addressing in 1 Corinthians before concluding with suggestions on how to practically apply this passage to our lives.

1. **The focal point (unifying theme) of all biblical preaching** (vs. 2).

   The first thing that I want you to see in vs. 2 is the focal point or the unifying theme of biblical preaching that Paul models for us. [vs. 2] Notice how Paul uses the word determined. He made a decision to be persistent, intentional, and purposeful in making Christ and the cross the very central jewel of all he preached.

   When Paul says that “he knew nothing among them except Christ and him and crucified” he’s not saying that he only preached evangelistic messages. Paul spent 18 months in Corinth. Certainly he covered many topics related to the Christian life and the ministry of the church during those months just as he does in all his writings. Yet Paul never taught about other subjects in a way that was divorced from his primary message of the gospel. Everything he taught was taught in light of who Christ is and His redeeming sacrifice on the cross. There is an obvious challenge here to those of us who preach and teach at any level. The person and cross of Christ must be the central unifying theme for our message to be truly Christian. But application doesn’t end here, does it. It follows that if Christ crucified is to be the core of all we teach, then those who follow biblical teaching should be applying the centrality of Christ and the gospel to all of life. In other words, our relationships should be lived in light of who Christ is and His redeeming work in our lives. We should view our work, our recreation, and our possessions with new set of values that are shaped by our new life in Christ—not just living for ourselves but for God’s eternal purposes.

2. **How not to preach the gospel** (vs. 1, 4a).

   Paul not only models the right content for gospel-preaching, he also speaks to the manner or method in which we present Christ and His cross. In vs. 1, Paul says, “when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God.” Again in vs. 4 he says, “my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom.”

   Now remember the context from our study in chapter 1. The Corinthians were enamored with worldly wisdom (philosophy) and persuasive speech. Corinthian philosophers and orators would compete with their abilities to
persuade crowds. Paul didn’t want to leave room for any impression that
the success of his ministry was based on his speaking skills. His goal was for
the people of Corinth to see and be persuaded by the power contained in
the message of the cross itself. I don’t think Paul was opposed to articulate
preaching. He himself was very articulate—just read Romans! I don’t think
Paul was opposed to persuasive preaching. He himself was persuasive. But
what Paul was opposed to was presenting himself in a personally impressive
way that would detract from rather than highlight the power of the gospel
and the centrality of Christ. So Paul humbly and modestly preached in such
a way that drew attention to Jesus and not to himself or his own eloquence
or strength so that people would not be taken up with following Paul but
looking beyond him to treasure Christ and His grace.

3. **How to preach the gospel** (vs. 3, 4b).

So what form did Paul’s preaching take then? Paul expresses his own
manner of preaching in two ways. First he says in vs. 3, I was with you in
weakness and in fear and much trembling. There was certain weakness
about Paul that he saw as an asset to his ministry. This weakness may have
been a physical ailment of some kind. In 2 Cor 10:10 his opponents criticized
him for weak bodily presence. Paul himself prayed that God would remove
some kind of thorn in the flesh from which he suffered. Gal 4:13-14 refers to
some kind of bodily ailment that Paul suffered from when he preached
there. But regardless of what the actual cause of his weakness was, the
point is that it delivered him from the crippling effects of self-sufficiency.
Paul was in touch with his personal inadequacy apart from the Spirit’s
power.

The point here is not that gifted preachers should somehow stifle their God-
given gifts. But in the use of those gifts, they must be aware of their
absolute dependence on God for any fruit in their ministry so that their only
boast would be not in themselves but in the Lord (1:29, 31). Likewise, we
should not be taken up with following men because of “how good they are”
but rather be looking for the power of the Holy Spirit working through their
ministry in pointing us to Christ and the power of the cross.

Along with weakness, Paul presented the gospel with fear and trembling. I
don’t think the main idea here is that Paul was fearful of the crowds to
whom he preached, but rather that there was a sense of fear and
trepidation at the awesome responsibility he had before God to present
Christ crucified to the world. Paul knew his personal weakness, he knew
the enormity and urgency of his task, so his only confidence was to rely on
the power of God.

This is the second way in which Paul presented the gospel, vs. 4: “in
demonstration of the Spirit and of power.” Paul’s ministry may not have
been personally impressive, but it was powerful. What kind of power is Paul
talking about here? Remember the context of chapter 1. In 1:18 and 1:23-24
Paul spoke of the message of the cross, of Christ crucified, as the power of
God which is saving those who believe. In other words, Paul’s ministry was
not personally impressive from the world’s point of view, but the Spirit was
demonstrating the power of the gospel in changing the hearts of men
through his message.

4. **The aim of humble Christ-centered preaching** (vs. 5).

Finally Paul zeros in on the intended aim of his preaching in vs. 5. The
purpose behind his message and his approach was “so that your faith would
rest not on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God.” Take note that it
is possible to be a person of faith but have your faith resting in the wrong
thing. Is your faith resting in human wisdom, in what makes sense or is
impressive to our natural human instincts, or is your faith resting in what
only God can do by His power and grace?

Now let’s just step back for minute and get a little broader view of Paul’s
argument. Do you think his purpose here is to merely give us some
summary points from Preaching 101? No, there is a broader purpose here
and vs. 5 helps us see how our passage fits into the bigger flow of 1
Corinthians. But first, remember what the Corinthians were struggling with.
There were factions and divisions in the church based on who was following

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1 This is the sense (reverence) in which Paul seemed to use this language in other
places (see 2 Cor 7:15; Eph 6:5; Phil 2:12)
who. Some were saying, “I follow Paul, I follow Apollos, I follow Peter,” etc (1:12). Now in 2:5 Paul says, my whole purpose in bringing the gospel to you in the first place was so that your faith would no longer rest on the wisdom of men but on the power of God. In fact the very manner in which I brought it to you served this purpose. So why are you now turning to set your hearts on following men instead of centering your hope on Christ? What you are doing is antithetical to the gospel!

My friends, God has given leaders to the church for our good, for our benefit, and for our protection. But their ultimate purpose is to point us to Christ as our hope and anchor so that our faith rests in the power of God.

Taking the Word to Heart and Life

So how should we apply 1 Cor 2:1-5 to our daily lives?

I’ve already commented on how this passage points to how we should minister, not seeking to elevate ourselves or to win the applause of men but to point people to Christ as their anchor. But let me be even more specific how we can respond to this passage.

Preaching is something we experience every week. I have a huge responsibility of preparation as the preacher, but what is the congregation’s role? May I make 2 suggestions:

a) Come with a readiness to listen with a teachable spirit, while at the same time examining that what is taught holds true to Scripture’s intent. “Lord, help me discern how You want to work in my life through Your word.”

b) Pray. Not only for your own heart and for the Spirit to be working in the hearts of your brothers and sisters, but also praying for the one preaching that his thoughts would be ordered by the Lord and that even as he’s preaching that his own heart would be purified and centered on Christ.

- Prayer guide: 7 ways to Pray for Those who Preach
- 8:45 am Sunday prayer

Having said all that, I think we would be short-changed to only apply our passage that far. At a very foundational level, I believe 1Cor 2:1-5 points not just to how we should minister or our need to pray, but to how we should live.

Consider this: When the cross cuts into our lives, our life is no longer about us. Tozer: “The cross will cut into our lives where it hurts worst, sparing neither us nor our carefully cultivated reputations. It will defeat us and bring our selfish lives to an end. Only then can we rise in fullness of life to establish a pattern of living wholly new and free and full of good works.”

The reason Paul could embrace his weakness and minister out of human modesty is because the cross was doing its crucifying work in his life. His ministry wasn’t about him—it was about Jesus Christ and Him crucified! The Corinthian believers, however, had lost sight of the way of the cross. They were not dying to themselves. They were living for themselves and their own reputations.

Sometimes we forget that the cross is a way of life. The cross is not just an historical event, though it is. The cross is not just a message of hope and forgiveness—praise God that it is! But the cross is also the believer’s way of life. Jesus said, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me.” (Luke 9:23). “Never let the cross loose its crucifying power in your life.” There are thousands of opportunities in any given day to die to yourself—to let the cross do its work of saving you from your natural craving to make more of yourself than God or other people. This is very relevant in our day because there is a tendency among some in pop Christian culture to treat the cross as a means of promoting self-esteem, self-fulfillment, or self-assertion rather than crucifying self with its sinful desires. Yet the reality is that true fulfillment is found not in feeling better about ourselves but resting in the God who loves us enough to change us and free us from our self-serving devotion.

I can’t say it better than John Piper when he said, “Christ died to save us from hell but not to save us from the cross. He died to save us so we could be glorified, not to keep us from being crucified.”

I realize that all this talk of taking up your cross and dying to self is not the most popular message people want to hear but does it bear a sense of power? Jesus said He came so that we might have life and have it abundantly (John 10:10). We should long for the abundant life He offers, yet we must not forget that the resurrection never precedes the cross. The crucifying power of the cross in your life leads to resurrection power in your life by freeing you from the sin and idolatry that inhibits God’s presence and Joy from bringing fully manifested in you. So it is for my ultimate joy that I remember that the cross is a way of life when I’m driving in traffic and having conversations with my wife and engaging the inconvenient parenting moments and serving a friend when I am exhausted.

If “Jesus Christ and Him crucified” is the priceless pearl of the gospel message, then it is also the crowning jewel of the believer’s life and the foundation of our joy.

“Oh the wonderful cross...bids me come and die and find that I may truly live.”

Communion:

Bread:

Cup:

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4 The Wonderful Cross, words and music by Chris Tomlin, J.D. Walt, Jesse Reeves.