

Preachers Are Tools in the Hands of God

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Hope for Tomorrow

By Bob Vincent

Bible Text: 2 Corinthians 2:12-16; Romans 10:8-14
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Robert Benn Vincent

80 Hickory Hill Drive
Boyce, LA 71409

Website: www.rbvincent.com
Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/rbvincent

Let me invite you to turn with me to 2 Corinthians 2 and we'll begin reading at verse 12 and that's found on page 1796. Starting at verse 12,

12 Now when I went to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ and found that the Lord had opened a door for me, 13 I still had no peace of mind, because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I said goodbye to them and went on to Macedonia. 14 But thanks be to God, who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. 15 For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. 16 To the one we are the smell of death; to the other, the fragrance of life. And who is equal to such a task?

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

May I pray with you?

Now, Lord, we beg you that your Holy Spirit would accompany the reading and the proclamation of your Word for the sake of the Lord Jesus Christ and for the sakes of all of us here through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The title of the sermon is "Who is Equal to Such a Task?"

By the way, one time a little Catholic boy and a little Presbyterian boy decided to visit each other's churches, and so when the little Presbyterian boy went with the little Catholic boy to the Catholic church, he was constantly asking him as the priest did this and the priest did that, "What does that mean?" So, the next Sunday when they went to the Presbyterian church, the little Catholic boy asked when the preacher took off his watch, "What does that mean?" And the little Presbyterian boy said, "It don't mean nothing."

Alright, the title of the sermon is the same as last week and that is, "Who is Equal to Such a Task?" So, picking it up where we left off last Sunday, I want us now to go to the part I didn't get to and that's over in 1 Corinthians 1, if you will turn there with me. 1 Corinthians 1 and you will find this on page 1772 and here we find these words in verse 18, "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." Do you see something here? As we're reading

this, Paul was a good preacher. Do you know how I know that? Because he always recycled his old material. This phrase right here, he's talking about the effect of the Word of God positively on some and negatively on another, and that's what we looked at a couple of weeks ago when we began this series.

And he says the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God. And then listen to what is said further in verse 21, "For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of preaching." Wow, the foolishness of preaching. What is preaching? Preaching is the explanation and application of the Bible under the anointing of the Holy Spirit. That's what it is: It's the explanation and application of the Bible under the anointing of the Holy Spirit. And we'll see that more as we develop this.

It is what we Presbyterians call one of the means of grace.

What is a means of grace? Well, we have a visible Word of God before us today on the Communion Table. There was a theologian, the great Italian theologian, and I will write a check for 1 million dollars to anyone other than my wife—I don't have that money—who can tell me the name of that famous Italian theologian. I knew you wouldn't know and that's why I won't have to write a check that would bounce higher than a beach ball.

His name was Peter Martyr Vermigli. Peter Martyr Vermigli, and he left Italy and he became a professor in England commonly known as Peter Martyr, and so he was a great Reformer and Peter Martyr referred to Communion as the visible Word of God.

Why is that? Well, we'll see more of that later on, but we say this simply, when you see the bread, you are reminded of the fact of the body of Christ, and when you see the Communion wine, you are reminded of the blood of Jesus. But as we'll see before the sermon ends, there's more to Communion than simply a reminder; it's not simply something that could be replaced with a flannel graph and do you just as good. Why?

Well, in a mysterious way, Christ Jesus himself—not in a physical, chew it with your mouth way, but by the power of the Holy Spirit—is present as we celebrate Communion, we actually do commune with Christ himself being present by the Holy Spirit who lifts you and me up to heaven where Christ is seated at the right hand of the Father.

So it is, of course, a memorial: It is a visible Word of God, but God's Word is more than something that can be recorded on a recorder. God's Word itself in preaching, Christ is present in the preached Word and Christ is present in holy Communion, so both of these things are what we might call means of grace.

Here's another word for means of grace: tools to help us become better Christians. Tools to help us become better Christians. Means of grace. The preaching of the Word is the first and foremost, the most important one of the means of grace because without the preaching of the Word, all this is, is crackers and juice. It's the preaching of the Word that empowers everything including baptism, including the Lord's Supper, including how we pray, including how we worship. All of those things, it's the preaching of the Word that is the first and most important of the tools for holiness or the tools for God to draw us to himself. So, it's the preaching of the Word, but this also is a visible Word of God.

Now notice what St. Paul tells us here in verse 21 on page 1772, “For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached.” Now we’ll understand, then, that it’s the content of the message but also the very fact of the message being proclaimed that is in view and so we’re told here God was pleased to save those who believe. That is an interesting thought. Let’s hold our hands there and then turn to the right, excuse me, turn to the left over to Romans 10. Do you know that our Westminster standards tell us this, that God maketh the reading but especially the preaching of the Word to be an effectual means, you see, the reading, but especially the preaching.

So let’s look here because we’re going to come back to 1 Corinthians in a moment, on page 1760, and we’re looking at Romans 10 and he says to us this in verse 8, he says,

8 But what does it say to you [referring to the word of God]? “The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart,” that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming

It’s interesting, the Greek language has different words for “word.” The word “logos” is used of Christ himself in John 1, “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God,” the logos, and that refers to the concept primarily but it doesn’t rule out speaking or reading. Jesus is the reason but there’s a second Greek word and it refers to speaking, the spoken word. Now notice in verse 8 he says, “that is the word of faith.” What is that? That is a word that someone speaks, in this case it’s referring to the work of a preacher who proclaims the Gospel and it is a spoken message, it is spoken and what happens? Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God. That’s why our Westminster standards do declare that God maketh the hearing but especially the preaching of the word to be effective.

So notice here he’s talking about proclamation. Now by the way, do you know that God has called you to preach? Every single one of you. From the youngest disciple to the oldest, when you tell somebody about the Lord Jesus Christ, you are proclaiming the Gospel and that depends on the power of the Holy Spirit to be effective. So pray and ask God to show you people that you can speak out your testimony to about the Lord Jesus Christ and he will guide you and he will direct you and he will bless that spoken word that you give to them. So, this is not about, “Hey, I would like a brand-new Rolls Royce with alligator skin upholstery.” Can you image what it would be like to sit on the upper part of an alligator on a car seat? Gracious sakes! No, this is about, what? This is about proclaiming God’s Word, God’s promises, and it means this, when what we speak lines up with the promises of God, God’s Holy Spirit is in that word to create faith, but this is fundamentally about our gathering together on the Lord’s day with the Lord’s people and someone who has been called to share the Gospel with us by means of speaking it.

So he refers to it, what? The word of faith, we are proclaiming. Now let’s look down further. I’m going to show you something very, very interesting on the next page, page 1761, and that’s verse 14, and I have only found one other English translation in all of my studies that actually reflects the structure of the Greek grammar. The structure of the Greek grammar I’m going to give you after I read it before you. He says in verse 14,

14 How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard?

The word “of” is an interpretation. What the Greek grammar is actually telling us is this: It refers to the speaker. Now let’s ponder that for a moment. What it’s actually saying here is how can they believe in the one **whom** they have not heard? Now that’s going to give us a real insight into preaching. You see, in real preaching, what’s that again? It’s the explanation and the application of the Word of God under the anointing of the Holy Spirit. In real preaching, the real preacher isn’t wearing a black suit, in real preaching, the Lord Jesus Christ himself is speaking to his elect people and he is creating faith in their hearts, he is drawing them to himself and he is the real preacher. And by the way, you’ll find that certainly is taught by John Calvin in his *Institutes* and all of the great theologians of the era that wrote the Westminster Confession.

Jesus Christ himself is the speaker and I’m going to say something to you and it’s very controversial: nobody can ever have faith and nobody can ever come to the Lord Jesus Christ until they hear the Lord Jesus Christ calling them to himself. But how does he do it? He does it through the voice of a young disciple sometimes saying, “You know, mama, I took Communion today and I took Communion today because I know that the Lord Jesus Christ died for my sins.” Do you know the word of God can come through all kinds of people. In fact, think of Judas Iscariot, he wasn’t ever really and truly a Christian and yet he proclaimed the good news of the Gospel, and Christ Jesus himself, by the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, spoke through the lips of Judas to bring people to himself.

So, the real preacher this morning is not the guy that’s standing up in front of you; the real preacher is the Lord Jesus Christ, and so we see here, how can they believe in the one whom they have not heard? That tells us something else, and I don’t want to get overly theological because then I’ve ruined all the future sermons I might want to give. We refer to the church in our Westminster way of thinking as both an invisible church and a visible church.

What is the visible church? I’m looking at the visible church right now, and that’s everybody who names the name of the Lord, everybody who’s ever been baptized who is gathered together in the name of the Lord. The visible church includes not only those who make their confession of faith, but their children through their parents’ confession. That’s the visible church, and in a judgment of charity, when I preach, I assume that everybody there is a real believer, but, always a but, there’s the invisible church. And the invisible church is the church as God alone sees it, and God knows that not every single person here today truly trusts in Christ. That’s another assumption I have to make, I don’t know who you are and in a judgment of charity, I never assume that people I’m preaching to: “Well, this person obviously is not a Christian.” No, in a judgment of charity, I accept all of those who name the name of the Lord as believers, but we know for a fact that not everybody talking about heaven is going there. There’s the invisible church and that’s the church as God alone sees it and it’s all his people in all ages who ever have been or ever will be saved.

Now that can be carried over to holy Communion. Holy Communion is a visible Word of God as Peter Martyr Vermigli said. We see the elements. But what’s invisible is the power of God that is present for all who eat in faith and drink in faith. And there’s the preaching of the Word. There is, well, it isn’t visible unless you’re thinking of looking at me, but it’s something we hear with our ears. But in addition to that, there is also that

which we cannot perceive with our senses and that's the voice of the Lord Jesus Christ saying to you and to me: "Come to me all who labor and are heavy-laden and I will give you rest." We'll hit that another time, and another time, and another time, as God permits me to come preach to you.

So here we have this: How can they believe the one, in the one **whom** they have not heard?

Now let's turn back to the right and let's look over there again at 1 Corinthians 1. 1 Corinthians 1 and that's page 1772 where we're told there again in verse 21:

"God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe."

And then we're told down at the bottom of the page in verse 24: "To those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength. Brothers," he says, and of course when he uses that Greek word, it is a word that means both brothers and sisters, and I won't go into another Greek lesson. But anyhow, so he says, "Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called." That is, again, the external calling through the proclamation of the Word of God and the internal calling through the Lord Jesus' working through the Holy Spirit drawing you to himself. Jesus said, "All that the Father gives me shall come to me and him who comes to me, I will never cast out." And he also said, "No one can come to me except my Father who sent me draws him and I will raise him up on the last day."

So, he's looking at us, a motley crew, aren't we? A motley crew, "Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth."

He's not saying no one, but he says not many. "But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us," for us who believe, "who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. Therefore, as it is written: 'Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.'"

And I've got to read the next five verses because they fit so well in part of it, and it's how I feel: "When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified."

Why is it important to remember the Lord's Supper? Because it's easy for a preacher to forget that he's not there to give moral lessons; he's there to give moral lessons so that you and I despair of ever getting our way to heaven by our own efforts.

What is the fundamental purpose of God's law? It is to drive us out of ourselves so that we flee to the Lord Jesus Christ and trust in him. And why the Lord's Supper is so important? Because no matter how forgetful a preacher may be, and believe me, I struggle with forgetfulness in ways I never did before the odometer of life crossed 7-0, there's always something there to remind me.

Christ Jesus died for our sins, and that's why he says, "I was determined to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." Now this is verse 3. Just before I came into the pulpit I was trembling, and I realized something was wrong with my blood sugar, and so I did something that I never do. There was a piece of donut, and I ate it, and I feel good.

But the trembling he's talking about is not because of fluctuations in blood sugar; he's talking about this: "Who is equal to such a task?" That's what he's talking about. He realizes that when he stands before people and tells them about the Lord Jesus Christ, when he is reflecting on that in 2 Corinthians 2, which is out of the text which we're not going to get to this morning, when he's reflecting on the awesome thing that happens in preaching, this causes him to say: "I came to you in weakness and fear and with much trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on man's wisdom, but on God's power."

Now turn with me, if you will, over to chapter 10 of 1 Corinthians, 1 Corinthians 10 and we have here something very important to consider related to the Lord's Supper. Look at the bottom of page 1782. He's warning the believers at Corinth about the dangers of idolatry. He's telling them not to participate in idol worship because something happens when you actually worship an idol, because he tells us there that the gods of the pagans are not actually gods at all, but demon spirits, and so there's something supernatural involved in the pagan world.

Now notice what he says in verse 14, 1 Corinthians 10:14:

"Therefore, my dear friends, flee from idolatry. I speak to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say." He says there in verse 16, "Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ?"

Let that sink in for a moment, "And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ?" What's he saying? What he's telling us is that when you and I partake of holy Communion, we are participating in the very body and blood of Christ, **not in a chew it with your mouth and swallow it down your throat kind of way**, but by the power of the Holy Spirit. Christ Jesus lifts us up to heaven where he's seated in heavenly places next to the Father, and as we are lifted up and seated in heavenly places in Christ, Christ himself makes himself real and precious and special to us.

Now, I want to say this: It is not fundamentally different than Christ who is already present here this morning as we have sung the praises of the Lord. God inhabits the praises of his people. And it's not fundamentally different than Christ is present in the preaching of the Word.

Because these are visible words of God, Christ is present in them in the same way that he is present in the preaching this morning. But notice what he says, he says in verse 17, "Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all share the one loaf."

Now you could go on, and I guess I should, "Consider the people of Israel," verse 18, "Do not those who eat the sacrifices participate in the altar? Do I mean then that food sacrificed to an idol is anything, or that an idol is anything? No," verse 20, "but the

sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot,” verse 21, “drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord’s table and the table of demons.”

Now, the Lord Jesus Christ on the night before he went to the cross, took the bread and he blessed it, “Blessed are you, Lord God of the universe, who gives us bread,” and he broke it and he said, “Take, eat, this is my body.” Likewise after they supped, he took the cup and he said, “This cup is my blood of the new covenant. All of you drink it.” Let’s think about that as we prepare for holy Communion, because this is not simply crackers and juice. Christ is present.

May we pray.

Lord, we thank you for the Lord’s Supper. We thank you for the preaching of the Word. We thank you for the ability to sing your praises. We thank you for fellowship. Lord, we thank you for prayer and all these tools that you use, these means of grace, to draw us to yourself, to renew our faith in you, and to give us assurance through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.