

A Reason for Bragging

Some of us would be familiar with the comical story of the American tourist who once visited an Australian wildlife reserve somewhere in The Outback. Sitting in the bus that takes people around the reserve he watched as the tour guide first pointed the tourists to cute little koala bears up in a tree.

“That’s nothing,” responds the American. “In the States we have grizzly bears that are twice the height of a grown man” he exclaims confidently.

“Thank you for that observation. I am sure they are quite a sight to see,” the tour guide responds cordially as he removes the hand break and continues on through the reserve.

A few minutes later the bus goes past a pack of dingos. “On the left we have Australia’s own wild dog, the dingo,” the tour guide blares through his intercom. A few moments of silence, and as he suspected, the American wishes to say something again.

“That’s nothing,” he says. “In the States we have wolves that are easily twice the size of your dingos.”

The tour guide smiles and nods, and as before releases the hand break, but this time takes off with a jerk that betrays his slight annoyance by the chatty tourist. This time round the tour guide thinks to himself, “I’m gonna let him have it now.”

Around a bend, over a gradual hill, and finally approaching a clearing, he spots a troop of kangaroos in the distance as he puts foot to the petrol. Before the tour guide can say anything the American shouts, “now that’s a sight for sore eyes! What are they called?” he asks.

The tour guide responds, “I’m glad you asked. That over there is our typical variety of *field mice*.”

Touché.

Let’s just say, it’s difficult not to brag at times, especially when the world is often filled with people who like to gloat about all their accomplishments. They like to talk about all their successes in life and somewhat expect any unsuspecting bystander to be okay about hearing about their jobs, the places they have travelled, the people they know and the things they have amassed throughout their years.

It can be tempting for Christians to want to play the same game when facing someone like this. Even Christian to Christian we can be tempted to want to share in the narcissist hobby of bragging, boasting, “tooting our own trumpet,” call it what you will.

Scripture does not allow for this kind of behaviour. Of all people Christians should be known for their humility. We are not people who goes around bragging about our accomplishments. The reason is simple. Everything that we have become in Christ is because of what God has done for us in Christ. I mean really, how can people brag who know that before they were saved God referred to them in the following way:

“None is righteous, no, not one;
11 no one understands;
no one seeks for God.
12 All have turned aside; together they have become worthless;
no one does good,
not even one.”
13 ‘Their throat is an open grave;
they use their tongues to deceive.’
The venom of asps is under their lips.’
14 ‘Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.’
15 ‘Their feet are swift to shed blood;
16 in their paths are ruin and misery,
17 and the way of peace they have not known.’
18 ‘There is no fear of God before their eyes.’”

This is what we used to be before grace had its effect in our souls. So hardly any reason for boasting.

But if there is any reason for bragging, any reason for triumph, any reason for letting the world know about it, let it be Christ. He is our only reason for boasting. The apostle Paul explains this so well in 1 Corinthians 1 where he talks about the worth of the cross, or the worth of Christ as the Saviour of the world. As he does so, Paul focuses his explanation of the cross, and in particular, its uncomplicated message on two broad groups, the Jews and the Gentiles. Aside these two groups there are no other groups to fall under, so they are all encompassing.

1. The universality of its message

The cross is *universally* applicable to all people. By this I do not mean the same as what theological “universalism” teaches. By no means. Sadly, there are liberal scholars in the world who have denied the requirements of the cross for all people, rendering it effectual for all indiscriminate of their receiving of Christ or not. According to this thinking they believe that every human being will eventually make it to heaven one day. This is not what I mean by the universality of the cross.

When we say the cross is universally true for all, we simply mean that it is God’s provision for all. We simply mean that there is no other provision for man’s sin than the cross of Christ. And this is why Paul appeals to these two broad groups in his description of the importance of the cross. This is why he says: “²² For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles...”

Paul hits the nail on the head with this dichotomy. Speaking of the Jews first, they had a tough time understanding that Jesus was the Messiah who paid the price for sins when he was crucified on a Roman cross. They battled with the idea of a suffering Messiah and that his kingdom would be “not of this world,” (Jn. 18:36) even though earthly (Rev. 21:9-27). This was one of the main reasons for their initial rejection of Christ despite his repeated efforts at gathering them to himself. Jesus even bewailed this fact when he said of them, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!” (Matt. 23:37).

They kept on rejecting Jesus even to the bitter end where they finally concocted the plan by which, ironically, God would accomplish his long-awaited plan when the Lord of glory pays for the price of sins on the cross. Roman soldiers could testify that Jesus was truly the Son of God, but they could not get themselves beyond the point of their unbelief (Matt. 27:62-66), simply because of what Paul said here in 1 Corinthians. He was a stumbling block to them.

The Jews sought something else. Someone who could overthrow the Roman Empire and re-establish Israel as that central nation in human history, even though Jesus did offer them the kingdom, they rejected it and many of them do, to this day.

The Greek on the other hand is a little different. According to Paul they seek “wisdom.” What Paul is saying is that Greeks lust after some worldly wisdom that would help them in their search for understanding. This is well illustrated in Scripture when Paul faces some Greek philosophers on Mars Hill whom he challenges through the message of the cross. Their incessant search for new philosophies or wisdoms becomes obvious in the way that Luke talks about Paul’s encounter with them:

“¹⁹ And they took him and brought him to the Areopagus, saying, ‘May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?’ ²⁰ For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean.’ ²¹ Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.”

The key words are present in these three verses quoted above. They were interested in what Paul was saying because it was something new or novel. What is this “new teaching” that you are presenting? This was so typical of the Greek mentality. If it is new or ground-breaking then it must be good. Do tell us Paul they go on. “For you bring some strange things to our ears.” These are interesting new things that you are teaching us. Do continue on in detail because “we wish to know.”

And then Luke actually tells it as it is. He inserts the helpful information that the Athenians were forever seeking new knowledge. But he does not say this as if it was a noble thing. For the Athenians this was the reason that they actually really became suspicious of the cross, largely because of its exclusivity. They would devote their time to seek “something new.”

Now of course there are always those people in both groups, whether Jew or Gentile who hear the message of the cross and who are really impacted by it. Like for instance the Jews who followed Jesus in spite of the general response of their contemporaries to him. Also, Gentiles who accepted the word of the cross, like some of those who heard Paul’s speech in Athens — people, who heard the message and believed it.

However, as a caricature for both groups in general, the cross became a stumbling block and foolishness. It was a stumbling block for the Jews because of the humble way that the Messiah was presented to them. For the Greek the cross became foolishness because of the simplicity of its message. This deserves some attention.

2. The simplicity of its message

The cross is that one message that old and young, wise, and not-so-wise can all understand without exceptional oratory efforts. Even the theologically confused Karl Barth after being asked during his only visit to America in 1962, how he would summarise the essence of the millions of words he had published, replied, "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so."

The cross is truly as simple as that. It is the message of God's love being put on display. The love that we are talking about is the kind of love that saw mankind in their sin and devised the means by which they could again be made to be in a right standing with God. See how Paul describes this message of the cross at the beginning of the same chapter in 1 Corinthians. He says:

"¹⁸ For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."

There can almost be no greater contrast among people than the division that the cross brings. Those who are still in their sin and unconvinced about the necessity of the cross continue to see it as foolishness or folly. They look at the "dreary" message of a suffering Messiah and they cannot help but see it as pure foolishness, even inhumane, uncivilised and uneducated. For detractors of the cross its message is not just too simple, it has become banal even. "We've heard the story before, c'mon, can you give us something else around Christmas this time instead of the same old, Noel, Noel..." This is how the critic of the cross views it. They receive no pleasure in being informed about the life of Christ. They are at best disinterested in how every event in his life is what eventually led him to that crescendo where he sacrificed himself for our sins.

Some might even develop a curiosity about the historical figure, Jesus of Nazareth, and who he really was.¹ This has become the passion of many historians, archaeologists, anthropologists, and philosophers alike, but it does not necessarily reflect a saving knowledge about him. Many people in the world even appreciate the sayings of Jesus — Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists included. Politicians would quote him during important speeches and even visit a church or two for the sake of diplomacy, but this does not necessarily translate into saving faith.

Rather, Scripture is very specific about the requirements of the cross, despite its *uncomplicated* nature. One determining characteristic of the cross is that it begs us to lay down our lives in order to have eternal life. And this is where the unsaved world cannot run along with its requirements. The reason is as simple as its message. The requirement is simply too much. It's too tall an order for some to commit to. Our

¹ National Geographic recently published a number of articles about the world's view of the life of Jesus. In addition to being mixed with liberal ideas about the true identity of Christ, such articles prove that the world has an interest in the Bible, at least in an academic sense, not necessarily leading to salvation.

Lord explained the requirement so well when he talked about the cost of discipleship to the audiences that would follow him around Israel.

For instance, he said in Matthew 10:34-39:

“³⁴ Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. ³⁵ For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. ³⁶ And a person's enemies will be those of his own household. ³⁷ Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. ³⁸ And whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me. ³⁹ Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”

What Jesus was saying here must have been shocking to his original hearers. However, upon closer inspection, Jesus did not intend for his words to mean that when we come to him that we must reject every important and meaningful relationship in our lives. Definitely not. Rather what he meant by these words is that when a person comes to him, and specifically as it involves his death on the cross, we embrace that fact by declaring that everything else in our lives will essentially be subordinate to this one reality. If Christ is primary in our lives then all other relationships becomes second tier to our most fundamental relationship, yet this is how we actually love our neighbour (wife, husband, brother, sister, etc.) best, by being in a relationship with him where he is the primary figure.

Though, in this way a relationship with Christ would also lead to enmity among people in some instances. When a father requires a son to do something that is contrary to the will of the one who saved him, then there will be a sword driven between them, as Jesus says. The same applies between mother and daughter, father and daughter, sibling to sibling, husband and wife and other kinds of relationships. When Christ is king in a person's life then things cannot be the same again, because of his calling on our lives. In this way one's enemies could very well be the people in one's own household who do not love Christ or want to obey his commandments. In general, whether there is enmity at home or not, there will be a certain antithesis between the saved individual and the lost world they must live in, and it's defined by Christ's requirements on the person's life.

So the inevitable then — a follower of Christ must love him above all others. Our love for him and his gift of the cross must outweigh the love we have for anybody or anything else. That's the simple requirement.

But Paul does not leave out the fact that this simple message is indeed impactful beyond comparison. The message of the cross, as simple as its message may be, is that loving *force* behind our salvation.

3. The saving power of its message

Paul continues to describe the cross as the “power of God”, not once, but twice in the same passage. What exactly does this mean? And I ask because there is great ignorance as it involves the power of God and how we see it on display in this world.

To be sure, Paul has no special manifestation of power in mind, except for the historical reality of Christ and him crucified. God's power is displayed in the cross in a way similar to his display of power in the Old Testament. God was made known,

for instance to Moses through an elaborate display of power accompanied by his word (Ex. 3:1-17). In the same way the cross is that power of God on display in human history by which he makes himself “known to humankind, to accomplish salvation, to defeat evil, and to transform lives and values.”²

That is the power of the cross. Its power lies in its transforming ability. In a personal sense the cross is what brought peace between sinners and God as they place their trust in Christ. Interestingly, the pagans had an understanding that the gods were powerful. In the cross, this view is naturally turned upside down as the God of all is crucified by the ones whom he created. In the cross it is as if God appears without power. But this is the heart of the message. The power of the cross lies in its ability to give life to those who would otherwise lose their lives, through the laying down of the life who alone possesses eternal life within himself.

This is the essence of the message. Our salvation does not lie in how clever we are, what we can do, or have done. Our salvation lies in the cross of Christ, literally in Christ alone. In this sense, those who choose to embrace Christ and his cross are seen as wise, although not of noble stock, at least in the Greek way of speaking. To be precise, God actually meant it to be this way to shame those who think they are wise in their own eyes. He chose a simple message to believe in to humble those who think that there is salvation in other things. This is why Paul says:

“²⁶ For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth.²⁷ But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; ²⁸ God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, ²⁹ so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.”

God chose those who aren't wise in their own eyes, but who considered God as the only means of salvation. In the world's eyes those who believe in the gospel message are seen as backward, antiquated, “not with it” and downright stupid. It amuses the clever thinkers of the world when one refers to sin, God's holiness, the cross of Christ, and the requirement of faith and repentance. They would look at this and perhaps brush it off as mythical, moralistic, but hardly scientific or helpful philosophically speaking.

This is why no Christian can be boastful about his own accomplishments. The world loves to brag about all their achievements, and this while in their unbelief they are heading headlong for hell. Christians on the other hand boast in Christ and what he has accomplished.

So there is only one way in which some boasting is permitted. Paul tells us:

“...so that, as it is written, ‘Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.’”

Quoting from Jeremiah 9:23, Paul does permit for some boasting. Rather, a great deal of bragging is allowed in this sense. And it makes a world of sense if we understand what we have been saved from and what we have been forgiven of.

² David E. Garland (2003:62) continues to refer to P. Marshall's commentary on 1 Corinthians who states that “the word ‘power’ was commonly associated in Hellenistic literature with rhetoric and eloquence, because eloquence won the powerful orator fame and glory.”

Let the one who boasts, boast about our great God who confounded the self-proclaimed wise people of the world through the simplicity of the cross.

The cross of Christ...

our Christ...

that's worth a great deal of bragging about!