

Life Group Questions

Oct 6th, 2024

The Power of God – Pastor Ray Harmes-Wiebe – **2 Corinthians 2:1-5**

Note from Pastor Jonathan

Hey Life Groups!

I know many of you aren't meeting this week due to the Prayer Summit. (I hope to see you there!) Even though you won't be meeting, I hope you will still think through the sermon passage.

I want you all to know that our first Bridge Group meeting went well. We had 4 people come to facilitate discussions and 16 people show up! I was blown away by how quickly people were opening up and talking together. Clearly, they're hungry for community and conversation. Praise God for this opportunity. Continue to pray for people to come and find a community, for more Life Groups to form so Bridge Group attendees will have a permanent group to join, and for more leaders to come facilitate.

Jonathan

OPENING QUESTIONS (Pick Any Questions You Like)

- 1. Do you have any hidden skills or abilities?**
- 2. What are some positives and negatives about this speaker?**
- 3. Who is an example of a great speaker and why?**

LET'S DIG IN (Pick Any Questions You Like)

- 4. How did Paul tell the Corinthians about Jesus?**
- 5. Why is it important for a church to focus on Jesus' crucifixion?**
- 6. How can knowing how Paul shared the Good News about Jesus encourage you to share Jesus with others?**

OPENING QUESTIONS (Pick Any Questions You Like)

1. Do you have any hidden skills or abilities?

I'm sure that people in your Life Group can do some unexpected things. What can your members do?

I've met people who are incredible cooks, musicians, athletes, and more. If you just looked at them, you could never guess what they could do. I'm sure there are some surprising talents in your group.

It's great to have amazing talents, but we'll learn in this passage that we don't need special gifts or skills to share the Gospel with other people.

2. What are some positives and negatives about this speaker?

This video is a parody of TED Talks by Onion News:

https://youtu.be/tom6_ceTu9s. I think it perfectly imitates the style of many big speakers but with a silly subject.

What about his speaking technique was good and captivating? What was bad? Overall, was this a good talk? Why or why not?

In this week's passage, Paul writes that he didn't use any fancy techniques to tell the Corinthians about Jesus.

3. Who is an example of a great speaker and why?

Maybe a pastor comes to mind, either a current one at Willingdon or another you've heard speak before. Perhaps you think of a professor or teacher who taught you. YouTube has many graduation speeches and podcasts. Got a favorite?

Do you like them because they're dynamic? Do they use illustrations or turns of phrases that make the points hit home? Maybe they sprinkle just the right amount of humor or can make the most complex ideas understandable.

Paul amazingly didn't use any special techniques. Most of us would probably think Paul was a terrible public speaker.

1 Corinthians 2:1–5

¹ And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom.

² For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

³ And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling,

⁴ and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power,

⁵ so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

LET'S DIG IN (Pick Any Questions You Like)

4. How did Paul tell the Corinthians about Jesus?

No lofty speech and wisdom. Lofty is ὑπεροχή (hyperoche), meaning “a state of excelling, superiority, preeminence” (BDAG). It “refers not only to elaborate rhetoric ... but also to speech that pretends to some superior special status” (*BEC 1 Corinthians*). Paul didn't speak in a way that made him sound fancy or special. The result of Paul's preaching wasn't “Wow, Paul is amazing!”, but instead, “Wow, Jesus is amazing!”

Ancient Greco-Roman culture was into good speakers. Aristotle (384-322 BC) wrote, “If there are two definitive features of ancient Greek civilization, they are loquacity and competition.” Loquacity is talkativeness. They loved to outtalk each other. We can see this same mindset hundreds of years later when Paul visited Athens.

Acts 17:21 -- Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.

Cicero (55 BC) records Antonius' view of an orator:

De Oratore -- “For I declared that the skillful speaker was someone who could speak with reasonable intelligence and clarity before ordinary people in accordance with generally accepted views, but that *the eloquent speaker was someone who could amplify and give distinction to whatever he wished in a more marvelous and magnificent way, and whose intellect and memory encompassed all the sources of all the subject that had any bearing on oratory.* (Emphasis mine.)

Good speakers explain a subject clearly. Next-level speakers are good at making *anything* sound good. The English expression fits this kind of persuasive speaker: “He could sell ice to a polar bear.” They can convince anyone of anything. Can you think of any that are in English or another language?

Paul didn't use clever sales tactics. No tricks. Just simple, honest truth.

Nothing But Jesus Christ Crucified.

Factions. Paul wasn't selling Paul. He wasn't a guru selling a course, a multi-level marketer recruiting for his downstream, or a celebrity building a fan club. Paul wanted the Corinthians to know that Jesus died for their sins to save them from eternal damnation and give them eternal life with Him. Paul wanted to “testify to the gospel of the grace of God” (Acts 20:24).

That shuts down the factions and divisions because Paul wasn't crucified for them. The Corinthians were baptized in Jesus' name, not anyone else. Their allegiance belongs to Jesus alone.

Focus on the mission. Greco-Roman people loved to hear about new stuff, so the church could get caught up in tangents and side-quests. Paul told Timothy to avoid “irreverent, silly myths” (1 Timothy 4:7). In fact, Paul writes about myths multiple times (1 Timothy 1:4; 2 Timothy 4:4; Titus 1:14). People love going down rabbit holes, chasing speculation. It always leads to weird and wrong ideas.

For example, the Bible tells very little about Jesus' childhood. People wanted to fill in the gap and wrote stories. (Check out this link for a summary: <https://udayton.edu/imri/mary/c/childhood-of-jesus.php>) In some stories, kid Jesus straight-up murders kids and brain-scrambles teachers. The people who wrote these stories forgot that Jesus came to die on the cross, not show off or throw His weight around.

Weakness, Fear, and Trembling. We don't know what his weakness was, but scholars made guesses like "an unimpressive presence, a repellent physical malady, his toiling with his hands, his relative impoverishment, his vulnerability to persecution, his refusal to play to the crowds with silver-tongued oratory" (*BEC 1 Corinthians*).

Surprisingly, Paul was there with fear and trembling. When I think of Paul, I picture Billy Graham. Billy Graham was over 6 feet tall and had a booming, confident voice (<https://youtu.be/oetTGBpoFfo>). Surely, Paul must have also been a bold guy, because he was so eager to hunt down and arrest Christians before meeting Jesus. He wasn't shy. That take-no-prisoners attitude must have continued, right?

But it looks like Jesus humbled him. He didn't have the backing of Jewish religious leaders (Acts 9:1-2). Instead of enjoying the angry mobs murdering Christians (Acts 22:19-20), those angry mobs tried to murder him. It's easy to be a bully when everyone has your back. Now only Jesus could protect him.

Paul was so afraid while in Corinth that Jesus had to tell him, "Don't be afraid" (Acts 18:9). Paul needed the Ephesian church to pray for the ability to boldly preach the Gospel (Ephesians 6:18-20).

Weakness, fear, and trembling weren't a problem. They were another opportunity to brag about Jesus' power in him (2 Corinthians 12:7-10).

Demonstration of the Spirit and of Power. Paul was an unimpressive, weak, and trembling speaker. His message seemed really, really stupid (see last week's sermon). The fact that people believed it was a demonstration of God's power at work. Paul can't get the credit.

Although God performed miracles through Paul (like healing), the greatest miracle was bringing people to believe in Jesus and be reconciled to God. And that was what Paul wanted.

5. Why is it important for a church to focus on Jesus' crucifixion?

Jesus, not the Pastor. Just as Paul pointed the church to Jesus and His work on the cross, our church must do the same. There are too many "celebrity pastors" out there. *They're* the superstars. *They* draw the crowds. Their churches are associated with *them*, not Jesus. People go to those churches because of *them*. Aspiring pastors and leaders go to conferences and events to imitate *those pastors*.

I went to a conference at a church in Dallas. The head pastor also started the church and was there to grow it to about four times the size of Willingdon. From what I gather, they've done good work. But I couldn't help but notice that the pastor felt like the focus. His face and name were everywhere, including pictures on the walls, handouts, and napkins. The church restaurant was named after him. He seemed to be the face of the church.

God's given us many amazing pastors. I'm thankful Pastor Ray's leading us this season. I haven't met previous lead pastors, but I've heard good things about them, too. But Willingdon Church wasn't built on the foundation of Pastor George Braun and the other pastors in between. God has been using many different pastors who have come to build up His church at Willingdon Avenue.

I have to appreciate the Life Group pastors who came before me. They've all contributed to pointing people to Jesus. I am simply continuing that legacy. We come and go, but Jesus stays at the center.

Jesus, Not Something Else.

Politics. I've seen and been in churches that embrace a political party and its positions without seeing what Jesus thinks. Although Christianity and politics are often associated with the States, I've been seeing it grow here in Canada. As I listen to Christians in Canada, I've been hearing people echoing talking points uncritically in both conservative and liberal churches.

Christianity easily becomes a tool to further a political agenda, not Jesus'. Political affiliation becomes a test of faithfulness, instead of what they believe about Jesus ("You can't be Christian unless you support ____!"). Believers and unbelievers get turned off by how we talk about people in the other political party ("The people who vote ____ are horrible and evil!").

Unless the Conservatives, Greens, Liberals, NPD, or any other party (in Canada or abroad) exists to know Jesus Christ personally and carry on His ministry, we will never fit neatly within a party. There will always be positions we will disagree with.

I'm not saying we can't discuss politics, but we must ensure we know the relevant biblical principles! If we're not careful, politics *will* hijack the church. If a political conversation comes up, start with Christ crucified and see where it takes you. How does knowing Jesus died on the cross for Canadians *and* foreign immigrants, cisgender *and* transgender, straight *and* gay, rich *and* poor, innocent *and* criminal affect where you stand?

Jesus' Kingdom and Mission. Christians can wander off into many good missions, but miss the one it was made for. Churches should love everyone, but some churches forget that love requires teaching Jesus' death is the only way to forgive sins (e.g., <https://united-church.ca/community-and-faith/welcome-united-church-canada/interfaith-relations/interfaith-dialogue-and-action>). Many organizations have sought to care for people's physical needs, which we should do (James 1:27), but have forgotten about their need for Jesus' death on the cross. Until recently, I didn't realize that YMCA stood for the Young Men's Christian Association (<https://www.ymca.int/who-we-are/the-worldwide-ymca-movement/the-ymca-history/>) and was more than a Western traditional folk wedding dance (<https://youtu.be/CS9OO0S5w2k>).

At Willingdon Church, we want to ensure all our ministries ultimately point people to Jesus' death on the cross.

6. Does knowing how Paul shared the Good News about Jesus encourage you to share Jesus with others?

We only used to see celebrities and famous people playing characters on screen. With podcasts, YouTube, Instagram, Twitch, and more we can see these famous people let their hair down and be themselves. As they share their vulnerabilities and struggles, fans realize many (not all, of course) are just like them. They struggle with similar insecurities, have the same guilty pleasures, and aren't so different from us.

I hope reading this passage had the same effect. Many of us pictured Paul as a *Giant* of the faith. Courageous and in your face, using the most elite oratory skills. But that's not true.

Most of us struggle to find the perfect thing to say in conversation, even me. (I spend a lot of time writing and editing my questions. No way I could be like this on my feet.) We aren't loud voices able to command a room of listeners. We don't understand everything there is to know about Jesus. In many ways, we are just like Paul.

Which is wonderfully liberating, because that means God can use us, too!