

The Means Of Grace The Gospel.

Text: 1 Cor 1:17-21

1) Is Divinely Appointed

Suggested Hymns:

2) Is Divinely Empowered

163, 355, 271, 282, 511

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is 1 Corinthians 1:17–21, *¹⁷ For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of no effect.*

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. ¹⁹ For it is written: “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, And bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent.”

²⁰ Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? ²¹ For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

The use of special terms to express a given matter in simple but meaningful words is a very common practice. Even so the Christian Church has come to use a certain amount of fixed terminology which was coined through the centuries to express certain truths. And there is nothing wrong with that practice, so long as the words that are used agree with what is taught in the Sacred Scriptures.

Every Christian believes in the Triune God. The word “triune” is a combination of two Latin numerals — three and one — and expresses the truth of Scripture that there is only one God, but that there are three distinct Persons.

Again, in teaching the meaning of the Lord's Supper, the Lutheran Church speaks of "the Real Presence" to emphasise that according to the plain words of Holy Scripture the true body and blood of Christ are really present under the bread and the wine.

Another expression that is familiar and used quite frequently is "the means of grace." The word "means" is the same as when it is used in such expressions as "means of transportation," "means of communication," "means of exchange," etc. The meaning of the word is "vehicle," "method," or "medium."

The other word, "grace," stands for God's grace, His saving love, His forgiveness, and His salvation. "The means of grace," then, refer to those methods or ways by which God offers, conveys, and bestows His saving love in Christ on the children of men.

We speak of three such means of grace — the Gospel and the two Sacraments, Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

Today we begin a series of three sermons on the subject of "*The Means of Grace*." May the Lord bestow His blessings upon each message. The subject of the sermon today is *The Gospel a Means of Grace*. May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. The Gospel As A Means Of Grace Is Divinely Appointed

In this chapter, as in other chapters of his Epistles, St. Paul has very much to say concerning the Gospel. The point which he stresses here is that it is a means of grace. And the first thing that he has to say of the Gospel in this respect is that it has been divinely appointed as such.

What Is the Gospel?

Do we know what is meant by "the Gospel?" It is a very meaningful word in any language. It means good story, good message. There is a very good reason why this name was chosen. The message it brings is good news, for it tells of God's love to and for sinners.

The Gospel therefore differs from the Law. The latter tells man what God wants him to do, and not to do, and at the same time threatens with divine wrath all who fail to do according to it.

How different the Gospel! It tells man what God has done and still does for his salvation. It shows man his Saviour and invites him to take by faith the salvation which He, the Lord Jesus Christ, procured through His suffering and death on the Cross.

The Cross? Yes, the Cross! It is the heart and centre of the Gospel. That is why Paul refers to the Gospel as “*the message of the Cross,*” and in a later verse he says: “*We preach Christ Crucified.*”¹ Remove the Cross from the Gospel, and you have nothing left that can really be called “Gospel.”

This statement probably calls for some clarification. The average person might think that the Cross speaks of suffering. And that is certainly true. It was used as an instrument of punishment for evildoers, and the worst kind of evildoers at that.

The enemies of Christ wanted it to be that for Him when they demanded of Pontius Pilate that He be crucified. And what agony of body and soul He endured the six hours that He hung there between heaven and earth!

But we must not for one moment think that Christ was a helpless victim of an enraged mob and a cowardly judge. He willingly offered Himself into their hands. Why? The mystery of it all is solved when we accept what the Scriptures say of His death on the Cross. It was God’s will that He suffer and die on the accursed tree of the Cross. In fact, God Himself was there pouring out the vials of His wrath upon Him.

The cause was sin — not His sin, but the sins of the world which had been imputed, or charged, to Him. The purpose was to redeem a fallen world, to regain Paradise for man, who through sin had lost it.

Thus He, a holy and a righteous God, made it possible for Himself to be forgiving and gracious to the children of men. The redemption of the world was wrought by Christ’s death on the Cross.

Paul writes to the Colossians that in Christ “*we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins.*”² No wonder, then, that Paul, in speaking of the Gospel, refers to it as “*the message of the Cross.*”

Why Christ Sent Paul to Preach the Gospel

Concerning this Gospel, Paul declares in the text: ***“Christ sent me ... to preach the Gospel.”*** On the road to Damascus the Lord stopped Paul, who was then called Saul, converted him, changing him from a persecutor to a preacher of the Gospel.

From that time forth Paul devoted his time, his energies, his talents, his all, to making known, particularly in the Gentile world, the Gospel of the crucified Christ. To the Corinthians he writes in 1 Corinthians 2:2, ***“For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified.”***

What was the purpose for which he had been sent to preach the Gospel? He tells us in verse 21, ***“it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe.”*** With these words Paul declares that God Himself ordained, appointed, the Gospel to be preached for the express purpose of saving souls.

In other words, the Gospel is a means of grace, appointed as such by God Himself. Was there not a message which the world with all its wisdom could produce for this purpose? Let Paul answer this question, for he was divinely inspired. ***“¹⁹ For it is written: “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, And bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent.” ²⁰ Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?”***

Not the wisest of men were wise enough to conceive this plan of salvation nor the method of transmitting the good news to the children of men. In the next chapter Paul expresses this thought even more directly and simply. ***“Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, Nor have entered into the heart of man The things which God has prepared for those who love Him.”³***

God in His wisdom prepared and appointed the Gospel to be preached for the salvation of sinners. He wanted the children of men to hear the wonderful salvation which He in His love and mercy had procured through the offering of His Son Jesus Christ. By the Gospel He wanted to extend the invitation: ***“Come, for all things are now ready.”⁴***

And Paul makes it clear that this simple but meaningful Gospel message was to be preached by him ***“not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of no effect.”***

It needed no embellishments in language in order to be effective; it required no beautiful surroundings. Any attempt to make such things of primary importance would, in Paul's own words, make the Gospel "*of no effect*," that is, destroy its very purpose, that of saving sinners.

The Gospel, with the Cross of Christ as heart and centre, is what Paul was sent to preach in simple language. Indeed, it was divinely appointed as a means of grace to "*save those who believe*."

The Gospel for Today

The Gospel of the grace of God in Christ Jesus is still a means by which God would save sinners from the wrath to come. He has commanded that it be preached to the ends of the earth until the end of time. By it He would bring to men everywhere the answer to the question: "*What must I do to be saved?*"

The Bible emphatically declares in 1 Timothy 2:4 that God *desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth*. And that truth, the Gospel, is so simple in language that even a child can understand the words.

Paul could therefore write to Timothy, as we read in 2 Timothy 3:15, ¹⁵ *and that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus*.

No new orders, no new commands, have been received from God to change this message for our twenty-first century. It is therefore as true today as it was when Paul wrote the words of our text: "*It pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe*."

Paul's motto should therefore be adopted and followed by every Christian pastor: "*I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ, and Him Crucified*."

Paul's appeal to the Galatians should therefore be taken to heart by every member of a Christian congregation, as we read in Galatians 1:8-9, ⁸ *But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed*. ⁹ *As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed*.

Remember, then, the Gospel of the Cross of Christ is appointed by God today also as a means of grace.

2. The Gospel A Means Of Grace Is Divinely Empowered

The Power of the Gospel

The Gospel is also empowered by God as a means of grace. The purpose of having the Gospel preached is, as has already been stated, to save sinners. But when is a person saved? Paul says: The Gospel should be “*preached to save those who believe.*” Man is saved by faith. We read in Romans 10:17, ¹⁷ *So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.*

Faith means believing. This truth, that we are saved by faith, is taught and emphasised throughout the Scriptures.

To mention but a few well-known passages. Mark 16:16, ¹⁶ *He who believes and is baptized will be saved.* Acts 16:31, “*Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved.*” John 3:16, ¹⁶ *For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.*

In order to be saved, therefore, man must have faith, he must place his trust in the merits of Christ, the Saviour. But where does this faith come from? Does man have the ability to produce it in himself? Indeed not! Man by nature, that is, by birth, is spiritually blind, dead, and an enemy of God.

Scripture tells us in 1 Corinthians 2:14, ¹⁴ *But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.* Who, then, is responsible for faith by which sinners are saved? Only God. And the means which He uses is the Gospel.

That is why Paul in the text, verse 18 speaks of the Gospel as “*the power of God.*” He does so again in verses 23-24, ²³ *but we preach ... Christ the power of God.*

And in his Epistle to the Romans he declares in Romans 1:16, ¹⁶ *For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes.*

By the Gospel, then, God creates in the heart of man faith, trust, confidence, in Christ as the Saviour. He brings men to faith through the preaching of the Gospel. But He does more. He also uses the Gospel to strengthen and preserve faith in Christ, the Saviour. At the same time He instils into the believer's heart and life the desire, the willingness, and the ability to live a holy life.

We read in 2 Corinthians 5:17, ¹⁷ *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.*

And in Ephesians 2:10, ¹⁰ *For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.* The Gospel is the means by which all this is wrought in those who are saved. It has been empowered by God Himself for this purpose, and it is therefore rightly classified as a “*means of grace.*”

Why Some are Not Saved

However, in some cases, alas, in many cases, the Gospel, although empowered by God, does not fulfil its saving and sanctifying purpose. The preaching of the Cross, the Gospel, is foolishness to some who hear it. Paul speaks of this in the text. ¹⁸ *For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing.*”

Man can, and man frequently does, resist the power of God in the Gospel. He hears the message of salvation, is invited to partake of its blessings by faith in Christ, his Saviour, but for him it is all “foolishness.”

The reason may be that he is self-righteous. He thinks that he is good enough for heaven and therefore does not need a Saviour from sin and death and hell.

Again, the reason may be that he is indifferent or does not care about his soul's salvation. He is not interested in his spiritual and eternal welfare and consequently turns a deaf ear to any offer of salvation.

Thus the Gospel, in spite of its wonderful message and power, is regarded as “*foolishness*” by some who hear it. How terrible! But what makes it especially terrible is the fact that all such people are doomed eternally. They shall perish for all of eternity!

The Gospel for You

What effect has the preaching of the Gospel had on you? Has it been and is it now for you *“the power of God”* unto salvation and sanctification? Or has it been, and is it even now, foolishness to you? God help us by His Holy Spirit to receive the Gospel as the wisdom of God and throughout our life experience its saving power. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ 1 Corinthians 1:23

² Colossians 1:14

³ 1 Corinthians 2:9

⁴ Luke 14:17