



Back to God Hour

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Is Preaching
Funny?

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IS PREACHING FUNNY?

We preach Christ crucified .
1 Corinthians 1:23

A comic strip in the daily newspaper I receive offends me very much. It pokes fun at preachers.

Every so often it features a Rev. Dunn, who personifies all the stupid things people think of when they think about preachers. This preacher has a counseling service that he uses to give out bad advice. He has also developed an unusual ministry to animals.

Sometimes the comic strip shows the preacher at funerals, trying to think up something appropriate to say about the deceased; what he ends up saying is uproariously funny. That is, it would be funny if the comic strip weren't actually ridiculing the preacher. At other times, the cartoon shows him preaching away at his flock, many of whom are sleeping. His remarks are often directed to their lack of attention. Sometimes I find myself smiling, but then I catch myself and remember that the comic strip is poking fun at the preacher.

I have toyed with the idea of writing the editor of my newspaper and the editor of

the *Christian Century*, which also carries the comic strip. But I have to admit that the strip does serve a useful purpose. It highlights some of the weaknesses preachers have. What they say can often be way off base. They can often be far too concerned about themselves and their reputations. They sometimes do stupid things. (So do doctors and lawyers, by the way.) And with their show of piety, they sometimes come off as not being very with it. The comic strip also reveals how a lot of people think about preachers. Many people honestly believe that there is something superfluous about them, that we don't really need them.

Well, preachers are not perfect by any means, and a lot of things have happened lately in the religion business that have confirmed the worst thoughts many people have had about them. But we must not think that the way some preachers behave is the way all preachers behave. Nor must we think that, since some preachers are egotistical, materialistic, and embarrassingly out of touch, we don't need preaching anymore.

We need preachers and preaching more than we need doctors and doctoring and lawyers and lawyering. The fact is, we need preachers as much as a drowning

person needs someone who will throw him a life preserver. I don't want to quarrel with those who may say that there's enough wrong with preachers to justify having a comic strip about them, but I must say that much of the devaluation of preachers has come about because of wide spread rebellion against God and His Word. The Bible makes very clear that preaching is extremely important; it has always been important, and it always will be.

When Jesus Christ was here on earth He spent much of His time preaching the Word. Read any one of the gospels (the first four books of the New Testament part of the Bible) and you will find the record of Jesus' dedication to preaching the Word.

The church of the Lord Jesus was built on preaching. The apostle Paul tells us that preaching was his main task-when ever he came into a city, he would preach. Preachers, consequently, had a major role in building the church. And preaching and preachers are still needed if the church is to grow. This means that you need preachers and preaching if you are going to be saved and are going to grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ.

And, really, it's not surprising that people these days ridicule preaching and

preachers. Did you know that the Bible recognizes something strange and foolish about preaching? The Bible actually talks about the foolishness of what is preached.

Look at what the apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1:

Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel-not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

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. . . . 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 to save those who believe. Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but 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 man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength (vv. 17,18, 21-25).

What does the Bible mean when it talks about the foolishness of preaching? Well, before answering this question, we should be clear on what we mean by preaching. We can talk about it in terms of the act of preaching. You might turn on your television set, for example, and watch a preacher. You might be impressed with the way he speaks. You might be fascinated by the way the audience responds to him. You could simply watch the whole program as a "show" and nothing more.

And in terms of how preachers conduct themselves when they preach, they can sometimes be a little funny. Some of us preachers develop certain ways of handling certain situations because we know we are being watched and we know we often must face criticism. As a result, the idiosyncracies we develop can make us look rather strange and funny sometimes.

Then, too, it's very easy for others to parody preachers, to mock them. Actually you can do that with anyone who is a public figure, and the result can be hilarious. The comic strip I mentioned earlier is a parody on preachers and preaching. It uses enough truth to make it realistic, and it uses exaggerations to make it funny.

Another way to talk about preaching is in terms of the message preached. In fact,

when the Bible connects the idea of foolishness with preaching, it does so in terms of the content of what's being preached. And the Bible recognizes that the message which preachers are required to bring is a foolishness. 1 Corinthians 1:21 says: "God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe." In other words the message a preacher brings has a foolish ring to it. It strikes those who hear it as peculiar and strange at first. They cannot understand it.

Now, what does the Bible mean when it speaks of foolishness? When we talk about something as foolish or strange or nonsensical, we are comparing it to something else. We must have some standard to which we think something does not measure up and is therefore foolish. The Bible operates this way too. When it talks of the foolishness of the message that is preached, the Bible is not saying that the message preached is foolish in and of itself but that it is foolish when heard in a world that has gone wacko. In this world, which is full of mistaken ideas, the message that preachers must bring sounds odd and foolish.

Just as young people who are accustomed to listening to heavy metal rock all

the time think that something is wrong with Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*, so people who are accustomed to the way people usually talk think that something is wrong with the message preachers bring.

The message of the preacher is a message of salvation through Jesus Christ. A preacher is required to announce that Jesus of Nazareth is the second person of the Trinity in the flesh, sent by the Father into this world to live obediently and to die obediently for the sins of humankind. A preacher is required to tell all people that there is salvation in no other name but the name of Jesus Christ. A preacher is required to command people to believe in the Lord Jesus so that they can be saved.

And 1 Corinthians 1 is very clear when it speaks about the foolishness of what is preached. During the first century, when the gospel was first proclaimed, the world was dominated by two forms of religion, both of which considered the message of salvation through Jesus to be absurd. Millions of people were deeply influenced by the religion of the Jews, who were waiting for God to do something spectacular through a Messiah. Jesus Himself, during His ministry, was continuously bombarded by requests to perform some fantastically great miracle. His compatriots were not

satisfied with His healing of the sick. They wanted Him to call fire down from heaven and blast the Romans off the map. Others were influenced by the Greeks, who had become very sophisticated in a search for wisdom. The Greeks had realized that much of their traditional mythology was childish, and they were creating some elaborate philosophies which we still study today.

Into this world the preachers came with their message about the true God. "Look at Him!" said the unbelievers. "He is a God on a cross." The message that the preachers brought was so outlandish, so farfetched, that it came across as near madness. The Christian gospel told of a God who saved men not through His strength but through His weakness, who saved not through His glory but through His shame. Those who did not believe in Him mocked Him mercilessly.

And along with the unbelievable message about the way God saved mankind came a devastating indictment against humankind. Jesus died to ~~for~~ pay human sin. We human beings are sinners, and our sins are so great that the only way we can be saved is through the intervention of God, who loved us so much that He sent His only Son into the world so that

whoever believes in Him will not perish but have everlasting life.

Are preachers funny? Is preaching funny? Yes. The apostle Paul knew who this message sounded to the people of his day. He was an educated man who was well versed in the Jewish religion. He was well versed, too, in the religion that sought for wisdom. He knew that, when he began to speak about the risen Christ who had changed his life around, people would think he was mad. Sometimes they even told him so to his face.

In today's world, in which human thought has run aground and foolishness has become the reigning orthodoxy, God's message of salvation sounds even funnier. If it sounds funny to us, however, that's a reflection on us, not on the message that is preached. The fact is that there is no other way to salvation except through Jesus. And the fact that it sounds so strange shows us just how far we have drifted from God.

In reality, there's nothing funny about the message of salvation through Jesus Christ. And over the centuries, it has become very clear that this message is extremely powerful. It's the most powerful message in the world. 1 Corinthians says that God is pleased to use this message to

save those who believe. When people hear this message, God comes into their hearts and removes the scales from their eyes and the stubborn hardness of their hearts, and they believe.

The Bible declares and history has shown that, whenever preachers have faithfully proclaimed the Word of Christ, church has grown and spiritual life has flourished and society has been renewed. The Reformation in the 16th century is an example of that. At that time, not only was the Word of God suddenly made available to the people, but strong preachers of the Word rose up and preached. The Reformers were men who preached not only on Sunday but day after day. When preachers preach, when they do it often, when people listen, there are conversions and there is revival. The only way such events can come to pass is through the preaching of God's Word. "God [is] pleased through the foolishness of what [is] preached to save those who believe." And this happens because what looks like God's foolishness is wiser than anything man can dream up.

So what does all this mean for us who think that preachers and what they preach nowadays are pretty funny?

It means that preachers and churches

might just as well understand that they are going to be ridiculed if they are faithful to the gospel. If preachers and churches really do their job, they are not going to be accepted. The apostle Paul knew that if he tried to adjust his message to the way people wanted it, he would destroy it. He knew that the message of the cross would be lost in such a process and that no one would be saved. He realized that he had to tell people the truth about God and that only then would they be saved from eternal destruction.

I am sorry to say that many churches nowadays are not very interested in the foolishness of preaching. A friend of mine told me the other day that he was trying to find a seminary where he could do post graduate work in preaching, and he discovered that such a seminary was hard to find. One major seminary told him that they just didn't have anything to offer him. Why? Because so many churches these days like to get involved in all sorts of programs that look intelligent while the foolishness of the message that must be proclaimed is muted and even forgotten.

Every one of us must find a church in which the Word of Christ is central. This must be the message that comes from the pulpit every time the church meets in

worship and whenever study groups meet within the church.

And don't be satisfied with a substitute. A church that does not focus on preaching the Word of Christ is not worth your time or effort.

Be aware, though, that anyone who wants the full benefits of the Word of Jesus must prepare himself to be scorned and ridiculed by others. There's no question about it: the message of salvation that is described in the Bible causes enormous offense. It tells us that we cannot save ourselves but that we must depend totally on the finished work of Jesus Christ. It calls us to worship a God who has humbled Himself in the depths of suffering and who saves us through what appears to be weakness.

Be aware, too, that this message is being announced today in a world in which the human race has never been more impressed with itself. Mankind, in its pride, wants to build its own gods. Surely, a race of beings that can explore the outer reaches of space should be able to save itself. So we think. So we are horribly in error. And the Word of Christ contradicts our error and calls us to the only way of salvation. No wonder so many people laugh at the gospel and make comic strips about preachers.

There is only one way of salvation-the way of Jesus, who died for us on a cross. This is the truth. Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. There is no other Savior anywhere. You are a sinner just like I am. And we must humble ourselves and cry out, "O God, be merciful to me, a sinner." We must run to Jesus and ask Him to save us. And He will do that if we ask Him to.

I know that what I have just said sounds foolish. And it's frightening that the message about the only way of salvation sounds like foolishness. Now you will have to choose whether you are going to die laughing or whether you will believe and live eternally.

PRAYER

Lord, we are ashamed that your message of salvation sounds strange to our ears. Forgive us for wandering so very far away from you. Now give us faith in our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Lord, work in the hearts of preachers and within your church so that there may be a new dedication to the preaching of your Word of salvation. Help preachers to resist the temptation to make your message more palatable and acceptable. And keep them from turning aside from the main task of bringing the gospel.

O God, work in our hearts so that we will not rest until we have found a church in which we can hear the message of salvation through Jesus. Both we and our children need this.

Lord Jesus, thank you for dying on the cross for our salvation. Now use the message of your sacrifice to bring many into kingdom. We pray in your name, Jesus. Amen.

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