

Pastor's Conference #5 - the Pulpit: It's Power & Pitfalls

by Alistair Begg

The sermon highlights the power and pitfalls of the pulpit, emphasizing the importance of prayer, humility, and the high standard of gospel preaching.

Duration: 52:45

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, 1 Corinthians 1:18-19, 1 Corinthians 2:2, 1 Corinthians 2:4-5, 2 Corinthians 5:20

Topics: "Pulpit"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the importance of not just hearing the word of God, but also putting it into action. He warns against deceiving ourselves by claiming to believe in the word but not living it out. The speaker also highlights the danger of losing our way in pastoral ministry and encourages pastors to constantly align themselves with the purpose-driven statements of the Scriptures. The sermon concludes with a prayer that acknowledges the paradoxical nature of the Christian faith and asks for God's guidance and clarity.

Transcript

Can I invite you to take your Bibles and turn with me to 1 Corinthians 1, and to follow along as I read from the 18th verse, 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 it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, the intelligence of the intelligent, I will frustrate. Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? 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.

Brothers, 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. 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. He 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 wisdom from God, that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.

Therefore, as it is written, Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord. When I came to you, brothers, 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.

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 men's wisdom, but on God's power. Thanks be to God for his work.

Father, with our Bibles on our laps and with our minds tuned to hear your voice, we pray that the Spirit of God will be our teacher. For Jesus' sake. Amen.

Now, my subject this morning is the pulpit, its pitfalls and its power. We're using the pulpit as a metaphor, of course. We're not suggesting that a block of wood has in itself power or faces pitfalls, but we're seeing the pulpit as the place at which the opening up of the scriptures takes place.

Our conviction is that from the pulpits of our country we are supposed to hear not the bright ideas of men, not their rambling thoughts, not their theorizing or their speculation. We assume that the pulpit is not a place for sloganeering or for manipulation, that it's not the place for tall stories and emotionalism, but it is the place for Spirit-filled, Christ-exalting, Bible-based, life-impacting instruction and direction from God through the words of a spokesman which impresses upon the listeners the power of text and not the performance of the preacher. That is the foundational assumption with which we come to this morning's study.

I have had the privilege of preaching the Bible for the last 23 years, at least since beginning to do so in a formal context within the framework of a local church. To address this subject this morning reminds me of the young man who graduated with a Ph.D. in child psychology. I'm very sure of his position.

His Ph.D. thesis had been published under the heading, Five Definitive Principles for Rearing Children. He was a single man, and after a year or two he got married. When he had his first child, they had come to him and asked if he would redo the thesis, and he took the opportunity to change the title to Five Principles for Child Rearing.

He dropped the definitive. After his second child came along, he changed it to Five Thoughts on Child Rearing. By the time they had closed off their family with the fifth child, he had changed it to Help Me, I'm Dying.

Whilst I should be presumptuous in front of many who are my peers and some who are my mentors, I feel very much that way about addressing the whole subject of preaching at all. The longer I go, the less I seem to know. The more mysterious the whole thing appears to me, what it's really about.

Even in private conversation in the last 48 hours, I've found myself often at great pains to try and articulate thoughts that are deep within me. Much of what I'm going to share this morning, especially initially, is largely without biblical warrant in the sense that I'm going to share with you first some pitfalls that may actually be my own peculiar propensities, and therefore it gives you an insight into where I'm coming from.

It may be that you can find a point of identification with them also.

Then we'll turn to finish with the scriptures by looking at the nature of the power of the pulpit. Bruce Thielman expresses what many preachers have felt when he says there is no special honor in being called to the preaching ministry. There is only special pain.

The pulpit calls those anointed to it as the sea calls its sailors. And like the sea, it batters and bruises and does not rest. To preach, to really preach, is to die naked a little at a time and to know each time you do it that you must do it again.

John Bright, the English speaker and statesman and brilliant orator who was well used to standing before crowds, said on one occasion, nothing that I can think of would induce me to undertake to speak to the same audience once a week for a year. Yet God enlists less able souls as pastors to disturb the comfortable and comfort the disturbed two or three times a week. Lord Jones was mentioned with frequency yesterday in the Q&A session, and I quote him in the opening address that he gave to the students at Theological Seminary Westminster in 1969 in the city of Philadelphia, explaining why it was that he had been prepared to come and give these lectures on preaching.

He said, ultimately, my reasons for being very ready to give these lectures is that to me the work of preaching is the highest and the greatest and the most glorious calling to which anyone can ever be called. If you want something in addition to that, I would say without hesitation that the most urgent need in the Christian church today is true preaching. And as it is the greatest and most urgent need in the church, it is obviously the greatest need in the world also.

That is a quite staggering statement from a man who had been trained as a medical doctor, who was assistant to Lord Horder, who was actually the physician to the Queen. And he had a life before him of great prominence and opportunity, not only in the practice of medicine but also in the high echelons of English society. And he turned from that to a small Welsh Calvinistic Methodist chapel, and burying himself in the obscurity of the hills of Wales, he began to fulfill what he says here was for him the highest and the greatest calling that anyone can ever face.

Certainly when we read of those who have been used of God in the preaching of the Word, and when we listen to what they have said, the immensity of the challenge that is before us is heightened. John Owen noted in his writings a number of qualifications which he referred to as being necessary for the effective performance of the primary pastoral duty. And I'm just going to tell you what they are for the record.

His number one was spiritual wisdom and understanding of the mysteries of the gospel. Secondly, an experience of the power of the truth in our own souls. Owen said of the scriptures or of the message, if it does not dwell in power in us, it cannot pass with power from us.

And no amount of effervescence or personality or ingenuity will be able to compensate for that divine transaction which is, in the words of Brooks, truth through human personality. Thirdly, and obviously, he said that the pastor would need skill in dividing the Word of God correctly. Fourthly, that he would require spiritual discernment of the condition of his congregation.

And fifthly, that he would need to be marked by a zeal for the glory of God and a compassion for the souls of men. Now, to the degree that Owen articulates for us there, the high standard of gospel preaching, small wonder that many of us would find ourselves shrinking from it, rather than seeking to press

ourselves forward. Let me give to you, then, just some random observations out of my own experience that relate to peculiar pitfalls that attach to pulpit ministry.

I plan not to spend a long time on these. First of all is prayerlessness. Surely the devil laughs at prayerless preaching.

He surely doesn't care about preaching that is not backed by and sourced in prayer. I have a little booklet in my files published by the Overseas Missionary Fellowship about prayer, and the front cover bears this quotation. If our prayer is meager, it is because we regard it as supplemental and not fundamental.

As I walk from the session yesterday, someone asked me, number one, how long do you think it is necessary to spend in preparation for preaching in terms of the study of the Word? And then the second and harder question was, how long do you spend in prayer in the prospect of preaching? I don't think there is any doubt at all that since the devil knows that the greatest effectiveness is in the soul of the man who is bathed in prayer, who is dependent upon God for everything, then he will seek to do everything in his power, limited as it is, to prevent us from that one thing, so that we will find turning to our commentaries, even turning to our Bibles, doing all kinds of things able to squeeze them into our days, and then somehow or another scrambling at the last minute to try and put in a little bit of prayer. In Acts chapter 6, in the spiritual reorganization that takes place in the early days of the Church, you will remember that the apostles, in determining that the waiting upon the tables needs to be given over to others who have peculiar gifts in practical ministry, said leave aside the preaching of the Word to wait on tables. We will pass this on to someone else, and we will give ourselves to prayer and the preaching of the Word.

I don't think there is any question, dear friends, that our preaching would be one hundred percent more effective if we were to pray far more, and if our congregations were to undergird our proclamations with their prayers. It is a great pitfall to become increasingly prayerless. Secondly, the pitfall of allowing an ever-widening gap between my life and the things I say.

Allowing an ever-widening gap between my life and the things I say. Now, that's essentially 1 Timothy 4, verse 16. Watch your life and your doctrine closely.

There is a peculiar pitfall in preaching, and it is this, that we think that because we have preached it, we have lived it. But after we have preached it, we have only preached it. Unless, of course, we have lived it before we preached it.

But it has to be both lived and proclaimed. And that's where, incidentally, our wives come in, and our children, too. One of my friends, an elderly gentleman who was not actually married, said, Every pastor needs a wife if for no other reason than to keep him humble and to be there to say, You know, honey, there is a brittleness about your tone, there is something here that just doesn't meld in the way that it once did.

It's not easy to take, but vital to hear. That's where accountability comes in amongst our colleagues. Because we can deceive ourselves and become those whom James warns against who are merely the hearers of the word, albeit the hearers of our own words, proclaiming the word, and we are not doers, and we deceive ourselves.

That's what he says. Do not be merely hearers of the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.

And there is a great challenge in this, I'm sure. C.S. Lewis ends his book, *The Four Loves*, and it is actually on the final page, at least of my copy, with this striking statement. He says, Those like myself, whose imagination far exceeds their obedience, are subject to a just penalty.

We easily imagine conditions far higher than we have actually reached. If we describe what we have imagined, we may make others and make ourselves believe that we have really been there, and so fool both them and ourselves. A peculiar challenge to anyone involved in teaching.

Surely, let not many of you become teachers, for he who teaches will be judged with greater strictness. The third pitfall I refer to as the danger of excessive popularity. I put this down here.

Frankly, many of us as pastors would like a little dose of this for once in a while. It may not be a major problem for you at this point in your ministry, but it may come. And every so often it will come, and with it comes the danger of thinking of ourselves more highly than we ought, beginning actually to believe that what people say about us is true, when in point of fact they don't even know us, so why would they even say these things? When I was a small boy, my father used to take me to a number of events that I didn't want to go to, not least of all the singing of male-voiced choirs.

It always seemed to happen on a Saturday afternoon. As part of a stop to my reluctance, he would allow me to go into a confectionery store and purchase sweets or candies, as you would say. Those were the days when they still had them in the big jars, and they metered them out in two ounces or four ounces or whatever it was, so you pointed up and the lady got it down and she poured it in the tray and she weighed it and she put it in a bag and she gave it to you.

So there was a transaction involved, and I remember particularly one place on a Saturday afternoon. I must have been all shined up and ready for action, brill cream on the hair, shaved up the back of my head, looked like I was ready for the army. There were, I remember, a number of people in the store, and I don't know what happened in the shop, but it must have been that somebody said complimentary things about this shiny-faced wee chap that was waiting for his sweets.

And when the shop cleared and there was just the lady and myself, this lady whom I don't know, I met her once in my life, and she handed me the bag of candy. She leant over the counter and she said, And I have learned in the course of pastoral ministry to discount the high end and to discount the low end. There are people who just, for all the best reasons, will tell you you're fantastic.

You know it isn't true, and therefore you have to learn not to listen to that, to walk around metaphorically with your fingers in your ears. Uzziah was gloriously helped until he became strong, and when he became strong he grew proud to his own destruction. I probably at this point in my life faced the greatest dangers that I have ever faced in relation to this particular pitfall.

Being aware of it is one thing. Being helped in it is another. The fourth pitfall is the other side, and that is the danger of crippling despondency.

The pulpit can lift you up and make you think you're terrific. It can bring you down and make you think you're the worst person that ever lived. To live with an almost paralyzing sense of uselessness attaches itself to the work of the pulpit.

I've not lived with this a lot, but I have lived with it routinely. I'm not talking now about clinical depression. I'm not talking about manic bouts.

I'm just talking about the blues. I'm talking about being totally cheesed off. I'm talking about being absolutely fed up.

I'm talking about ending a Sunday and wanting to run as far as you possibly can from every responsibility in pastoral ministry that you have ever known, for enduring the smiles and the handshakes, wishing somehow that you could actually merge with the platform or the pavement that you're standing on and be lost into obscurity forever. Waking up at two in the morning and trying to think of one other reasonable thing that you could do with your life, if only you could get a job. And fearing that the only reason you're still in pastoral ministry is because you couldn't get a job.

The spirit of Elijah is wrong, but it's real. I'm the only one that's left around here that cares. I'm the only one that really believes this.

I'm the only one that really owns this. I'm the only one that really understands this. No, you're not.

I'm going to find a broom tree. I'm going to sit under it. The Lord sent the angel and said, Have a drink of water, have a muffin and go to sleep.

He sent the angel a second time and said, Have a drink of water, have a muffin and go to sleep. Luther had a great strategy in relationship to this, because his wife one morning came down dressed completely in the black of formalized mourning. She took her place opposite him at the breakfast table, and he was staggered by her appearance.

He said, My dear, what has happened? Has someone died that I didn't know? Yes, she said, God has died. Come now, said Luther, that is a dreadful thing to say. Then she said, Well, why, my dear Martin, do you live as you live, if God is still alive? It is well with my soul, was written out of the experience of a psychiatric hospital.

No, it was not. It was written out of the experience of the loss of the four kids. God moved in a mysterious way.

It was written by Kelper out of the experience of a psychiatric hospital. Judge not the Lord by feeble strength, nor try his works in vain. God is his own interpreter, and he will make it plain.

I don't know that anybody has ever truly preached unless they have felt the burden of crippling despondency. For when you read the prophets, it says the oracle of Amos, or it says the oracle of Elijah. The word there is the burden, the burden of this man, this immense burden that you have the responsibility now to stand and deliver.

It's not just giving a talk. It's not just unfolding your wisdom. It's not just sharing your ideas.

It is that God has put you in this place. I don't know what it's like to have a baby, but I can imagine that it's pretty awesome. I would imagine that to truly preach is the closest a man will ever come to the travail of childbirth.

All the joy and all the sorrow, all the pain and all the expectation and all the emotion that is wrapped up in. Therefore, this pitfall is a real pitfall. Remember that when you're glide-handing your pastor.

Remember that when you're making your superficial comments in the dangling conversation, and the superficial sighs on the borders of our minds, as you speak the things that matter with words that must be

said. Can analysis be worthwhile? Is theater really dead? So much twaddle. What do you do? What do I do? Well, my wife hugs me and then she kicks me and kicks me back into action, hugs me back into life.

Luther's antidote, incidentally, when someone came to him with despondency was, he said, Harness the horses and spread manure on the fields. Can you imagine going for pastoral counseling with a sense of crippling despondency? You go in and you start to unfold your long story, and Martin interrupts. He says, My dear soul, let me tell you in a phrase what to do.

Just go harness your horses and spread manure on your fields. There'll be something about that smell up your nostrils that will transform everything for all time. I must move on because there's a second half to this message.

The fifth one is laziness, the pitfall of laziness. There's no question that if you give yourself wholeheartedly to the ministry of preaching, it will demand every ounce of your fiber. But if you want to skive, which is a Scottish word for do as little as possible, then pastoral ministry provides that opportunity.

There are a tremendous number of lazy people in pastoral ministry. If they were involved in any kind of private enterprise, they'd be belly up, they'd be flat broke, they'd never make a dime, and they need a good kick in the seat of the pants and back into action. Beware the laziness of just sitting around in your socks when the members of your congregation have had their shoes on for the last four hours.

Stop this nonsense about how you need to be home with your family, because if you don't take care of your family, you can't take care of the Church. I understand that, but that's not an excuse for sidling around and going on picnics and doing whatever pleases you, nor me. Laziness is a dreadful thing, look at how many ministers have got big fat tummies.

How do you get them? Sixthly, I was talking about people in Britain there, I wasn't talking about America. Sixthly, misplaced affections. The pitfall of misplaced affections such as loving the ministry rather than loving Jesus, such as loving talking and hearing your voice rather than loving the privilege of opening up the Scriptures, such as loving the Bible and not actually loving the Christ to whom we are introduced in the Bible.

It's very possible to stay close to the Word of the Lord and not be close to the Lord of the Word, to become a theoretician, to become doctrinaire, to become able, to become an answerer of questions, but to become cold and refrigerated and disentangled from the loving embrace of the Christ that we serve. That's a pitfall, to be consumed with money rather than with contentment, to drift into immorality rather than to live in personal purity. Misplaced affection.

That's Solomon, incidentally. Seventhly, a sense of aimlessness. Howard Hendricks apparently had in his study a sign, he may still, that said on it, what in the world are you doing with these people? There is a great danger that we lose our way in pastoral ministry, so it is imperative that we constantly are harnessing ourselves to the purpose-driven statements of the Scriptures.

Paul is classic, he says, I want to win as many as possible in 1 Corinthians 9. He says, I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection in Philippians 3. He says, I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. In other words, he was absolutely clear about what he was doing and where he was going. And it is a shame when in the responsibility of opening up the Scriptures, our friends and our colleagues, our leaders alongside us are looking to us and saying,

Do you have any idea what you are doing? Do you have any notion of where you are going? Will you help us? Will you take the helm of the ship? Some of us need help in relationship to that, and people will always be glad to help, provided we are prepared to say help.

But some of us want to still hold the tiller. We don't quite know where to move it or how to direct the boat, and we are aimless and we drift, and our congregation drifts with us. Did I quote to you yesterday? I've spoken so many times in the last few days.

My little friend T.S. Mooney, who said that his purpose in teaching the Bible class was that every boy would have a purpose in his life, a Savior in his heart, and a Bible in his hand. Clarity. Eighthly, the danger of capitulation.

The danger of capitulation, forgetting that the primary purpose of our pulpit is to see men and women put in a right relationship with God. For us to capitulate to the notion that it is our business to either make people happy, or to see their lives integrated, or to relieve their circumstances, or to improve their conditions. No, we stand between a holy God and sinful men and women, and ours is a ministry of reconciliation.

And knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men. Our responsibility is to feed the sheep. It's to teach them, not to tickle them.

It's to guide them. There is a great danger in our day that we would capitulate and we would become just glorified cheerleaders, happy chaps that stand up and try to make everybody feel a little better about themselves. The last pitfall I want to mention picks up on the ramblings that we started yesterday about naked preaching, if you were present.

You will remember that the question was, how right is it for the pastor to use himself as an illustration? And I knew in the back of my mind that I had something in my files concerning this, and I found it, and I just want to use this opportunity to share it with you. There's someone who's writing an article about this whole notion of authenticity and being authentic. And indeed the heading of the article is, naked creatures are distracting.

And he says this, have you ever decided to act authentically? I think I'll act authentically now. That's as dumb, he says, as deciding to act humbly. You either are or you aren't.

To intentionally pepper my sermon with doses of predetermined authenticity is to be inauthentic. An elderly woman complained to me that she could tell when her pastor had not had time to prepare a sermon, because he would begin crying at the weakest point in the sermon. Crying, I said? Yeah, crying, she said.

He says something like, when I think of what Jesus did for us, I just, well, forgive me. I'm just overcome with gratitude. He usually is overcome with gratitude about once a month, usually related to his fishing schedule.

In a society where the emotional striptease is the standard stuff of daytime television, in a culture where we are encouraged relentlessly to scan our egos as if there is no help for us other than that which is self-derived, do we preachers need to be authentic? Authenticity is more than a matter of being who I am. It is a matter of being who God calls me to be. For preachers, authenticity means being true, not just to our feelings, but true to our vocation, true to God's call.

We serve God's people by laying aside ourselves, taking up the cross, preaching Christ and him crucified, whether we feel like it next Sunday or not. That's authenticity. Now, that brings me away from the pitfalls to the other side of the coin and to the power, and I want to spend the balance of my time here.

You say, we better hurry up because you don't have much left on the scale. I can't remember even when we started. We didn't really start at half past ten, did we? We started the session at half past ten.

When did I start speaking? Quarter to? All right. It's twenty, it's thirty-five. I've got about ten minutes.

Okay. Now, we read purposely from 1 Corinthians and chapter 1 and 2. Let me just say a word or two about power. Paul is talking here about power.

In this section, as you would know, you'll be familiar with that. It is a very timely message because in his generation, as in ours, there was a phenomenal preoccupation with the notion of power. And Paul, recognizing that it was customary for people in the context in which he was moving to be intrigued by, interested in power, powerful people doing powerful things, he apparently picks that up and chooses to instruct the Corinthian church as to the nature of God's dynamite.

And in the midst of all that he is saying here, and he is saying a great deal, let me zero in on this one notion, which I believe to be true to the text, and you're sensible people and you can examine and see whether this is accurate or not. What Paul is saying here, that power, the power of God, is active on the lips of those who preach. That the power of God is manifested through the foolishness of what was preached.

So that in this very act of spirit-filled, God-anointed, Bible-based instruction from God to man through the lips of a spokesman, God's power is manifest. And that, you see, is the explanation of apostolic preaching. That Peter and the others were not on the streets of Jerusalem giving lectures on Christian doctrine.

They were not on the streets of Jerusalem sharing vague generalities about Christian principles that people might like to try and appropriate and assimilate into their lives and thereby be better people. No, they were on the streets of Jerusalem conveying facts, but conveying facts in such a way that it was owned by the Spirit of God. And so there was a power, there was a dynamite about what was going on.

Now, in a book that was written many years ago by a little Scottish theologian by the name of James S. Stuart, he highlights this, and it's a book that I found in a second-hand store just recently, and he talks about this in relationship to contemporary preaching. For some of you, this quote will take you into the realm of postgraduate study, and you can just kind of go, oh, and get back to it. For others of you, it will be apropos where you are.

He says, The kerygma is so much more than the recounting of certain facts, whether this be done in Aramaic or Hellenistic Greek or Basic English or anything else, and all theological reinterpretation and all evangelism will be words, words, words, unless they are the creative word. Peter could have told on the streets of Jerusalem the facts about Christ, could have kept on recounting the events of the gospel without doing anything that could be remotely be described by the verb the New Testament uses for preach. A film of the life of Jesus taken by a neutral reporter, writes Bruner, or an account of the life of Jesus written by an unbelieving compiler such as Josephus, for instance, would not have the power to awaken faith in Jesus.

Now there's an aside here that I think I should probably leave alone. Now I'm just going to mention it and I'll go on. I don't believe that drama awakens faith in Jesus.

I don't believe that art awakens faith in Jesus. I believe that preaching awakens faith in Jesus in a way that nothing else does. Christian preaching begins only when faith in the message has reached such a pitch that the man or the community proclaiming it becomes part of the message proclaimed.

When the man or the community becomes part of the message proclaimed, so people come among your Christian community and they say these people are the message. The message is these people. This preacher is this issue.

This passion is this person. You can't disentangle the man from the communication that is taking place. These Christians must show me they are redeemed, cried Nietzsche, before I will believe in their Redeemer.

Thus when the apostolic church declared the hour cometh and now is, this is the age of the spirit. The church itself in its total life was part of that dramatic truth. For men encountering that church felt, even though they were pagans, a waft of the supernatural, a mysterious power like the stirring of a dawn wind.

Isn't that an amazing little section? They encountered, even as pagans, a waft of the supernatural, a mysterious power. That's the preaching of Whitefield. That's the 18th century awakening.

That is something far different from a knowledgeable fellow speaking with emphasis. It is a divine encounter by means of the living God. Now when Paul uses power in relationship to preaching, this is his emphasis.

He says God has chosen to work in such a way that his power might be displayed. That, he says, illustrating it, is why he has chosen the likes of you. It's almost humorous in verse 26 and following.

He says if you want to know that this principle is true, that God's power is made perfect in weakness, that God has chosen to bring down the strongholds of wisdom by the measure of foolishness, he says just think about yourselves. He says just think about your church. What were you like when you were called? Not many of you were wise by human standard.

You weren't a bunch of influential people. You didn't come from noble birth. And he says that's the whole point.

God chose the foolish to shame the wise, the weak to shame the strong, the lowly things that despise things, the things that are not, so that people would stand back and say there is only one explanation for this event, and that is that God's power is here. Now that's what we want to see happen. Not that we reduce our congregations to the lowest common denominator so that pagans feel that they are at some sort of erstwhile Johnny Carson show or something that makes them feel very comfortable, and a little band plays, and a little interview happens, and a little skit happens, and, you know, funny people come out and dance around, and they go away and they say, my, you know, the church is a wonderful place.

That's not it at all. Think about the personality, he says, and think about the preaching. When I came to you brothers, I didn't come with eloquence or superior wisdom.

As I proclaimed to you the testimony about God or the testimony of God, I wasn't there to share my ideas. I was there to speak as from God, about God, to bring you to God. Now, when you do a little bit of history and go back and read the Acts of the Apostles, read around chapter 14, 15, 16, 17 into 18, you will know that he wasn't coming off a private plane here.

He had been in Philippi, and he got flogged. He went from there to Thessalonica, and riots broke out, and they had to take him out of the city under cover of darkness. He buzzed down to Berea, and the people who came from Thessalonica stirred up the agitation in Berea.

He then went to Athens, got to Athens, and his heart was breaking. He had paroxysms as he looked at the idolatrous situation there, and his life was stirred within him. Then on from there and into Corinth, and he begins to preach in the synagogue, and they throw him out of the synagogue.

And he reminds them of these historic days. He says, When I came, you remember, I didn't have much baggage. He picked him up from the airport, and he was coming to speak at your conference in Corinth.

He said, Do you have any bags, Paul? Well, I had a couple that I left behind. What did you leave behind? I left eloquence behind. Oh, you did? We love eloquence here in Corinth.

Yeah, well, I didn't bring that. Well, you know, people are expecting that. Yeah, I know, I didn't bring it.

Well, you know, people are really into that. They are into miracles, and they are into eloquence, and they are into wisdom. I mean, haven't you done a kind of market research before you showed up here? I mean, you know you are supposed to give the people what they want, don't you? He said, No, I didn't bring eloquence.

I'm not going to impress people. I'm not going to do all that kind of Shakespearean drivel just to impress people. I'm not going to impress them with my talk, you know, my lesson, madam, to expostulate what duty is, why day, day, night, night is time, and time is time, for nothing but to waste both night, day, and time.

And since brevity is the soul of wit, and tediousness the limbs and outward flourishes, I will be brief. Your noble son is mad, mad call I it, for to define true madness, what is but to be nothing else but mad. And the Queen breaks in and says, Polonius, dry up.

Let's have more matter and less art. Get to the point. There is a kind of preaching that just impresses people with this stuff.

Let me tell you, you cannot impress people with yourself and impress them with the Lord Jesus simultaneously. So he left behind a bag of eloquence, he left behind a bag of wisdom. I don't have time to go into all of this.

It is Sophia, it's a very important thing, and he says, I did bring one or two things with me. I brought weakness and fear and much trembling. Oh, this is terrific, the guy must be saying when he picks him up, you know, he takes him home to his house, he puts him in the house, he goes through the kitchen, his wife's there, she says, Well, what do you think we've got? He says, Well, as far as I'm concerned, we've got a major problem.

I was talking with him on the way home in the back of the cart, and he's not going to do anything about eloquence, he's ditched on the whole idea of wisdom. He says that he frankly feels totally scared spitless,

and he's shaking a lot. That was the manner in which he showed up, the message with which he came was real clear.

I resolved, and krino is the verb, it means I made the singular determination. Not that he was unable for these things, he was exceptionally bright, he couldn't have written a book of Romans had he not been. But I determined, I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

I was weak, I had fear, I shook a bit. My message and my preaching did not say to people, Man, is he wise, is he persuasive? But there was something about the message I proclaimed, and it was a demonstration of the Spirit's power. Brethren, is this not what we long for? That the Spirit of God would come down upon our preaching, surprise us, that even the pagans would catch a waft of the supernatural, would be caught up in some way.

Now his express motivation is there in verse 5. I determined to do this so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power. See, if he came in and just impressed them with his ideas and his notions and his skill and his eloquence and so on, then the people would have been stabilized for a wee while, but they would have been at the mercy of the next person who came into town, a little brighter, a little more eloquent. So Paul says, when I came in, I didn't want you to respond on the basis of that.

That's why I proclaimed the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ, so that your faith might rest not in man's wisdom, but in God's power. My dear friend and mentor, Eric Alexander, in giving an address in Canada some years ago, concluded his remarks like this. There is one thing I want to say to my brethren who are called to be preachers.

There is one thing above all other things in the world that we need. That is the mysterious thing we call the unction of the Holy Spirit of God upon our lives and upon our ministry. Charles Spurgeon used to say, unction is that somewhat that it is impossible to define.

But you always know when it is present and you can usually tell when it is absent. We need to cry to God for the Holy Spirit's anointing upon our preaching, so that the people may not go away with the notion, what a great preacher. Instead, they should say, what an amazing God, how glorious He is.

We have been in the presence of God this day. Truly, God is on this place. Often times God takes the most feeble, weak, despised servant of His and comes down upon him for the simple reason that it would be difficult for anybody else to get the glory.

God exalts His name and glorifies His Son and melts the hearts of His people because God has come upon this particular instrument of His glory. Above all other things, we are to be the instruments of His glory and honor and we shall find expository preaching, the most amazing labor in the world. There is really nothing quite like it.

It is utterly consuming. It may sometimes be utterly exhausting, sometimes utterly exhilarating, but it is the most glorious privilege in all the world. On mornings, I find myself getting up from my study desk and walking around saying out loud in the study, fancy for being paid to do this.

Isn't that one of the great mysteries of the world? Fancy somebody actually paying you to do this kind of thing. I find that quite overwhelming. It is a privilege beyond my understanding.

From one of my dearest of Scottish friends to one of my dearest American friends, in a note I keep in my file from the 17th of April, 1980, Alistair writes John MacArthur, preach the word, brother. This is the heart of our service, not always easy, but always blessed. In my often struggles to fulfill that service, the following Puritan prayer has strengthened me.

Let me finish now my address with this Puritan prayer. Lord, high and holy, meek and lowly, thou hast brought me to the valley of vision, where I live in the heights with thee and in the depths with me. Hemmed in by the mountains of sin, I yet see thy glory.

Let me learn by paradox that the way down is the way up, that to be lowly is to be high, that the broken heart is the healed heart, that the contrite spirit is the rejoicing spirit, that the repenting soul is the victorious soul, that to have nothing is to possess all, that to bear the cross is to wear the crown, that to give is to receive, that the valley is the place of clearest vision. Lord, in the daytime, stars can be seen from deepest wells, and the deeper the wells, the brighter thy stars shine. Amen.

Thank you for your attention.

Audio: <https://sermonindex1.b-cdn.net/17/SID17025.mp3>

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/alistair-begg/pastors-conference-5-the-pulpit-its-power-pitfalls/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net