

Confessions of an Attention Seeker

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Sisyphus is the mythological King of Corinth, who after being a bit too cheeky and self-aggrandizing, gets what's coming by being punished by the god Zeus. Now mythological punishments never disappoint and this one is no different. Poor Sisyphus is forced to push a boulder up a hill, only to find that once it looks like he has succeeded, have the boulder roll back down again. And so he does it again and again.

Sometimes I wonder if as ministers we end up punished in our own version of the Sisyphian cycle; each week I attempt to push a clever sermon into the pulpit, determined that this will be the great success that I believe it deserves to be, only to have it roll back down into Monday where I have another week to come up with my own masterpiece. Again.

Now this isn't about the rhythms of the pastoral week. No, just as the rhythm was a punishment for a certain pride, I believe a certain breed of pride lives in me that is causing this rhythm to become a punishment. You see I am an attention seeker. I am driven by the need to be novel. I love to be clever, and seen to be clever. That's why I start papers with references to Greek Myths.

Now, to set the scene, I occupy and preach in the world of consumption. At any given moment we can stream breathtaking sermons by preachers far better (and godlier) than me. They are just right there. And our attention spans are very short. So, it follows – I need to punch above my weight. I have to prove my worth. I have to be ambitious. I need to be clever. But the table is rigged. We think we just need to be able to count cards better and then we'll be on top. But no, we need to fold. Cut our losses and walk out into the fresh air.

The real problem lies in my addiction to being noticed. Being seen as having the answers. And I do chase that hit as eagerly and creatively as any junkie. My Bible talks are constructed around it and my conversations are shaped by it. Ironically, we would decry the desire for popularity and fame by any other means and yet we do the same thing in the very sermons that are meant to be the source of freedom and life.

What do I mean by being clever? I never want to say something that anyone else has ever said before. I don't want to look at the passage in a tired or predictable way. I want my application to be a twist, like my sermon is a thriller where you never quite know how it's going to end. These might not be quite so bad per se, but the problem lies in just how short the step is from wanting to use my God given creativity for the good of God's people to using my self-absorbed cleverness to get the attention of those who are hearing me. I want to wow people. I want to be seen as having something.

We are good at this. Take languages. Give me accordance and I'll pull rabbits out of hats every week. And few will question me. Or commentaries and commentators. Chances are we have spent more time and money on access to Christian thought than most other people in your congregation. Just cherry pick your favourite author at the moment, and even if someone else is reading the same thing and they are seeing your play book, well that's all the better because you get the kudos for being a disciple of a relevant and popular author. And then there is philosophy. This is my Alamo. If someone questions me or makes me feel slightly out of my depth, I'll just pull out some Hegel or Heidegger or whoever to trump that conversation. That's not all though, we also use our knowledge of current events, political insight or cultural interpretation. When being the centre of attention is the end, then being clever, novel, insightful and relevant become the tools of our trade. And if we do this really well, you'll probably get commended by another minister.

Mixed in here, there is probably some virtue there that the Gospel should never be preached predictably or pedestrian. But I wonder how much I'm elbowing the Holy Spirit out of the way and

I'm making it my job to settle the truth of the Gospel into the hearts of people. Yet it sounds so incredibly pitiful to suggest I do that by my cleverness.

In fact the times when Jesus, or Paul for that matter, come across as clever (and they are brilliant – think of 'Give to Caesar what is Caesar's' or the Mars Hill address) it is actually to try and undo those who are self-aggrandizing and attention seeking. They are putting those who are being clever in their place. Sometimes we picture ourselves as the knowledgeable ones but I wonder how often it would be us that would get the rebuke for trying to incline the attention and popularity toward ourselves. Paul would say to the Corinthians (who I remind myself of more than I like to admit),

When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human 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 with great fear and 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 human wisdom, but on God's power.

I don't doubt that we, at a deep level, want to only preach the cross. That is something we have probably settled and need to resettle again and again. But I think my real problem is I think both too highly of myself and too lowly. On one hand, I just don't treat myself with the level of distrust that is necessary, like Paul, to drain my words of any attention seeking quality so that those hearing are actually just meet Jesus. I want to be there too. I want my hearers to meet Jesus. And me. Like we are the dynamic duo. I'm just that proud.

And yet on the other hand this comes from a deep seated insecurity. That I actually need to be the one that draws attention, or actually validation, to myself. Its like school all over again and I'm the class clown, except I have a theological degree and I'm using, nothing short of, God's Word to get people to laugh. This is a doubt of God's Word spoken over me, that I am rescued and redeemed and adopted. It's like I'm back out there on my own again, every week, trying to convince people that I'm worth something. There is no end to what my own sinful heart will fashion into an idol that will promise me fulfillment. Worse than this, it actually shows that I don't think highly enough of my Saviour, that he would take my very ordinary testimony of himself, and by his Spirit, speak the Words of life to others. Rolling my great and clever sermon into the pulpit, actually just reveals the diminished view I have of Jesus and his redemption of me.

I wonder what this looks like then? To continue to fuel my imagination to paint the gospel each week with all the texture and colour it deserves. To be creative, just as we all are called to employ every aspect of ourselves for his glory. To make much of Him, knowing only the cross. To demonstrate the Spirit's work through me each week. I don't imagine that to be comfortable. Because it requires a death in me every day. It requires a firm suspicion of myself that I might smuggle into the pulpit my own cleverness on Sunday and a long interrogation of myself on Monday as I set out to prepare again. It means considering the brokenness and difficulties I experience each week as gifts from Jesus so that I might know and speak of him as the only Saviour (we are close, but we're certainly not the Dynamic Duo), rather than as interruptions to my genius. It requires me to see myself from his perspective and love myself as he does. Not by any fragile act of my own, much less a sermon.

Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a very clever sinner.



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