

This morning, I am beginning a new sermon series called the Gospel Changes Everything, based on the New Testament book 1 Corinthians, which is the Apostle Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth. Before we begin, let me reiterate that we believe that:

*2 Timothy 3:16-17 - All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, <sup>17</sup> so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.*

And that goes for the letters of Paul as well as the gospels or any other book of the Bible. Before we dive into 1 Corinthians, I want to address how you read the New Testament letters like 1 Corinthians. First of all, you need to understand that these letters are not addressed to you. They weren't dropped out of the sky to 21<sup>st</sup> century America. They are letters addressed to specific people in a specific context. This means that some of what is written will be particular to the culture, while some of it will be transcultural – for all people in all circumstance and all times. Sometimes you might read something that you can apply to our culture word for word – think *1 Corinthians 10:31 - So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.* Sometimes, you may need to do a little work in order to understand what a passage meant in its original context and whether there are any principles that apply to us today. For instance: *1 Corinthians 11:5 - And every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head-- it is just as though her head were shaved.*

Basically, in order to understand what these passages meant to its listeners and what it means for us today, **you need to do some work to understand the historical and cultural context**: what the culture was like, what the Corinthian church was like, and what problems were going on in that he was addressing. It's going to take consulting Bible dictionaries, concordances, other Biblical as well as historical sources outside of the Bible.

**So where is Corinth?** In Paul's day, Corinth was a part of the Roman Empire, a major port city on a narrow land bridge between Peloponnesus and mainland Greece. As a result, it was a significant economic and cultural hub, and a great place for a missionary like Paul to start a church.

In **Acts 18**, we read about how Paul started the church in Corinth. The historical elements of this chapter, specifically the reference to the political leaders Claudus and Gallo, mean that Paul was starting the Corinthian church in the year 50 AD. We read in Acts 18 that Paul stayed in Corinth for a year and a half building up the

church. Some of the noteworthy people mentioned in Acts 18 that Paul partnered with in Corinth were Priscilla and Aquila, Crispus, and Sosthenes. As we read 1 Corinthians, we will find that the letter was written by Paul in **response** to a letter they sent and to the news he was hearing about issues going on in the church. In particular, **Paul will be addressing issues of divisions in the church, heretical teachings, sexual issues, idolatry issues, and issues in their worship gatherings**. He wrote 1 Corinthians from the city of Ephesus, probably about 54-55 AD. It's actually not the first letter he wrote to them; 1 Corinthians 5:9 refers to another letter Paul sent, and 7:1 refers to a letter the Corinthian church sent to him.

We are going to read chapter 1 this morning, which has a great deal to tell us about how to overcome divisions and rivalries, especially in the church:

*1 Corinthians 1:1-31 - Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes, <sup>2</sup> To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ-- their Lord and ours: <sup>3</sup> Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>4</sup> I always thank God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. <sup>5</sup> For in him you have been enriched in every way-- in all your speaking and in all your knowledge-- <sup>6</sup> because our testimony about Christ was confirmed in you. <sup>7</sup> Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. <sup>8</sup> He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>9</sup> God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful. <sup>10</sup> I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought. <sup>11</sup> My brothers, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. <sup>12</sup> What I mean is this: One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas"; still another, "I follow Christ." <sup>13</sup> Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul? <sup>14</sup> I am thankful that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, <sup>15</sup> so no one can say that you were baptized into my name. <sup>16</sup> (Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I don't remember if I baptized anyone else.) <sup>17</sup> For 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. <sup>19</sup> For it is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate." <sup>20</sup> 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? <sup>21</sup> 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. <sup>22</sup> Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, <sup>23</sup> but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, <sup>24</sup> but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. <sup>25</sup> For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength. <sup>26</sup> 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. <sup>27</sup> 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. <sup>28</sup> He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things-- and the things that are not-- to nullify the things that are, <sup>29</sup> so that no one may boast before him. <sup>30</sup> 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. <sup>31</sup> Therefore, as it is written: "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord."

Go back again to the beginning:

*Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes,*

Notice that Paul calls himself an apostle. An apostle is one who is called by God and sent to be a witness to the crucified and risen Christ. He was not appointed by any church, but set apart by God for this work. And he writes with Sosthenes, a member of his ministry team. In other words, **Paul is not a lone ranger**; he is a man under Christ's authority, working alongside others for the sake of the Corinthian church.

<sup>2</sup> *To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ-- their Lord and ours: <sup>3</sup> Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

He tells the church that God has sanctified them, and they are called to be holy. This calls to mind two key words: **justification and sanctification**. Justification is God's declaration that you have determined to be righteous in His sight. You have been declared not guilty by trusting in Jesus' death for your sins. But while that cancels the penalty of sin, you need to daily partner with God to cancel the power of sin in your life. That is sanctification – the continual process of being made

more holy, more like Jesus Christ. Both are needed: your status in Christ as one who is perfect in God's sight, and your calling to work out that holiness in your life.

*Philippians 2:12-13 - Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed-- not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence-- continue to **work out your salvation** with fear and trembling, <sup>13</sup> for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.*

A good analogy of this reality is marriage – when you speak your vows, you become legally one in an instant. But becoming one in function takes a lifetime. You are married, but now you must put to death your single nature and live as a married person. In this passage, Paul is reminding the Corinthians of who they are in Christ, and who they have been called to be, and then he exhorts them to become that.

So what is the main problem he addresses in this first section? **There is division in the Corinthian church**, a competitiveness based on people boasting in the leader they follow. Paul's primary concern is that the church would be united and not divided.

<sup>10</sup> *I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you **agree with one another** so that there may be **no divisions** among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought. <sup>11</sup> My brothers, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. <sup>12</sup> What I mean is this: One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas"; still another, "I follow Christ." <sup>13</sup> Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul?*

Certainly this kind of division can happen anywhere. In the Roman culture, social stratification and pride was particularly ingrained. There was a lot of jostling for power and prestige. It was a shame and honor culture, where people sought ways to gain the honor of the public. Unfortunately, what was commonplace in the Corinthian culture was also happening in the Corinthian church. Instead of their being united under Christ, there was significant division, as the believers elevated one leader above the others, and thought more highly of themselves based on the leader they followed.

How easily can this happen in our culture? People divide and form rivalries all the time on the basis of political affiliation, race, cause, sports team. And often the

church is no better. I am reformed, I am charismatic, I am a Calvinist, I am progressive, I am concerned about justice, I have been baptized in the Spirit, I speak in tongues, my church is more hip, more woke, plays better music, has better coffee – anything we stand for or believe in can become a reason for pride and a cause to divide. Instead of unity, we have rivalry and division.

Let's take some time to dig a little deeper. What is underneath all this division, both in our culture and in the church? **I believe it is a need to believe that we are worth something.** We need to forge an identity, and we often do it by comparing ourselves to others in order to feel good about ourselves. This is what is known as "social comparison theory," which was a term coined by Leon Festinger in the 1950's. This is the belief that we determine a great deal of our worth based on how we stack up against others. We compare ourselves to others on a number of fronts: attractiveness, success, intelligence, parenting ability, wealth, morality, coolness, wokeness – and that informs how we feel about ourselves.

Or, as CS Lewis put it in *Mere Christianity*: *"Pride gets no pleasure out of having something; pride only gets pleasure in having more of it than the next person. We say that people are proud of being rich, or clever, or good-looking, but they are not. They are proud of being richer, or cleverer, or better-looking than others. If everyone else became equally rich, or clever, or good-looking there would be nothing to be proud about."*

In other words, when someone in the Corinthian church is saying "I follow Apollos," he is not just saying "I follow Apollos" but "I am better than you because I follow Apollos." And when we are proud because of our intelligence, we are not just saying "I am intelligent" but "I am more intelligent than they are." It's not just "I am woke" but "I am more woke than they are." It's not just "I am accepting and loving" but "I am more accepting and loving than they are."

This is where so much rivalry and judgmentalism comes from, not to mention anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts. We are not sure of our self-worth, and so we gain our self-worth and identity through comparing ourselves with others, judging them and taking pride in ourselves, or thinking less of ourselves.

**We need to find an identity, but how do we find an identity that does not need to compare itself to others or look down on others? What is the solution?**

This is Paul's answer:

<sup>17</sup> For 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.

Paul argues that the underlying problem is that they are finding their identity and self-worth in something other than the gospel, and it is leading to unnecessary division. In order to cure their divisiveness and rivalries, he points them back to the gospel and its implications for their church.

So what is the gospel and how does it help us to find an identity that does not need to look down on others?

Paul defines the gospel later in his letter:

**1 Corinthians 15:1-8** - Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. <sup>2</sup> By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. <sup>3</sup> For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, <sup>4</sup> that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, <sup>5</sup> and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. <sup>6</sup> After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. <sup>7</sup> Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, <sup>8</sup> and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

The gospel in one sentence is this: Christ died for our sins. Our sins had separated us from a holy God. We were headed for eternal separation from that God. Jesus lived the perfect life we could not live and died a sacrificial death on the cross in our place. **So how does the gospel address divisions and the underlying pride and free us up to have an identity that does not cause us to look down on others?** Let's see how Paul handles this in 1 Corinthians 1:

**1) You are saved by grace and not by your own merits.**

<sup>26</sup> 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. <sup>27</sup> 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. <sup>28</sup> He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things-- and the things that are not-- to nullify the things

that are, <sup>29</sup> *so that no one may boast before him.* <sup>30</sup> *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.*

In other words, God did not choose you because you were wise, or moral, or powerful. He was not scanning resumes and choosing the most talented or worthy. He chose you because of His grace, an undeserved gift given by an unobligated giver. God consistently chooses the most unlikely figures throughout the Bible – youngest children, women, slaves, lepers, tax collectors and sinners.

If this is the gospel, if it's all an undeserved gift, then how can you look down on anyone else? When you get a gift, you don't praise the recipient, but the giver. How can you look down on anyone else when everything you have is a gift? It's like finding a winning lottery ticket.

***Ephesians 2:8-9** - For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- <sup>9</sup> not by works, so that **no one can boast.***

Or, as Paul puts it later in 1 Corinthians:

***1 Corinthians 4:7** - For who makes **you** different from anyone else? What **do you** have that **you** did not receive? And if **you** did receive it, **why do you boast** as though **you** did not?*

Back to the beginning of 1 Corinthians - listen to how he praises them in the beginning:

*<sup>4</sup> I always thank God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. <sup>5</sup> For in him you have been enriched in every way-- in all your speaking and in all your knowledge-- <sup>6</sup> because our testimony about Christ was confirmed in you. <sup>7</sup> Therefore **you do not lack any spiritual gift** as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. <sup>8</sup> He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>9</sup> God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful.*

If you listen closely, he never actually praises them for anything. In other letters he commends the Colossians or Philipians for their love or their good deeds, because the issues in those churches were not divisions and rivalries. With the Corinthians, however, he emphasizes how everything they have has been given to them by Christ. It is He who has given them gifts, He who will keep them strong, and He

who is faithful to them. As we are going to find out as we read on, they may have every spiritual gift, but their character and maturity is lacking, which is why he can not commend them.

If I am saved by grace, that means that others may be more intelligent than me, more moral, more loving, better parents, better spouses, more successful, better looking, more woke – none of that changes my identity. I do not need to assert myself against another or judge or look down on another person. I know that I am loved and I am worth so much that the Son of God gave His life for me, and I don't need to compare myself to anyone else to know that. I am the recipient of an undeserved love, and nothing can take that away. The gospel of grace, when understood correctly, puts an end to the social comparison theory, the human need to find our self-worth in comparison to other people. And that is good news. This is why Paul points them back to the gospel.

## 2) You are all equal members in Christ

The second implication of the gospel is that they are all equal members in Christ. This is how he begins:

<sup>2</sup> *To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ-- their Lord and ours:*

See how he emphasizes their unity – “church of God in Corinth” – instead of naming the individual house churches. He also emphasizes that they are unified with everyone around the world who calls on the name of the Lord Jesus. There are no hierarchies. There is no social status in Christ. He will emphasize this throughout the letter. We are like a body, with every part indispensable, the eye, the ear, the toe – every part is needed.

And so he tells them:

<sup>10</sup> *I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought.* <sup>11</sup> *My brothers, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you.* <sup>12</sup> *What I mean is this: One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas"; still another, "I follow Christ."* <sup>13</sup> *Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul?*



Christ has not been divided. They all belong to Him, no matter who led them to Christ. In fact, Paul will go on in the chapters to come to tell them that He is nothing but God's servant. It's not about him, it's about Christ. He doesn't need any special status. The bottom line is that they are all equal in Christ, no matter their race, socioeconomic status, gender, age, or anything else. In the Corinthian culture, status and hierarchy were extremely important. But in the church, because of the gospel, that is not to be the case.

As Paul put it elsewhere:

*Galatians 3:26-28 - You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, <sup>27</sup> for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. <sup>28</sup> There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*

What does this mean for us? **Be careful that you do not divide Christ's church over unnecessary and foolish things, or speak poorly about each other.** We can be harmonious even in our differences or denominations as long as the gospel of Jesus Christ is the main thing. Yes, there are many different denominations. But it is possible to worship differently and emphasize different aspects of the faith while still loving and worshipping together. We worship in the park with other churches every Labor Day. It is possible to be different but also be united without looking down on others or comparing ourselves to them.

### 3) To follow Christ means to be like Him in serving others

<sup>17</sup> *For 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.*

The gospel is not just how we are saved; it is what is saving and sanctifying us. We are shaped by the cross in how we live, serving others above ourselves.

Once again, Corinth was a place that was obsessed with self-exaltation, honor and public reputation. People were often building monuments, temples, putting on public spectacles, making big shows of donating money and becoming benefactors, all to enhance their public reputation. And sadly, that had infiltrated the church as well, as people climbed all over each other to gain status and prominence. But

throughout this chapter and book, Paul reminds the Corinthians that the cross did not only save them, but is the very thing that is to shape their discipleship as followers of Jesus. It is not about seeking self-glory, but seeking the good of others, laying down our own rights and wants for the good of our brothers and sisters.

As Paul put it in another letter:

***Philippians 2:3-7** - Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. <sup>4</sup> Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. <sup>5</sup> Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: <sup>6</sup> Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, <sup>7</sup> but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.*

How does the gospel destroy rivalry and division? By forming a people who are being transformed from a self-serving, glory-seeking people into a community that serves each other and honors one another above themselves.

He challenges their cultural notions of shame and honor by promoting both Jesus and himself as figures of shame. Those who are weak and lowly and despised are those whom God chooses and uses.

#### 4) The only boasting is in the Lord

<sup>31</sup> *Therefore, as it is written: "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord."*

Look at what God has done! Herald that.

<sup>17</sup> *For 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.*

The gospel tells us that the way to live is not to boast and elevate yourself above others. We were foolish and weak and God saved us. We have been given an undeserved gift, and the only right thing to do is to praise and honor the giver, not to take the glory for ourselves. Everything we have is a gift from God. The only boasting is in the Lord. As John the Baptist put it: **John 3:30** - *He must become greater; I must become less.*

Keep the gospel central. When the gospel is rightly understood, then we live rightly. When we understand the gospel of grace that saved us when we were at our worst, then we realize that there is no place for pride, no cause for self-centered division and rivalry. When we keep the gospel central and boast only in the Lord, then we can find unity.