

The Message of the Cross

1 Corinthians 1:1-31

Key Verse: 1:18

“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.”

Like the Corinthians, we live in a sophisticated culture. Some call this “the age of uncertainty.” Postmodernists have tried to debunk the idea of absolute truth. So everyone seems to live in his own way, without any clear direction, often in confusion. However, one thing is unchanging and absolute: the message of the cross. We must hold on to the message of the cross and apply it in our lives. Then we can create a new culture based on gospel faith. As we study the book of 1 Corinthians, let’s learn how to apply gospel principles in our lives and community, even in our nation.

I. Paul’s appeal for perfect unity (1-17)

Look at verse 1. Paul identified himself as an apostle, not by his own will or the will of people, but by the will of God (1). He includes Sosthenes in his greeting, revealing his teamwork. Let’s read verse 2 together, “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.” Here we can find the characteristics of a church. It is not a building; it is made up of people who call on Jesus Christ. Though they were sinners, Paul calls them “sanctified in Christ Jesus...called to be holy.” They were being made holy. Paul includes “all those everywhere who call on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ....” The church is universal.

Though Paul had many problems to deal with, he did not begin with a harsh word. Paul greeted them warmly, “Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (3). Paul thanked God for the great work he had done among them. When they heard the gospel through Paul, the Holy Spirit worked mightily in them. They were saved and they received abundant spiritual gifts. This was nothing but the grace of God.

Paul wrote with the conviction that they would be blameless when Jesus came again (8). How could Paul have this conviction? Look at verse 9. “God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful.” Paul knew that God is faithful. God who began the work would carry it on to

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completion. This was the source of his great hope for them. When our Bible students have problems, sometimes we lose hope for them. But when we have faith that God is faithful, we can have hope for them.

Let's read verse 10. "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." The phrase, "the Lord Jesus Christ" is repeated many times in verses 1-10. Paul did not command based on his own authority, though he was a great apostle. Rather, on the basis of Jesus' Lordship, Paul appealed for perfect unity (10). What? Perfect unity? Humanly speaking it is impossible. We are all different characters. In our democratic societies each person speaks his own opinion boldly. Still, we can be perfectly united in mind and thought in our Lord Jesus Christ.

In order to understand the Corinthians, we must consider their cultural background. They lived in a society dominated by philosophers and academic schools, such as those of Plato, Aristotle, the Epicureans and the Stoics. It was natural for them to align with one school or teacher and argue with the others. This spirit had crept into the church. The Corinthians treated Paul, Apollos, and Cephas like competitive philosophy teachers. Some said, "I follow Apollos because he is most eloquent." Others said, "I follow Paul, because he has a great shepherd heart." Still others said, "I follow Cephas, because he is Jesus' top disciple." Humanly this may be understandable. But spiritually it had led them to division. They were no longer Christ-centered, but man-centered. This was the root problem. When this happens, the church cannot stand. Satan exploits divisions to destroy the church.

There is a saying, "United we stand, divided we fall." When we are united in Christ, the Holy Spirit works. Jesus said in John 13:34,35: "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." All Christians must obey this command. We must practice the unconditional love of Christ, remembering how he has loved us. Then we can be united in mind and thought through the work of the Holy Spirit.

Paul wanted them to realize the seriousness of their division. So Paul rebuked them. "Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul?" (13) Some were boasting that Paul baptized them. Paul said that he could not even remember this. Then Paul got straight to the point: the cross of Christ. Let's read verse 17. "For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach

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the gospel—not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.” Paul believed that when they came back to the cross of Christ they could be united in mind and thought and could solve their division problem from the root.

II. Christ crucified: the power of God and the wisdom of God (18-31)

According to Acts 18, when Paul pioneered the city of Corinth he devoted himself exclusively to preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus was the Christ. Especially he focused on the message of the cross (2:2). Then there were two responses. Some accepted the message and others became abusive, and began to persecute him. Paul was afraid. Then the Lord spoke to him in a vision: “Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city” (Ac 18:9,10). So Paul kept on speaking. Then God worked through him and there was a great revival in the city of Corinth.

Let’s read verse 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.” How one responds to the message of the cross may seem to be a light matter. To receive or reject is a matter of free choice. However, the result is very serious. We will bear responsibility for our choice. Those who regard the cross as foolish will perish. They will live in bondage to sin until they go to the fiery lake of burning sulfur for eternity. However, those who receive the message of the cross are saved from their sin. They become children of God with eternal life in his kingdom. They are happy in Jesus. The message of the cross is the power of God for salvation. As Jesus was crucified, two criminals hung on crosses nearby. One rebuked Jesus in his pride. We can imagine what happened to him. The other confessed his sin and guilt. He believed that Jesus was innocent and was being punished unjustly. He heard Jesus’ prayer on the cross, “Father, forgive them.” He saw God’s love in Jesus and appealed to Jesus to remember him. Jesus promised that he would be with him in paradise. Immediately, all his sins were forgiven and he became a citizen of Jesus’ kingdom. God is pleased to save people who receive the message of the cross. That is the secret. When we simply believe the message of the cross, we are saved.

To some people, this sounds too simple. They think that salvation is so precious that one should attain it only after much study and intense discipline. But at the bottom of this thought is the belief that man can save himself. It is an exaltation of human reason and effort that displeases God. God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble (Ja 4:6b). In verse 19, Paul quoted Isaiah to explain how God

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deals with worldly wisdom. God destroys the wisdom of the wise and frustrates the intelligence of the intelligent. Paul asks rhetorically, “Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age?” (20) They are so many wise men and women, famous scholars and philosophers. They say many good things, but they do not show us the way of salvation. They cannot solve the problem of sin and death, even for themselves. Karl Marx made a fascinating ideology with the phrase, “From each according to his ability, to each according to his need.” But now that ideology has been destroyed. In the same way God will destroy all the ideas of wise men without Christ.

On the other hand, when we simply preach the message of the cross, God works. Paul was highly educated and eloquent. But he did not depend on this. He depended on God humbly, and God worked. John Wesley, George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards, Charles Finney, D.L. Moody and Billy Graham all preached the message of the cross simply and God used them greatly. When Moody began to speak at Cambridge, students did not open their hearts. They sat with arms crossed, thinking, “Let’s see how he does.” But when Moody preached the message of the cross, their hearts opened. Many repented and were changed into new creations. Among them were the Cambridge Seven, representatives of the student movement. Later some of them went to China, others to Africa, as missionaries. Some intellectuals have criticized Billy Graham’s message as too simple. However, God has used him to bring many people to God through the message of the cross. During our Easter Bible conferences, when messengers preached the gospel simply, God worked mightily. So let’s keep sharing the message of the cross.

Look at verse 22. “Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom....” There were two streams of culture: Hebraism and Hellenism. Hebraism came from the Jews, Hellenism from the Greeks. Hebraism is to seek God through religion. Hellenism looks for wisdom through human reason; it led to the development of science. Jews demand miraculous signs. They valued miracles and divine visions as superior to reason. They wanted to be persuaded by miraculous signs without repentance. They demanded Jesus to prove himself by doing miracles, if he were the Messiah.

Greeks developed a superior philosophy and culture. Alexander the Great conquered the world with his army. Then he forced Greek culture on others. It is interesting to know that his teacher was Aristotle. Through Greek culture, the world was civilized. Later, Rome occupied Greece and conquered the world. However, Greek culture conquered the Roman Empire. The Roman elite always wanted to hire Greek tutors for their children. Western culture has been derived

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from Greece. There are many good elements. The problem is that they did not accept that they were sinners. They tried to reach God through reason. They think the message of the cross is foolish. The cross of Jesus is a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.

Look at verse 24. "...but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." Here we find two aspects to the message of the cross. **First the cross of Jesus is the power of God.** We need power to save us from the power of sin and death. Otherwise, we will perish. One girl was suffering from meaninglessness. In her agony, she decided to commit suicide on her 20th birthday. Before that day came, she heard the message of the cross. She confessed all of her sins and was forgiven. She found the meaning of life. She no longer had a reason to commit suicide. She had reason to live. She got married and went to another nation as a missionary. No one could save her from the misery of sin. But she was saved by the power of the message of the cross. Many are slaves of lustful desires, anger, bitterness, pride, or selfishness. No one can save us from the power of sin and death. However, Jesus can save us; he solved our sin and death problem through his death and resurrection. Through Jesus' death on the cross God forgave all our sins and brings us back to the kingdom of God. Through Jesus' cross we have eternal life and eternal victory. The cross of Jesus is glorious. The cross of Jesus is the power of God.

Second, the cross of Jesus is the wisdom of God. We need divine wisdom to be saved. God's character includes both love and justice. God is love and God is holy. How can God balance love and justice? God hates sins but loves sinners. How can he save sinners? Many people kill sinners to solve the sin problem. We need wisdom in order to save sinners from their sins. There was a nation that experienced great suffering from hunger when one careless drunkard ruined their crops by trampling on them. So the king issued a decree that anyone who did that in the future would be punished by gouging out his eyes. It was an absolute decree with no exceptions. But one day the king's son was caught trampling the cornfield. The king agonized. He could not bear to gouge out the eyes of his son. But if he did not do so, he could not uphold his justice. Finally he decided to gouge out one of his own eyes and one of his son's eyes. He was praised for his wisdom. But still he and his son were left with only one eye. However, God satisfied his love and justice perfectly on the cross. God punished sin to the full measure in Christ and then raised him from the dead. This is God's wisdom in the cross.

In verses 26-31, Paul reminded them how they were saved. They had been lowly people. But God called them and saved them through Christ Jesus. It was nothing

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but God's one-sided grace. They had nothing to boast about. So Paul concludes, "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord."

God provided the way of salvation through the message of the cross. It seems foolish to the people of the world. But to those who receive it, it is the power of God and the wisdom of God. God is pleased to save those who believe. When we preach the message of the cross simply, God will work through us. So let's pray that we may keep on preaching the message of the cross simply, believing that God will work through us.