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Tillamook, Oregon

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One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism – Paul’s First Epistle to the Corinthians

*Part 5 – The Word of the Cross is
Foolishness to the World*

March 17, 2024

Sermon Text: 1 Cor 1:17-31

Scripture Reading: 1 Cor 1:1-31

I believe in God, the Father
Almighty,
Maker of heaven and earth.

And in Jesus Christ,
His only begotten Son, our Lord;
who was conceived by the Holy
Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,

suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was
buried.

He descended into hell.

On the third day he rose from the
dead;

He ascended into heaven,
and sits at the right hand of God
the Father Almighty;

from there he shall come again to
judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting.

AMEN.

.....
The church at Corinth was, as is

true of so many local churches today, in trouble. They had separated from one another into factions. What was the cause? *Pride*. Pride and a foolish desire to be great *according to the world's measure of greatness*. Surrounded by a culture which worshipped *wisdom*, they were conforming to that measure of wisdom. They had formed their own separate schools, identifying with a particular leader – Paul, Peter, Apollos, and even a distorted version of Christ.

Paul, you will recall, got right to it in the first words of his letter, showing them the foolishness of their divisions and admonishing them for distorting the one gospel by behaving as if Christ is to be divided into various nuances according to individual personalities. As if they were saying, “I prefer Paul’s version of Christ.” “I identify with Peter’s message.” All of this was being done from arrogant, sinful, worldly pride. Paul’s rebuke of them will continue, really, all through this epistle.

1Co 3:3-4 for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way? (4) For when one says, “I follow Paul,” and another, “I follow Apollos,” are you not being merely human?

Satan is at work in all of this. He knows that when we as Christ’s people are walking in unity, when we are loving one another genuinely, all working for the glory of God and not for ourselves, we are a powerful witness for Christ in this world. This is where he attacks typically. To sow pride and arrogance in us and break us into factions, each seeking to exalt himself.

- This church is about my music and the music ministry. See how great I am.
- This church is about me as a teacher. See how great I am.
- This church is about getting large numbers of people in and building new buildings. See how great we are.
- Our goal is to be popular and

highly thought of in the community. See what a great place we are.

Therefore, Paul now proceeds to admonish and instruct them in truths which are non-negotiable. That is to say, if we do not understand and believe these things then we simply cannot and will not follow Christ in truth. I will do what so many professing Christians today do – I will arrogantly desire and practice a “Christianity” which has nothing to do with Christ and has everything to do with ME, and which cannot save. Listen to Paul say it:

1Co 1:17-18 For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. (18) For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

The wisdom of the world. The foolishness of the cross. The wisdom of the world. The wisdom

of God. These are the themes Paul is now putting before us. He will repeat them over and over until we get it:

1Co 2:1-5 And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. (2) For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. (3) And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, (4) and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, (5) so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

Not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

Paul’s critics at Corinth, false teachers who were working to lead the Corinthians astray, used the simplicity of Paul’s gospel as a means to accuse him:

2Co 10:10 For they say, “His

letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account.”

Listen again:

1Co 1:17-18 For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. (18) For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

Let's break this down.

The gospel of Christ is the fundamental and foundational truth of the Christian religion. The Word of the Cross must always be the Word of the Cross. It can never be altered in the slightest. Everything else depends upon it. Here it is in Ephesians:

Eph 2:19-22 So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, (20) built on the foundation

of the apostles and prophets, **Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone,** (21) in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. (22) In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

If the cornerstone of a building is wrong, the entire building is wrong. Rome is a building built upon a false foundation and thus every part of Rome – it's teaching, its sacraments, its priesthood, its worship – is wrong.

When you are going to build a building, the first thing must always be the first thing – the foundation must be laid out square. If it is not, then you are going to fight that error throughout the entire building process. That infection of foundational error is going to spread into the framing, into the roof trusses, onto the siding panels – the whole building will be wrong. That is Rome. And that is what is true of many, many local churches today because they are

growing and building upon the Word of the Cross. They have altered that Word so that it appeals to man. So that it is no longer foolishness to the natural man. It becomes entirely man-centered:

We are also aware of the hurts and struggles of everyday life. In this exact moment God sees both your struggles and joys. Our desire as a church is to share with people the life-changing message of Jesus Christ and how the truth of the Bible speaks to our everyday struggles and longings. [quote from website of a typical local church]

Of this kind of “gospel,” Paul said:

Gal 1:8-10 But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed. (9) As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed. (10) For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please

man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ.

The Corinthians were emptying the cross of Christ of its power to save. How? They were “dressing up” the Word of the cross so that it would be regarded as “eloquent wisdom” the focus of which was no longer Christ and the Cross. *It only requires slight alterations to empty the gospel of its power to save.* The Holy Spirit is that power and He will not work through a worldly version of the Cross. In fact, *even an alteration in the method of delivering the gospel can strip it of its power.*

1Co 2:4-5 and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, (5) so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

Listen to these words from John Owen, that great Puritan in the days of Oliver Cromwell. He is rejecting the use of philosophical terms and

scholastic forms of argument in preaching the gospel:

“That which we count to be our wisdom and learning may, if too rigorously insisted upon, be our folly. When we think that we must sharpen the reasoning of the Scriptures, we may straiten (ie, to hem in or confine, to bind) the power of its spirit. It is oftentimes more effective in the Scripture’s own freedom, than when restrained by our methods of arguing; and the weapons of the Scripture are keener in their own soft breathings than when sharpened in the forge of Aristotle” (ie, presented in Aristotle’s philosophical forms and methods). [The Doctrine of the Saints Perseverance Explained and Confirmed, John Owen]

This is what Paul was rebuking the Corinthians for doing and why he reminded them of this:

1Co 1:17-18 For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, **and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.**

(18) For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

Let me prove to you from our Lord’s own words that the Word of the Cross is being altered into a man-pleasing message today *very commonly – in fact, typically.*

Mat 7:13-14 “Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and **those who enter by it are many.** (14) For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and **those who find it are few.**

Many. Few. Many. Few. I read recently that “hundreds” of people chose to follow Christ at a large event led by a famous preacher. I hope that you are skeptical of such reports. They are almost always the product of a false gospel, of a message of the Cross which has been emptied of its power. Typically this alteration is that of minimizing man’s sin, the wrath of a holy God, man’s inability to

make himself acceptable to God. Raising man up and bringing God down.

But how can it be? How can a “mega” church be? In fact, based upon Jesus’ own words here in Matthew 7, *what are we wise to conclude about such “big” things?* I can tell you:

It is Broadway. Its gate is wide and the way is easy and those who enter by it are many.

Contrast that with what Jesus says is true of His true church:

For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and **those who find it are few.**

Let those words really sink into your thinking. Don’t rush by them quickly. Ponder them and their implications.

The Corinthians were toying with Broadway. They were acting and thinking like the world – like mere men. A church like this wants to start off each service with Ed

Sullivan’s old line –

“We have a really big shew tonight.”

None of it is based upon the foundation which must always be Christ. Everything is out of square. It is a counterfeit. The gospel, for these kind – the Word of the cross of Christ – must be presented as “a really big show.” If church signs today were truthful, they would read something like: “We are the church of the broad way. Come on in. It’s easy and big things are happening here. We’ve got a really big show for your entertainment.”

Many. Few. Easy. Hard.

Joh 6:65-66 And he said, “This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father.” (66) After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him.

We are not given details of how specifically the Corinthians were altering the gospel except that they were apparently emphasizing how

polished the rhetoric and personality of the preacher was – be it Apollos or Paul or Peter. Others it seems were presenting a “Christ” they altered a bit. But we can be certain that a false gospel, no matter how amazingly close to the original it might be, will always do these things to be pleasing to the natural man:

1. Allow for man to contribute toward his salvation in some way.
2. Minimize the terrible wickedness of man’s sin
3. Minimize the holiness and wrath of God against the sinner.

Such things must be done if preaching is going to be acceptable and appear to be “wisdom” to the natural man.

One chief reason that “few are they who find the narrow way” is that the Word of the Cross of Christ *always* begins with the bad news of man’s sin, his inability to do anything to save himself, and God’s wrath and condemnation upon him.

I want all of us to carefully think of something else on this point. I mentioned it last week in our study of Romans.

The good news always begins with bad news. The Word of the Cross, the gospel, always begins with the truth of man’s sin, of his hopeless and helpless condition before the holy, holy, holy God. Any so-called “gospel” that does not begin here is a false gospel, emptied of God’s power, unable to save anyone.

Now, let me prove this to you from God’s own Word. I want you to think carefully about the order the Apostle Paul follows in his letter to the church at Rome (and really in all of his epistles). What is the order? It is this:

Chapter 1

Rom 1:18-25 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. (19) For what can be known about

God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. (20) For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse.

(21) For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.

(22) Claiming to be wise, they became fools, (23) and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things. (24) Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves, (25) because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

Chapter 2

Rom 2:1-6 Therefore you have no

excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things. (2) We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things.

(3) Do you suppose, O man—you who judge those who practice such things and yet do them yourself—that you will escape the judgment of God? (4) Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? (5) But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed. (6) He will render to each one according to his works:

Chapter 3a

Rom 3:9-20 What then? Are we any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under

sin,

(10) as it is written: “None is righteous, no, not one; (11) no one understands; no one seeks for God. (12) All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.”

(13) “Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive.” “The venom of asps is under their lips.” (14) “Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.” (15) “Their feet are swift to shed blood; (16) in their paths are ruin and misery, (17) and the way of peace they have not known.” (18) “There is no fear of God before their eyes.” (19) Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God.

(20) For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

What is the Apostle Paul’s chief subject in this letter to the Romans? He tells us at the very start:

Rom 1:16-17 For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. (17) For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.”

The gospel. The power of God to salvation to all who believe. The righteous shall live by faith. That is his theme.

And how does he begin it? What is the first point of his preaching before he ever arrives at this:

Rom 3:21-22 But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— (22) the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction:

A righteousness which is from God. Established by God through His Son at the Cross.

But the first message of his gospel is *bad news*. For 2 ½ chapters (with frequent reminders in the entire rest of the letter), it is man's absolute separation from God, man's terrible sin, man's intense hostility toward God, man under God's condemnation, man's total inability to make himself acceptable to God, the horrible fruits of man's sin. You see the very same order followed here:

Eph 2:1-5 And you were dead in the trespasses and sins (2) in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— (3) among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.

(4) But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with

which he loved us, (5) even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—

These are the things without doubt that the Corinthians, in their prideful desire to be highly regarded by the world, had minimized or even cut out of the Word of the Cross. Their “gospel” had no power to save.

1Co 1:17-18 For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. (18) For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

Do you see how subtle and cunning the enemy is? “*Surely it is a good thing for a preacher to preach in such a manner that he “sells” the product? Convinces the sinner.*” But the Apostle Paul says that if it is the preacher's “polish” that convinces the sinner, the Word of

the Cross is emptied of its power. Where man boasts, the Holy Spirit departs.

This should be very sobering and even frightening to us. It is the WORD which the Holy Spirit empowers, not my words nor yours. Man's "wisdom" is in fact foolishness. Many visible churches today are "ships of fools" who have believed the foolishness of man's wisdom. A false gospel.

Are you a Christian, or are you a Corinthian who has bought into the wisdom of man? Let me close with two statements from Martyn Lloyd-Jones which I read in the mid-week study. They bear repeating:

"Many people often say that about my preaching. 'Too hard,' they say. 'Too harsh. It is unpleasant. Let me listen to somebody who is always talking about love and about the love of God.' Ah, how smooth his tongue is! If you believe that, which is no gospel – which is always praising you and praising your world, calling it a

beautiful world and saying that man is wonderful, and that all is well...if you believe that, you really see no need for the blood of Christ. And that message will inject into you this poison that will damn your soul and send you to hell. False teaching that sends people to sleep, and gives them that false exhilaration, finally ruins and destroys the soul."

"Let me put it plainly. If you do not accept this, and if you do not accept this description of *yourself apart from the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ*, then there is no need to argue about it, you are just not a Christian. If you resent all this, you are not a Christian. You are not yet convinced and convicted of sin, and you are not a believer in Christ, though you may think that you are. If you in any way object to this, you are automatically putting yourself outside the kingdom of God and the Christian faith." [The Righteous Judgment of God, Martyn Lloyd-Jones, Banner of Truth]

Paul's words are absolutely true,

though every man call it foolishness. This is the true position and condition of man apart from Christ. It is the condition in which YOU and I entered this world and lived in. We were children of wrath. Condemned by God. Traveling on Broadway with all the rest. Have you seen it? Do you confess it about yourself?

There is a way out of this terrible path which leads all who travel it to the Lake of Fire which burns forever and ever. But there is only ONE way. It is the Word of the Cross. This Good News which begins with Bad News.

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**Further quotes on this subject from Lloyd-Jones (Vol 1, The Early Years, Lloyd Jones biography by Iain Murray) –

“Modern preaching, Dr. Lloyd-Jones believed, had gone fundamentally wrong. He saw the main proof of that fact in the failure of the pulpit to recognize that the first work of the Holy Spirit is to *convict* of sin and to humble men in the presence of God. He knew that

any preaching which soothes, comforts and pleases those who have never been brought to fear God, nor to seek his mercy, is not preaching which the Spirit of God will own. The truth is that he was going back to a principle once regarded as imperative for powerful evangelistic preaching, namely, that before men can be converted they must be convinced of sin.”

“There is something even worse than that about the situation as I see it and that is that present-day preaching does not even annoy men, but leaves them precisely where they were, without a ruffle and without the slightest disturbance....The church is regarded as a sort of dispensary where drugs and soothing mixtures are distributed and in which everyone should be eased and comforted. And the one theme of the church must be ‘the love of God.’ Anyone who happens to break these rules and who produces a disturbing effect upon members of his congregation is regarded as an objectionable person....”.

If ever anyone knew the love of God, if ever ‘the love of God’ was preached and understood by anyone, that one was Jesus Christ. Yet what was the effect He produced upon His congregations? Did all go home from the service smiling and happy, and feeling very self-satisfied and complacent? Was His perfect ministry one in which no one was offended and at which no one took umbrage? Do His services suggest the type so popular today – the building with the ‘dim religious light’ where nice hymns are sung, nice prayers are offered, and a fine and cultured ‘short’ address is delivered? Look to the pages of the New Testament and see the answer.”