**THE MESSAGE OF THE CROSS**

***1 Corinthians 1:1-31***

***“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.” (v. 18)***

Happy New Year! Welcome to our study of 1 Corinthians. In the first century, Corinth was the chief city of Greece both commercially and politically, much like New York City today. The city was a multicultural, polytheistic, and hedonistic society. The Corinthian church was pioneered by Paul in 51-52 A.D. during his 2nd missionary journey. God blessed Paul’s labor for one and a half years, but the church was yet immature, influenced by the godless culture of Corinth. There were divisions, immorality, lawsuits among believers in pagan courts, abuses of the Lord’s Supper, misuses of their spiritual gifts, and false teachings. To deal with their specific problems, Paul wrote this epistle in the winter of 55 A.D. while staying at Ephesus during his 3rd missionary journey (1Co 16:8). Paul rebuked and corrected their wrongdoings with a compassionate father’s love. The major solution to their problems was to go “Back to the Gospel” (1Co 15:1). Today we are living in an environment that is very similar to that of the Corinthians. Many of the spiritual problems in the Corinthian church are still problems in our modern-day churches. I pray that God may grant us spiritual help to go back to the gospel and promote biblically healthy Christian community through our 1 Corinthians study.

1. **Be perfectly united in mind and thought (vs. 1-17)**

Paul begins by reminding his readers of two callings—first, his own calling and second, that of the Corinthian Christians. Look at verses 1-2. ***“Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes, To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be his holy people, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours.”*** God called Paul to be an apostle, an ambassador, of Christ Jesus. Christ is our Savior King. He calls his servants in every generation and sends them as his ambassadors to preach the good news. Paul was once a persecutor of the church, but by God’s grace, he was called and he served his Savior King with all his heart.

Paul calls the Corinthian Christians ***“the church of God in Corinth.”*** In Greek, the word “Church” is derived from a word meaning “to call out.” So the church is the “called-out ones” of God. God called the Corinthians out of the world to belong to him. He set them apart to continually grow in God’s holiness. Paul reminds them of their spiritual identity and God’s hope for them as God’s chosen people.

After his customary greeting (3), Paul first thanked God for the grace given to the Corinthians. God had made them rich in every way, especially in speaking and in knowledge. Furthermore, God enriched the Corinthians with many spiritual gifts. Paul even thanks God for his future work for the young church in Corinth. Look at verses 8-9. ***“He will also keep you firm to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.”*** Paul believed in God’s faithfulness upon his chosen people to complete his good work in their lives regardless of their current problems. Likewise, we can also be thankful and see great hope for each of us because of God’s grace and his faithfulness to help us continue growing in our Lord Jesus Christ.

After giving thanks, Paul begins to deal with the problems. Read verse 10. ***“I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly untied in mind and thought.”*** Paul appeals for unity among the Corinthian believers in the most authoritative fashion: in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Why did Paul deal with divisions as of first importance? “Divide and destroy” is Satan’s prime strategy. It is not difficult to see how divisions have devastated churches throughout the ages. On the other hand, when a Christian community is united in one mind and heart, the Holy Spirit works powerfully.

So Paul urges them to be perfectly united in mind and thought. Here ***“be perfectly united”*** literally means to “have been knit together.” It reminds us of a beautiful fabric or carpet joined closely and firmly together with various and colorful yarns. Likewise, desiring a harmonious whole, the Corinthians should have used their eloquent speech, deep Bible knowledge, and spiritual gifts to build up the church. Instead of this unity, however, the fabric of the Corinthian church was coming apart at the seams. In fact, there were at least four factions in the church. Some said, “I follow Paul because he is the greatest scholar in the Scriptures.” Others said, “I follow Apollos because he is the most eloquent.” Still others said, “I follow Cephas because he is Jesus’ top disciple.” Those who despised the factions said, “I follow Christ, not like you guys.” By boasting of their prominent leaders, each faction thought they were better than others.

At the heart of these contentions was their pride. And at the center of pride, there is always self. Self-dependence, self-glorification, and self-preservation are its basic nature. But Proverbs 16:18 warns, *“Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall.”* Pride leads to division and eventually destruction. A proud mindset can be cured by only one remedy: a Christ-centered mindset.

So in verse 13, Paul helps the Corinthians to fix their eyes on Jesus, ***“Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized in the name of Paul?”*** He magnifies Christ and minimizes human leaders, beginning with himself. By asking three questions, Paul reminds the Corinthians that Christ is their foundation. Christ is the head of the church, and we are his body (Eph 5:23). He is the only Savior, who was crucified for us. In him alone, we can be dead to sin and alive to God. Paul saw the root of the Corinthians’ problem—they forgot God’s grace given to them through Jesus Christ, and slid back into their sinful nature, boasting of themselves. They forgot Christ, their Lord, and they became their own kings. They needed to renew their minds and submit to Christ, their King, to be perfectly united in mind and thought.

Christ is the only solution to restore the kingdom of God in an individual’s life, home and in the church. That’s why Apostle Paul fully devoted himself to preaching the gospel. Read verse 17. ***“For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with wisdom and eloquence, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.”*** Especially Paul wants to tell about the cross of Christ. Let’s think about why the cross of Christ was Paul’s main point in his preaching.

1. **Christ crucified: The power of God and the wisdom of God (vs. 18-31)**

In the rest of this chapter, Paul reminds the Corinthians of how new life came to them when they accepted the message of the cross and helps them to continue to remember it. Look at 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.”*** The message of the cross divides people into two groups according to their responses—those who are perishing and those who are being saved. There is no middle ground. Think about the three men who were crucified on Golgotha—two criminals on each side and Jesus in the middle. When the two criminals were being punished justly for their sins, they heard Jesus’ prayer, *“Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (Lk 23:34a).* One of them hurled insults at Jesus in his pride. To him, Jesus’ cross was nothing but shame and defeat. The other, however, acknowledged his own sins and believed that Jesus was innocent and dying for sinners. When this man heard Jesus’ prayer, his eyes were opened to see God’s saving love and the invitation to his kingdom. By faith, he asked, *“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”* Jesus immediately promised him, *“Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise”* (Lk 23:39-43). These two men represent all humanity. Their eternal destines were divided according to their beliefs and responses to the crucified Christ.

But why do so many people choose the way of eternal destruction instead of choosing eternal salvation? It is because they think they are wise while the message of the cross is foolish. Look at verses 22-23. ***“Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.”*** In the first century, there were two main streams of culture: Hebraism and Hellenism. Hebraism came from the Jews and 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. Western culture has been mainly derived from Hellenism.

The Jews stumbled over the message of the cross because the crucified Christ was not fit for their own self-interest and benefit. If Jesus had marshaled an army and led them to defeat the Romans, they would have marched behind him. To the Greeks, the message of the cross was foolishness because it was not compatible with their own philosophies and worldview. They reasoned that God cannot be flesh; that Almighty God would not allow feeble men to nail him to a cross; and that when a man dies he cannot be resurrected. The world has changed, but people haven’t. The two streams of culture still flow onwards, and we meet and live among people like the first century Jews and Greeks. Whether they consider themselves religious or non-religious, they are basically equally guilty of worshiping self.

Likewise, the Corinthian Christians were evidently influenced by the contemporary culture. Failing to recognize the supreme value of the cross of Christ, they had moved on to a self-seeking lifestyle. They wanted a Christ without a cross to feed their own interest in power, human approval, prosperity and self-achievement. What did Apostle Paul emphasize to them? 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.”*** He points out two aspects of the message of the cross.

First, Christ crucified is the power of God. The cross is the power of God because of what it achieves—the salvation of sinners. The famous Danish Philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, in his book, “The Sickness Unto Death,” defined “sin” very biblically and easily: It is seeking one’s identity and sense of worth apart from God. Apart from God, people try to find meaning in money, social status, power, pleasure, or romantic relationships to name a few. This is the fundamental sin. Sin is basically rebelling against God to try and be equal with him. However, sin brings man neither greatness nor freedom but only demands serious payment. Due to a broken relationship with God, we suffer from emptiness, instability, anxiety, and fear. Sin not only has an internal impact on us but also a devastating effect on the fabric of society with envy, hatred, conflicts, violence, crime and war resulting. As Kierkegaard implies in the title of his book, “The Sickness Unto Death,” sin eventually leads us to death and eternal destruction. Sin is an incurable disease. Where can we find its remedy? Only one place: Christ crucified.

When I first encountered Christ crucified at a summer Bible conference, God opened my spiritual eyes to accept the meaning of Jesus’ suffering and death. For the first time, from my heart, I realized the seriousness of my sins, beating, flogging, and nailing Jesus on the cross. At the same time, through the crucified Jesus, God’s love and forgiveness deeply touched my heart. To forgive and save such a sinner like me, God abandoned and sacrificed his one and only Son to the point of death on the cross. The love of God manifested in Christ crucified melted my hardened heart, gave me peace with God and changed my life to follow Christ for the rest of my life. There are numerous cases testifying to the power of God through Christ crucified. The power of God solves our deadly sin problem and restores any kinds of sinners to be his children.

Second, Christ crucified is the wisdom of God. While Jesus hung on the cross, people shouted, *“He saved others; let him save himself if he is God’s Messiah, the Chosen One…If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself” (Lk 23:35-36).* The wisdom of this world continues asking us to “save ourselves”; for the wisdom of the world is based on the idea of self-preservation. The wisdom of God, however, is a reversal of the world’s value. It seemed that the crucified Christ was a loser and failure. But through his crucifixion, Jesus defeated the power of sin and death, and crushed the head of Satan. His resurrection from the dead assures us of his victory. On the Cross, Christ wins through losing, triumphs through sacrificing, achieves glory through service and humility, and comes to riches via giving all away. This is God’s wisdom revealed in the cross of Jesus.

Jesus Christ turns the values of the world upside down. Christ creates a whole new order of life and a counterculture. So Jesus commands us to follow this new wisdom and order in Mk 8:34-35, *“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me and for the gospel will save it.”* Paul is thus helping the Corinthian believers to apply the wisdom of God and be used in life-giving and community-building for the body of Christ in Corinth.

In verses 26-31, Paul reminds the Corinthians of their humble origins. The content of the gospel is foolishness to the world. God also chooses those who are humble, weak, and lowly by human standards to receive and preach the gospel. Why? Look at verses 29-30. ***“…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.”*** To gain salvation and to be used by God are solely by God’s one-sided grace. In the past, we were weak, powerless, and ungodly due to the power of sin. But now we have become princes and princesses in God’s kingdom and the ambassadors of God. Our new life is possible solely through Christ crucified. Christ alone is our righteousness, holiness and redemption. So Paul concludes in verse 31, ***“Therefore, as it is written: “Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.”***

In his book entitled, “The Cross of Christ” John Stott, a world-wide preacher, defines the community of Christ as a community of the cross marked by sacrifice, service, and suffering for Christ and others. As an illustration of how a Christian community can be comprehensively stimulated by the cross, he introduces the Moravian Brethren, founded by Count Nikolaus von Zinzendorf (1700-1760). In 1722 he welcomed some pietistic Christian refugees from Moravia and Bohemia to his estate, where he helped them to form a Christian community. Socially, they were poor refugees, but they are best known as a missionary movement. The Moravians’ stress was on Christianity as a religion of the cross. They defined a Christian as one who has “an inseparable friendship with the Lamb, the slaughtered Lamb.” Their seal bears a Latin inscription, which says “Our Lamb has conquered; let us follow him.” They were deeply concerned for Christian unity and believed that the slaughtered Lamb would be the basis of the unity. Their emphasis on the cross brought them into genuine humility and repentance, self-giving, joy, and confidence of their salvation in God.

Indeed, their healthy emphasis on the cross arose largely from Zinzendorf’s own conversion experience. Sent as a young man of nineteen to visit the capital cities of Europe in order to complete his education, he once found himself in the art gallery of Dusseldorf. He stood before Domenico Feti’s Ecce Homo (Latin for “Behold this Man!”), a painting in which Christ is portrayed wearing the crown of thorns, and under which the inscription reads: “All this I did for thee; what doest thou for me?” Zinzendorf was deeply convicted and challenged. There and then the young Count asked the crucified Christ to draw him into ‘the fellowship of his sufferings’ and to open up a life of service to him. He never went back on this commitment. By the time Zinzendorf died, God used the beautiful Moravian community to send out 226 missionaries to 10 different countries. As a single church, the community sent out more missionaries than the whole Protestant church had done in the previous 200 years!

Christ crucified is the power of God to give us salvation from the power of sin. It is the wisdom of God, proving that self-sacrificing and self-giving ultimately triumph. We are called to depend on God’s power, live by God’s wisdom, and boast in the crucified Christ alone. May God strengthen us to follow in the way of Jesus’ cross, death and resurrection! May God bless our church to be the salt and light of the world as a community of cross (Mt 5:13-14)!