1 Corinthians 1:1-17 Sermon Manuscript

“Making the Cross of Christ Empty”

Have you ever known people in your life that you knew and sensed that their identity was in someone else or a certain group? Have you ever known people that you knew would just go full panic attack and be full of fear if the person they thought was a somebody abandoned them and rejected them because without them, they know they would be a nobody? While that might conjure up humorous scenes of petty high school movie dramas where there’s a bunch of cliques getting at each other’s throats, yet this is sadly a common reality in our lives. We live in a culture that is insecure, and because they don’t have their security in Jesus Christ like we do, they are trying to find their security in someone else that was never meant to take their place. And sadly, the church at Corinth was acting like the world around them. They were forming factions after certain prominent leaders of the church, they were forming “cliques” you can say because they were still infected with the sinful Greek culture around them that placed a premium on rhetoric and oratorical skills. That would be like today someone with the “gift of gab.” But when cliques are formed, when leaders are put on a pedestal that is only rightly reserved for Christ, we end up making the cross of Christ empty. We end up stripping the power that the cross is meant to have on us because we get in the way of its glory.

And let me tell you I hated the aspect of cliques in the church. I especially noticed that cliques were more prominent in the younger folks like teenagers, which makes sense because we all at one point were insecure teenagers trying to find our place in the world. I believe cliques go against the very nature and purpose for why the church exists which is to be an open community for believers to get to know one another, form bonds with one another, and to accept one another. Now I get it, I’m not saying it’s wrong to gravitate towards certain people in the church because you feel more comfortable around them and like them more than others. I’m not saying it’s wrong to form a core group of brothers or sisters in the church that you are closest to. But what I am saying is that it is wrong when that close knitted group becomes a “closed knitted” group. It is when the mentality turns from “I feel a close kinship with these brothers” to “I will not allow any other brother to come in and get to know us and thus ruin the special relationship I have with this person or group of people.” When we have a mentality like that, that becomes a dangerous mentality and it becomes partiality which the Bible condemns.

And that is what we are going to look at today, the first issue in the letter to the Corinthians was about these factions and divisions that were formed after certain apostles and teachers of God’s Word. But before Paul gives the imperatives (“do this”), he is going to give the indicative (“This is the reality of who you are”) to remind the Corinthian believers that they are no longer characterized by their sin, but by the holiness of Christ. And so look with me starting at verse 1: “*Paul, called as an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother, to the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, called as saints, with all who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours: grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*.” Now notice that in verse 1 that Paul mentions Sosthenes our brother. Now this could be referring to a different Sosthenes, as Sosthenes was not an unusual name, but most likely this is referring to the Sosthenes of Acts 18, who was the Jewish synagogue ruler. Acts 18 recorded for us Paul’s missionary efforts in Corinth where this church of Corinth was started by him. But like other cities, Paul ran into opposition from the Jews and was brought to trial before the judgment seat of Gallio, the Roman proconsul of Achaia, the region where Corinth was a part of.

But, to the disappointment of the Jews, the attempt to have Paul arrested did not go well because the basis for their accusation of Paul was mostly theological saying Jesus was God, and according to Jewish Law, that was considered blasphemy. So Gallio being not a Jew but a Roman didn’t want to deal with theological squabbles with the Jewish people, because they viewed Christianity as a sect of the Jews, an off branch of the Jews. So Gallio turned the case down, and Acts 18 describes how Sosthenes, the ruler of the Jewish synagogue was dragged and beaten in front of the judgment seat. We don’t know if the “they” spoken about are the Roman soldiers who beat Sosthenes for wasting his time and calling a court order for nothing, or if the “they” that beat up Sosthenes was Sosthenes’ own people, the Jews, for representing their case so poorly. But whoever it was, the beatings that Sosthenes received perhaps was the instrument by which God saved him. Sosthenes got the sense “beaten” into him to turn to Christ and be saved. That’s a colorful way to be saved. But isn’t that wonderful? Once an enemy of the faith, an opposer to the apostle Paul, but now because God showed mercy to Sosthenes, he is now of the faith.

And Paul together with Sosthenes addresses the Corinthian church as those who are “sanctified” in Christ Jesus. To those who are called as “saints.” That was the problem of the Corinthian believers. They were not living and acting as sanctified saints of God. In fact they were acting in many ways like unbelievers. They were struggling to live out their righteous and holy standing before God in conduct and practice. But Paul reminds them of their identity and standing before God. You are saints of God O church of Corinth, remind yourself of that. Satan and his army loves to trick believers into thinking that they are still locked in their sins, enslaved to their sins, and trying to make them think that they are trying to win a hopeless battle. Satan loves to make believers doubt whether they are truly saved and we all too easily can forget the calling with which God called us; to be saints of Christ. Ultimately our sanctification comes from the Lord Jesus Christ when we call on His name and power to help us live like Him. That’s why it says “*with all who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ*.” And the remedy for the way the Corinthian believers were acting is the same remedy for any sinful behavior; to remind ourselves of the grace and peace that God gives through His Son “*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*.”

And Paul is not done there with the encouragement. In verse 4 he says this, “*I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus, that in everything you were enriched in Him, in all word and all knowledge, even as the witness about Christ was confirmed in you, so that you are not lacking in any gift, eagerly awaiting the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will also confirm you to the end, beyond reproach in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ*…” Despite the carnal and worldly behavior of the Corinthian church, Paul acknowledges and recognizes and gives praise to the Lord of the fact that He has shown His grace to them, that they were enriched in all word and all knowledge, and were gifted with many spiritual gifts. Their testimony in Christ was confirmed both by believers and non-believers, and they eagerly await the revealing and day of the Lord Jesus Christ. And Paul adds that in addition to all this, he gives them assurance that Christ is going to keep them beyond reproach on the day of Jesus Christ. Sounds like a church that shouldn’t have any issues right? Sounds like a church that is spiritually mature. Yet, despite having all the same resources that God gives to any church, the believers in Corinth were not where they should have been. And any other religion or works based system would look at the church of Corinth and all its problems and say, “well there goes that church. How could God possibly keep His faithfulness toward those wayward Christians?

But the wonderful truth of our faith is that our faith is not based on us, our salvation is not dependent on whether we continue to be faithful, but on whether God continues to be faithful to us or not, because it is God who grants faith for us to believe. So if God is the granter of faith, then God is the only one who can negate that faith. But will He? Can He? Verse 9 “*God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.”* Once God has promised that He will finish the work He has started in us, He has now put the reputation of His faithfulness on the line, and He will not allow His faithfulness to fail. In fact, it is impossible for God to fail in being faithful to us because God is immutable, He can’t change…and Hebrews says it is impossible for God to lie. God is faithful. God is faithful. Having said that… Now…Now…verse 10 says, “*NOW I exhort you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment for I have been informed concerning you, my brothers, by Chloe’s people, that there are quarrels among you*.”

What kind of quarrels? Verse 12 “*Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, “I am of Paul,” and “I of Apollos,” and “I of Cephas,” and “I of Christ*.” This problem is essentially the ancient version of our celebrity culture today. It is inherent in the sinfulness of man that man desires to be noticed and be a somebody in this world. Or, if that person cannot be a somebody themselves, they will attach themselves to someone who is a somebody to feel like they are somebody. It goes back to our pride, and our ego, and the worship of self. And it wasn’t really different for them either. Now I could imagine the temptation to venerate these apostles and and prophets of God and to align yourselves in the camp of one of these men you like. Those who are of the camp of Paul would say “well Paul was the first one who came here to establish the church and I was here. You came later.” Those of the Apollos camp would say to Pauline camp, “well it doesn’t matter if you are first, it matters that our preacher can preach eloquently and mightily in the Scriptures.” Then the Cephas (or Peter) camp says, “Ha, you think your leader Apollos can wax eloquent in preaching?! Come to our Wednesday evening service and be blown away by the fierce passionate booming voice of the rock, the apostle Peter!” And those of the camp of Christ, will say to all of them, “Well, unlike you I don’t need a crutch of an imperfect leader like what you guys follow….I follow Christ. I don’t need anyone to follow other than my God.”

You can see how all these groups, even those of the camp of “Christ” (which might seem good on the surface) are making idols and factions out of these leaders. I have a Christian themed board game called “The Acts” based on the book of Acts and it’s pretty fun and neat game where you pick an apostle that has a special power and you go around Jerusalem and the biblical region making disciples. The problem is, it’s not a cooperative game. Everyone is for themselves, so you are competing with each to see who can make the most disciples. So it’s not quite biblical in that way if you know what I mean. But these factions and divisions and this child like mentality of “My guy is better than your guy” was bad and worldly. Verse 13 “*Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one would say you were baptized in my name*.”

Paul responds back to these factions with some very powerful rhetorical questions. Did Christ get a spiritual knife and severe the parts of his body away from each other where each is claiming it’s the real church? Or let’s take the faction that supposedly is exalting me…was I (Paul) crucified for you? Notice the wisdom of God in Paul taking down himself and not saying “was Apollos crucified or Peter crucified for you?” Because if he started with that, those followers of Apollos or Peter may have gotten the wrong idea that Paul was defending his own followers and getting at the other factions. And when Paul mentions being glad that he did not baptize most of them, he’s not saying the act of baptism is bad, but that he’s thankful and glad to God that in His sovereignty and providence, God didn’t have Paul preach the gospel and baptize all those whom he came across, but rather that Paul preached the gospel, and someone else came along to baptize those converts. Verse 16 he adds, “*Now I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized any other*.” As far as I can tell, I have not baptized anyone in that church of Corinth other than Crispus, Gaius, and the household of Stephanas.

Verse 17 “*For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to proclaim the gospel, not in wisdom of word, so that the cross of Christ will not be made empty*.” As important as baptism is, and as close as baptism is in connection to salvation, Paul’s primary mission is not to baptize people, but to proclaim the gospel. His emphases and ministry is not on the religious rite of baptism as if he was conveying to those he was somehow this “holy man” with magical powers that only he possessed to baptize. He didn’t come to baptize as many people as he can to create a following of his baptizees. No, he came as a proclaimer of the good news of salvation…and not only to proclaim the cross of Christ, He came preaching not in a way where man would place their trust and hope in the eloquence and delivery of the message, but on the message itself. You might have the gift of gab, you might be very gifted in telling stories and being able to connect with people’s emotions and tears, but if that is the reason why people keep coming back to hear you, and not because they are being sanctified by the Word of God that you are proclaiming, you are making the cross of Christ empty…void of its power. A godly Christian will live his or her life in such way, will use his or her giftings in the Lord in such a way that they will see Christ in them, not them. When you do something commendable, honorable, or wonderful in the name of the Lord, do people give credit to the Lord and are they pointed back to the Lord or does the credit involve your name in it and is the focus on you?

Oh how dangerous is the potential we have of getting in the way of the saving cross of Christ to sinners! And I hope you didn’t come hear today to listen to me because I am funny, or because I tell cute stories, or even because I am “gifted” in preaching. I hope you are coming because you are desiring and hungering after God’s Word, and you know that I am preparing God’s Word to feed it to you so that you would know what the will of God is for your life to live for his glory and your good. I hope that you are coming because I try to be faithful to the Word of God and explain its meaning as accurately as I can to you so that you would be sanctified by the truth. I am not special, you are not special. I am not a somebody but a “nobody.” You are not a somebody but a “nobody.” The only person who is a “somebody” is the One who one day we will bow our knee to, the only one who is worthy of the worship of the entire created order, the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ who lived a perfect life of righteousness on our behalf to be the perfect sinless sacrifice for our sins on our behalf, paying the infinite debt that we owed to God. The one who rose from the dead conquering sin and death that we might have life in His name. Christ is everything. Only Christ matters. Our name will perish, but His name will live on forever. “*Not to us Oh Yahweh, Not to us but to your name give glory*.” [pray]