THE MESSAGE OF THE CROSS

1 Corinthians 1:1–2:5

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.”

Have you ever found it hard to get along with somebody? Whether it was a family member, spouse, classmate, teammate, workmate or neighbor, we’ve all had our share of disagreements. This happens even in the church. In today’s passage Paul begins by addressing disunity in the church. How does he help these divided people? By focusing on the message of the cross. The cross helps us in so many ways personally, but it also helps us as a community. May God open our hearts and speak to us personally through his living word today.

To start out, Paul introduces himself. He says he was called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God (1). “Christ Jesus” literally means “King Jesus.” His “apostle” means his ambassador, with his authority. Paul was called to this “by the will of God,” not by his own ambition. In fact, he’d been persecuting Christians. But God called him, of all people, and made him an apostle of King Jesus. It was God’s own choosing grace and inscrutable will. Some in this church were questioning Paul’s authority. Paul implies that they were actually questioning God’s will. Sosthenes had been a synagogue leader in Corinth who’d been persecuted along with Paul (Ac18:17). Now, for some reason, he’s with Paul in Ephesus as he’s writing this letter. By mentioning the name of Sosthenes Paul is recalling their suffering together to get this church started.

Next, Paul addresses the church members. Read verse 2. By calling them “the church of God,” he’s emphasizing that they belong not to any one particular servant of God, but to God himself. He stresses that they’re sanctified and called to be holy people—different from the world. Though they live in a corrupt culture, they’re called through Christ to live as holy people. And by mentioning all those who call on the name of Christ, Paul is helping them not to be conceited. There are so many others who are just as much God’s people as we are, who have Jesus as their same Lord. We can be united when we all call on the same Lord. In verse 3 Paul blesses them, as he usually does in his letters, with the best things: grace and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Next, in verses 4–9 Paul gives thanks for them. As we’re going to see, this church had many serious problems, and they grieved Paul in many ways. But he starts out this letter by giving thanks for them. How and why was he thankful? Read verse 4. Fundamentally, Paul was thankful because they’d received God’s grace, just as he had. God’s grace is always our great unifier. Human cultures have many ideas of how people should live together. Some cultures are very hierarchical and prejudiced, others, very egalitarian. But we can never force people to see each other as equals. Only when we receive the gift of God’s grace in Jesus do our spiritual eyes open, and then we begin to see that in his grace we’re all brothers and sisters in Christ, and fully equal.

Read verse 5. The Corinthians valued those who spoke well and knew a lot. In fact, as we’re going to see later, this power of speech and knowledge became one of the sources of division among them. But here Paul gives thanks that any giftedness in speech or knowledge they had was actually a gift of God’s grace. It was actually in Christ that they’d been enriched in every way. We too need to see that only in Christ do our personal gifts become blessings. Only in Christ are we truly enriched in every way. When we’re personally very secure in the grace of Christ, instead of feeling threatened by or competitive with others, we can be genuinely thankful for others’ gifts through that same grace.

Read verse 6. The fact that they had been so enriched in Christ was evidence that Paul’s gospel ministry among them was a sign of his legitimacy as an apostle (2Co3:2,3). Read verse 7. Here Paul speaks to them as a community. These people had varying and various spiritual gifts, and they didn’t all share all the same gifts, as Paul mentions in chapter 12. But God had blessed them as a church to have all the spiritual gifts possible. He also had blessed them all with the same hope. They all were waiting for our Lord Jesus Christ to come again. The Second Coming of our Lord Jesus is another great unifier among believers.

In light of this great hope, Paul goes on. Read verse 8. The problems Paul mentions in this letter were threatening to tear them apart, not just personally but especially as a community. But Paul had confidence that our Lord Jesus himself would be able to keep them firm to the end. Paul wasn’t depending on his own efforts in helping them, but on our Lord Jesus who is their true Helper. Read verse 9. Once people receive God’s grace in Jesus, God is faithful to them to the very end. Also, God calls us all into fellowship with our Lord Jesus Christ. This fellowship, too, is our great unifier. Only this fellowship truly satisfies our souls.

In verses 10–17 Paul addresses one of his greatest concerns for them, that they were divided. The New Testament in many places appeals for unity among believers. But this church in Corinth had an especially severe problem. Read verse 10. Paul starts out by mentioning the basis for his appeal to unity. He calls them “brothers and sisters.” We may not realize it, but in Christ we have a stronger bond with each other than even blood ties in families. Paul also appeals to them, he says, “in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” It’s a very serious matter. Unity among us is not just for our comfort; it’s for Christ’s name’s sake, and it’s a mandate under Christ’s authority. No matter our strongly felt reasons or justifications, disunity among believers dishonors Jesus and displeases Jesus.

In verse 10b Paul tells them to agree with one another in what they say. We tend to think contrary to what others are saying; in our minds we question and play devil’s advocate to every comment, suggestion or advice. But we should be saying things to one another that build up our unity. To do that, we’ve got to be more careful about what we let come out of our mouths. If we’re speaking randomly, it may not seem like such a big deal, but it can become a source of disunity. To agree with one another in what we say, we need to be saying things based on the core teachings of the Bible. We need to be prayerful so that we can be saying things to build one another up in Christ.

Next, Paul forbids them from having divisions among them. All kinds of divisions can creep into the church. Some can be theological, but most of the time they’re human divisions. We divide based on our preferences, our age group, our ethnicity, our educational, economic or social status. But when we come to church, we’ve got to see every single person among us as a precious brother and sister in Christ—not as someone less than us, but as fully equal; not as an enemy, but as our closest friend in Christ. We’d like this to happen naturally, but it never will; we’ve got to be intentional about it. We’ve got to firmly decide not to allow divisions of any kind to come into our community.

Finally Paul urges them to be “perfectly united in mind and thought.” What’s *that*? How can that even happen? Human beings have wildly different personalities, preferences and ways of thinking and approaching life. Does Paul mean we all should be clones and have “thought police” among us? No. To be “perfectly united in mind and thought” is also translated as “made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment or purpose.” We gain this same mind, this same judgment, this same purpose, as we become united with Christ. Philippians 2:1–5 reads, “Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus…” To be perfectly united in mind and thought means to have the humble, loving mind of Jesus. We all need this mind.

Look at verses 11,12. This church especially had divisions about which spiritual leader they were claiming. Some were loyal to Paul, others to Apollos, others to Cephas (Peter), and still others, only to Christ. Surely they had many good reasons for having such strong loyalties. It’s good to honor those who led us to Christ or who mentored us. But our ultimate loyalty needs to be to Christ first, and then, to all those in our Christian community, even those very different.

How does Paul help them? Read verse 13. These are rhetorical questions, but also very strong words. The first is most profound: “Is Christ divided?” No way! And yet Christians think it’s okay to create many divisions in his church. That’s never okay. We see here that Paul doesn’t want anybody’s human loyalty, that they focus on Paul himself. We may have had someone great helping us spiritually, and it’s wonderful to remember that special grace that we received through that special person. But only Christ himself was crucified for us. Christ crucified is a major theme in Paul’s appeal to these divided Christians. When we remember that Christ was crucified for us all, we can have true spiritual unity.

In verses 14–16 Paul briefly gets into who he baptized among them. “Who baptized me” seems to have become a mark of prestige that caused these divisions. Baptism is good, but it’s not the point of the gospel. Read verse 17. Paul’s main focus was on carrying out Christ’s task for him. It was the task of preaching the gospel. What is the gospel? It’s the good news of Jesus’ death and resurrection (15:1–4). These are the two main pillars of the gospel.

The first part, Jesus’ death on a cross, Paul says here has “power” in it. What’s the power of the cross? It’s the power to change hearts. The prophet Jeremiah lamented, “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?” (Jer17:9). Genesis 6:5 reads, “The LORD saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time.” Wow! We think we’re good, or reasonable, but the Bible says our human hearts are very sick with sin, and we don’t even know how sick we are. But the power of the cross of Christ changes even the most sin-sick heart. Counseling and therapy help to a degree, but at some point we realize we’re really dealing with the sinful nature within us. It’s our own sin that manifests itself in pride, selfishness and all kinds of ugly things. Our Lord Jesus said, “For it is from within, out of a person’s heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly” (Mk7:21,22). Our hearts can be crooked and corrupted by many things. But our sin-sick hearts can be healed and changed through the power of the cross of Jesus. His blood shed on the cross purifies our hearts from all sin (1Jn1:7,9). When we fix our eyes on his cross, God’s light begins to shine into our souls. We begin to see how proud, selfish, foolish and ugly we’ve been. We begin to recognize the great love of God which melts all our crookedness, bitterness, and changes how we view others.

The power of the cross also changes our relationships, represented in the two bars of a cross. The vertical bar shows that our relationship with God is restored, and the horizontal bar shows the restoration of all our relationships. Nothing else can transform both the desires of our hearts and our relationships. No amount of education or social or religious programs or disciplines can have the power to bring about such profound changes. Only the cross of Christ really changes people from deep within. Perhaps the greatest power of the cross of Christ is the power of God’s love. Our Lord Jesus said, “Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (Jn15:13). Romans 5:8 says, “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” The cross of Christ unites us with the inseparable love of God, the love that gets us through the worst, the love that makes us more than conquerors (Ro8:35–39).

In 1:18–2:5 Paul goes on to stress the message of the cross as the best way to build unity. Read verse 18. The point here is not to judge and condemn those who reject the message, but to appreciate the unique quality of the message. Of course, we need to make the message of the cross meaningful to people in widely different cultural and spiritual contexts. But the message of the cross doesn’t change based on the generation or the culture. It’s basically the same message for everybody. What is it? It’s that we’re all terrible sinners, and that Jesus suffered and died for us all (1Ti1:15). Very simple; very powerful.

But then as now, people see this message in polar opposite ways. Some see it as foolishness; others see it as the power of God. Why do some see it as foolishness? It’s because, according to the life philosophies of the world, the cross makes no sense. Why would somebody’s death in such a shameful and painful way be anything good? It looks weak, futile, even meaningless. Why would anybody believe in such a man and dedicate their lives to following in his footsteps? It goes against our innate impulse for self-preservation. It’s not a rational message or way of life. But those who are being saved have repented and put their trust in Jesus on the cross. They’re still struggling sinners, a work in progress, so it says they “are being saved.” But God gives them the Holy Spirit, and they can see the power of God in the cross.

In verses 19–21 Paul emphasizes how unwise or irrational the message of the cross seems, but that through it, God himself is still working powerfully. God chose to work through the cross of Christ to help people give up depending on their own reason and wisdom and start depending only on his grace. Being wise or intelligent is good; they are gifts from God. But often, such wisdom or intelligence can get in the way of our receiving the grace of God through the cross. So we have to let go of our human wisdom and intelligence and just trust God and what he’s done for us. This can only make us humble. This is God’s wisdom in the gospel, designed to root out our human pride, which is at the root of all our sin. People in the Corinthian church were mostly Greeks, and people in their city prided themselves on knowing all kinds of philosophies and having all kinds of knowledge. But the message of the cross has nothing to do with human philosophies or human knowledge. Paul wanted the Corinthian Christians to come back to the cross. Read verses 22–24. Jews and Greeks represent the two main cultural streams at that time. Some people like power, others like wisdom. For both types, the cross seems useless. But for those who repent and respond to God’s call, the cross becomes our true power and our true wisdom.

Next, Paul helps them remember who they were. Read verses 26–31. These verses have been a great comfort to many believers down through history. God chose to work through the cross of Christ, and he also chooses to work in every generation through humble people. In this way, only God is glorified. Over time, success tends to make us proud and self-sufficient. It’s a great exercise to really remember all God’s grace in our lives. Throughout this letter Paul mentions boasting many times (1:29,31; 3:21; 4:7; 5:6; 9:15,16; 13:3,4; 15:31). There is good boasting and bad boasting, and most of it is bad. The only good kind is to boast in the Lord. It means to relish in God’s amazing grace to me personally, and, to relish in God’s grace to use even me for his gospel during my lifetime. Any other kind of boasting, even in subtle ways, creates divisions.

Finally, Paul mentions how he delivered the message of the cross. Read 2:1–5. Paul was a highly intelligent man with an extensive education. Frankly speaking, he was vastly superior to many people. But in sharing the gospel of Christ he resolved to know nothing but Jesus Christ and him crucified. Why was he so weak, so full of fear and trembling? It was because he was keenly aware of what a wretched man he was, what an unworthy sinner, no better than anyone else at all (Ro7:24; 1Co15:9,10; 1Ti1:13-16). He didn’t worry about how wise he sounded, or about what people thought of him; he only depended on the power of the message of the cross. He believed that when he proclaimed the message of the cross by faith, the Holy Spirit would work powerfully to convict people of sin and bring them to saving faith. It tells us that anyone is qualified to proclaim the message of the cross, if only we humbly depend on God and focus on the message itself. It also tells us that proclaiming the message in this way helps people to focus not on us, but on God and his power.

Read 1:18 again. Through our study of 1 Corinthians may God bring us back to the cross of Christ to experience his power and grace newly. Through the message of the cross may God help us to root out all kinds of pride and divisions and make us truly united spiritually.