

Sermon Draft

Text: 1 Corinthians 3:1–9

Sermon: “The Cross”

Epiphany is wrapping up, and the Lenten journey to the cross will soon begin. Because we rehearse these events every year, we can feel we already know this story. However, if we think we know it, we do not know it as we ought.

The Corinthians had many problems. They argued which of their pastors was the greatest: “I follow Paul! I follow Apollos!” They argued which spiritual gifts were the best: “I speak in tongues!” “I prophesy!” One of them had sued his fellow church member, which caused a public embarrassment. Some were living sexually immoral lifestyles, and no one corrected them.

They had divisions between male and female, and they fought about women’s roles in the church. They had divisions between rich and poor, which led to an abuse at the Lord’s Supper. Some even denied the resurrection! The Corinthians boasted about being mature in the faith, but Paul says, “No. You’re still babes. You are still fleshly. You are still thinking like the world.”

So, if you were Paul, where would you even begin? How do you clean up this mess? Well, in the first two chapters of the book, leading up to our text, Paul has pointed the Corinthians back to “Start,” back to the message of the cross. He says, ***“I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified”*** (1 Corinthians 2:2).

The Corinthians had tried to move on from that message. They thought they were mature, and that cross thing was baby stuff. “Oh, not another sermon about the cross. Ugh! Paul’s sermons are just so basic. Let us move on to more mature issues.” But it was precisely because they had overlooked the cross that they had all these errors.

Brothers and sisters, the cross is not basic Christianity, nor is the cross advanced Christianity. The cross is the whole thing from start to finish. The cross is the key to it all, shedding light on all matters of faith and life. The cross is obviously our faith. We believe that Christ died for us, and whoever believes has eternal life. But the cross is also our temporal life, for we seek to live our lives following him. We seek to imitate the Crucified!

If we follow Paul's logic throughout this letter, he addresses problems by asking two basic questions: What decision would bring glory to Christ? And how can we imitate Christ crucified toward one another? So, for instance, consider the issue of lawsuits. Should we sue our fellow Christian? Well, let us apply Paul's questions. First, would it bring glory to Christ? Would this cause the name of Christ to be praised or to be mocked? That's the first question. Second, would it be Christlike? Would it be helpful and build the congregation up in love?

When we ask the right questions, the decision becomes quite clear. If we ask the world's questions, like "What's in it for me? What would make me happy? What is my heart telling me?" we'll arrive at one conclusion, the wisdom of the world. But if we stay under the light of the cross, looking not to our own interest but to the glory of God and the benefit of neighbor, we'll come to an entirely different conclusion!

The Corinthians were still thinking like the world. They were still thinking like babies. So, Paul tells them that they need to learn the mind of Christ, which is foolishness, baby stuff, in the eyes of the world, but for us it is the wisdom of God.

So, what is the mind of Christ? Well, it is to think like Christ thinks. Allow me to read how Paul describes it in Philippians: ***“Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name”*** (Philippians 2:3–9).

Do you want to be great? Then be like Jesus and make yourself nothing! Do you want to be first? Then serve God and serve neighbor and place yourself last. Deny yourself, take up a cross, and follow Jesus. This is how Christ the crucified thinks.

Have you ever noticed that Jesus never looked to his own interests? Have you ever noticed that Jesus only used his miraculous powers for others?

When he was hungry, he did not make the stones into bread. He entrusted himself to God. But when others were hungry, he fed the five thousand and again the four thousand. Likewise, when others were sick, suffering, or dying, he gave them healing. But when he was dying, he stayed on that cross, and he did nothing for himself. Rather, he entrusted himself to the Father, and he persevered out of love for us. If we want to be mature, have this mind—the mind of Christ.

This seems so basic to our haughty hearts. We think, “I’ve heard that all before.” Then why don’t we behave this way? We know not to be selfish. Then why haven’t we stopped? We think just because our ears have heard it that we have already mastered the teaching and are ready to move on! But James reminds his hearers to ***“be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves”*** (James 1:22). James says this to crush their pride. Paul is crushing the pride of the Corinthians in our text. If we are hearers of the Word but not doers, we are clearly those of little faith mere babes at best! O Lord, we believe, but help our unbelief. And the good news: he will! He will help our unbelief! God is so Patient with us, willing to teach and reteach the glorious Gospel again.

As humans, we like the idea of progress, of moving on to bigger and better things. However, generation after generation, God is patient! So again and again, God teaches all people the same message: “***You are all poor, miserable sinners, but I have reconciled you to myself by the blood of my Son.***”

Yes, friends, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. And there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. And this is always the message we need when our egos overinflate.

First, we need the Law to crush us, especially our pride, and then we need the Gospel to build us up again. We need the Law to cut us open like a surgeon’s knife that cuts out the cancer, and then we need the Gospel to heal our wounds and make us whole.

We need the Law to prune away all the branches bearing no fruit, and then we need the Gospel to give us new growth that will produce the good fruit by God’s power.

The message may seem basic, but in this basic message, we find power. As Paul says, “***I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes***” (Romans 1:16). It may seem basic, but we have not even begun to fathom the implications.

Therefore, Paul prays that we *“may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God”* (Ephesians 3:18–19). If we are ready to move on from the cross, we have not scratched the surface of the mystery of God’s love.

So, I invite you as we enter the Lenten season to learn it once again, to sit at Jesus’ feet, like humble Mary. I invite you to hear the message anew. Next week we have Transfiguration, and then we will begin the Lenten journey to the cross. Let us not assume we already know this story, but let us hear it with fresh ears. For in the cross, all things are revealed. First and foremost, our faith! But then also, our way of life. There is so much to learn, and we are still babes. We have been foolish, but God is willing to teach us again.

Consider this: How many times did you have to teach your children something before they finally learned it? How many times did you have to repeat yourself? In a similar way, God must repeat himself constantly if we are ever to learn, but surprisingly, he’s okay with that because he is so very patient. He desires all to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.

Therefore, pray to him. Pray that he would teach you the good news again that we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in the work of Christ crucified alone. Pray that he would give you a love for that message and pray that he would grant you the Holy Spirit to act accordingly. For the one who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door shall be opened. May the Father never grow tired of teaching us about his beloved Son. To God alone be all glory!

Amen