**The Message of the Cross Is the Power of God**

January 10, 2021

1 Corinthians 1:1-31

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.”

1 Corinthians is called “problem book” in the sense that the apostle Paul handles the problems that faced the church in the wicked city of Corinth: divisions, hero-worship of leaders, sexual immorality, marital problems and misuse of spiritual gifts. Living among many ungodly people, Corinthian Christians were so heavily influenced by the surrounding godless culture that they were living just like unbelievers. Today’s churches have the same problems, and we need the lessons from 1 Corinthians more than ever. However, 1 Corinthians is not just problem book. It contains chapter 13, the most beautiful essay on love in all literature. Chapter 15 is the most remarkable teaching on the resurrection—both Christ’s and ours. The regulation of the Lord’s Supper is in Chapter 11. In Chapter 1, Paul emphasizes the message of the cross. The message of the cross is simple, namely, that you are a sinner, and you cannot save yourself; Only Christ crucified saves. It is foolishness to those who do not believe. But to those who believe, it is the power of God. May God help us to learn why the cross of Jesus is the power of God, and the wisdom of God.

Look at verse 2. “To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Corinth was a center of commerce in Paul’s day. Corinth was so notorious for its sexual immorality that “corinthianize” came to mean “to practice sexual immorality.” The worship of Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of beauty and sexuality, fostered prostitution in the name of religion. The temple in Corinth, for example, had 1,000 temple prostitutes. It is amazing that a church can be established in such a wicked city like Corinth. It shows the power of the gospel to overcome any kind of problems. Thus we have a great hope for Toronto to be a holy city. Look at verse 2 again. Paul calls them “sanctified in Christ Jesus...called to be holy.” The Corinthian Christians were far from being holy, plagued with many problems. But they are holy in the sight of God because of Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross, and through the Holy Spirit’s work, they are being made holy. We are changing day by day to be holy, though sometimes slowly. So we feel frustrated many times. Man is a paradoxical creature. We are holy in God’s sight but in reality, our actions are not holy. It is our great hope that when Jesus comes again, our actions will match our holy status in God. A children’s song goes, “Little by little every day, Little by little in every way, Jesus is changing me…He’s changing me, my precious Jesus, I’m not the same person that I used to be, Sometimes it’s slow going but there’s a knowing That one day perfect I will be.”

Look at verse 4. “I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus.”

We can learn from Paul that we should always try to find something thankworthy in the lives of others. If the Corinthian Christians’ practical lives were not very commendable, Paul could at least thank God for what he had done for them. When they heard the gospel through Paul, the Holy Spirit worked mightily in them. They were saved and they received abundant spiritual gifts. This was nothing but the grace of God. Paul wrote with the conviction that they would be blameless when Jesus comes again (8). How could Paul have this conviction? Look at verse 9. “God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful.” God who began the good work in them would carry it on to completion. This was the source of his great hope for them. When our Bible students have problems, sometimes we lose hope for them. But when we have faith that God is faithful, we can have hope for them and continue to pray for them.

Look at 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 united in mind and thought.” Now Paul addresses the problem of division in the church. In order to understand the Corinthians, we must consider their cultural background. They lived in a society dominated by philosophers and academic schools, such as those of Plato, Aristotle, the Epicureans and the Stoics. It was natural for them to align with one school or teacher and argue with the others. The word philosophy literally means in Greek the love of wisdom, sophia and phileo. This spirit had crept into the church. The Corinthians treated Paul, Apollos, and Cephas like competitive philosophy teachers. Some said, “I follow Apollos because he is most eloquent.” Others said, “I follow Paul, because he has a great shepherd heart.” Still others said, “I follow Cephas, because he was Jesus’ top disciple.” Some even claimed to follow Christ, meaning that they alone were disciples of Jesus.

Humanly this may be understandable. But spiritually it had led to division. They were no longer Christ-centered, but man-centered. This was the root problem. When this happens, the church cannot stand. Satan exploits divisions to destroy the church. There is a saying, “United we stand, divided we fall.” When we are united in Christ, the Holy Spirit works. Jesus said in John 13:34-35: “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” All Christians must obey this command. We must practice the unconditional love of Christ, remembering how he has loved us. Then we can be united in mind and thought through the work of the Holy Spirit. Paul wanted them to realize the seriousness of their division. So Paul rebuked them. “Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul?” (13) Some were boasting that Paul baptized them. Paul said that he could not even remember this. Then Paul got straight to the point: the cross of Christ. Look at verse 17. “For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.” Paul believed that when they came back to the cross of Christ, they could be united in mind and thought and could solve their division problem from the root.

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.” How one responds to the message of the cross may seem to be a light matter. To receive or reject seems to be a matter of free choice. However, the result is very serious. We will bear responsibility for our choice. Those who regard the cross as foolish will perish. They will live in bondage to sin until they go to the fiery lake of burning sulfur. However, those who receive the message of the cross are saved from their sin. They become children of God with eternal life in his kingdom. The message of the cross is the power of God for salvation. As Jesus was being crucified, two criminals hung on crosses--one on his right, the other on his left. One hurled insults at Jesus. But the other confessed his sin and guilt. He believed that Jesus was innocent and was being punished unjustly. He heard Jesus’ prayer on the cross, “Father, forgive them.” So he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” Jesus promised him that he would be with him in paradise. Immediately, all his sins were forgiven and he became a citizen of Jesus’ kingdom. God is pleased to save people who receive the message of the cross. When we simply believe the message of the cross, we are saved. To some people, this sounds too simple. They think that salvation is so precious that one should attain it only after much study and intense discipline. But at the bottom of this thought is the belief that man can save himself. It is an exaltation of human reason and effort that displeases God.

On the other hand, when we simply preach the message of the cross, God works. So, the message of the cross, which looks like foolishness to men is really the power of God. The message of the cross is simple. Jesus himself said, “Truly I tell you, anyone who will not accept the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.” (Mk 10:15) It is not a complex philosophy. Every religion and philosophy that man has ever developed except Christianity is complex. That appeals to our ego. It is elaborate. Man will not crush his ego to come down to the level of the simplicity of the cross and recognize that it doesn’t matter what he thinks, and it doesn’t matter how smart he is, but that you are saved not through your intellect, but through faith. He doesn’t like the cross because if you come to the cross, you have to admit that you are a sinner and you cannot save yourself.

Look at verse 23. “But we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles.” To the Jews, Christ crucified was a stumbling block. They looked for a mighty military leader to deliver them from the oppression of Rome. Instead the gospel offered them a Savior nailed to a cross of shame. To the Greeks, Christ crucified was foolishness. The word foolishness is moron. It is moronic, stupid, silly. They could not understand how one who died in such seeming weakness and failure could ever solve their problems. Likewise, if we want to get a good mark, we usually listen to the advice of honor students. If we want to make money, we listen to the advice of millionaires. We also want superheroes to solve our problems. They are powerful. They can fly. Most of all they never die. We don’t want a superhero who is weak.

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.” To the Greeks, God was totally indifferent to men. He was unconcerned about people. He was incapable of feeling, because they said God has to be so far beyond men that he could never be touched with anything human. So the idea that God became incarnate and human flesh and bore the sins of men, the pain and the anguish, died on the cross, was absolutely ridiculous to them. Celsus, who made a life career out of attacking Christianity with zeal said this, “God is good and beautiful and happy. If then he descends to man, it involves change for him and a change from good to bad, from beautiful to ugly, from happiness to unhappiness, and God would never accept such a change.” So the Greeks could not allow for our God to become man. They thought it was incredible that God would come to earth and love mankind and die on a cross. Another thing about Greek philosophy was that everything had to be complex. If you could figure it out, it probably wasn’t true. If the average guy could figure it out, it wasn’t any good. It had to be something only super intelligent people could handle. Nothing was more absurd to the proud people than that the blood of a crucified God could remove sin, secure salvation, and give eternal life. They laughed at the message of the cross.

But God is not foolish, nor weak. Look at verse 25. “For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.” If men were to build a church, they would want to enroll the most prominent members of the community for a maximum publicity. For example, Scientology recruited a famous actor Tom Cruise for publicity. Hillsong church became a megachurch by attracting many celebrities such as Justin Bieber. It looked so cool to attend with many celebrities. But it had a numerous scandals. The church built on human reputation not on the cross of Jesus will collapse. People mock Christianity, saying that only foolish and low individuals and slaves can be Christians because they are the only ones who can be persuaded to believe. It was true of the Corinthian Christians. It is true with us. Usually those who go to church are the poor, the sick and problem-filled people. So we get frustrated easily at people’s problems.

Look at verses 27-29. “But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him.” The ones God calls are not generally the ones the world considers great. God chose 75 year-old man Abraham who was childless to become a source of blessing to the whole world. God used trumpets to bring down the walls of Jericho. Even though the enemy of Israel had a superior weapon like iron chariots, the army of Israel led by General Joshua defeated them completely. God reduced Gideon’s army from 32,000 to 300 to rout the armies of Midian which was like the sand on the seashore. God said to Gideon, “You have too many men. I cannot deliver Midian into their hands, or Israel would boast against me, saying, ‘My own strength has saved me.’” (Jg 7:2) God’s purpose in all these events is that all glory should go to God, not to man. God alone is worthy of praise. Were you weak when you were called? God will make you strong. Were you not wise when you were called? God will make you wise. Were you lowly when you were called? God will make you man of high position. In this way God will be glorified. Look at verse 30. “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.”

Paul concludes, “Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.” God provided the way of salvation through the cross. It seems foolish to the people of the world. But to those who receive it, it is the power of God and the wisdom of God.

Big Idea: The message of the cross is the power of God