

# CROSS CENTERED LIVING

## 1 CORINTHIANS 1:26-31

### INTRODUCTION:

I am aware that the leader of our family of churches has a book by a similar title as our message today: “The Cross Centered Life”. I am not trying to copy that title without giving credit, making a slight change to try to be original and then pretending I don’t see the similarity! Actually, the title came from a recent conversation with a good friend.

**ILLUSTRATION OF CROSS-CENTERED LIVING** – a highlight for me as a pastor came recently when a close friend and brother told me that many of the things that concerned him and his family members were no longer important because of the central message of this church. He shared that some things that seemed so all vital even just a few years ago were more properly viewed, proportionately perceived, and that now he believes that in part those things were so attractive and important at the time because they were a distraction from, and here is the key phrase, from cross-centered living. This man was highlighting that what is important is the cross, the gospel, and that sometimes we make other things more important than they are, when we lose sight of central truth. For me to hear someone identify this as the heart and soul of Riverside was a very encouraging moment.

The point was not, ‘Brian I now see how right Riverside has been all along and I have seen the error of my ways!’ Instead, he and I were agreeing that we are lost and trapped without Christ and the cross. We are nothing apart from him! And everything else is just a distraction from that reality!

***BUT WHAT IN THE WORLD DOES IT MEAN WHEN WE STEP BACK AND VIEW A MAN HANGING NAKED ON A TREE, PUBLICALLY BEATEN, MOCKED, EXPOSED AND THERE WE LOOK AND SAY, ‘THIS IS THE CENTER OF MY LIFE’?*** How can a cruel instrument of death be something that becomes the sum of what we are about and the center of one’s religion?

We are all tempted to want what everybody else wants: ***WE WANT THE WORLD*** and all it can offer us. We want wealth. We want knowledge. We want power. The Corinthians were no different and that had come to a place where they were seriously in trouble because they

wanted the world. In their case it looked like a desire to follow certain men, certain leaders, but behind it all was a desire to impress the world and be like the world. They wanted wisdom, which for Greek culture was supreme. They boasted in travelling philosophers who came around and imparted and cultivated wisdom.

**WE ARE IN THE HEART OF THE EASTER SEASON** and we have come to three sermons on the cross. How refreshing this has been for me to come aside to this passage in 1 Corinthians. And yet it is challenging as well. Refreshing because it was I need the most. Challenging, because as CJ says at the very beginning of his book, **“THE MOST IMPORTANT TRUTH IS THE EASIEST TO FORGET.”**

This important message is a difficult one to hear because we, most of us, already agree with it. It is not that the message will be disputed. But will it be heard?

#### IN **CHAPTERS 1-4** PAUL IS DEALING WITH A PROBLEM OF DIVISIONS WITHIN THE CHURCH AT CORINTH

**1 Corinthians 1:10-12** *I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. What I mean is that each one of you says, "I follow Paul," or "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Cephas," or "I follow Christ."*

1. Those who followed Cephas, or Peter – it is possible that Peter himself had visited Corinth, but we don't know for sure. What was the appeal here? We do not know for sure. Was this a Jewish appeal, the Judaizers are work? Or was it simply Peter's status as a true heavyweight?
2. Those who followed Apollos – here was a man who we know to be a very eloquent speaker and one who had followed after Paul and ministered at Corinth. Evidently, he was quite impressive in terms of his gifts.
3. Some were followers of Paul – Paul had founding pastor status and was truly a “superstar” by any means of evaluation.
4. Some were of the “Christ party” – we might at first think that this is the group that had it right. They were not following a leader, but Christ himself. But something seems to be off with this group. They too are lumped in with the trouble making factions and it may have been that they were not according to the true fruit of the Spirit and style of Jesus. There may have been an elitist attitude and a divisiveness that was not reflective of gospel humility.

There is nothing to suggest that the actual leaders themselves had anything to do with the divisions. In other words, they did not encourage people to personally follow them and were not necessarily at fault in the divisions within the church.

**IN 1:10-17 PAUL DESCRIBES AND CONFRONTS THIS SERIOUS CONCERN.** The problem had gotten bad enough that evidently some were bragging about who baptized them.

#### MORE THAN JUST FOLLOWING MEN

It becomes apparent that the problem is more serious than just following a certain leader. In verse 17 and then throughout the rest of chapters 1-4 we find that the Corinthians were infatuated with the topic of wisdom. Heavily influenced by Greek culture and the popularity of travelling philosophers, it seems that each little group esteemed their particular leader of choice in the claim that it resulted in “wisdom”. In other words, their fights were all in the cause of wisdom, the love of wisdom, the exaltation of it. But this was not a godly pursuit. It was human wisdom and he was the great craving of the day in their culture.

#### THIS IS A CRITICAL POINT FOR ALL OF US

Seldom do people come out and crassly say, “I follow this leader because I like him better, or because he is a better speaker.” We often appeal to something deeper. It may be hard for us to feel the draw of wisdom in first century Corinth, but it was evidently powerful. It was worldly, believe it or not! For us the draw may be success.

The gospel itself was at risk! That is the danger.

**THEY ARE GUILTY OF TAKING CHRIST AND CHRISTIANITY AND TRYING TO IMPRESS THE WORLD AND BE LIKE THE WORLD.**

#### PAUL COUNTERS THIS DANGER WITH A SIMPLE THREE POINT ARGUMENT

1. **LOOK AT THE MESSAGE:** In last week’s passage, **1:18-25** it is the gospel itself that makes these divisions unthinkable. The gospel, the message that all Christians believe in is a message about a cross. It is the compelling cross. It cannot be ignored; it takes over and defines who we are and think about it... How can you get all puffed up about human wisdom? You follow a Messiah who was crucified. The whole message is foolish to the wisdom of the world.

- A. **WE LEFT THE WORLD AND THE THINGS OF THE WORLD – BY GOD’S GRACE WE CAME TO SEE THAT IT WAS ALL PERISHING (1:18). WE FOUND SOMETHING BETTER.**
- B. **THIS MESSAGE OF THE CROSS IS PURE FOOLISHNESS TO THE WORLD.**

You will have to change the message itself to make yourself and Christianity attractive to the world.

- 2. **LOOK AT YOURSELVES:** In today’s passage, **1:26-31**, Paul tells them to just stop and take a good look at themselves. Not very impressive! Nothing here to brag about!
- 3. **LOOK AT ME:** And then in **2:1-5** Paul tells them that his own preaching reveals that it is not human wisdom that brings the power of God, but the preaching of the cross in the power of God.

#### IT IS NOT THAT THERE IS NO WISDOM IN THE GOSPEL – **REST OF CHAPTER 2**

Paul of course is not anti-wisdom. In 2:6-3:4 Paul asserts that true wisdom is divine and not human, and that it is only known by the Spirit of God.

#### PAUL WRAPS UP HIS DEALING WITH THE PROBLEM OF DIVISIONS IN **CHAPTERS 3 & 4** BY...

... Teaching them about the nature of true leadership, leading them back to focus upon Christ in true gospel humility, and by reasserting his proper apostolic authority as their father in the Lord.

Do you realize how difficult this is – what Paul is trying to do here? He has to reassert his apostolic authority because the gospel itself is at stake; we might say that the salvation of the Corinthian Christians is at stake, and the health of the church in Corinth is at stake. He is an apostle of Jesus Christ. He brings the message of the cross, of Christ, and this message is the foundation of the church. If it is twisted, the building will fall. So, he must reestablish his own authority, his own credibility. But, he must do it so that ultimately Christ and the cross is the foundation and not himself. He is just God’s tool.

Do you realize how tempting it would have been for Paul to elevate himself over Peter? Over Apollos? Do you see how easy it would have been to do? Instead, we read in chapter 3,

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*1 CORINTHIANS 3:5-9*

*What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor. For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building.*

#### THE FLOW OF TODAY'S PASSAGE:

Look at yourselves.

- a. God chose mostly nobodies to be in Christ
- b. To bring the some bodies to nothing
- c. So that no person would boast before God
- d. And that all would boast in God alone

What you are in Christ was made possible by Christ and the cross.

#### BOASTING IS A KEY TO THE PASSAGE.

Asking this all important question is a litmus test for the Christian. Am I boasting in God alone? Am I boasting in Christ? Am I boasting in the cross? Or, am I boasting in something in the world?

The Corinthians had started to boast in certain men. They were boasting in human wisdom and in the end there was little difference between them and the world.

So let's ask three questions that are before from this paragraph to help us properly frame our perspective.

***WE ARE IN THE HEART OF THE EASTER SEASON*** and we have come to three sermons on the cross. How refreshing this has been for me to come aside to this passage in 1 Corinthians. And yet it is challenging as well. Refreshing because it was I need the most. Challenging, because as CJ says at the very beginning of his book, ***"THE MOST IMPORTANT TRUTH IS THE EASIEST TO FORGET."***

#### I. WHERE? WHERE WERE YOU WHEN GOD FOUND YOU? (1:26)

Not many of you were wise.

Not many of you were powerful.

Not many of you were of noble birth.

Do you remember where you were when God found you?

ILLUSTRATION: JOHN MACARTHUR AND HIS HIGH SCHOOL FOOTBALL COACH: "YOU ARE THE THIEF ON THE CROSS"

*Recently, I had an amazing thing happen to me and I need to tell you this. My football coach, 50 years ago, Jim Brownfield. I used to try to witness to him, tell him about Christ, and he wanted to have nothing to do with it. He wanted to live his life, didn't want to marry, liked the ladies, that's the way he was going to live his life. A few months ago, I get a phone call; this is 50 years after I first met him. He is in the hospital, he's not going to live; he is dying and would I go see him, he wants to see me. He has had a massive heart surgery and is not doing well. I go to the hospital – he hasn't opened his eyes, moved, spoken in three days. I reached down and grabbed his hand and said "hey coach, it's Johnny Mac" (I was always 'Johnny Mac). He opened his eyes and nodded his head and this is the first thing that I said to him, I said **"Coach, you are the thief on the cross, this is your hour. You don't have a future. You need to repent and embrace Christ now. I am here to tell you that God has graciously spared your life through this surgery and this is the time for you to come to Christ...you're the thief on the cross.** That day, he did it; he repented and gave his life to Christ. It was an amazing, amazing time. You know, you don't always know the fruit of that, but I went back to see him a few days later and he has made this remarkable recovery and he is sitting up (even though he has a trach.). He's sitting up in a chair. He takes out a clipboard (he always had a clipboard) and he has an alphabet written on it – 'A, B, C...' and all that, with a pencil, because that's the only way he can communicate and all that. So he takes his finger and he starts pointing out letters. He spells out 'What can I do for our Lord Jesus?' And he's feeling the weight of living almost 80 years and knowing the Gospel for most of it and rejecting it and he wants to make up for lost time. I said 'You know what, he'll be ok. This isn't your time to do for him; this is his time to do for you.'*

You are the thief on the cross. Can you imagine? Not just because this coach had little time, or "no future". But also consider that all of us because of our sin deserve judgment and punishment. Many of us can relate, but for some of you who cannot, consider that in God's eyes we have all rebelled against him and rejected him as God and lived to be our own gods and to do our own thing.

Could you imagine any more vivid picture of what happens in salvation than for this man who hung beside Jesus on the cross? How in a moment, having been made to confront the evil and

the failure of his life and being made to suffer the horrible consequences, to the next moment he is in paradise with Jesus?

Is it possible that he would have somehow turned that into something to boast about in heaven? “I was there!” “Actually, I was very close to Jesus.”

ILLUSTRATION: SAUL WAS THE FIRST KING OF ISRAEL.

1 SAMUEL 15:17 AND SAMUEL SAID, “THOUGH YOU ARE LITTLE IN YOUR OWN EYES, ARE YOU NOT THE HEAD OF THE TRIBES OF ISRAEL? THE LORD ANOINTED YOU KING OVER ISRAEL.

Saul had become big in his own eyes. He was puffed up. When he was anointed king he was a nobody. When we read in chapter 10 of 1 Samuel about Samuel proclaiming him as a king we laugh when he was hiding in the baggage – he thought so little of himself that he hid. He did not put himself forward, but God brought him forward.

Saul, what are you thinking? You didn’t do this. God chose you and brought you forward and made you what you are – have you forgotten? Have you now made it about you?

## II. WHY? WHY DID GOD CHOOSE YOU? (1:27-29)

Because you were just perfect to show the world and all its some bodies that they are nobodies! God could take you and shame the so called wise!

God wanted to use you to show that his salvation is a gift. It is free. He wanted to bring to nothing the pride and pretensions of this world.

ILLUSTRATION: NADINE MAHABIR AND SERVICE HOURS

We, Beth and I, had a conversation with one of our high school girls recently about some of her service to the community. We asked her if she was tracking and documenting them all. You may not know this, but you have to have some many hours of service now and they have to be documented. This young lady is serving beautifully here in our church family. She responded by saying that she had met her requirements, but that she felt a little weird recording her hours beyond what was required. She felt like she really didn’t do anything. She felt like it was almost inappropriate. We told her, yes, but this will help you get scholarships. And her parents had told her the same thing already. The point she makes though is exactly right. Why do we do service anyway? Is it to document as many hours as possible? Is it to give or take? It is good that we encourage our youth to serve and that we try to value these things, but in the end

we may be doing more harm than good, because we may lose sight of the “why” – why we do these things and why we value them!

Paul is telling the Corinthians the why.

### III. WHAT? WHAT DID GOD SAVE YOU FOR/TO? (1:30-31)

God has saved us to something better.

This passage quotes and is in fact echoing an OT passage.

#### JEREMIAH 9:23-24

*Thus says the LORD: “Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the LORD.”*

Do not boast in the things of this world, but boast in God. Boast in this, that he knows me! Boast in God and who God is.

Now, in 1 Corinthians we see that this is made possible in Christ.

He has saved us to life in Christ. Verse 30 makes it clear that all that we know in God is through Christ.

Here is wisdom, not human wisdom, and not the kind of wisdom that impresses the world. This is divine wisdom.

Wisdom, true godly wisdom – this is what we are saved to.

But this wisdom is not just human wisdom on steroids. It is not triumphalism. Stand back world and we will impress you now with how we will do so much better than you at everything. Not is not the point.

Here is how he defines wisdom:

1. Righteousness – right standing with God because of Christ.
2. Holiness – I belong completely and exclusively to God.
3. Redemption – a slave market image where we have been ransomed, bought, and have been set free. Freedom is what I have been saved to!

#### ILLUSTRATION: DISTRESSED FURNITURE.

You probably have seen how it is fashionable to finish furniture with a distressed look. There are distressed wood floors. I like them because you can tell when they get damaged! This is what God has done with our lives – he has turned distressed furniture into something new, something beautiful. But we can hardly now find it appropriate to go back and boast in how much better looking we are. We must boast in the cross that has saved us.

#### FINAL THOUGHTS AND APPLICATIONS:

Where is our boasting?

Avoid a celebrity culture...

Riverside, let's boast in Christ and the cross.