

“Called:Be Unified”

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 1:10-18

Graphics: phone, world, calling, baptism, cross

Big Truth: The grace of God was poured out into the first century church through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. The early church was called by God to receive that grace and live as holy saints because of Jesus. God’s grace and a life of holiness leads the church to be steadfast when struggle comes, to be unified when division seeks to tear it apart, to be wise when the world’s wisdom seeks to confuse, to be Spirit-filled when the supernatural is dismissed, and to be ready for Jesus to move in new ways. We are called to be the Church for today and always by God’s grace given to us through Jesus and the presence of His Holy Spirit.

Focus Phrase: Jesus’ cross calls us to be unified when quarreling seeks to divide.

1. Introduction

A. Let’s Pray! (Jesus you are Lord...)

B. We’re in week 2 of a 5-week sermon series that we’ve entitled CALLED. The Church of Jesus Christ is CALLED - chosen and set apart by God - to be the hands and feet of Jesus for today and every tomorrow!

C. The Church in 2023 shares many of the challenges that the Church in the first century had. Yet, we also have some unique challenges that the first-century Christians didn’t have.

D. No matter what time or place the Church finds herself, however, we’re STILL CALLED to live out our mission and vision. For us here, that’s **to make disciples of Jesus Christ by lovingly giving every person in our community the opportunity to believe in and follow Jesus.**

E. If the Apostle Paul were alive today, would the Church in America be getting a letter from him like the early church? Perhaps. But, as we saw last week, we can and should read and study the letters that Paul DID write to the churches in the first century...to look in the mirror to see how we, today, are called to BE STEADFAST, to BE UNIFIED, to BE WISE, to BE SPIRIT-FILLED, and to BE READY. Those are the characteristics that will carry us, as a church, through the difficult times of struggle and discernment, as well as the times of celebration and joy...and every season in between.

F. Now, last week, we proclaimed that the **grace of God calls us to be steadfast in the midst of struggle.** I pray that, as you went out into the world last week, that you truly experienced the spaces of grace that God gave to you, through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in your life.

G. As we continue in Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, he dove right in to the reason for his letter. **Division.** Lack of unity. Quarreling...in the church. As Paul began this appeal to them, he wasn’t warning them about the external

persecution from the culture and the outside world. This was about **internal quarreling**.

- H. In order for the Church to continue to be sanctified - made into the image of Jesus - they (and we) need to start by looking at what's happening **INSIDE** the Church. And what Paul had heard was happening in Corinth was **not good**.
- I. This morning, Paul calls the Church to **BE UNIFIED**. Being unified doesn't necessarily mean agreeing on everything or for each of them to live out their faith in exactly the same ways.
- J. Unity, for Paul, has everything to do with two things:
 - i. 1. the death and resurrection of Jesus, symbolized by the Cross, and
 - ii. 2. the baptism that the church proclaims, which signifies to the world that we belong to Christ and his Cross.
- K. Even in the midst of quarreling, the cross of Christ calls us to be unified.
- L. In your notes, or in the margin of your bible, jot this down: **Jesus' cross calls us to be unified when quarreling seeks to divide**.
- M. In your bibles, let's turn to 1 Corinthians 1, starting in verse 10. Take a deep breath and let's let the Holy Spirit do the heavy lifting in us right now...

2. Scripture

A. READ 1 Corinthians 1:10-18

- B. When my brother and I were teenagers, we didn't agree on much.
 - i. We were 18 months apart in age and had VERY different visions and goals for our lives. My brother was not a great student, academically, but extremely talented musically. I was a good student, and learned to play music, but my focus was on my studies.
 - ii. We would fight with each other over stupid stuff and not speak for days at a time...and, look, we were both OK with that.
 - iii. Yet, as we got older, we learned to not only appreciate each other, but truly love each other. We probably couldn't live in the same house together for very long today, but we truly enjoy spending time together.
 - iv. He's still a touchy-feeling creative type, while I'm way more Type-A, calculating and logical. But, we're connected together at the most basic level because our last name is Taylor and we love each other...and we share a passion for disc golfing, motorcycles, and the Buffalo Bills (Go Bills!).
 - v. Someday, I pray that he will fully surrender his life to Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit is at work there, and I keep praying. Yet, even in our differences, we are bound together at the most basic level.

- C. It can be the same in the church, but for even more powerful and eternal reasons.
- D. As Paul took out his piece of paper and pen, he began writing this letter because he'd heard that there was **quarreling in the Church**...among its people and leaders. And it grieved Paul, greatly.
- E. I mean, this was a church that Paul planted and Apollos watered to help grow. And, now, Paul heard that there were factions among them...causing division.
- F. Grief is a powerful emotion. Paul began this section with an appeal to the Corinthians. Actually, this word *appeal* used here in the NRSV, is a little watered down. That Greek word leans more toward pleading or asking, with emphasis, "PLEASE! PLEASE!"
- G. And he even adds the reminder of his authority from Christ, like he did in the first section we read last week. "PLEASE, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ..."
- H. "Be in agreement...have no divisions among you...be unified in the same mind and the same purpose."
 - i. Let's unpack this for just a moment. Remember: Paul was strongly appealing to one young church in a very specific context.
 - ii. We know this because he reported that Chloe's people had sent word to Paul about division in the church.
 - iii. Who this Chloe was, we don't really know. She may not have been a believer, but she had people in her household who WERE believers... reporting all this to Paul.
 - iv. And the reports were alarming: people weren't agreeing...they were causing factions to form and people were squaring off in different corners.
 - v. Paul's plea was that they find ways to be in agreement...have no divisions among you...and be unified in the same mind and same purpose.
 - vi. That was the goal...but what was the problem, really? Well, Paul wrote that people in the church were apparently aligning themselves with different human leaders who'd helped plant and grow the church.
 - a. Some were saying, "I belong to Paul." or "I belong to Apollos."
 - b. Others were saying, "I belong to Peter." or "I belong to Christ."
 - c. Now, look, Paul wasn't tearing ANY of those four down. In fact, later in Paul's letter to the Corinthians, he would actually command the Church to emulate him and Apollos as they lived out their ministries.
 - d. We aren't exactly sure how Peter (Cephas) fits into this mix, but Peter may have visited the Church in Corinth.

- e. And by putting Christ into this mix, it allowed Paul to shift the focus on the divisions, to ask a set of rhetorical questions...the answers to which are already known, which is, “Of course not!” (let’s try that):
 - i) Has Christ been divided? “Of course not!”
 - ii) Was Paul crucified for you? (join me) “Of course not!”
 - iii) Were you baptized in the name of Paul? (together) “Of course not!”
- I. Paul even said he was thankful that he didn’t baptize many of them, so that they couldn’t claim that they were baptized in the name of Paul, making the divisions even worse.
- J. But then, in verse 17, Paul got to the very heart of it, “For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might be emptied of its power.”
 - i. SO, Paul’s pleading to stop the divisions...the whole appeal for unity... passionately asking the church to be of one mind and one purpose...**it all had one reason and one solution: The cross of Jesus Christ.**
 - ii. In the first century, people didn’t wear crosses around their necks. That would be akin to us wearing a little electric chair or noose as jewelry today. The cross was a horrific, bloody, excruciating way to die. It not only was THE worst way that the Romans could find to kill someone, but was used to send a very public warning to everyone else to behave.
 - iii. In the church today, we have crosses on t-shirts, on our jewelry, on our walls. There’s nothing wrong with that, but I wonder if the cross of Christ has lost its power in our midst?
 - iv. I’m thankful that every year, on Good Friday, we come together to spend our worship time looking intently and intentionally at the cross of Christ... and Christ on the cross.
 - v. For Paul, the cross of Christ and its power was the ONE THING that - despite all the other ways the church was making a mess of it - the CROSS was the ONE THING that drew them together.
 - vi. They could disagree on just about everything else. But if they truly gathered around the cross of Christ, they would KNOW, without a doubt, that there is POWER in the CROSS.
 - vii. This device of torture and death was exactly the place around which the early church unified.
 - viii. And it didn’t make any sense to those in the culture around them. In verse 18, which will visit again next week, says, “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.”

- K. Paul's appeal was not really for the church to play nice and get along - that's not how they would be unified.
- L. Paul's appeal was for the church to turn every eye and heart and mind to the absolute worst day in the life of the disciples, so that they would **remember** that God's ONE plan of salvation hung on a Roman cross.
- M. And yet the **purpose** of that man hanging on a cross, suffocating and dying, was to bring ALL PEOPLE together through Jesus alone.
- N. Not Paul or Apollos, as amazing as they were. Not even Peter, who Jesus said was the Rock on which He would build the church...and the gates of hell would not prevail against it.
- O. In some ways, even the life of Jesus was not the thing that Paul knew would unify the church. Many people think Jesus was a great teacher, and left with us a set of moral guidance that makes our lives easier.
- P. While that's true, it's the DEATH of Jesus that is not only the pivot point of all history, but the very thing that unites the church, no matter what we think about anything else.
- Q. Now, don't get me wrong, Paul didn't think that whatever the Church believed was OK as long as they rallied around the cross. What he DID firmly know was that if they started from the cross of Christ and they experienced the POWER of the cross, the church would be of one mind and of one purpose.

3. Application

- A. Now, there's really no need to tee up the things in our lives that cause division. In fact, it seems that over the last 3, 5, 10 years, our country, our social media feeds, and even our churches have been characterized by division more than we'd like...by quarreling...and by lack of unity.
- B. Many times, those divisions exist are because we line up on specific political lines, social and economic policy lines, or theological and doctrinal lines. Other times, we treat our opinions as the only truth.
- C. But, as we said last week, this isn't about each of us as individuals as much as Paul is writing to the Church.
- D. Paul's appeal to the church is that we would not allow the lines into which we separate to become the main thing...but that we allow the cross of Christ to be the starting point (and, the ending point).
- E. By that I mean, whatever we do as a church in a particular place and time, must begin by us, together, gathering around the cross of Christ, in order to experience its self-ending power.
- F. That alone will make the church SEEM foolish to everyone who is not believer in Jesus Christ. However, for those who are in the process of being saved,

steadfast to the end, gathering around the cross enlivens us with the power of God himself.

- G. And God has given us a thing to DO that can help us rally around the Cross. In order for us to agree together what the power of the Cross is for the church, Paul points us to the waters of baptism.
- i. The waters of baptism are not primarily a symbol of cleansing from sin, although they are that. They are not just a declaration of a person's willingness to enter into the life of the church, by God's grace, although they are that, too.
 - ii. No, the waters of baptism, (are you ready?), are the **Church's proclamation that our only path to new life in Christ - unity in the body of Christ - is through death...and then resurrection, like Christ.**
 - iii. The power of the Cross is death. The waters of baptism are a going down into the grave, so that we die to self, die to what we want, die to what we do with our lives, and die to what we pursue in this life. Baptism is our cross experience...and only THERE can we shed everything else that might divide us...and simply die together with Christ.
 - iv. BUT (my favorite word) (passion) BUT...all praise and glory to God, Christ didn't stay on the cross. He didn't stay dead. AND WE DON'T STAY DEAD in those waters of baptism. We are raised to new life with Jesus, even while we remember the Cross and its death.
 - v. And when the Church - every believer together in one place - Paul said, all come through the waters of baptism together, IN THE NAME OF the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, remembering our deaths and resurrections, then we can stand arm-in-arm to proclaim LIFE together in Christ! That's what defeats division and quarreling in the church, not eloquent speech or vain arguments.
 - vi. **Jesus' cross calls us to be unified when quarreling seeks to divide.**
- H. There is no single doctrine, theological perspective, or ministry that unifies the church, other than the cross of Jesus Christ - which, for Paul, represents the gospel - Jesus' birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension. Right smack dab in the center of all that, is the cross and its power.
- I. But its not a power that we use to then go out from this place to prove we're right or to Lord it over anyone else...or try to convince others that we are justified. The power of the cross is found in the fact that it's a pathway to humility and grace and mercy toward others IN THE CHURCH and OUTSIDE the CHURCH.
- J. I don't have a list of three application points today, because the whole point is that there is ONE focus. The cross of Christ.

- K. In this season of discernment, it's the cross of Christ that will unify us. Being the church in our divisive culture requires a single focus on the cross of Christ.
- L. If there's division, then the church looks exactly like the world. If there is unity, the church stands apart from the culture in which we find ourselves.
- M. Our mission is not to look like the culture. Our mission is to engage with every person we call 'neighbor' in order to invite them to the cross with us.
- N. We don't invite people to clean up their lives. We don't invite people to get right before they stand at that cross with us. If that were the case, none of us would be there either.
- O. We humbly and graciously invite people to the cross - everyone, of every stripe, every race, gender, sexual orientation, theological understanding, age, and status - to stand at the cross together...to let Jesus do the powerful work of transformation from death to life. Come as you are...but don't expect to STAY as you are when you stand at the cross.
- P. It's THEN and ONLY THEN that division in the church, whatever it is, will take a back seat to the power of the cross and the message of the gospel.

4. Conclusion

- A. Jesus' cross calls us to be unified when quarreling seeks to divide.
- B. Will there be 100% agreement in the church? No. Will denominations agree about how to live out the gospel? Probably not. Good thing God is in charge.
- C. Yet, God calls us, and I continue to call us, as a church, to show love and offer grace in all things, to all people. Love and grace don't come because I or we want them to come. The love of Jesus and the grace of God come into the body of Christ when the people of God remember that our baptisms take us to the cross, and means death to self and new life in Christ.
- D. And when conflict, hard times, struggle, discernment, and striving for God's future come, we are steadfast and we are unified IN HIM ALONE.
- E. Praise be to God!
- F. **Let's pray...**