

Sunday July 23, 2023

Lesson 8: RSVP

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 1: 10-25

Context:

Today we continue our summer curriculum, “Inspired By God.” In this third lesson of our second unit, “Wisdom,” we continue looking at how wisdom plays a prominent role as a gift from God to humanity. Today we look at Paul’s letter to the church in Corinth, a church known for its various issues in coming together as part of the body of Christ. We will explore what is meant and not meant with possessing unity in Christ.

Paul’s opening to the letter in Corinth names the major theme he wants them to focus on: unity. Paul had left the Corinthian community in a harmonious condition; now he has learned quarrels are splitting the church.¹ People in the church have reached out to Paul to let him know the parties aren’t organized, but instead there are arguments where people have made personal allegiance to particular leaders rather than by clearly defined theological differences.² People are using the names of others, perhaps even without their knowledge, to lobby certain points and thus argue amongst each other. There are some who even play the Christ card, saying their camp is aligned with Jesus.

For Paul, the situation is absurd and has reduced the body of Christ to become interest groups rather than a body. Some of his questions point to issues they haven’t considered: “Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or you weren’t baptized in the name of Paul, were you?” The life of the community depends entirely on Jesus’ death on a cross and the Lord into whose dominion the community has been transferred in baptism in Jesus Christ alone.³ It seems the church in Corinth misunderstands baptism as well as their focus on the mission of Jesus Christ.

Yet Paul knows an appeal to unity will need more than a calling out of the factions. Paul leads into a meditation on the meaning of the cross, explaining how prideful confidence in human wisdom is antithetical to the deepest logic of the gospel.⁴ For Paul, the fundamental theme is the opposition between human wisdom (*sophia*) and the “word of the cross.”⁵ Here, Paul addresses how there are “leaders” who use wisdom and eloquence to show their power. Yet God chose to save the world through the shameful and powerlessness of the crucified Messiah.⁶ There was nothing in terms of worldly power or strategy God did at Calvary.

¹ Hays, Richard. “First Corinthians.” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2011), 21.

² Ibid., 22.

³ Ibid., 23.

⁴ Ibid., 26.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 27.

Paul's point was radical. To proclaim a crucified Messiah was nonsense in the Roman world, yet the gospel declares the crucifixion of Jesus as the event through which God triumphed over those worldly powers.⁷ The "foolish" and "weak" thing was the cross and yet this is the very way God spoke to the world of God's power and wisdom.

Application

A few months ago, a colleague sent me a meme/picture which was hilarious, and both drew a laugh and a vigorous nod of the head. It stated: "Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to the churches of the United States of America – grace to you and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ: I don't even really know where to begin with you guys..." (See below for a reference.) How true this would be considering what we see happening to the church today.

If you pay attention close enough to the news or to social media (which seems to revel in discourse and hatefulness), you will notice the church is having quite a bit of division. Every denomination in our country is struggling with something where people are arguing with each other. Whether it is social issues or power issues, Christians have joined in with our earlier Corinthian brothers and sisters to join in camps and factions where we are pitted against one another. And at times we sadly cannot tell you what we are arguing for and why we have such qualms against each other. We just find it easy to attack and promote division in the body of Christ.

A few months ago, one of my best friends went through a painful church division which rattled the community and his life. I watched as colleagues of ours participated in slandering him or did things behind his back, and the church turned in on itself. People who once called each other "brothers and sisters in Christ" did things more reminiscent of toddlers instead of those mature in Christ, seeing how everyone is someone's child with a name, a face, and feelings.

The experience led my friend to come up with how we need to get back to "unity and not uniformity." Unity is premised upon the idea of coming together for something larger than oneself. The United States is a country with states reflecting different cultures and customs, yet bound to be united as a nation which promotes independence and freedoms such as free speech, religion, etc. While there are competing notions of what this means and thus conflicts, there still the focus we are better as coming together instead of being apart.

Uniformity is different than unity. In uniformity, it is like those students who attend certain schools with a uniform. Everyone looks the same and is to function the same. There is no diversity because there is the belief everything should be homogenous.

While there are some places uniformity is important, I am not sure it gives as much freedom and richness as unity. This is especially true in the church. I have yet to meet one person, even people who I see as kindred spirits, who I agree one hundred percent on every theological, political, or social issue of the day. Yet I love them because they bring a richness to my life and for those who are Christians, I know how much they love Jesus and want to serve him just like me.

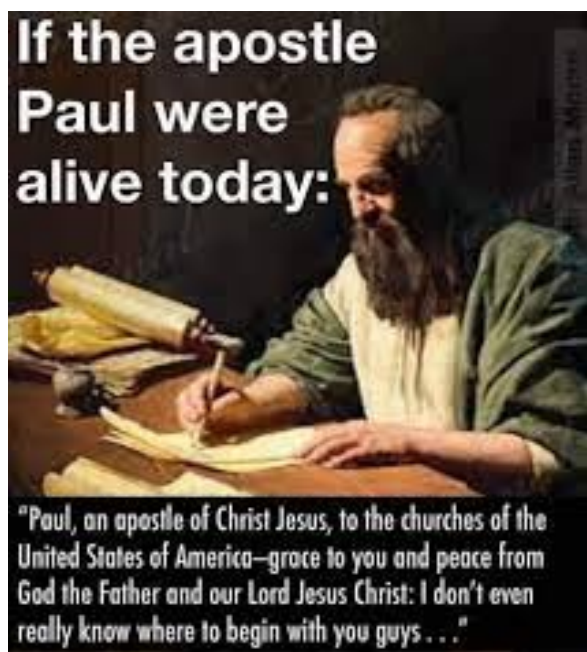
Just as Paul preaches, the cross and what Jesus did there show us something all Christians can be united in. God showed true power and wisdom upon the cross. And thus, Jesus invites us to follow him and see the foolishness the cross offers us as Jesus pours himself out for all.

Coming back to Paul's line of logic, who are we to come up with human wisdom where we divide into camps and factions based on this or that hot button topic of the day? Who are we

⁷ Ibid., 30.

when we start using leaders, whether active or retired, to make big decisions where we alienate others based on slander and half-truths? When God faced the darkness of the world, God didn't come in with an army or with a list of facts and opinions to destroy and divide people. Instead, God poured himself out on a cross, being exposed to the world with grace, love, and forgiveness.

Why do you think unity is a theme throughout scripture, particularly Paul's letters? How can a focus on unity help us move forward as a body of faith? Where is the danger in idolizing a leader, whatever their age or status, in making decisions as a body of Christ? How does the foolishness of the cross turn the wisdom of the world upside down? Why do you think God chose the cross, a symbol of cruelty and humiliation, to show God's love for the world?



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