
Christ, Our Righteousness

I Corinthians 1: 18-31

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Introduction

A. The focus of the series

Every now and then, the Chapel pulpit moves in its focus. It leaves its commitment to sequential, textual exposition and explanation to find a place for more topical arrangements and associations. No, the actual piece of furniture is not relocated, although we have had forums in which the traditional platform arrangement is disturbed, but the organization of our thoughts from the Scriptures and their presentation is adjusted.

Russ Kennedy, as the Pastor for Preaching here at the Chapel, is rightly committed to a style of presentation that is anchored in illuminating the message as it is presented within the framework of the Biblical text. To accomplish that you **must** systematically and sequentially work your way through a number of actual Bible books to hear their message in its context. That is why we find ourselves hearing sermons through Ezekiel, Hebrews, and Genesis. And that is why Pastor Dan Turner takes us into the Pauline letter to the church at Colosse.

But there are times when to understand a wider scope of a theme, to group together related texts and present them in a unifying way is helpful to see the unity of the Biblical message. Not only do we affirm that in preaching that a contextual exposition is a necessity, but we also affirm the consistency and unity of the Biblical storyline. These should not be understood as mutually exclusive but complimentary. So as you listen to Pastor Russ expound on a particular book, you will hear him connect it to the rest of the canon; he will, if not directly review the whole Bible context, will often allude to the Old Testament support or the New Testament elaborations related to the text he is preaching from.

And we intend that our topical series are likewise grounded in contextual explanations and not “proof-texting” per se. That is our intention with this series. In this “Christ and the Christian” unit, we are tying together the concept of finding our identity and our strength from Christ and linking the various themes and texts that emphasize this idea. Each morning and evening sermon pair is intended to be heard as a unit, the morning presentation of the Word is focused on an aspect of Christ’s person and work, and then in the evening we will examine a text that relates that same theme more specifically to the life of the believer. Please make every effort to return for both “pages” of this series other wise you will miss the very important “flip side.”

B. The purpose of the Corinthian correspondence

This morning we are focusing our attention on a passage of Scripture found in Paul’s first Corinthian letter in chapter one and verses 18 to 31. The Apostle Paul had a tumultuous relationship with the church in this great metropolitan center. Corinth as a culture was cutting edge, diverse and contemporary (for its day). The church that was founded by Paul

also included many of these characteristics. Because of this church and social culture, Paul's ministry, both in person and through his correspondence, challenged the Corinthian believers on many of these fronts especially with the primacy of the Gospel. He challenged them to consider the gospel, its message and impact, as the organizing principle of their lives. Often we approach the gospel as a part of our lives with every thing else draped around it. For many it may even be at the center, but for Paul (and therefore for us) the gospel should be all. It is not just an entry gate to God, but is how God expects us to view and relate to Him through the work of Christ.

It appears as you read the two documents that we have in our Bibles that are addressed to the Corinthians (he likely had written at least one if not two more that we do not have in our collection) that Paul and his message were challenged on numerous fronts and in the form of numerous facades or glosses. Leadership divisions, fiscal integrity, worship liturgy, and the like were all being manipulated in effect to challenge the true content and effect of the gospel. Both letters to the Corinthians are loaded with response to challenges as to the true meaning of the gospel and its impact in our lives.

C. The immediate context (1:10-17)

1. Propositio (10)

Our First Corinthians takes the bull by the horns from the very outset of the letter. As we have taught before, Paul's arguments take on the form of argumentation of his day, and we should expect to find early in the letter a sentence that serves as a type of thesis statement for the correspondence. And after reading through the traditional trappings of a first century letter, that has rhetorical significance as well we read this statement in verse 10:

"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."

Paul in this letter is calling for a unity of mind and judgment that is "by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." Do not read over statements like this in the Bible and brush them off as mere solemnizing oaths. The unity Paul is calling for is 'intimately associated with', indeed is 'because of' who and what Jesus is and has done. **God is calling us to a single-minded pursuance of the gospel and our satisfaction in it for our being and comfort.** Yes, Paul has many issues to discuss, but this is his connecting theme.

2. Narratio (11-17)

In following the course of the argument, often additional facts of the case need to be reviewed and highlighted. Verses 11-17 point out some issues that brought some of this to a head but he concludes with the near doxology that "*Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with word of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.*"

D. The foreshadowing of the answer (1:4-9)

To drive home the point that this indeed is the unifying theme of this letter, even in the part of the letter known as the thanksgiving/prayer that often followed the greeting in a letter Paul hints that all of their current blessings and gifts have their origin in their relationship and status in Christ. Verse 4 points out that they had grace given "in Christ Jesus."

Verse 5 states that their speech and knowledge were “enriched in him.” Verses 7 and 8 refer to their sustenance in the faith as related to the “revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.” And verse 9 finishes this thanksgiving by acknowledging that their calling into the fellowship is in relation to the “Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.” (As an aside notice all of the permutations of his reference to Jesus in this section.) We should be poised to hear then how our identity should be shaped and determined by Christ, his person and his work.

The Wisdom of the Cross

vs. 18-25

So as we enter the body of the letter we should not be surprised to see a reference to this unifying fact, that of our oneness, both in who Christ **is**, and because of what Christ **has done**. And in fact, we see Christ as being set up as the ultimate wisdom even in the **wisdom of the Cross**.

A. The conflict of wisdom (18,19)

As we begin, we first of all see Paul’s challenge with the “**conflict of wisdom**.” In verses 18 and 19 we read:

“For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”

Paul has been challenged as to his lack of “expertise” in the arts of the philosophy and rhetoric of the day. These statements have often been used to negate Paul using any form of reasoning from his culture and extrapolating that to today seeing form and structure, planning and reason as inherently evil. What Paul was not doing was basing his argument on its inherent rationality. He will go on to say that the message of the gospel does defy ordinary explanations and does not need further ornamentation to make it agreeable. He goes back to Isaiah 29 to support his argument. Let us turn to Isaiah 28 and follow the prophet’s words to understand Paul’s point.

In these two chapters we are moving back and forth from the sinner to God’s righteous deeds. In 28:1 and 3 “*the proud crown of the drunkards,*” in verses 14 and 15 the “*scoffers*” have “*made lies our refuge, and in falsehood we have taken our shelter.*” Their stupidity and folly are evidence that they fail to hear and heed the instruction of the Lord (see the many references judgment, knowledge and teaching in the chapter). But Isaiah completes the chapter by pointing out the excellency of God’s wisdom, “*This also comes from the Lord of Hosts; he is wonderful in counsel and excellent in wisdom.*”

In chapter 29 he then elaborates on the intrusion of this wisdom upon this folly of this age and its resultant resistance, 29:8 states that “*so shall the multitude of all the nations be that fight against Mount Zion.*” Truth will be exchanged for lies and God’s true wisdom replaced with man’s folly in the guise of wisdom. The resistance will even look religious as we come to verse 13:

“And the Lord said: ‘Because this people draw near with their mouth and honor me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me, that their fear of me is a commandment taught by men, therefore, behold, I will again do wonderful things with this people, with

wonder upon wonder; and the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the discernment of their discerning men shall be hidden.”

The gospel does not bring a “commandment taught by men.” Why? We have already read, “lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.” The conflict is not over whether Paul makes sense or not, it is over whether the inherent ability of the gospel is in its message or in its presentation. When the trappings of the gospel take on greater relevance than the message itself we strip the message of its power and in the words of Isaiah run the risk of aligning our selves with the fools, the enemies of the gospel.

B. The content of wisdom (20-24)

As Paul works through this debate he contrasts the so-called wisdom of the world with the true wisdom of God, and exposes a bit of the content of this wisdom. Note the contrast is not with that is inherently foolish, but only foolish to those fail to see through God’s perspective.

[Read 20-24]

In verse 23 we see that “Christ crucified” is the apparent folly that is indeed God’s true wisdom. So we should see the reference to “Christ” in verse 24 to include the ideas of cross, crucifixion, and indeed the victory from Isaiah 29 as embedded in this reference. In effect, the gospel is God’s true wisdom.

C. The confidence of wisdom (25)

Verse 25 then brings us to a minor conclusion along the larger argument that since this is God’s plan, to bring about his wise and powerful purposes in a vehicle that appears to be foolish and weak, we should have the utmost confidence in this wisdom. Not in its appearances but because of its source. God is wiser and stronger than us, why would we need to argue? Remember the passage he is echoing in Isaiah:

1. 28:2 *“The Lord has one who is mighty and strong, like a storm of hail, a destroying tempest, like a storm of mighty overflowing waters...”*
2. 28:5 *“The day of the LORD of hosts will be a crown of glory...”*
3. 28:16 *“Behold, I am the one who has laid as a foundation in Zion, a stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, of a sure foundation: whoever believes will not be in haste.”*

These are just to list a few of the recollections indicating the power and might of the God of the gospel. In fact he finishes chapter 29 with this amazing recapitulation of the work of gospel begin in verse 17:

“Is it not yet a very little while until Lebanon shall be turned into a fruitful field, and fruitful field shall be regarded as a forest? In that day the deaf shall hear the words of a book, and out of their gloom and darkness the eye of the blind shall see. The meek shall obtain fresh joy in the LORD, and poor among mankind shall exult in the Holy One of Israel... (down to 23)... For when he sees his children, the work of my hands, in his midst, they will sanctify my name; they will sanctify the Holy One of Jacob and will stand in awe of the God of Israel. And to those who go astray in spirit will come to understanding, and those who murmur will accept instruction.”

The Work of our Calling

vs. 26-29

Paul then shifts gears just a bit and wants to be sure his hearers see themselves in this cosmic challenge. He wants them and us to be reflective and consider their own entrance into this work and plan and to see the work of our calling.

A. A different standard (26)

In verse 26 we are reminded that God is using a different standard in determining the participation into this great work. The work of the gospel is not based upon our social standing or giftedness. These are issues Paul will directly address later on in the letter. Here we are reminded that *“not many were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth.”*

Two passing comments are in order, one a further hint that the idea of wisdom is based upon some secondary standard, and he says not “many.” This is necessary to avoid the converse of the argument that one of necessity need to be of the lower social class to belong.

B. A different purpose (27,28)

But we go on to see how God has a distinct and different purpose in this calling. The first part of this sentence that extends to verse 29 links three clauses expressing the purpose of God’s calling or choosing with this outlook. The first is God chose the foolish...to shame the wise. The second, God chose the weak...to shame the strong. And thirdly, God chose what is low and despised...to bring to nothing things that are.

In our normal reckoning of things we want to choose the best and the brightest. Most of us can remember the playground days and standing in line while the “captains” chose their teams. The skilled and the strong followed by those who were “in” were how the sides were selected. You, if you were fortunate to fit into one of those categories were able to participate, if not you were left to hope for another day. The gospel calling does not “exclude” those people to get even, but is part of the purpose to show the lack of ultimate value these things have.

C. A different result (29)

In fact the final purpose is to bring about an entirely different result. The sentence ends with a big “so that” which highlights a far greater theological point than is often recognized. The idea is not merely so that we are not boastful in how we made it in the gospel. But it alludes to the fact the gospel involves a boasting by God. The gospel is his boast not humankind’s.

The Wonder of the Christ

vs. 30,31

And here is why, the wonder of Isaiah 29:14 is found in Jesus Christ.

A. Our “being” in God (30a)

First of all our being is in God. The very source of our life is because of God and is connected to the gospel. We must realize sometime or another that the gospel is what life and the world is about. It is not about job or family. It is not about behavior and relation-

ship as important as those might be. It is not about how smart you are, how good you are, how accomplished your children are, how important you are at the office or on the job, its about what God is doing to make his name great in who and what Christ is and has done. Everything else may have a place but this is the key and the core. Until we “get” this everything else will be a struggle with no true peace. Peace and unity are in the gospel.

B. Our benefit in Christ (30b)

In fact here we see the big picture and “so what.” Christ has been “made our wisdom, and our righteousness and sanctification and redemption.” When we read this verse we need to keep in mind the conflict. This is not a conflict over worship styles or evangelistic schemes. Paul sees the lack of unity as indicative that many in the Corinthian community are outside of the power of the gospel. Lifting any of their issues to the level of ultimacy is to negate the true value and intent of the gospel. Our life, indeed our wisdom that has broken in at this end of the age is Christ. He is our only hope and life. All of our wisdom, schemes and plans will come to naught. And because Christ is our wisdom, he also is our righteousness, sanctification and redemption.

These three are not to be read here as in some sort of chronological or even logical order but as three free-standing pictures for the reality in Christ. He is our redemption that is our delivery from captivity, probably the captivity to sin and death. He is our sanctification, a term in this chapter that connotes a designation as God’s holy people, set aside for his service and demonstrating his character. And he is our righteousness. Because of his death, resurrection and ascension he now is our access to God from our sin and death. The change into a fruitful field in Isaiah 29 is realized in us because of the intrusion of the gospel in the person of Jesus Christ. All that Christ is can now stand in my stead. Isaiah’s Holy One of Israel, the precious cornerstone, the crown of glory has made himself to be sin for us so that his righteousness could stand for me. This is what is involved in the theological idea of justification. My sin needs an answer, not just a white-washing. In the words of the hymn-writer, “Christ has for sins atonement made, what a wonderful Savior!”

C. Our boast in the Lord (31)

Indeed then, where would our boast be but in the Lord. This time from Jeremiah, in a similar passage to Isaiah in a warning of impending judgment upon those who would say they are wise (read Jer. 8:8), Paul quotes the prophet in these words:

“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’”

Conclusion

What shall we say then?

1. Don’t exchange wisdom for folly.

You are placing your self on the wrong side of God's judgment and wrath. Embrace the cross today and everyday. If you need help to understand this better seek one of the elders or myself and let us explain more fully the wonder and power of the gospel.

2. Don't elevate your gifts.

Be very careful to exercise your gifts and talents in the service of God and his people at the Chapel, but always give the due deserving of his name as He is who we are and is responsible for all the we might accomplish.

3. See your standing in Christ alone.

Embrace who we are in Christ. See the gospel and the centerpiece of what God is doing in the world. You are to be a small part in what God is doing, the world does not revolve around you, are you satisfied in Christ and in him alone? Is he your joy and crown? Pray daily that it would be so!