

Introduction

[Slide 1: Blank] Good morning! LeeAnn and I are happy to visit with you again and to see so many friends!

We want to begin with an experiential illustration, but we need your participation. We will give you two types of testimonies, and you cheer if you think what we say is praise worthy. If what we say has no praise value, just be silent; if it has a little value, politely clap a little; but if we say something really praiseworthy, we want you to clap, stomp your feet, and cheer like you were at a sporting event. Now I know this is a conservative group, so just to be sure we have shrugged off our shyness or a sense of impropriety, let's give the loud raucous cheering a test run. On the count of three, think of how praiseworthy Jesus is, and make enough noise that the Catholic church next door wonders what we are doing over here. Ready? One, two, three...

Will: Type 1: My last boss in banking said I was the best he had ever seen at my job.

LeeAnn: Type 2: This year, a seminary student started a web page to encourage parents of children with Downs Syndrome. God already has used this ministry to bless parents and save the lives of babies who otherwise might have been aborted.

Will: Type 1: I got an A+ in my advanced Greek grammar class.

LeeAnn: Type 2: Last year, we met a first grade refugee girl who was so shy she would not even tell us her name, but after God saved her through her faith in the gospel during children's church, she became active in our Sunday school class, started praying for the salvation of her family members, and even memorized several verses of Scripture before we left.

Will: Type 1: In high school, I dated a cheerleader who said she hated to go out in public with me, because everyone looked at me instead of her.

LeeAnn: Type 2: When Will and I prayed through the gospel for my dying grandmother, God led her to accept the gospel right then and she told us she believed in Jesus, two days before a stroke incapacitated her.

Thank you, LeeAnn. If you have access to a Bible, you might turn to 1st Corinthians chapter 1.

[Slide 2: Passage Title] It has been two years since I last spoke from this pulpit. I see some things have changed: for one thing, there is no pulpit! I also noticed at Christmas that many of you were dressing more casually to make visitors feel more welcome. That's a good objective. Casual clothes, blended worship, putting on the best Christmas and Easter events in the north county, these are all worthy ministry efforts. By themselves, however, they cannot lead people to Christ or fill the pews of the church. To accomplish those things, we have to focus on the gospel mission of making disciples.

The Letter

As we discussed last week, the Corinthian church was well equipped by God to carry out this gospel mission of making disciples, because they not only had Christ in Heaven strengthening them, they also were wealthy in the spiritual gifts by which God was supernaturally working through them. They should have been a great success story! But what happened? Anyone remember? We saw last week there was disunity! Paul had heard that they were arguing amongst each other about which ministry leader they would follow.

That was silly, right? It would be like you yelling at each other, "I'm a follower of Seth!" "Yeah? well I like Jared better!" or "Mike" or "Charlie" or "Will." **[Slide 3: worldly poll]** You see, Jared was right in the race until he switched cell phone carriers. You have to give him integrity points though, he had a chance to change the numbers. The thing is, ministry leaders are not like politicians. Can we fix this slide? **[Slide 4: Christian poll]** Spiritual leaders have unity and work together because we are focused on Jesus Christ and his gospel mission.

My friends, there is a great philosophical battle going on in the world, it was going on back in the days of the Corinthians and it is going on now, it is the battle between the fallen world's way of thinking and God's way of thinking. **[Slide 5: disunity vs. unity]** Using worldly wisdom, the Corinthians chose to take sides and fight, instead of seeking peaceful

unity as Jesus commanded. And this division hurt the gospel mission in at least two ways. First, it caused the Corinthians to lose focus on what was important, the gospel mission; second, Jesus had said [John 17.21] the church's unity would cause people to believe in him, so by fighting the Corinthians had hurt the credibility of their gospel message.

The same is true today. If we are divided instead of unified, no matter why, we are choosing to follow worldly reasoning instead of God's revelation, and we are being disobedient to the command of Christ. Thus we will lose focus on the purpose and mission of our church, which is the gospel mission of making disciples, and we will be ineffective in sharing the gospel with others because they will not see Christ in us if we are fighting each other.

[Slide 6: pride vs. humility] As we will see in a few weeks, this was not the only example of the Corinthians relying on fleshly wisdom instead of God's revelation. Their worldly way of thinking even turned those wonderful spiritual gifts into a problem. *Because* God was doing so many wonderful things through them, they became prideful instead of humble, and they developed a sense of entitlement instead of an attitude of servanthood.

The Passage

Let's keep these thoughts before us as we continue with our study of this letter. We pick up in chapter 1, v.18. I will be reading from the NET Bible and adding a little clarification here and there...

¹⁸For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

Here we see the contrast between worldly wisdom and godly wisdom: the unbelieving world thinks the gospel is foolishness, but those of us who believe see it is the power of God, because God uses it to bring people to faith in Jesus Christ, and thus to salvation and ultimately to transformation. This transformation, by the way, includes fully moving into God's way of thinking. Let's continue...

¹⁹For it is written [in the Old Testament prophesy of Isaiah 29.14], "I [God] will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and I will thwart the cleverness of the intelligent." [Then Paul continues...] ²⁰Where is the wise man? Where is the expert in the Mosaic law? Where is the debater of this age? Has God not made the wisdom of the world foolish? ²¹For since in the wisdom of God the world by its [own] wisdom did not know God, God was pleased to save those who believe by the [supposed] foolishness of preaching. ²²For Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks ask for wisdom, ²³but we preach about a crucified Christ, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles. ²⁴But to those who are called [by God], both Jews and Greeks, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God.

[Slide 7: gospel is foolishness] Sometimes Paul's way of writing can sound confusing when translated into English, but I will explain. The unbelieving world thinks it is very smart and wise. They decided that mankind's reason is better than God's revelation. Then they decided that mankind's reason could prove that God's revelation is not even real. So the unbelieving world thinks we are foolish to believe in the gospel, because they think the gospel itself is foolishness.

[Slide 8: gospel is power] God's response is this: what the unbelieving world thinks is wisdom is in fact the very folly that leads it to unbelief and thus spiritual death. The worldly wise man, the scholastic expert, the great debater of this age, who do not believe in the gospel message, are not coming into God's kingdom. God chooses to save only those who are willing to believe in his gospel promise, the message of the cross that the world thinks is foolishness.

Now let me clarify one thing so we don't have any misunderstandings: God, Paul, and I are not saying that Christians should not use their brains, or that all reason and wisdom are bad. I just invested seven years of my life in a seminary education, so I certainly value using my reason and wisdom in teaching. And as you will discuss next week, in chapter two of this letter, Paul says there is a godly wisdom that is good. But right now we are discussing the unbelieving world's reason and wisdom, which denies God and his revelation. We are contrasting the unbelieving world's way of thinking with God's way of thinking.

In this passage, Paul quoted from the prophet Isaiah. An interesting thing about this passage in Isaiah is that God was talking about his own people who did not really believe. Today we find many in our churches who believe they are Christian, but when we look at their attitudes and lifestyles, we see they are relying on the world's wisdom instead of God's revelation. We need to be sure that doesn't describe us, like it described people in Israel and in Corinth.

Let me summarize this passage again in a different way, because it is important. The world is confident in man's ability to reason, in worldly wisdom. That reason and wisdom say that the gospel is mere foolishness, not to be believed. They say they might believe if there were more evidence, but their reason and wisdom cause them to deny all the evidence that is put before them. They say they might believe if there were more signs and miracles, but their reason and wisdom cause them to deny the signs and miracles that have occurred. Because they do not believe in Christ and his gospel message, those who are wise and intelligent only by the world's standards are not saved, are not entering into the kingdom of God.

Let's continue now, with v.25: *²⁵For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength. ²⁶Think about the circumstances of your call [from God], brothers and sisters. Not many [of you] were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were born to a privileged position. ²⁷But God chose [for himself] what the world thinks foolish to shame the wise, and God chose [for himself] what the world thinks weak to shame the strong. ²⁸God chose [for himself] what is low and despised in the world, what is regarded as nothing, to set aside what is regarded as something, ²⁹so that no one can boast in his presence. ³⁰He is the reason you have a relationship with Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, ³¹so that, as it is written [in the prophecy of Jeremiah 9.24], "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord."*

[Slide 9: boasting] We are not so different from the Corinthians, are we? I bet there are many of us here today who have thought a lot of ourselves from time to time... but what is the truth? The truth is, God builds his church mostly with those who are not the cream of society. We are recovered addicts, former prostitutes, reformed homosexuals; we are people who have lost years to depression, raised our children poorly, or gone bankrupt; we have been in jail, we have lusted and slept around, we have hurt, hated, and even killed, and if some of us have lived better than all of that, even so every one of us knows that without Christ we are just sinners who are enemies of God.

Did any of us deserve salvation? No! Salvation is a gift from God, it is by grace through faith. In another letter, Paul wrote, *[Ephesians 2.8-9]: For by grace you are saved through faith, and this [salvation] is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God; it is not from works, so that no one can boast.*

Paul said to the Corinthians that God chooses those who are not much in the world so that no one can boast. As we will see later in the letter, the Corinthians were boasting. When they saw the miracles God was doing through their spiritual gifts, they became proud and boastful about themselves. Paul reminds them here, that they have no reason to boast, because without Christ they are nothing. Without God's grace, they not only would not be doing amazing works for God, they would not even be saved.

Worldly wisdom says to boast about yourself and your giftedness, to think your gifts are better than what others have or that your gifts make you special. It's the same for your natural abilities, your looks, your wealth, your place in society, whatever. Here in v.31, we see that God's revelation says we should not be boasting about ourselves at all... we should boast only about the Lord.

Paul quoted from the prophet Jeremiah here. I think it is worth looking at what Jeremiah wrote more fully: *[Jeremiah 9.23-26] ²³The LORD says, "Wise people should not boast that they are wise. Powerful people should not boast that they are powerful. Rich people should not boast that they are rich. ²⁴If people want to boast, they should boast about this: They should boast that they understand and know me. They should boast that they know and understand that I, the LORD, act out of faithfulness, fairness, and justice in the earth and that I desire people to do these things," says the LORD. ²⁵The LORD says, "Watch out! The time is soon coming when I will punish all those who are circumcised only in the flesh. ²⁶That is, I will punish the Egyptians, the Judeans, the Edomites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, and all the desert people who cut their hair short at the temples. I will do so because none of the people of those nations are really circumcised in the LORD's sight. Moreover, none of the people of Israel are circumcised when it comes to their hearts."*

Even God's people of Judah and Israel – who were part of God's covenant community – were identified here by God as not belonging to him in their hearts. Paul says the same is true for some in the Corinthian church, who were choosing to live by the world's wisdom and act in the flesh instead of understanding and obeying God's revelation.

What about you? I speak now to the Christians in the room... which system do you want influencing your thinking? Look at the slide! Where will you align yourself? Do you want to think like those who do not believe, who are not saved, who are not walking with God? Or do you want to learn to live by God's revelation, and become in unity with your spiritual leaders who are walking with God? Seth, Jared, Mike, Charlie, your deacons... we're all on the same page. We're all hoping you choose to walk with us and Christ.

When we say it is important to be humble and not be proud, we are not talking about that glowing feeling you get when you see your child do something wonderful, nor are we talking about the satisfaction you feel when you have done your work well; we are talking about putting value on yourself above others and lessening your sense of need for God's grace and help.

Sometimes we boast out of pride, sometimes we do so out of insecurity. I am one quarter Polish-Ukrainian. When I was growing up, I heard a lot of Polish jokes. So what did I do? I made jokes about homosexuals and Baptists. I had never met a homosexual or a Baptist, but I put them down to feel better about myself. If you are a homosexual here today, you will realize I am not making fun of you right now when you remember that this room is filled with Baptists. To feel more validated, the Poles in our city put up a statue of Copernicus. They had to go back to someone who had been dead for 440 years, and apparently was the only famous Polish person at that time, before Lech Walesa.

In the world, we all feel a little insecure, and so we subconsciously look for ways to feel better than someone else. We compare our looks, clothes, wealth, careers, children, intellects, cars, houses, number of friends on Facebook, spiritual gifts, and on and on... But it is not supposed to be that way in the church. In the church, we realize that every one of us is nothing without Christ, and with Christ we are equally called to be a part of something bigger than ourselves. We don't have to be insecure when we have Christ, because he gives us our value; and we must not be proud when we have Christ because without him we have no value.

I want to finish reading our passage, and then I will talk a little about those big words in v.30. ^{2:1}*When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come with superior eloquence or [worldly] wisdom as I proclaimed the testimony of God. ²For I decided to be concerned about nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. ³And I was with you in weakness and in fear and with much trembling. ⁴My conversation and my preaching were not with persuasive words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, ⁵so that your faith would not be based on human wisdom but on the power of God.*

As an example to them, Paul reminds them that when he was there he was relying not on his abilities or wisdom gained from experiences in the world. Instead, he shared the gospel with them and relied on God to bring them to faith. I am sure Paul did his best to communicate effectively in his preaching, just as he did in his writing of this letter, but he never relied on worldly wisdom or techniques to save people, instead he relied on God and his gospel message. As an aside, I mention that watering down the gospel message to be more attractive to the world would be a good example of relying on worldly wisdom instead of God's revelation.

The Gospel

[Slide 10: blank] Now we have seen several hints already in this letter about the gospel. It appears to be a confirmation of the testimony about Christ, which is a message about God offering people grace and forgiveness through Jesus Christ being crucified on the cross, so that those who believe in the gospel – and thus call on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ – are themselves called by God to become holy and by God's power are given salvation, fellowship with God, righteousness, sanctification which here in v.30 means being set apart for God, and redemption also in v.30 which means deliverance from both the power and punishment of sin.

That sounds pretty good. Some of you here today are not clear on what the gospel says, so I am going to tell you. Don't feel ashamed that you don't already know. Most of the rest of us don't know it well enough and need to hear it again. In fact, if we all understood and appreciated the gospel fully, epistles like 1st Corinthians and sermons like this one would no longer be necessary.

In one sense, the whole Bible is part of the gospel, because it all reveals aspects of what we need to know. But we can boil the essence of the gospel down to three main points: our need for salvation, the identity of the savior, and how he can save us. Let's look first at our need for salvation...

[Slide 11: tainted] In the beginning of the Bible, God creates people and desires an intimate relationship with them. Sadly, all of us are separated from God because he is perfectly pure while we are flawed with impurities, which we call sin. **Romans 3:23** says, “**for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.**” Would you agree that in some way you have fallen short of perfection, that you have done something wrong at some point in your life? This is important to admit: You are tainted and thus separated from God.

[Slide 12: no fix] To some degree most people are aware of this, sensing that God is distant, feeling an emptiness, or feeling guilt, and so we try to reconcile with God by going to church, giving to charity, and doing nice things for others. Unfortunately, nothing we can do will accomplish a reconciliation with God. **Proverbs 14:12** says, “**There is a path before each person that seems right, but it ends in death**” [NLT]. The problem is that while the things we do might be good, they can never make us pure again, and so they can never reconcile us with God. The Bible states this conclusively in **Romans 3:20**, which says, “**Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin**” [TNIV]. Christianity is the only major religion in the world that says you cannot earn salvation. Do you understand that you cannot make yourself pure enough to be intimate with God? This is an important part of the gospel message: You are tainted and you cannot fix it.

[Slide 13: Hell] **Romans 6:23** begins, “**For the wages of sin is death...**” Because of our sin, we have spiritual death – which is the separation from God – and physical death; and if we end this life still separated from God then we are destined to spend eternity separated from God, what the Bible calls Hell. That’s the bad news: You are tainted, you cannot fix it, and so you deserve to go to Hell. I am stressing this part about our need, so you can see that it makes no sense to be a prideful Christian, like the Corinthians were, because part of the process of accepting the gospel is admitting our helpless need for saving!

[Slide 14: Jesus] The “Good News” is that God is willing to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. We need to know the identity of the Savior and what he has done for us. The whole of **Romans 6:23** says, “**For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord**” [NLT]. Jesus was both man and God, he was God here on earth. He was the promised deliverer of the Old Testament of the Bible, the one called the Messiah or Christ. Though he was God the Son, he came to sacrificially die for us, to pay the penalty for our sin. Jesus, as a person, lived a pure life – which only he could do because he was also God – making him a worthy sacrifice for mankind, and he was capable of making this sacrifice, of taking on the penalty of our sin, because he was God. **Romans 5:8** says, “**But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners**” [NLT].

[Slide 15: God saves] A couple of days after Jesus’ death on the cross and burial, he was resurrected from the dead to prove his identity as the Son of God, to prove the acceptance of his sacrifice, and to prove his conquering of death and sin. Later in our letter, in **1 Corinthians 15:3-6**, Paul wrote, “**I passed on to you what was most important and what had also been passed on to me – that Christ died for our sins, just as the Scriptures said. He was buried, and he was raised from the dead on the third day, as the Scriptures said. He was seen by Peter and then by the twelve apostles. After that, he was seen by more than five hundred of his followers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have died by now.**” At the end of time, it will be Jesus who will return to judge everyone as the righteous king.

Based on Jesus’ sacrifice, God offers us forgiveness of our sins, he offers to attribute to us the righteousness of Christ, and thus he offers to reconcile us to himself, and save us from eternal death. We accept this gift of grace simply by believing the promise to be true. **Romans 10:9** says, “**For if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.**”

You are tainted, there is nothing you can do about it, so you deserve Hell; but God is willing to save you as a gift, through your faith in Jesus being the Son of God who came to earth as the promised human deliverer known as the Messiah or Christ, and died on the cross to pay the penalty for your sins, then rose from the dead to prove his identity and accomplishment.

Do you believe it? If so, you are right now, saved forever. Your acceptance of God’s grace in faith brings you into God’s family and kingdom! You are now a citizen of Heaven, a child of God, declared righteous before him! Your name is written in the book of life, the Holy Spirit has sealed your salvation and come to live inside you! You have eternal life

right now! If you are feeling an emotional rush or consciously thought to yourself, “Hey, I believe this!” for the first time, please let us know, so we can celebrate with you and provide you with some free resources to help you understand the Christian life.

[Slide 16: blank] If you already knew you were a Christian when you walked in here today, I hope you will consider this gospel once again. The gospel is not just for those seeking Christ for the first time. It is the power of our transformation, it is the guiding principle of our way of thinking and our way of life, and it is the basis for our mission as a church. If we really believe in the gospel we should be end our pride and self-importance, and seek to learn and live by God’s revelation, walking in unity with our spiritual leaders to carry out the gospel mission of making disciples and thus glorifying God.

If you agree with this, here is what I want you to do. If you believe in the gospel message, if you believe the gospel mission of making disciples should be the focus of this church, if you agree that the implication of this is we must be in unity with our spiritual leaders and give up our pride and self-importance, then I want you right now to give Jesus the most raucous cheer of praise ever. Go ahead... [Pray...]