

“Weakness and Power at the Cross”

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Jesus wants his followers to be IN the world but not OF the world. He says so in John 17. In other words, he wants his church to exist within particular societies and cities while at the same time living in a way that reflects their status as “sojourners.” Through his teaching (see, for instance, the Sermon on the Mount) and by his own example, Jesus explained and displayed what such a life should look like. Almost the whole New Testament gives us further detailed instruction on how to be IN the world, not OF the world, but FOR the world. But living this way isn’t easy, and the church often gets it wrong. In fact, often we end up looking like we’re OF the world but not IN the world. That is, the church isolates itself from the surrounding culture, but at the same time reflects the values and tendencies of the surrounding culture – both good and bad!

Perhaps this is what happened in the church that the Apostle Paul helped to plant in Corinth. What we know for sure is that many negative aspects of the surrounding culture had somehow seeped into the church. As a result, instead of being a loving, learning, worshiping, sharing, disciple-making community of Christ-followers (see Acts 2:42-47), this church became a group of divided, self-indulgent, self-seeking competitors. Instead of sharing their gifts and possessions, they were suing each other and grabbing for power. Conflicts were escalating, relationships were deteriorating, and missional effectiveness was diminishing.

- How do you think a community of faith arrives at such a state? What do think went wrong in Corinth?

- How do you think the state of affairs in the Corinthian church affected their ability to carry out their mission (i.e., to make disciples “baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that [Jesus] commanded”)?

So, how does a church reverse all this? How does it fix what’s broken? Better yet, how do we avoid all this from happening in the first place? How do we work toward and maintain unity (not uniformity) in the midst of beautiful diversity? How do we remain in and for the world without becoming a microcosm of the world?

The answer, according to the Apostle Paul, is the gospel. The solution to all these problems, and the answer to all these questions lies in the gospel of Jesus Christ – a message that **shocks, humbles, and heals** individuals and entire communities.

The Gospel Shocks

Paul calls the gospel the “word (or message) of the cross.” It’s a message that centers on the crucifixion of Jesus. And that’s shocking. In the first century Roman world, crucifixion was known by all to be a shameful, brutal, humiliating form of execution reserved for those considered the worst criminals (e.g., terrorists) and for those who possessed the least amount of power (e.g. slaves). It wasn’t talked about in polite company. So the notion that the long-awaited Messiah – the Chosen One of God – would be crucified was simultaneously offensive and absurd. And to think that through his crucifixion salvation and liberation would be achieved. That was a shocking message. To the Jews it was scandalous. To the Greeks it was stupid.

But Paul continues to preach this message of the cross to his friends in Corinth because he knows that it's their only hope for survival and transformation as a church. Furthermore, he's determined to deliver that gospel without depending on his own eloquence or wisdom. Instead, he's dependent on the power that exists in the message itself.

- What do you think Paul means when he says that his speaking was “in demonstration of the Spirit and of power”? How was power demonstrated when he spoke the gospel? How should we expect power to be demonstrated when we speak this same gospel?

The Gospel Humbles

This shocking message of the cross is designed to humble us. It does so by revealing to us our limitations in the face of God's power and wisdom. Paul reminds us that, in our own wisdom, we can't understand or, much less, believe this message. It remains offensive and/or foolish to us until God opens our eyes to its beauty and power. That's humbling.

The gospel also humbles us by reminding us of our need. After all, it's because of our sinfulness that Jesus was nailed to that cross. The gospel reminds us that it's our brokenness and rebellion that necessitated his humiliation and death.

The Gospel Heals

But, thankfully, the gospel not only humbles us but, as it does so, it heals us too. It shows us that we have perfect acceptance and forgiveness from God. In the words of Tim Keller, the message of the cross tells us that we are “more sinful and flawed than [we] ever dared believe, yet more accepted and loved than [we] ever dared hope.” That's humbling. But it's also freeing. It frees us from the need to make excuses for ourselves, to justify our own actions, or to work hard for approval. After all, in the words of Anthony Thiselton, the gospel is “not about achieving [or deserving!], but receiving.”

- What are some contexts in which you feel the need to boast or promote yourself? Why do you feel it's necessary to promote self in these contexts?

-- How can we reconcile the urge or need to promote self with the truth of the gospel and call to humility and selflessness? In other words, how can we operate and even succeed IN the world without being OF the world when it comes to this issue?

This shocking, humbling message of the cross was the only message that could heal that fractured, imploding church in Corinth, and it's the only message that can preserve and heal our community of faith. It's a message that calls us to stop focusing on our own achievements, abilities, and potential. It also calls us to stop focusing on the achievements and abilities of others (on the one hand) and their sins and shortcomings (on the other hand). It's a message that calls us to focus on the Savior crucified for us and all the wisdom, power, love, and perfection embodied there.

- Are there practical ways in which you can move toward becoming more focused on and amazed by the word of the cross?

- How will continued focus on the cross help us to carry out our mission as a local church?