

SERMON NOTES
I Corinthians 1:1-9
“Alive with Problems”

Intro:

- Imagine a church such as this:
- *Influential Christian leaders have their band of loyal followers within the church – causing division among subgroups in the church*
- One of the church leaders is having an affair – and the church refuses to take any disciplinary action in spite of a stubborn lack of repentance
- *When believers cannot settle financial or legal disputes with one another, they sue one another in secular courts*
- Several couples are living together or having sexual relations outside of marriage – and this is tolerated as normal for that culture
- *Some believers drink alcohol to excess – while other believers react against that by declaring that all alcohol use is sinful*
- There are serious disagreements within the church as to the role of women in ministry and worship and family life
- *Some members believe in the immortality of the soul – but have doubts about the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ and the future bodily resurrection of believers*
- There are major controversies and disagreements over spiritual gifts and their proper role and function in the life and worship of the church
- *Spiritual pride is rampant – with believers on different sides of these divisive issues convinced that their viewpoint is more spiritual and more closely aligned with God’s will*

- I have not described an imaginary church
- *I have just described some of the problems of the church in Corinth – a church wracked by divisions – and yet very much alive in the Spirit*

I. THE CHURCH’S BEGINNING

- In Paul’s day, Corinth was an important city in Achaia (southern Greece)

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- The City of Corinth is strategically located on an isthmus connecting the Greek mainland with the Peloponnesian peninsula

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- Corinth was located near the narrowest part of this isthmus – 3.7 miles wide – connecting the Aegean Sea with the Mediterranean Sea to the west
- *Ships were often portaged over this 3.7 mile wide stretch to save them from traveling all the way around the peninsula*
- Today there is a canal

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- This location made Corinth a flourishing crossroads city for trade throughout the Roman Empire
- *Ancient Corinth looked something like this:*

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- As a crossroads city, Corinth was a place where many cultures and religions mingled
- *It was also a Roman colony that followed a Roman city plan including marketplace, shops, basilicas, city hall, gymnasium, baths, latrines, a theater, a tribunal, several temples including a great temple to the god Apollo as well as a temple of Aphrodite located on a mountaintop just outside the city*
- Corinth was also home to an important sanctuary of the god of healing – Asklepios
- *And of course there were also marks of the Roman imperial cult*
- The worship of these various Greek and Roman gods was fully integrated into governmental affairs, civic festivals, trade guilds, social clubs, and even buying meat in the meat market
- Corinth was famous for its scandalous sexual immorality even by pagan standards – *the Greeks coined a word – to corinthianize – meaning to practice sexual immorality* -- and worship at the Temple of Aphrodite included heterosexual and homosexual activities with Temple prostitutes

- *Beth and I visited Corinth as part of our Sabbatical trip to Israel and Greece in 2017*

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- This is the mountain outside of Corinth where the Temple of Aphrodite was located

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- This is the remains of the Temple of Apollo that dominated the city proper

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- Just down the hill from the Temple was the marketplace where meat from Temple sacrifices was sold

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- *It was into this prominent city noted for its prosperity, idolatry and immorality that Paul brought the Gospel during his second missionary journey – probably around 50-51 AD – spending 18 months there*
- The story is told in Acts 18
- Paul arrived in Corinth discouraged
- *He had been driven out of Galatia and Asia Minor (Turkey)*
- He had been driven out of Macedonia – out of Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea
- *He was barely tolerated and mocked by the intellectuals of Athens*
- Paul was a brilliant, well-educated man – and it weighed heavily upon him that so many of the intelligentsia of Athens dismissed his Christian message with patronizing contempt

STOP SHOWING SLIDE

- Paul arrived in Corinth alone – his traveling companions Silas and Timothy were back in Macedonia checking on the churches there
- *Paul was anxious for these new believers and new churches in Philippi and Thessalonica who were facing intense hostility and persecution*

- And then Paul was confronted with the overwhelming sensuality, moral filth and crass commercialism of pagan Corinth – while still wounded by the rejection in Athens
- *Physical fatigue / weariness of spirit / loneliness / paucity of results / wondering if any of your hard work would survive and have any lasting value / plus being surrounded by moral filth* – all of that a recipe for discouragement
- When Paul was feeling lonely and discouraged, God graciously supplied Paul with a strong Jewish Christian couple as friends and fellow-workers and ministry partners
- *Priscilla and Aquila were living in Rome in 49 when Emperor Claudius expelled all the Jews because of a riot over a certain “Chrestus” – probably a reference to Jewish disputes over Jesus the Christ*
- Jewish Christians like Priscilla and Aquila were also forced to leave along with other Jews
- *So the couple moved to Corinth, where they set up their tentmaking business*
- When Paul arrived, Priscilla and Aquila opened their home to him and invited him to work with them
- *“No problem is ever as dark when you have a friend to face it with you”*
- Serving the Lord and making disciples is not a one-man job
- *We all need Christian friends and fellowship with other believers as part of a church family*
- Then Paul received a visit from Silas and Timothy which helped greatly to revive his spirits
- *He was glad to be together with these good friends again*
- And they brought good news from Macedonia that the churches in Philippi and Thessalonica were thriving
- *And they brought Paul a financial gift from those new churches so that Paul was able to devote himself fully to the ministry of the Gospel*
- Yet, as Paul continued preaching that Jesus was the Messiah in the Jewish synagogue every Sabbath – he encountered opposition and abuse there as he had in other cities as well
- *After a poor response in Athens – and now being greeted by hostile opposition in Corinth – Paul was ready to see some people respond positively to the Gospel*

- He moved his ministry base from the synagogue to the house of Titius Justus – a Gentile worshiper of the one true God of Israel
- *And the Lord graciously produced an encouraging response to the Gospel – and ironically, the first one to believe in the Gospel in this Gentile home was the Jewish synagogue ruler – Crispus – and his entire household*
- And many Gentiles also came to believe in Jesus and were baptized into Jesus Christ

Acts 18:5-8 When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, Paul was occupied with the word, testifying to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus. And when they opposed and reviled him, he shook out his garments and said to them, “Your blood be on your own heads! I am innocent. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.” And he left there and went to the house of a man named Titius Justus, a worshiper of God. His house was next door to the synagogue. Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed in the Lord, together with his entire household. And many of the Corinthians hearing Paul believed and were baptized.

- Paul came to Corinth in weariness, weakness, fear and trembling
- *He was in need of a fresh encounter with the living Christ*
- He was in need of assurance that his ministry and suffering were not in vain
- *He was in need of direction as to whether he should remain in Corinth or move on to another city*
- And the Lord met his need fully

Acts 18:9-11 And the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, “Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people.” And he stayed a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them.

- *Do not be afraid – for I am with you*
- *Keep on speaking – because no one is going to attack and harm you*
- *Do not be silent – for I have many people in this city who will come to believe in the Gospel message*
- Some have already believed – and many more would believe and be baptized in the coming months – for God had already claimed them as His own people

- Everywhere Paul went preaching the Gospel – he encountered danger
- *But in Corinth the Lord promised protection*
- And the Lord provided that protection through the Roman proconsul Gallio who threw the Jewish case against Paul out of his court
- *God used a pagan Roman ruler to protect Paul from harm being done to him by his own Jewish people*
- Gallio refused to get involved in a religious dispute – he refused to favor one religious faith over another
- *That is the kind of separation of church and state that provides religious liberty and enables Christianity to thrive*

SHOW 3 SLIDES (one picture after another)

- Here are a couple of pictures of the exact place – the tribunal – the “bema” judgment seat and platform – where Paul was brought before Gallio

STOP SHOWING PICTURES

- Christianity does NOT require a Christian government or Christian political leaders in order to thrive
- *Government neutrality and freedom of religion without state interference is an ideal environment in which the Gospel can flourish*
- The truth of the Gospel does NOT need government help
- The truth of the Gospel will do just fine in an open marketplace of ideas and beliefs
- *The truth simply needs the freedom to be able to persuade people freely of its truthfulness*
- There are benefits to a society when it acknowledges the one true living God and seeks to live by His moral standards
- *But Christianity does NOT need cultural or governmental support in order to thrive*
- We are NOT called to criticize non-Christians for behaving like non-Christians
- *And our goal is NOT to get non-Christians to live in accordance with our values and morals*

- Rather – we are commanded by our Lord to seek to persuade people of the truth of the Gospel – and our goal is to see non-Christians come to believe in the Gospel and become Christ-followers and find newness of life in a personal relationship with Jesus
- If the Gospel can thrive in a place like Corinth – then it can also thrive in our world – *IF we are bold and faithful in proclaiming the truth of the Gospel*
- Let's look, then, at Paul's letter to the Corinthians – next several months

II. THE CHURCH'S IDENTITY

I Corinthians 1:1-3 Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes, To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

- Paul was well aware that this church was wracked with divisions and struggled with sexual immorality among members and conflicts over spiritual gifts and factional loyalties to different leaders and many other problems
- *Yet he calls them “sanctified” and “called to be saints” – both words derived from the Greek word for “holy”*
- This church was anything but holy in its behavior – and Paul knew that – so why would he address them as sanctified?
- From God's perspective, all believers are saints – meaning – they are sanctified in the sense of being set apart for God and called to be holy
- *Believers in Jesus Christ are already sanctified in the sense of being made holy by the blood of Jesus Christ*
- And believers are in the process of being made progressively holy by the work of the indwelling Spirit
- *This process of sanctification will be completed at the return of Christ*
- Now, the Corinthians were also still sinners

- *But Paul wants them to focus on who they are in Christ – even as he will later in this letter confront them with their flaws and problems*
- But this church struggling with disunity needed to focus on their identity in Christ
- The cause of unity is served as each believer understands his own identity in Christ and understands the Christian identity of other believers
- *Our common identity is that we are all sanctified in Christ because of our relationship with Christ*
- Unity problems are at root identity problems
- *Unity problems are caused by allowing some other identity to take precedence over our identity in Christ*
- “Yes, sure, I’m a Christian – but my most important identity is that I am black or white or gay or straight or male or female or conservative or progressive or Republican or Democrat or American or Asian or Baptist or Pentecostal or Catholic or anti-racist or a veteran or transgender or ...
- *Some other identity has preeminence over being “in Christ”*
- And our primary loyalty will be to our primary identity
- If your political identity is stronger than your Christian identity, then it will be difficult to worship and fellowship with Christians with different political views
- *If your racial identity is stronger than your Christian identity, then it will be difficult to worship and fellowship with Christians of different races and ethnicities*
- The Gospel proclaims the radical message that we are all one at the foot of the Cross
- The Gospel proclaims the radical message that all who believe in Jesus Christ are sanctified – set apart -- part of One family of God – Jew & Gentile / black & white / liberal & conservative – all one in Christ
- Every time we break fellowship with other Christians over secondary issues – we give lie to that message
- *Because then we are saying that our unity and fellowship are not based on the Cross of Christ – but rather on our agreement on secondary issues*
- Biblical unity is quite simple: *God has made us one through the death of His Son, and it is our job to keep that unity by accepting as our brother or*

sister everyone whom God accepts as a son of daughter – and accepting them on the same terms as God accepts us – namely, our faith in Jesus Christ as Savior & Lord

- Period
- *No other conditions*
- *NOT faith in Jesus Christ PLUS agreement on spiritual gifts or the Rapture or worship music preferences or masking or vaccinations*
- NOT faith in Jesus Christ PLUS agreement on politics
- Just faith in Jesus Christ – period – we accept one another and fellowship with one another on the same terms as God’s acceptance of us into His family – faith and faith alone

- The first step toward disunity is to start thinking that people who disagree with us over secondary matters unrelated to salvation are not really one with us in Christ – not really on the same level with us at the foot of the Cross – *and therefore we can treat them as adversaries rather than as sanctified brothers or sisters in Christ – and therefore we can break fellowship with them because the differences that divide us are deemed to be greater than the common faith that unites us*
- And an important step toward Christian unity is to acknowledge that all who trust in Jesus Christ as Savior and confess Him as Lord are sanctified in Christ Jesus – called to be saints together with ALL those who call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ – their Lord and ours

III. THE CHURCH’S VITALITY

I Corinthians 1:4-7 I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge— even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you— so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ,

- Misunderstandings and misuses of spiritual gifts were a major cause of conflict and division in the Corinthian church
- *Yet as problematic and controversial as spiritual gifts can be – especially the charismatic gifts such as tongues and prophecy and words of knowledge – Paul’s attitude was to give thanks to God for all the gifts He had given the church in Corinth*
- *The church was being enriched and empowered by these spiritual gifts*

- Paul rejoiced in the rich diversity of the spiritual gifts in Corinth – and he instructed them to keep on using all the spiritual gifts until the Second Coming of Christ
- *No hint here that any of the gifts were temporary and would cease in a few years with the death of the apostles or the completion of the NT*
- Nowhere in Scripture does it say that any of the spiritual gifts were confined to the NT period
- Keep exercising all your spiritual gifts until Jesus comes again

- How do some conservative churches – including some Baptist churches – deal with problematic spiritual gifts?
 - *They are canceled – they are banned or suppressed or silenced or neglected*
 - How did Paul deal with these potentially problematic gifts?
 - He thanked God for them
 - *And then he gave instructions on their proper use in chapters 12-14*

- Paul gave thanks for their spiritual gifts even though those gifts were a source of strife in the church
 - *Why?*
 - Because the church body was being enriched and empowered by those gifts
 - Because those gifts were evidence that this church was spiritually alive and abundantly fruitful
 - *The Presence and Activity of the Spirit were very powerful in transforming lives*
 - Prostitutes, homosexuals, thieves and drunkards were being set free from bondage to sin and Satan by the witness and ministry of these Spirit-filled believers
 - *How many churches can say that?*
 - Churches that are spiritually alive and are effectively reaching lost people – serious sinners – broken people – *such churches are often messy and filled with problems*
 - But they are alive – and fruitful – and the Life of the Spirit is flowing through them to transform the lives of broken people
 - Churches that quench the Spirit and the gifts of the Spirit may be more orderly and controlled and peaceful – *but are sinners being saved in those churches?*

- Some Christians and churches come close to inferring that certain spiritual gifts are bad in themselves and should be avoided because they are potentially problematic
- Question: does God give bad gifts?
- *Did God make a mistake by giving the church certain problematic gifts that are potentially divisive?*
- Was that Paul's attitude?
- *And was Paul's solution to forbid certain gifts – or to suggest the Corinthian church should split into two churches – one charismatic and one non-charismatic?*
- How did Paul deal with these divisive issues?
- By focusing on the Cross as the basis of Christian unity – the ground is level at the foot of the Cross – *and all the walls and barriers that we use to segregate ourselves from one another have been destroyed by the Cross of Christ*
- By careful teaching on the nature and function of the church as the body of Christ and the temple of the Holy Spirit – and the proper roles of church leaders and spiritual gifts in building up the church
- *And most of all – by inserting into the middle of his teaching on spiritual gifts the great love chapter – I Corinthians 13*
- Unity problems are NOT caused by God's good gifts
- Unity problems are caused by spiritual immaturity / by spiritual pride / by jealousy and selfishness / by demanding one's own way / *by not understanding how each part contributes to the effective functioning of the body of Christ* – and most of all – by a lack of godly love for one another
- To be faithful to the message of the Cross – to be fully alive in the Spirit – to be equipped and empowered to reach all kinds of lost and broken people with the Gospel – *we need every kind of believer and every spiritual gift*
- Jews and Gentiles need each other / blacks and whites need each other / rich and poor need each other / conservatives and liberals need each other / *charismatics and non-charismatics need each other to become complete and mature in Christ*

IV. THE CHURCH'S DESTINY

I Corinthians 1:7-9 as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

- *Paul knew all about this church's problems and flaws – and he will deal with their issues later in this letter – but he begins by pointing them to the reality of what they will be when Christ returns: guiltless / blameless / perfected in Christ-like holiness*
- *Being called into the fellowship of Jesus Christ changes everything – it changes us == into His likeness*
- Some people think that if a church has problems – that is a reason to leave it and look for a church more to their liking – *the assumption being that God's purposes can be fulfilled in their life only in a church where they agree with what's going on and never get offended*
- Paul's perspective was different
- Every church that preaches the Gospel is a church of God – and there was one church of God in each city where Paul went
- *Paul assumed that all churches are imperfect works in progress*
- And Paul assumed that God is faithful and able to work in that church to bring about renewal and fruitfulness

Philippians 1:6 And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

- Instead of focusing on human frailties – Paul focused on God's faithfulness
- *Looking at people and their flaws will lead to disappointment and a critical, complaining attitude and ultimately to disunity*
- Looking at God and His faithfulness will lead to encouragement, hope and greater unity
- This is how Paul could look at one of the most problem-filled churches of all that he started – and call them “sanctified saints” in verse 2
- God had set them apart as His own People – God was faithful to bring to completion the work of sanctification that He had begun – God would

- sustain them to the end -- and on the day of Christ Jesus these believers would in fact be guiltless / blameless / perfected in Christ-like holiness
- *So he addressed them in their present flawed condition according to what they would be like when God's work in them was completed: holy / blameless /*
 - Paul wasn't blind to their faults – but he also saw beyond their present flaws to what they would be one day
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- The other day Beth was reading the story of Gideon in Judges 6
 - *She was struck by the fact that when the angel of the LORD first appeared to Gideon to commission him to lead Israel into battle against the powerful Midianites who had been oppressing Israel – the angel called Gideon: O mighty man of valor*
 - But as the story reveals – Gideon was anything but that at that moment – he was in fact a scaredy-cat filled with self-doubt and God-doubt and much fear
 - *But the LORD was with Gideon – and Gideon did in fact become a mighty man of valor who led Israel to victory with a small army of only 300 men*
 - The angel addressed Gideon on the basis of what he would become – not on the basis of who he was at the moment
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- When Jesus changed Simon Peter's name from Simon to Cephas – Peter – Rock – *was Peter a rock at that moment?*
 - NO – far from it
 - *Would Peter become a Rock after the death and resurrection of Jesus and after Pentecost when he became filled with the Spirit?*
 - YES
 - Jesus named Peter on the basis of what he would become – not on the basis of what he was at the moment
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- Toward the end of my 4 years of seminary I went to a conference with some other students and some Minnesota district leaders
 - *Many seniors had already received a call to pastor a church*
 - I had not
 - *No churches seemed interested in me*
 - I was becoming a little anxious and insecure
 - *During one of the small group sessions – one of the district leaders – a man I respected – said to me words to this effect: God is going to use you to be an effective communicator of His Word*

- I sure didn't feel like that then – but his words gave me great encouragement – and those words sustained me for the next 3-4 months until a church in Ely finally called me to be their pastor
- *Words of encouragement can be quite powerful, can't they?*
- Some people can only see what is – and they focus on present flaws – their own flaws and the flaws of others
- *And that leads to being overly self-critical or overly critical of others*
- *But Paul saw what will be when God's work is finished – and taught people to see themselves accordingly*
- He taught sinners to see themselves as saints – and to see other believers as saints
- *Not because he believed in people's ability to change themselves*
- Rather, because he believed in God's faithfulness – and in the transforming power of Christ living in us – the hope of glory
- Take Paul's words to heart: He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God, who has called you into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful.
- How do you see yourself? How do you see other believers?
- *Do you see yourself as unclean / flawed / unworthy / of little use?*
- Do you see other believers – especially those who are different from you or think differently – or behave differently – or vote differently – *do you see them as fundamentally flawed because they are not more like you?*
- Or do you see yourself as God sees you – sanctified – called to be holy – indeed, destined to be holy and blameless because Christ is in you and God is faithful to finish the work He has begun
- *And do you also see your brothers and sisters in Christ according to their true identity and destiny?*
- Will you choose to look beyond your differences to see them as God sees them – to see them as sanctified – set apart for God and His purposes – *to see them as works in progress as Christ changes them from the inside out* – to see them as valuable members of the body of Christ who can reach others you cannot reach because they have gifts you do not have – *and to see them as destined to be holy and blameless and Christ-like at the Coming of Christ?*

Prayer