

Title: After Darkness, Light

Text: 1 Corinthians 14.20-25

Theme: The presence of the Word is a blessing from God

Series: 1 Corinthians #83

Prop Stmt A healthy church will emphasize that which will mature the church.

I am reminded of the 2 chronologically challenged women (we used to call them elderly) who were traveling by car on interstate 20, when they were pulled over by the police for driving too slow. The police officer informed the driver that the minimum speed on a highway is 45 MPH. She informed him that she had been driving since before he was born and that the sign said 20, and she was doing what the sign said. He tried to explain to her that the 20 sign was referring to the identification of the interstate, not to the speed limit, and that the signs were indicating different things. Hoping for a little help, the officer looked over at the passenger whose nails were embedded in the dashboard, hair was standing out on its end and a look of sheer terror was on her face. When the officer asked what the problem was, the driver said she wasn't sure, but that she had been like that ever since they had been on State Route 121.

Read 1 Corinthians 14.20-25

In Geneva, Switzerland, there is a park called Bastions Park which is alongside of the University of Geneva. The park has a large wall in it and along with the statues of Calvin, Beza, Farel and Knox the wall has the following inscription: **Post Tenebras Lux**, After darkness...light.

Psalm 119.130 says, "The unfolding of your words gives light."

The revealing of God's Word has always been a blessing and a curse. It is a blessing to those who receive it by faith and submission, and a curse to those who reject it. This pattern is clear. Faith-driven obedience to God's Word leads to more light. Rejection to God's Word leads to darkness. Darkness is an indication of God's judgment. Light/Revelation is an indication of God's activity.

For 430 years, the nation of Israel lived in the land of Egypt. In those days there was no word from the Lord. Then, Moses came on to the scene, and God began to speak to his people once more. But, the blessing of God speaking was an occasion for faith-driven obedience or rejection. The people who believed what God revealed were given more light (the Israelites), while those who rejected it (the Egyptians) were under the judgment of God. This pattern continued when Israel moved into the Promised Land. During the closing days of the judges, the Word of the Lord came to Samuel during a time when "the word of the Lord was rare" and "there were not many visions." (1 Samuel 3.1) The entrance of the Word brought light, but the entrance of light brought with it an opportunity for acceptance/blessing and more light, or rejection/judgment and subsequent darkness. When a king would prepare to go into battle, he would usually ask one of the prophets if there was any word from the Lord. This scenario was played out over and

over in Scripture. On more than one occasion, a false prophet would claim that God had spoken and that the king would be victorious in the campaign, when in reality, there had been no vision, which was a sign of judgment. Kings, like Saul would be desperate to get a word from the Lord, only to reject it.

One of the voices for God was a prophet named Isaiah. Isaiah spoke God's Word to both the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. Isaiah's sermons and writings were very clear. At times, God would call Isaiah to use his life as a dramatic illustration of the message he was giving. On one occasion (chapter 20), Isaiah was directed by God to live for 3 years without the benefit of shoes and clothes so that, when the people asked, what on earth are you doing, Isaiah could tell them that this is what is going to happen to the people who are captured by the king of Assyria. Isaiah's prophecy is absolutely fascinating. It is so powerful and so accurate that it has led many liberal scholars to claim Isaiah could not have been written by one man, simply illustrating the point that God's Word always brings a response; either of acceptance or rejection. In chapter 28, Isaiah is warning the people of the northern kingdom to not reject the clear Word of the Lord. He is warning them of the consequences that will come upon them, not only economically, and militarily, but more important, spiritually. In that chapter, Isaiah says, that if you do not listen (obey) the Word of the Lord that you are now hearing in your own language, then, the day will come when you will hear the message of the Lord in languages you do not understand. The northern kingdom did not listen to the Word of God in their own language, and in 722 BC, they were overrun, overthrown and scattered by the Assyrian Kingdom.

The Southern kingdom of Judah did not fare much better. They too plugged their spiritual ears to the Word of God through His prophets and they were overrun, overthrown and taken into captivity by the Babylonian empire, but they eventually returned to the land. But, not too long after their return, the Word of the Lord stopped coming to the prophets. For 400 years, there was no Word from the Lord, then the Word Himself became flesh and dwelt among us. In Matthew 12, the leaders of Israel plugged their ears to his message, so in chapter 13, Christ began to speak to them in parables. The parables were both an act of judgment and an act of mercy all at the same time.

More revelation brings more responsibility and more accountability. If you reject a little bit of revelation you will be responsible for what you have rejected. If you are the recipient of a lot of revelation, and you reject that, your accountability and liability for judgment is even greater. Therefore, when Christ began to speak in parables, he was hiding his truth from those who had already rejected it, and while this was an act of judgment, he was mercifully protecting them from even greater judgment since they had already rejected the light they had received.

You cannot change the Word, the Word changes you. Neither can you judge the Word, the Word judges you. We stand for the reading of the Word to remind us that we all stand under the authority of the Word. We are all on equal footing, under the Sovereign reign of God. That is why the process of God revealing, recording and preserving His Word is such a supremely sacred matter. We take his Word seriously. The preaching of

the Word is a very important mark of a true and healthy church. Giving due attention to the preaching of the Word by careful listening and intentional obedience and cultivating a climate that values and encourages preaching and preachers, teaching and teachers is so very, very important to our spiritual health. Immaturity is marked by a desire for entertainment and showmanship. Maturity is marked by an appetite for thoughtful study and genuine relationships. Throughout this section, the gift of tongues is characterized as being something that is more on the showy and immature part of the scale.

The assumptions that some of the Corinthian believers had was this: 1) Tongues are great because they are a sign of spiritual achievement. 2) Tongues are great because they will amaze unbelievers. This is very problematic for the church. In this text we have seen over and over that Paul says that the gift of tongues is not bad. It is a gift, but, don't treat this gift as if it is the ultimate experience for a Christian, or is in some way the goal of the Christian life, because it is not. It was never designed to be that. You are trying to make it into something that it is not. This text gives us two exhortations regarding this matter. The first is found in v.20.

1. **Grow Up!** (20-22)

“Brothers” is used by Paul in this section to mark of his three main points. Beginning in v.6, he is making a very strong point regarding the importance of edification. Think of it! When you are a child, you think that everything is supposed to be done for you because when you are young, for the most part things are done for you. You are fed, clothed, provided shelter and love. As you grow up, the idea is for you to learn that you are not to expect your parents to feed you and clothe you and provide shelter for you for the rest of your life, this is something that you have to learn to provide for yourself and then for others, presumably your family. One of the marks of maturity is that you realize that all of life does not center on you. That same dynamic is true for the church.

When you first come to faith in Christ, you are fed, and helped and taught and loved, and as time goes on, you are expected to grow up and mature to the point where by your life and ministry you serve others either through teaching or serving. You are to realize that your life in the body is to be part of the process that God uses to mature others. But, you cannot edify others, you cannot help build others up and help them mature if they cannot understand you. Edification demands understanding. (v.6-12). The second time he uses “brothers” is here in v.20, where he builds on that theme and now gets right in the face and says “grow up.” A person who is mature realizes the difference between what is valuable and what isn't. We laugh at the kid who at Christmas plays more with the box than he does the gift, but for an adult to that, is a tragedy.

A. **Realize what is truly valuable.** (20a)

In v.20, Paul is challenging us to realize what is truly valuable. “Stop thinking like children” is a command! Do you see the irony here? Paul is really making a very, very strong statement, but he softens his rebuke with the affectionate term of “brothers.” Here were people who thought that they were the spiritually elite. Earlier in this letter (3.2),

Paul already said that he did not think that they could handle spiritual steak, they were so immature, that he had to feed them applesauce instead. The irony is, the ones who were speaking in tongues thought they were spiritual giants because of this incredible demonstration of the Spirit's power and presence. But, the gift of tongues was completely overblown and being abused. People love to try to measure their spirituality by the intensity of the spiritual experiences, instead of being considerate of the needs of those around them.

B. Stay away from what is destructive. (20b)

Paul has just said, stop thinking like children, but then adds as an aside, except when it comes to evil. It is not his main point in this text, but it is a great reminder. There is so much evil in this world that we are tempted to think that even though we know that there is a lot of sin that we have no desire to participate in, we are curious to know what some of it is. After all, we kind of like to know what exactly is going on. What are people doing? There are many things that I do not need to know.

C. Look at the big picture. (21-22)

Alright, those of you who think that tongues is the greatest thing ever, open up your eyes. Tongues is a sign alright, but it not the sign that you are thinking it is. Tongues is a sign of the judgment of God on unbelieving Israel. Here in v.21, Paul is quoting from Isaiah 28, where Isaiah told the nation of Israel, that if you don't listen to and obey the Word of God in your own language, then you will hear God speaking to you through languages that you do not understand. The point that Isaiah made and what Paul is saying, is this: It is not that God used the foreign languages to communicate specific information in propositional form. It was the fact that the tongues themselves were a sign of God's displeasure. In other words, when you wake up in another country and you are hearing languages spoken in the street that you did not grow up with, let this experience be a sign to you that you have rejected God's Word.

When you think of it, that is exactly what happened at Pentecost. The believers who had been gathered in the upper room, spoke in tongues, and they obviously went out into the temple arena, where this continued. Some of the Jews mocked them and accused them of being drunk. Others were intrigued because they were hearing their own language. To those who were intrigued, Peter preached the gospel to them and many of them came to faith in Christ.

Tongues is a sign (v.22) but Paul is pointing out that to the unbelievers, it is actually a sign of judgment. It is not a sign of judgment to believers. Look at the text. "Tongues then, are a sign (of judgment), not for believers (it was a blessing for them), but for unbelievers;" Wow! There were obviously those in the church of Corinth, who were "justifying their indiscriminating overemphasis on tongues" by trying to show how great of an evangelistic tool this can be. Just think, when we encounter unbelievers, we can speak in tongues and they will be so amazed, they will want to know where we got this power and then they will want to get saved. Paul is saying that they are a sign alright, but

not like you think they are. They are in reality a sign of judgment for unbelievers. Now, for the believers in Isaiah's day, they were a sign that God was fulfilling his Word through his prophet – Isaiah. Tongues are at the same time a sign of blessing and judgment.

Remember the demonstration of power that God provided at the Red Sea? Was that demonstration of power an indication of blessing or judgment? It depended on whose side you were on – didn't it?

Let's step back for a second and review. You guys are making way to big a deal about the gift of tongues. Yes, it is a gift, but it is not all that valuable and effective. Don't try to make it into something that it is not. Yes, it is a sign, but it is not a sign for believers, but it is a sign of judgment for unbelievers, so don't think that this is a good means of spreading the gospel because it isn't. And don't think that this is something that ought to be a prominent part of your church because it was never designed to be that. Prophecy (general word for preaching, teaching and communicating the Word) is what the church ought to emphasize, because that is what is so effective in edifying the believers.

Now Paul is ready to apply this. Keep in mind, that Paul is addressing what these people were doing when they gathered together for their regular times of worship and instruction.

2. **Be Clear!** (23-25)

So, the church gathers together, and a bunch of people start speaking in tongues (I think he uses everyone in a general but not technical sense – based on his next comment) and you have as part of the gathering people who do not have the gift, who do not understand what you are saying and there are people who have come who are investigating what it means to be followers of Christ, but at this point they are unbelievers. That is the scenario Paul paints.

Remember the assumptions that some of the Corinthian believers had: 1) Tongues are great because they are a sign of spiritual achievement. 2) Tongues are great because they will amaze unbelievers. Here, Paul is taking on the second assumption.

A. **Tongues are confusing and not helpful.** (23)

Sure, you can gather together and speak in tongues, but it will not be helpful to all the believers; and to any unbelievers who have come, they will think that you have lost your mind. To the believers who have no idea of what you are saying, they will feel like they are foreigners in another land, when they are in their own church. That is wrong! Speaking clearly is what God has always used to bless His people and help them. Speaking in coded words, and in unintelligible ways is what God uses to judge. Tongues must be governed for use in worship because they are so confusing. However,

B. **Preaching/Teaching is clear and effective.** (24-25)

The preaching that Paul is referring to in v.24 is not evangelistic preaching per se, but the communication of the Word that brings about effective change in the lives of the hearers. This is something that the unbeliever can see. He can understand the truths of God's Word and make the connection with life.

I think that this is so critical to understand. We think that if we can wow people with something that will amaze them, then they will want to become followers of Christ. If all we do is try to wow people, then we will encourage people to become seekers of the wow, instead of followers of Christ. But, if we preach and live the Word and by the Spirit's power, live lives of humility and faithfulness and unity and joy, and with a wide-eyed wonder at the gospel of Christ and a sold-out passion for the glory of God we worship with intensity and by faith walk in obedience, then the image of God and the glory of His Son will be put on display even through us, imperfect people being transformed by Him and helping each other walk closer to Christ. This will cause them to look on us with wonder. They will be amazed, not at our power, but our love, not at our wow, but our humility, not at our achievements and buildings and programs but at our unity, and authentic lives, being lived with an open hand and open heart.

Only the gospel preached and embraced can cultivate a community like this.