

Title: Better than the Website

Text: 1 Corinthians 13

Theme: Love until it bleeds

Series/Occasion: Intro to 1 Cor. 13 and 1st Sunday of January

Prop Stmt.

Read Text: 1 Corinthians 13

We are followers of Christ and we stand on the shoulders of generations of believers who have passed to us the torch of the gospel. By God's grace, we will pass that torch on to the next generation. Our task is to take the torch of the gospel and to make certain that it is burning even brighter than it was when we received it. How do we do that? We do that in two ways: 1) ***By protecting and promoting the doctrinal integrity of the gospel.*** That is, we articulate and defend the biblical definition of the gospel. That is not easy to do. The gospel, while it is good news is offensive and controversial. The gospel is the good news that "***For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all.***" (1 Tim 2.5-6a) The fact that Christ gave Himself as a ransom means that we were held hostage by our sin and we could not free ourselves. That truth, no matter how true and obviously true it is, is offensive to our world. The winds of our culture blow against us to soften our rhetoric and not use such words as sin and bondage and condemnation and judgment. But, without an accurate understanding our true condition, we cannot understand the depth of the grace of Christ. The doctrinal integrity of the gospel also means that we proclaim and defend that there is only one mediator. There is only one Savior. We cannot save ourselves. All religions are not equal. All belief is not equally valid. Those are fighting words today, and I do not say these things in order to fight, I say things I because these truths are part of the sacred trust of the gospel. In order to make certain that the torch of the gospel burns bright, we have to defend the theological integrity of the gospel and make certain that what we are calling the gospel is what the Bible says is the gospel. But there is a second way we promote the gospel. 2) ***By living gospel in every facet of life.*** Leaving a legacy for Christ demands that you live each year for Christ. Your life is the sum total of the years that you live. Your year is the sum total of days that you live. Each day is the sum total of the daily, minute by minute choices that you make. Therefore, when you break it down, your life is the sum total of the decisions that you make. ***Every decision that you make needs to be made based on the cross of Jesus Christ and the throne of Jesus Christ.*** We need to stop and look at how important those decisions are, and how they are affecting life and eternity. The beginning of a year is a natural time to do that for your life, and therefore a natural time to do that for the church since all that we are is all that we are. Cornerstone, for good or for ill, is the sum total of our lives. The vitality and spiritual health of this church depends on your passion and obedience to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

Now, having said that, I want to praise you and publicly give thanks to God for a quality that I believe marks this church and in a number of different ways was put on display this past year. It is my observation that you as a body of believers, really allow the Word of God to set the agenda for the church. This past year, I have preached through 1

Corinthians 8-12. During those same months, God brought us through a number of situations that became the occasion to put into practice what we have been learning. If we humbly accept the Word as our standard and we patiently communicate and help each other work out this truth, then this atmosphere of love for and understanding of the gospel and true sensitivity for the real needs of people will only increase. This we desire!

Today, I want to cover three main points before a final challenge. They are: what we have learned, what we are doing about it, and what can we anticipate.

1. **What have we learned?**

What have been some of the significant things that have happened this year? The year began with the leadership realizing that there is a need in our church body for deeper fellowship amongst our people and for authentic relationships. Many of you made it very clear that you were not satisfied with attending church, you longed to be more of the church in action with each other. The fact that so many of you expressed that longing was a great, great encouragement because it spoke of your vision to be a body, not simply attend a church. This desire from you I see as an illustration of one of the major themes that the Spirit of God has been drilling into us from the pages of 1 Corinthians. But, we had some work to do. Some people did not feel connected. And while the year began with no apparent crisis, we knew that there was an unsettledness.

Then a failure in our leadership took us to our knees. And the very issues of transparency, authenticity, brokenness, mutual humility were thrust upon us. Cornerstone, the church that for years had been a place of refuge for so many was humbled, but something happened in those weeks. The openness of the leadership in dealing with the matter became an illustration of what 1 Corinthians demanded. The entire situation became a catalyst for a fresh wind to blow among God's people here. The discomfort of dealing with problems became the occasion for experiencing and relying upon God's grace.

So many of us could see in such a new way, that we really are people in need of change, helping people in need of change and we do that by pointing each other to the changeless Savior and lover of our souls. So, when opportunities came to serve in the McRest program, there was on the part of many a gospel-loving approach to the entire task of feeding and housing people who were without shelter. I believe that all of this is part of a process that God is doing in our lives of teaching us that the needs that exist in the lives of others are not intimidating. We do not have to be afraid of problems because we really have a truth that sets people free and there are a number of things that we can do to model that and communicate that to others.

In October, the Peace-making Conference was so helpful to the many of you who were part of that. It was all part of us learning how we can be a faithful friend to each other. And then came the Living for Eternity month. I think something happened in November. I did something that I do not do that much, I preached on money! I said things like, "***The way you handle money is an indication to you of what you are trusting in.***" It is not the

only test of authentic Christianity, but it is one. If the way that you spend your money is driven by, what do I want – instead of driven by a desire to honor the King, then it may be an indication that you do not really know and trust the King.” The next week I said, “...Your life right now is kingdom boot camp. You are being trained right now for your eternal life. Your life, right now matters for eternity. Everything that you do, even homework, changing the oil, changing the air filter and diapers, commuting to work, going to the doctor and eating lunch is Coram Deo – before the face of God. *God is testing you and training you right now to see whether or not your faith is authentic and to see whether or not you can be trusted with a responsible position in his government.*” The stronger I preached, the more you said, “bring it on.” Instead of driving people away, visitors said, “I want to be part of this.” Our classes for new members have been consistently big. November was a thrill.

2. What are we doing about it?

A major emphasis that we have been highlighting is the need for us to connect with each other better in order to help each other fulfill our calling as brothers and sisters. This has led to our launching of a small group ministry that is taking place very, very soon. I am so thrilled with that. But we are also attempting to elevate the way we greet guests and assimilate new people into the body life of the church. I think that at times our services are too stiff and impersonal. I do not want the music to be a performance and the sermon to be a lecture. You are not the audience in an auditorium. You are a follower of Christ in a family of believers gathered in a Worship Center. While there are those who lead in worship, there has to be a high level of participation by all of us at the heart level, in order for it to be true corporate worship.

Another thing that we are doing is changing the format a bit on Sunday nights. Since being more actively involved in the music, has taken me away from teaching an elective on Wednesday evenings, I am going to be teaching on Sunday nights here in the Worship Center. That frees up Jerry to work more closely with the Small Groups, since some of them will no doubt be meeting on Sunday nights. But for those who want to be here on Sunday nights it gives me an opportunity to teach in a format that is a little different than Sunday mornings. It is my desire to save the last 15-20 minutes of every teaching time for a wide open Q and A. Our Sunday evening service is going to be more like, my Sunday evening Bible Study and “what about it Bob” time. Whenever we have business meetings and open mics, we have people who have so many good questions that it is very obvious that we need to provide more opportunities for a public conversation regarding not just the ministry of the church, but matters of theology, trends and philosophy. I am going to be teaching on the topic of Living the Cross Centered Life, starting Feb. 11. It is a series designed to help you consistently express the gospel in every facet of your daily life. Now, there will be some people whose small groups will meet on Sunday nights. But, for those who are not ready for a small group, or for those who like the Sunday night format for church, I am looking forward to this.

3. What can we anticipate?

Let me start with what I am looking forward to. Just as, my understanding of the church and our mission has been deepened in the past year, I am looking forward to wrestling through 1 Corinthians 13. This week I found a little article that someone had given me entitled, “the perfect pastor.” I told someone to throw it away because I hate guilt. I really think that 1 Corinthians 13 is going to take us to our knees. In my initial study of this chapter in preparation for a several month safari in it, I have come to the very uncomfortable conclusion that I am a rather selfish person. I don’t like what I see in the mirror of the Word, and I am asking God to change me. When you step back and see how this chapter flows with the rest of this section of 1 Corinthians, I think you can really see how critical these verses are for us. I remind you that Paul is dealing with the issue of what it really means to be spiritual. And in essence he is saying beginning in chapter 12 that true spirituality is not seen in a person’s giftedness or abilities. We are far too easily impressed with talents and gifts of speech. But, if you really want to a true measure of spirituality, then look at how that person or how that church loves. Patient, enduring, sacrificial love is the mark of spiritual maturity.

In the history of the church, some have made it appear that we have to choose between love and truth, as if you have to let go of the one in order to have the other. God certainly does not see it that way. Love and truth are balancing foundational pillars of the church. Can we be a church that articulates and celebrates a rich doctrinal confession, and a true theological heritage, while at the same time we passionately love Christ and love each other and love our needy and broken world? Yes!! We have to be!! In a phrase, I desire that this year we champion our rich theology and we express it in loving relationships.

And my hope is that our study of 1 Corinthians 13 will take us so near to the cross that we learn to love until it bleeds. John Stott said, ***“The Cross is the blazing fire at which the flame of our love is kindled, but we have to get near enough for its sparks to fall on us.”***

Many heroes and many people look much better from a distance. But when you see them up close, when you live with them, their Teflon wears off, their shallowness and pettiness rises and what used to be awe can become distasteful. In the same way, a church can put together a very impressive website, DVD, billboards, brochures and posters. From a distance, or in a 4-color spread, we can look awesome. But what are we really like up close? What do the kids think about the parent in the brochure? Real life is not the graphics on a brochure or a high-powered website. Real life is broken people helping other broken people discover and surrender to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

It is easy to be impressed with a performance, or amazed at someone’s giftedness. But, 1 Corinthians 13 makes it so clear that the possession of a gift and its exercise does not count for anything, without love. Our lives, and our families ought to be better in reality than they are in the pictures. We want to be a church that is even better up close, than it is from a distance. To help us in this goal of living so near the cross that we learn to love until it bleeds, there are a couple of things that I want us to do together. One is, I want us to memorize 1 Corinthians 13 by Easter Sunday. If we learn a verse a week, starting with next week, we can do it by April 8. The other thing that I am seeking to do, is to really

focus more than usual our time of worship around the cross, because true love is Christ-centered and Christ-driven. The only way that we can happily be used up in loving others, is if our love is driven by the Spirit of God who wants to see Christ exalted. Otherwise, we will be held bondage to the rusty irons of “what’s in it for me?”

Specifically, here is what I am asking you to do. For the first three months of this year, will you read 1 Corinthians 13, 5 times per week? Obviously, this will help us all in our desire to memorize this chapter, but our real goal is not in committing it to memory, but in living and loving in a manner consistent with this chapter. The standard is high because the cross is higher.

- 1) Daily feed on the Word – 1 Corinthians 13, part of that.
- 2) Pray – Pray from a prayer list
- 3) Invite 1 person a week to church

You can do more in terms of selecting good books to read, setting relational goals for family members, ministry goals for serving, giving goals, etc. But we can all do these 3 right now!