

Title: Fighting for Unity (over the cross)

Text: 1 Corinthians 1-7

Theme: We have to fight for unity in our relationship to God, to other believers and to our family.

Series: 1 Corinthians #30

Prop Stmnt. Living in view of the cross is the only solution to our lives of isolation.

There is an old saying that it is lonely at the top. Really, it can be lonely anywhere you are. How many of you feel a distance between you and God? You are sitting in a worship service having sung some songs, listened to some prayer and perhaps even prayed yourself. You have a Bible in your hands and yet, you feel that God has forgotten about you, or has neglected you. It looks to you as if He is helping others just fine, but at the expense of you. You have very little motivation to pray, it doesn't seem to do much good. Frankly, you are feeling a little sorry for yourself.

Some of you feel a sense of isolation in your family, perhaps between you and your spouse. You live in a relationship with walls, rooms and closets. You are the kid whose parents assume they know the real you. You are the parent who is trying to figure out how to be able to have an honest conversation with your kid that doesn't turn into an argument. There is a level of tension and awkwardness in your relationship. Your needs, your desires, your dreams and your hope for a comfortable and compassionate relationship were all bulldozed by reality, years ago. Today, you look at others with envy, thinking that their family must be so much better than yours. Every once in a while, you or your spouse or someone else musters up some energy to try to improve things, but it usually doesn't last.

Some of you feel that sense of isolation here with your church. No one really knows the truth about you. You do not think that anyone here really understands, or that anyone here really cares. If you were gone, it would not really matter. Even though we may laugh and smile, shake hands and say hello, some of us live quiet, private lives of wonder. We wonder about ourselves and everyone else. We wonder if we have what it takes in this life. We wonder if we can ever resolve our past, have joy in the present and face the future? We wonder. We wonder if we are sentenced, pre-destined to live a private life of introspection. It seems that in any relationship, each person feels used and unappreciated. Then you wonder, what am I doing here anyway?

Starting a relationship is easy. In fact, starting a relationship can be down right exciting because it gives you an opportunity to start over and pretend to be this person that you always wanted to be. Or, perhaps you can pick a relationship with someone or the type of person that you always wanted to be around. But what happens? That new job with all those new people turned out to be a whole lot like your old job. The truth is, it is so easy to start, but it is a challenge to finish. It is in our very nature to feel isolated from God and from each other. That is what sin does. Sin separates and divides. Look at Iraq. Getting rid of Saddam Hussein was the easy part. Living with a semblance of unity looks borderline impossible. Why is there so much turnover at work? Why is there so much turnover in families? Why is there so much turnover in churches? Starting is the easy

part, finishing is the challenge. Isolation and distance is not a new challenge. You can make a list of all of the people in the Bible who felt that isolation, none more intense than Christ when He said, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

So, basically we have a choice. We can be a pretend church and pretend to be nice, but never deal with the real issues. Or, we can pursue authentic relationships and run the risk of finding out how fragile and broken we really are. Every congregation has a choice – a bag of marbles or a bag of grapes. This is the reason why I chose to preach through the book of 1 Corinthians. Today, we come to the end of this series for this year. We have basically made it through the end of chapter 7. Today, I want to stop for a Sunday and look back over what we have covered, because it does not do us any good to go on, if we have not started to put into practice what we have studied thus far. I realize that some of you are really interested in chapters 12-14, so we can wrestle with the whole issue of spiritual gifts. In fact, some of you would like to jump ahead to that right now. But, spiritual gifts is not the biggest issue in this book. Unity in Christ is the biggest issue. These people were just like us. Their lives and their relationships were cracking apart. So, what do you do about it? How do you deal with a church full of division? How do you deal with people whose lives are being ripped apart by immorality? How do you address families that are fractured and isolated by sin? There is only one way. You have to deal with all of life based on the message of the cross. In our church, in our relationships and in our homes, we have to fight for unity. But that fight has to take place on the foundation of the message of the cross.

The message of the cross does several things.

1) It humbles us, because it reveals that we are sinners.

One of the disastrous problems that affects relationships is the attitude of pride. I am better than you. I don't need you. You do not measure up to my expectations. You do not know who you are dealing with. When people think like that or speak and act like that, they are saying that they believe that they are fundamentally better than other people. The message of the cross reveals that fundamentally we are all sinners, who are in equal need of a Savior. How much forgiveness do you need? An infinite amount because your sin, just like my sin has offended an infinitely holy God. You and I both need the same amount of grace and mercy. That is what the cross is about. Because God is a God of justice, He had to punish sin so that He could ethically forgive the sinner. God punished our sin, when He sent His Son to die on the cross in our place. The death of Christ was the ultimate expression of God's justice and mercy. There was no other way for you to be forgiven than for Christ to die in your place. You could not save yourself because you have a problem that only God can solve. That is why church is not a place where we preach ourselves, advance ourselves, promote ourselves, exalt ourselves, live for ourselves and go around with thin skin and take offense and get our noses out of joint. It is not about us. The message of the cross lets the air out of every pious gas-bag who tries to go around belching his religious halitosis.

You can try to live that way. You can live, looking to find fault with people, thinking that you have all of the answers and that everyone has to satisfy you. And if you do, by your actions you deny the very gospel that you claim to believe.

2) It exalts Christ, because it reveals that He is our only Savior.

Jesus is the hero of the Bible. Jesus is the champion of the church. Jesus is the captain of our salvation, the lover of my soul and the delight of my heart. The message of the cross exalts Jesus because it reveals that no one loves you like Jesus does. The message of the cross not only humbles sinners, but it exalts Jesus because it reveals that no one can save you like Jesus. No one can live for you like Jesus. No one can die for you like Jesus. No one can pray for you like Jesus. No one can intercede for you and plead for you like Jesus. The message of the cross reveals that no one could be resurrected for you like Jesus. The heart beat of the church, and the heart beat of your family and the heart beat of our relationships has to be the heart beat of Jesus.

3) It enables us to pursue an authentic and spiritual unity based on truth.

Do you see it now? The message of the cross provides for us a mutual starting place, because it reveals the truth about us and that is that we all have to begin at the cross recognizing and submitting to our need of Christ as our Savior. That is where we begin together. But, when you come to faith in Christ, you become part of a family of believers who are becoming more and more like Christ. You not only start with Christ, you end with Christ. In between, we live together with Christ. Christ provides us with the basis and the atmosphere in order to live our lives together. In Christ, we not only start together, we live together and we finish together. As we live together as families and as a family, we put the gospel on display. If we do not live together well, we deny the gospel. The message of the cross is the message of hope that stands as the bedrock that literally facilitates relationships to be able to grow together in authenticity because we are able to view each other and treat each other in light of the truth of how God views us and treats us. Saying the same thing that God does is powerful.

So, when Paul is trying to put the church in Corinth back together, he goes back to the cross. He tries to help people put their lives and relationships and homes together all on the basis of the message of the cross. We are called to live, as C.J. Mahaney calls it, "The cross-centered life." Living a cross-centered life is another way of describing the fact that we have to fight for unity.

1. **Our Church is Built on the Message of the Cross.**

That means that we must create a culture in the church that reflects the gospel. The gospel becomes the grid through which we filter all of our actions and attitudes. Our actions and attitudes reveal whether or not we really understand the gospel. Even though you may be able to explain the doctrine of salvation does not mean that you really believe it. Your true belief will be reflected in your actions and attitudes. In the book of 1

Corinthians, the apostle Paul is trying to help these people connect the dots between what they claim to believe and how they are living. I want to help you do the same.

A. We Embrace Humility

1 Cor. 1.26-31

Do you see how Paul makes the connection here between humility and the gospel? This is the same thing that Jesus said in Matthew 5.3 – “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” To be poor in spirit means that you do not live with a “know-it-all” attitude. We are the creation! God is the CREATOR! That means that He is THE know-it-all. We try to project to others the lie that we are know-it-alls, and we are not. Only God is. We do not have the solutions – God does. We do not have all the answers – God does. Therefore, we dare not pretend as if we do. Proud people are living a life of make-believe. They are pretending that they are superior to others.

At the very least that means that as a church we must embrace humility because humility is the necessary and logical attitude that comes from understanding our own sin, our own failures, our own limitations, our own short-sightedness and therefore, our need of Christ. Now, let’s say that you disagree with someone here about something. How would a person who embraces humility go about the process of resolving that issue? For example, let’s say that I am pretending to be the know-it-all. How would I respond to you, daring to question me? Let’s say that after the service you come up to me and you say, “Bob, I have a suggestion for the worship service.” And I say, “Look, I not only have a college degree in Bible, but I spent 10 years going to seminary, earning a Master’s Degree in Divinity. I have served on the pastoral staff of 3 churches, and have been here for 16 years. I have 53 books in my library on this subject and have read dozens of articles and have sat through several seminars on worship and you think that you are going to tell me something that I haven’t thought of?” What have I just done? I have just denied the gospel! Do you see it? The message that I was communicating was saying that I don’t need to listen to you, that I can’t learn anything from you, and that my arrogance closed my heart from hearing anything you said and in so doing I not only failed to learn, but I also failed to connect with you on our common ground.

Now, let’s say that you had a thought about the service and I said, “I always love to hear the ideas that God’s people have, because I always want to do things better and I would love to hear what you think. The first response denies the gospel, the second ones screams it.

B. We Embrace Hope.

1 Cor. 1.8-9

You see what Paul is saying to these people. Because of what Christ is doing in your life, I live with hope that your lives are going to change for the better. It is hard to live with hope when you are a Lion’s fan. We wonder, how are they going to snatch defeat from

the jaws of victory this week? Our hope in church is not based on a new coach, a new offense, a new quarterback a new – whatever. Our hope is based upon the gospel that cannot let a person down. The gospel is God's. It is solid and will save every single person all the way because Jesus will love that person all the way.

Because Jesus is a bigger Savior than we are sinners that means that we must never view a person or treat a person, including ourselves as being hopeless. How do you act toward someone when you have given up hope that the person will ever change? I am not talking about being naïve concerning the person's situation or struggles, nor pretending that there are not serious problems, when there are. We all live with a measure of disappointment in others and certainly in ourselves. The gospel does not eliminate all of our problems in life, but the message of the cross gives us the basis to be able to deal with them and the confidence in knowing that one day we will be delivered from these problems.

C. We Embrace Unity

1 Cor. 3.16-17

Because of the message of the cross, we embrace humility, and hope and we also embrace unity. In fact, humility and hope help pave the way for true unity. About any student of history can tell you that war can make some pretty strange alliances. Countries who usually hate each other will work together when they have a common enemy. But, when the threat of the enemy is eliminated then that fragile unity is also broken. The unity in the church has to be

Today, if you believe the gospel, then you have to fight for unity. That fight for unity starts in your own life as you preach the gospel to yourself.

In your relationships, you have to fight for unity. We preach and teach and embrace what the Scriptures say about our personal lives. In our natural condition, we are people who need a Savior because we are sinners who have tried to be our own King, and our own master. I tend to look at things only from my own perspective which is so self-serving that I do not even realize how deeply flawed my own view is. I have to preach the gospel to myself in this sense. I have to continually remind myself that I

2. Our Homes are Built on the Message of the Cross.

I am confident that you can see the connection between these attitudes regarding the gospel in the church and the gospel in your home. Homes that are built on the gospel are going to be reflected in relationships that embrace humility, hope and unity.

A. We Embrace Humility in our Families

In your home, are you known for having a teachable spirit, or are you always right and everyone has to see it your way?

B. We Embrace Hope in our Families

Because of the gospel we embrace hope for each other. Do you? Do you show that? Is your family secure? Do they get from you a strong sense of hope because you believe that you and those around you have a positive future because of Christ? Or do you run people down, pointing out their faults, treating them in light of past failures and doing everything to them that Satan attempts to do to you?

C. We Embrace Unity in our Families

We want to get along in our homes, but true unity never comes at the expense of truth. Unity is not, let's all pretend that everything is fine, when it is not. Unity is based on the truth. But, this is the problem. The truth about our lives is not pretty. The only way that we can handle the truth about ourselves and about each other is through the gospel. The message of the cross gives us the basis to be able to forgive each other and live in light of that. If there is a member of your family who is pursuing a sinful life and is therefore, running from the gospel, true unity cannot be achieved because that person is not living in light of the message of the cross. That is another issue. The point that I want you to understand is that if your family claims to believe the gospel, you have the opportunity to live it. Living the gospel is fighting for unity in the midst of a world, and in the midst of your own self-centeredness that would seek to rip it apart.

Humility, Hope and Unity – if you don't live it, then you probably don't really believe the gospel.