

What's the Message – Lesson 124

Come with us now as we continue our search for guidance for our own lives in Christ.

Greetings in the name of Jesus, our Savior. Our prayer today is from another of our favorite hymns*: *Not what I feel or do, can give me peace with God; not all my prayers and sighs and tears, can bear my awful load. Thy work alone, O Christ, can ease this weight of sin; Thy blood alone, O Lamb of God, can give me peace within.* Amen.

In our last lesson we saw some of St. Paul's practical guidance to the church at Thessalonica. In today's lesson we begin to look into a much broader range of problems and questions raised by the church at Corinth. The first problem addressed is the issue of a division which had developed in the church -- a division which had grown into four distinct groups. Talk about cliques in a congregation! Corinth had it in spades. There was the Cephas (or Peter) group, the Apollos group, the Paul group, and a vaguely identified bunch we will simply call "the Christ-men".

Each of these groups claimed to have the correct and proper doctrine, not only insisting that the others were inferior, but the so-called "Christ-men" were actually contradicting the teaching of Paul.

Paul begins his rebuttal and rebuke by establishing a basic principle in chapter one, starting at verse 18: *For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. . . . Has God not made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. . . . we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.*

* Not What These Hands Have Done

For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men

The principle that Paul is stating, puts his focus on the cross of Christ.

This division in the church was a serious problem, and it was tearing the church apart. Some were saying they followed the teaching of Cephas (the Hebrew version of Peter's name), some were saying they followed the teaching of the brilliant Apollos, some were claiming they followed the teaching of Christ, while others said they followed Paul. Paul realized that these teachers in the church were focusing on the wrong point. They were focusing on the individual greatness of certain men, and not focusing on Jesus. Their loyalty was man-deep, instead of being Christ-deep. As Dr. Martin Franzmann has written: "The Gospel of the Crucified is the absolute opposite of that wisdom of this world which fosters human greatness and creates factions which center in men. The cross of Christ destroys all human greatness. If the new teachers seek power and create a faction, Paul seeks unity and decries all parties, including the one that called itself after him."

"Paul operates with the slogans of the new leaders, but by relating them all to the cross (of Christ), he gives them a radically different content. If they extolled the Christ as the giver of knowledge and freedom, Paul exalts Him as the Lord of glory who was crucified by the rulers of this world. If they empty the cross of its power (1 Cor. 1:17), he is resolved to know nothing but the cross (1 Cor. 2:2), and he sets the cross squarely in the center of the church again . . . The cross, which pronounces an annihilating judgment on all human greatness and on all human pretense to wisdom, cuts off all boasting of man, and marks as monstrous and unnatural any clustering about great men in schools and factions that give their loyalty to men."

But it was not a matter that was quickly and completely settled. We know that Paul actually wrote at least four letters to Corinth, only two of which have been saved. The problem was seen as so destructive that Paul interrupted his work at Ephesus, and made a quick trip to Corinth, a trip Paul refers to as "the painful visit," to settle this matter. This matter of division, focusing on following certain messengers rather than the message, is still a problem that often pulls congregations apart today. And Paul's apostolic guidance still is pertinent for us today.

Next Paul takes up the problems within the congregation that have been reported to him, and gives plain and straightforward advice. The first of these categories of problems was a set of three moral issues, followed by a whole series of other issues and questions that we shall discuss in our next lessons.

It was reported to Paul that one of the Corinthian members was living openly with his father's wife. Now this concerned Paul, of course, but what concerned him even more was that the congregation was doing absolutely nothing about it! This is what Paul has written in chapter 5: *It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife.*

And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you. . . . Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven, leavens the whole lump? Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump . . . Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

Church discipline was called for, and for two reasons. First, that the guilty would be led to repentance followed by forgiveness, and not damned by the negligence of a careless congregation; and secondly, that the church must take action quickly lest the church itself be seriously weakened. It is not the role of the church to judge outsiders, but it is the duty of the church to act with discipline on its own members when circumstances demand it. As Rev. Harley Swiggum has written: "The apostle implies that genuine Christian concern must sometimes be accompanied by painful rebuke, and that Christianity must never be reduced to a ridiculous sentimentality or spiritual cowardice, which dares to judge no one. Better a minor pain now and a saved life, than no pain and a lost life."

Our next lesson will continue Paul's guidance to the Corinthians.