

There's a pretty good chance that, at some point over the recent holiday season, you got into an argument with a family member. And I don't say that because I'm cynical or jaded, nor because I experienced that myself. In fact, my trip to visit family in Ohio was actually quite peaceful. No, I say that because statistics say it's true.

There was a survey released just two years ago that said 40% of family gatherings involve some level of open disagreement, with one-third of those escalating into a long-term family rift. The topics are pretty much what you would expect. Politics was at the top of the list. As were old family grievances, dug up from the past. Relationships, finances, and parenting practices rounded out the top five. Regardless of the causes, it's pretty clear that while Christmas may be a time for peace on earth, it's not necessarily a time for peace around the dinner table.

To put it bluntly, conflict comes easily to sinful human being. It slips into families, congregations, friendships and communities. And when we finally stop and ask, "Why is this happening?" the answer is almost always the same. Somewhere underneath the disagreement there is a quiet but stubborn conviction that I am right and they are wrong. I'm smarter. I matter more. I see more clearly. I deserve more attention. I must be right.

That kind of conflict isn't new. It's as old as human pride itself. Scripture shows us that right away. Cain didn't rise up and murder his brother Abel because he lacked proper conflict-resolution skills. Cain's pride was the problem. His offering wasn't regarded by God, his brother's was, and Cain couldn't bear being less than Abel. Pride turned into anger, anger into violence, and that violence ended in death.

The Corinthian congregation in our Epistle lesson was doing something similar, though perhaps with nicer words and better manners. They were dividing themselves over leaders and teachers. "*I follow Paul.*" "*I follow Apollos.*" And perhaps worst of all, the pious-sounding claim, "*I follow Christ,*" which in context wasn't a confession of faith but a way of saying, "I'm above all of you and your petty loyalties." What all of these had in common was the assumption that Paul or Apollos, or the one making the claim, was something on his own, apart from Christ.

And once you start thinking that way, the rest follows easily. If my teacher is superior, then I must be superior. If I belong to the right group, then you must belong to the wrong one. Instead of recognizing that each member of the congregation had the same Christ and therefore stood on exactly the same footing before God, they began ranking themselves. "I'm more important than you" is just another way of saying, "I'm something on my own. Something more than what Christ has made me."

Our conflicts aren't any different. The names and details change, but the reasons are the same. Lurking in the basement of every fight is pride that wants to put me first. That wants to bring me attention, recognition, and love. Pride insists on being noticed. Pride keeps score. Pride is convinced that it belongs among "*the wise,*" "*the discerning,*" "*the scribe,*" "*the debater of this age.*" And when that pride is challenged by a family member, a fellow church member, or even by God's Word, conflict is almost guaranteed.

But that same conflict begins to fizzle and die when we admit something that's deeply uncomfortable, but also freeing, in its own way: we're really nothing on our own. Because, let's face it. This isn't the greatest congregation that's ever existed. You aren't the best parishioners who have ever walked into a church. And I'm not the world's greatest pastor, father, or husband.

St. Paul doesn't flatter the Corinthians, and the Holy Spirit doesn't flatter us. God simply shoots us down. "*I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.*" "*Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age?*" In the end, all human boasting collapses under God's judgment.

And if we're honest, we don't even have to think very hard to see the truth of that fact. How many times has our own wisdom turned out to be foolish? How often have our clever arguments proven to be flat-out wrong? How frequently have we been so sure we understood a situation, a person, or even God Himself, only to discover later how biased and self-serving our perspective really was?

The really great thing, though is that once we stop pretending to be something on our own, we're freed from the exhausting work of judging, comparing, and measuring ourselves against one another. In that moment, I am free to confess my sins without needing to feel superior to anyone else. You're nothing on your own, and neither am I, and that takes all the burden off our shoulders.

Paul writes, *"Not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth."* That isn't an insult. It's a reality check that levels the ground at the foot of the cross.

And this shouldn't surprise us. Jesus was criticized throughout His ministry for collecting sinners, outcasts, and nobodies to Himself. He ate with tax collectors and prostitutes. He touched lepers. He welcomed children. He called fishermen as his disciples, not philosophers. He surrounded Himself with people who had nothing to offer.

And He hasn't changed. Jesus still calls disciples who are nothing. God chooses what's foolish in the world to shame the wise. He chooses what's weak to shame the strong. He chooses what's low and despised, even things that aren't, to bring to nothing the things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.

And instead of leaving us as nothing, Christ does something far greater. He calls us who were nothing and transforms us by the power of His cross. *"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."* That cross is the something we could never produce on our own. It's the center of God's wisdom. The heart of His saving plan.

There, we finally see how foolish we are and how brilliant God is. No human mind would ever have devised a rescue plan that involved the eternal Son of God taking on flesh, submitting to mockery and violence, and willingly bearing the punishment for sins He didn't commit.

And at that cross, we also learn how weak we truly are and how strong God is. We see God hanging helpless, nailed in place, mocked by His enemies, and yet, in that very weakness, saving the entire world. What looks like defeat is victory. What looks like foolishness is divine wisdom. What looks like weakness is the power of God for salvation.

And Paul says that it is a great gift, overflowing in blessings. He lists four different blessings, in fact. *"Because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption."*

Wisdom. Not the wisdom of winning arguments or impressing others, but the wisdom that recognizes salvation where the world sees failure. The cross teaches us to see our sins honestly, not as small mistakes, but as the very reason Christ died. And it teaches us to see that His death is enough.

Righteousness. When judgment comes, and it will, you won't stand there presenting your achievements, your insight, or your morality. You will stand clothed in Christ Himself. His righteousness is given to you freely, as you are baptized into His death and resurrection.

Holiness. Not a vague spiritual glow or an abstract status, but the holiness of having been made right with God. The holiness that frees us to love our neighbor, to forgive, to serve, and to bear one another's weaknesses without needing to prove ourselves.

Redemption. For you have been bought back from slavery to sin, from the tyranny of pride, from the endless need to justify yourself. You are God's child right now. That isn't something you achieved. It's something Christ has done for you.

*"So that, as it is written, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.'"* Pride divides. The cross unites. Pride says, "Look at me." The cross says, "Look at Him." And when Christ crucified is at the center, the flames of conflict lose their oxygen. There's simply no room left to boast in ourselves, because everything we are, and everything we hope to be, comes from Christ alone. Amen.