**His Story 4 1 CORINTHIANS LIVING IT OUT**

We are in a series of messages about taking a whole book of the Bible each Sunday and asking the question, what is its essential message? If the books of the Bible are God’s love letters to us, what is He saying in each of them? Gospels – were four eyewitness accounts of the life of Jesus. Acts – Communicate, Community, Confrontation, Confirmation.

Romans – How can we be put right with God, win over our fallen nature and live in community with each other? 1 Corinthians – Controversies that almost killed a Church.

Two years ago Judy and I spent a few months travelling by car in Europe, one place in Greece we went to was Corinth. I was keen to see the famous Corinthian canal – an engineering masterpiece where ships can save days. Instead of having to travel around the bottom of the Peloponnese isthmus, you can motor straight across a huge cut in the landscape. But the city of Corinth also interested me – as we ate our lunch beside the sea on a rocky beach – I wondered about this church in this city and how it survived. Like me, you have probably read the Bible and sometimes come away from it saying something like – ‘well that’s OK for them in the year 60AD – they don’t live in the world we live in today!’ But friends, Corinth was the world we live in today….and even worse…. It was known as ‘sin city’ of the sailing world. A pagan city with the temple of Aphrodite the goddess of pleasure and her 1000 temple prostitutes who offered sex as a part of daily worship. It was the city where Julius Caesar made his home in 44BC and his craving for power, wealth, and control permeated through the society. And into this city came the Gospel. People believed in Jesus but they bought all kinds of baggage from their past. So how can a person make a clean start when their thinking and beliefs are so bound up in loose living and a mishmash of pagan beliefs and practices? Beneath the surface of this book, there is a struggle going on….

**Gnostic Teaching**

One of the greatest threats to this new Church was not people leaving it because of the persecution and opposition….it was the threat from within. The threat of seductive teaching that purported to be apostolic but was in fact heresy. They were called the Gnostics and their very appealing message went something like this. Believing in Jesus gets me right with God and sets my destination for heaven – it’s a spiritual thing about the future – it has little to do with living now and what I do with my physical body. So let me do the Jesus thing for the spiritual part of me and live any way I want here and now with my physical body. The two worlds are not connected with each other.

God will forgive me and what I do with my body now and it does not affect my spiritual future. These Corinthians got the best of both worlds, they received Christ but then continued to live in a pagan godless way and thought nothing of it! In fact, they began to teach this very appealing lifestyle to others. And it was a hit! People loved it and throw in some mystical spirituality and kind of hierarchy of insight and revelation so that just a few had the power and control and you have a perfect religion that appealed not only then but also now! Paul was so troubled in spirit he wrote this book which is a letter to the Church in Corinth to correct this teaching. The book contains teaching about: How to live in harmony with each other. How to deal with factions and divisions in the church. What the real qualities of leadership are. Why the gospel appears so foolish to rational thinkers. How followers of Jesus should live with sexual purity both inside and outside of marriage. Why secular law courts are not the place for believers to sort out their quarrels. What having freedom really means when what I do might be misunderstood by someone else. How people should contribute their spiritual gifts to build up the church and its witness in the community. This book of 1 Corinthians – teaches us *how to live out our faith in a world where loose living, rampant immorality, wealth, power, and control dominate the economic horizon!* So how do we do this? It's one thing to be told what we should do but how? Let me give you three things that will help you get started.

1. **Turn from pride and an attitude of entitlement** that causes favouritism and splits.

There is no room for this in God’s community. I’m for Paul or Apollos….. I’m for this or that kind of deep teaching that appeals to both my intellect and my chosen lifestyle. Your intellect cannot save you, we need to learn to drink our theology! Persuasive and eloquent teachers can mislead gullible people. The message is Jesus and Him crucified which is delivered in weakness by servants of God, not popular acclaim. *What in your life cannot be understood without the cross of Jesus?* Paul sets straight this error which teaches live as we want now – it doesn’t matter!

1. **Deal with blatant sin** – call it what it is…..

Resolve differences among yourselves not in the law courts. Live lives of purity inside and outside of marriage. Warn people who continue to engage in immorality, greed, alcohol abuse, and cheating that they need to stop it….

You should make judgements inside the church but not outside it. What you do in your physical body does affect your spiritually. If you have sex outside of marriage you join yourself to that person and the Holy Spirit which lives in you is compromised by your choice. If you chase financial gain at someone else’s expense – your greed destroys any witness in your life about Jesus as does your lust after power control and abuse of authority in marriage and in business. It's straight talk.

1. **Serve in the Church and in the world**

Be the last to seek recognition for what you do. Exercise wisdom by the way you live, understanding the principle that you might do something but someone else might stumble by observing you. This is especially true for leaders in the Church. All of you exercise your gifts to build up the church body. Don’t rely on the prominent speakers and leaders of the Church to do the ministry….you are all to mobilise your gifts and serve God. This book outlines clearly how to go about living in a godless pagan world.

I think at the core teaching of this book is what I’m going to call –*spirit-controlled meekness*. What is the answer to those who seek to divide Churches by popular eloquence? What is the message we need to keep saying to believers who chase after the latest teaching that mixes truth with humanism and some liberty thrown in? What is God’s strategy for contesting the world’s attempt to shape its gospel message to make it more appealing? – an apparently foolish message. How should we confront blatant immorality inside the Church?

When believers dispute with each other – how should we resolve this? How should we live when what we do might be misread by others? When my right to freedom is crossed by someone else’s convictions?

When my marriage is struggling, broken or I’m not married but need to live with physical longings of intimacy and passion? When I’m passionate about my spiritual gift and think everyone else should be like me – and I want to judge them – or I feel disillusioned. When I just want to pull down the blinds on the bus and wait for heaven and don’t care about lost people, lonely people, or the Church community. When I feel disappointed or disillusioned about being a Jesus follower. When I just want to give up on the Church because it’s too hard.

You see here is the thing….Whether you are the pastor, the teacher, the leadership team or hold any role or position in the Church community…. you are still a servant of the body. Now I need to unpack this meekness and weakness thing a little. We live in a world where people’s weaknesses are exploited. Especially in business and politics and also sadly in relationships. So we learn very quickly to not show weakness. Weakness means you will be walked over. Weakness means you will not get that promotion or make that sale. Weakness means you will not appeal to the other person. But there is a kind of weakness that the Bible speaks about which is to be desired, strong people can carry this weakness quality because they know where their trust is placed. They know where real strength is to be found. So I believe the word unpacked is more like ***‘a harnessed strength controlled by the Spirit’.***

**See if you can recognise some of these:**

Time and time again God says to his leaders – you are too strong! GIDEON There are too many of you – I need to reduce your numbers! You’re a fighter and wrestler but I’m going to make you limp! JACOB You try to do my work without my help – you’re going away for 40 years! MOSES You have so much knowledge & passion I’m going to blind you for a time! SAUL you fight and talk too much and too loosely – you need to fail badly! PETER You began well but I’m taking my power and anointing off you KING SAUL. It was this great Apostle Paul – who said in the next book 2 Corinthians 12.10 ‘When I am weak then I am strong’ - I would rather glory in my weakness, then the power of God might be shown through me!” Weakness does not mean walkover, it does not mean spineless. Weakness means a harnessed strength controlled by the Spirit - which relies on God, not ourselves.

These controversy’s about morality, marriage, lawsuits, authority, what is the gospel for now!!! This just about destroyed the Church…. But it was only when people stood filled by the Spirit speaking God’s Word with a *love for people*…that the church survived and flourished. Weakness means knowing that you say what you need to which might sound foolish to the world’s way of thinking but it’s still God’s Word and if people react – they are reacting to God and his Holy Spirit, not to you. Weakness means you know that what you do is important but it’s only God who can make it last and make it count. Weakness means when you stand before someone and have to tell them they need to stop what they are doing because it’s wrong…. you say it with tears, not with a judgemental superiority. Weakness means you can rightly divide truth from error even when error looks more appealing by its lifestyle – but you have to make a stand and you do so because people’s destinies are at stake – somehow they sense you are loving them towards choice not pronouncing doom on them. Why because it’s the way of love…. speaking the truth in love.

How do we say tough things? Answer – say it with tears! We are all fallen in the process of being rebuilt and remade by God. There is no room for super-spiritual do-gooders who tell others how to live. How do we make a moral stand for godliness without appearing superior? How do we carry compassion with single-minded uncompromising boldness? I believe people can sense we are either giving off a polarising divisive superior message or we are speaking the truth in love. The message does not change but the messenger does.

What did Paul say to these loose, divisive, believers who wanted to practice a kind of Christianity that mixed pagan and secular thinking with the gospel?

1 Corinthians 6:11 “And such were some of you……but you were washed’.

You see God never gives up on people like you and me. But I’m so weak you say…..well congrats because that’s a great place to start from. In your weakness, you can now seek God’s power and control to help you start living a Christ-like life. If you’re a leader here today – and you feel weak, discouraged, or disillusioned. May I remind you that God's power comes in when you’re weak. That our church will not become what we desire when the pastors or the leaders get things right….it will happen when we all start working together using the gifts God has given us…. practising the law of love!

In the middle of the book there are two little statements that are fascinating…

You are God’s field…. you are God's building. We’ve all heard of the Auckland housing crisis…and the need for reasonable land prices. Well God’s got a building crisis too because he has plenty of land. But the land is saying to the owner – don’t build on me! I don’t want one of those built on me. Just let me be land. I just want to watch. Other land says to its owner. You can build on me but I only want one of those designs. Don’t put anything else! I restrict your building permission. And if you are going to build on me, I reserve the right to choose the builder and I want I want I want. But the Bible says – you are God's land and God's building….and he is building something special in and on you. And what He builds on you is His choice!

Did the church at Corinth listen? Towards the end of the 1st century…..a letter was written again about the church at Corinth and guess what…..they were still struggling with some of the same issues. Each of you when you contribute in some way to God’s building….do it well. Because someone is coming behind you to build on what you have done. Do you know the biggest problem God has with most of us? My land, my house, my way, my design, my shape, my turf. And it’s the Spirit-controlled weak people who say to God. God your land, your house, your design, your shape, your people, your church, your building. And my contribution is to love God and love people using the gifts God has given me….and let God build whatever he likes in my life. God never gives up on you! And such were some of you…. You used to be this way. But now you are washed…cleansed, sanctified….and you carry inside spirit controlled weakness!