

*Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our heavenly Father, through the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

### **1 Corinthians 1:10-18 (ESV)**

<sup>10</sup> I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgement. <sup>11</sup> For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarrelling among you, my brothers. <sup>12</sup> What I mean is that each one of you says, "I follow Paul", or "I follow Apollos", or "I follow Cephas", or "I follow Christ." <sup>13</sup> Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? <sup>14</sup> I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, <sup>15</sup> so that no one may say that you were baptized in my name. <sup>16</sup> (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas. Beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) <sup>17</sup> For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

<sup>18</sup> 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.

*Dear Heavenly Father, send us your Holy Spirit so that we may not be divided, but united in faith and mind and purpose with our Lord Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.*

Is there anyone you might point to as someone who had a positive influence on your faith in God?

For example, maybe your parents were a good influence as they lived out their faith in all of their life, and not just for an hour or two on Sunday mornings. Their practice of prayer, patience, Scriptural insight, and grace served as a pointer to the breath of Christ living in them.

Perhaps it was a Sunday School teacher or youth leader, whose knowledge and excitement about Jesus helped your faith grow as they told the stories, sung about what God has done for us, and practiced what they believed about God and his forgiveness in their lives.

Maybe it was a relative or close friend who provide a beacon of hope and peace in your dark days because they seemed like the presence of Christ himself for you when you needed him. They may have taught you about what it means to be loved without expecting anything in return. They're somebody you might trust with your heartaches, your failures, your questions, and your joys.

Or maybe a pastor has had a great influence on your faith as they taught you in confirmation lessons, prepared you for marriage, or was there for you in your struggles and grief. He kept pointing you to Jesus Christ and helped you gain confidence in God's Word and Sacraments.

Whether you've always been a Christian, or whether you've only recently come or returned to the Christian faith, you might be able to think of someone, or some people, who provided positive influence on your faith.

This was the situation in Corinth. Like many congregations there were key figures in their relatively short history. There was Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles, who helped found the congregation. Apollos, who followed soon after Paul, was a very gifted preacher. Peter, one of the favoured Apostles, may have visited them and made a significant impression as an eyewitness of Christ. People liked them and looked up to them.

Perhaps we're not much different today. We too have our favourite people who have helped shape us into who we are today and how to live out our faith. We look back with fondness on their time in our life and how they helped us grow in faith.

Yet, despite the many blessings which come through some of our favourite people and pastors, this can sometimes be the cause for divisions, especially if we don't all agree on the same influential people, teachings, styles, or approaches.

You see, every pastor and lay person will have their strong points which will appeal to some, but not others. They'll also have their weaknesses which some will dwell on and criticise. Some pastors will be good at visiting, but others won't. Some may be good preachers and bible study leaders, but others might struggle in this area. They'll all live out their faith in God through their love, forgiveness, and service, but they'll also sin and fall short of many expectations.

This means we'll all naturally look up to some, but down on others, and we won't always agree on whom we all look up to or down on.

When this happens, we may end up unconsciously dividing ourselves between 'us' and 'them'. The 'us' who like 'what's-his-name' versus the 'them' who prefer 'what's-his-face.'

As we try to justify or defend our 'us' and 'them' positions, we might start to think or say unchristian words and thoughts against each other, or we'll be tempted to avoid each other (even though we all belong to the one body of Christ).

In other words, whenever we have divisions (even if those divisions are based on preferences, favouritism, or loving respect), we'll usually have judgments. When we have judgments, we'll soon experience, or dish out, some form of criticism or attacks against fellow members of the body of Christ who don't agree with us.

When Christians fight against, or separate themselves from, one another because of differences of opinion (even when we're honouring or questioning each other's favourites), our faith in our loving God may be threatened, our unity in Christ may become strained or broken, and our witness to the forgiveness and peace of Christ is diminished.

Even though we might think our natural favouritism and preferences aren't a bad thing, the devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh will work hard to divide us.

For instance, the devil delights in us when we play one person, or one pastor, off against another, or one style against another, or one teaching against another, or one preference against another. The devil loves to use our love and respect of our pastors, leaders, and influential people of faith against us, hoping our love for these people will divide us, or lead us (or others) away from faith in Christ.

But it's not just the devil!

The world uses our divisions and the way we dishonour each other as justification for not believing what we believe. Why would anyone want to come to church when they hear and see how we treat each other, or criticise God's chosen servants?

Similarly, our own sinful flesh too easily despairs of our faith when we see those we love and honour being questioned, criticised, or dismissed. No wonder many walk away from the church or don't want to join us in our worship!

And so, our pride and desires to emulate great people of the faith, our love for those people who have shaped our beliefs, our critical comments about those who disagree with us or our favourite people, and our stubbornness which doesn't want to listen to, or respect, another's opinion, end up dividing us and leading many away from Christ and his holy community.

While it's right and good to honour and thank God for the faithfulness of God's people who helped us and encouraged us in faith, we also need to remember they don't save us. Christ alone is the one who saves. If we're to look up to anyone, we need to keep on looking to our Lord Jesus Christ who is not divided and will never let us down.

No matter what any of us think about any pastors, Sunday School teachers, or lay people, they're not our Saviour. Even our favourite faithful people will let us down because they're also selfish, insecure, and desire the wrong things, just like we do. Many will say 'yes' when they should say 'no' and say 'no' when they should say 'yes,' just so they might be loved or respected. All of those people we look up to, as well as those we look down on, are sinful human beings who also need Jesus.

It was Jesus Christ who died for us, shedding his precious and holy blood for us. It was Jesus Christ who took on all our humanness, shame, guilt, pride, and sin into himself. It was Jesus Christ who paid the full price for our sins of favouritism and criticism. It was Jesus Christ who rose to new life for us, freed us from our chains to sin, death, and the devil, so that we might live a new life with our Triune God in heaven.

So, even though we might have different favourites which may divide us, we all have a common faith in our one Lord, Jesus Christ, and Christ isn't divided!

But, despite our divided opinions, Christ, out of patient and loving grace, constantly calls us back into a united fellowship with him, calling us to be one in name, one in body, one in baptism, one in confession, and one in faith. He continues to reconcile us to himself through the forgiveness of sins so we may also be reconciled with each other.

By keeping our favouritism and faith firmly focussed on our Lord Jesus Christ, we'll be of one mind and one conviction, no matter who has previously been, or will one day be, our major influence in our faith journey, for really, it was Christ who called us, served us, and spoke to us through them.

In this way, despite our private opinions of the different people God uses in our lives, we thank God for them, because we realise Christ works through them, despite all their flaws.

God has graciously sent us all those pastors and people to show us different aspects of his own love, mercy, forgiveness, and justice, even if some of it wasn't welcome. At all times, we're to look for the light of Christ shining through all pastors and people, so that Jesus remains the focus of all our attention and praise.

For really, it was Jesus who baptised us through the human hands of our pastors. Jesus is the one who offers us his own body and blood through human hands to forgive and cleanse us from sin and give us a taste of his heavenly feast.

Jesus is the one who speaks to us through the words and actions of fellow human beings, so that we might grow in faith. Jesus is the one who sits beside us in human skin to suffer with us and walk with us through our darkest hours.

Jesus is the one who puts human arms around our shoulders when no words will do. Jesus is the one who prays for us through human parents, pastors, and other carers to bring our needs to his Father. Jesus is the one who uses our human lips to sing heavenly praise and thanks to God.

Let's not be divided because of any favouritism, opinions, or differences, but let's remain united in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, for he brought us together to become one. Let's continue to be one in confession and conviction. Then as one people in Christ, may we bear witness to the work of Christ to the world around us.

In this way, may...

*...the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard our hearts and minds as we remain united as one in Christ Jesus. Amen.*

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