

1 Corinthians 12:1-3 “How Much is Enough?”

A few years ago I was having a conversation with Katy Valentine, our associate minister at the time. We were talking about how there are times when we feel like imposters, even when we're engaging in something that we've been trained for. Come to find out, this is a legitimate condition. Some psychologists call it Imposterism, others call it Fraud Syndrome, but most people call it Imposter Syndrome. Here's one definition: “Despite external evidence of their competence, those experiencing this phenomenon remain convinced that they are frauds, and do not deserve all they have achieved. Individuals with Imposter Syndrome incorrectly attribute their success to luck, or as a result of deceiving others into thinking they are more intelligent than they perceive themselves to be.” Anyone here ever feel like that? I think to some degree we've all felt like this at some point in our lives. But for some, the question is, “How many times per week or even per day do I feel like this?”

I think those who identify as “Christians” or “Followers of Christ” feel this way sometimes too. For the last few weeks, we've been talking about what it means to be living “in the Spirit.” But how many of us are plagued with the question, “How do I know if I've *really* put my life under the control of the Holy Spirit?” Or maybe we ask, “How can I be sure that the Spirit of Christ has really become a force in my life?” Or to put it plainly, “How can I be sure that I'm not just kidding myself?”

Some of us may have been given shallow answers to these questions based on the scripture Barbara just read. This verse has often been taken to say that you can tell whether or not the Holy Spirit is in your life by what words about Jesus come out of your mouth. But then we end up running it backwards by just trying to say the right things in order to convince ourselves (and let's face it, others too) that the Holy Spirit is in our lives. Most of us in the church would never think of saying, “Jesus be cursed,” anyway. That's just weird. So then we think, “Okay, since I'd never even say that, I'm halfway there already!” So what else can I

do? Oooh! I know! I can sing songs that repeat the phrase, “Jesus is Lord” over and over again until I’m absolutely sure that there was no possible chance I hadn’t said it enough! Then I can convince myself (and others) that this is evidence of the Holy Spirit! Because, “Jesus is Lord” is the phrase that pays, right? This is how we know that the Holy Spirit is living in us. If we just say that enough, then ... well ... maybe that’s how we’ll convince the Holy Spirit to come live in us! Makes sense. Right? Maybe? But if that were the case, then “Jesus is Lord” is just some kind of magical incantation that manipulates the Holy Spirit into taking up residence whenever we say it.

So let’s talk about what Paul is saying here. And if we’re going to really get our heads wrapped around what he’s saying, we need to compare these two phrases. “Jesus be cursed” and “Jesus is Lord.” See, back in Jesus’ time the phrase, “Let Jesus be cursed” didn’t sound as strange to the people who lived in the first century as it sounds to us today. “Jesus be cursed” was a way that people expressed what they thought was just common sense. Because Jesus was a threat to the status quo of the day. Jesus was a trouble maker. By claiming to be someone who was chosen by God to bring about God’s kingdom on earth, he was putting anyone who claimed to follow the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob at risk. Wherever he went, he stirred up trouble. And who was there to try to shut him up? The religious leaders who either feared Caesar or supported him unconditionally. Because every time Jesus came into town stirring up trouble, Rome assumed that the Jews were on the uprising again, so hey, I guess we better crack down on them to keep them in place! So yes, the corrupt religious leaders were willing to cozy up to Caesar to avoid having the sword fall down on them. “Better to get rid of one upstart Rabbi than put everyone else at risk.” So to say, “Let Jesus be cursed” was almost a statement of fact for some folks. Of course Jesus was cursed! So many people were out to get him! And if I’m going to stay out of trouble, I’d better go along with whoever wants to get rid of him too. Shoot, even Deuteronomy 21:23 straight out of the Law of Moses states, “Cursed is the one who is hung on a tree,” and what did they do to Jesus? They hung him on a cross. So yes, if he was

the kind of troublemaker who became a threat to national security, common decency, and law and order, then I might as well just state the obvious: “Jesus be cursed.”

How different would it be today if some preacher who was a minority voice among other preachers, came around and told us to love one another ... even our enemies? *Especially* our enemies. What kind of logic is that? Are you saying I have to love people who are responsible for the deaths of others? I have to love the skinhead who wears his white power tee-shirt and carries his neo-Nazi flag? I have to love people who openly incite their followers to harm other people? How can anyone in their right mind advocate loving our enemies? Why should we show grace, generosity and compassion toward someone whose very presence makes our blood boil? Hey, listen: Anyone who advocates that kind of love for our enemies must somehow be in cahoots with the bad guys. Or at least whoever we think are the “bad guys” at any given moment. Anyone who advocates for that kind of love has to be called out! They need to be ridiculed. They need to be sanctioned! They need to be ... cursed so that we don’t wind up in trouble too. It’s just common sense.

Okay, so how about this other phrase? What about, “Jesus is Lord?” What about those “magic words” that Paul seems to be saying are the key to letting folks know we’re living in the Spirit? Those words don’t sound strange to us at all ... especially to those of us who may have grown up in the church. But to the folks back in the early church? The words, “Jesus is Lord” may have prompted some folks to say, “Shhh! Don’t say that! Only Caesar is Lord!” I know I’ve said it before, but in the first century, the only one who was ever supposed to have the title of “Lord” was Caesar. So when someone said, “Jesus is Lord,” that meant “Caesar is not.” And to say that was dangerous. That could get you thrown in jail or worse. To say that Jesus is Lord meant that you were fully committed to following Jesus even at the risk of jail or death.

So now that we have an idea of what those two phrases meant to the folks who first heard these words from Paul, let's revisit the questions we left lying on the table: "How can I be sure I've placed my life in control of the Holy Spirit? How do I know I'm not just kidding myself? How do I know I'm not just a fraud? Am I good enough? How many times do I have to say, 'Jesus is Lord?' How much is enough?"

Well first of all, "Jesus is Lord" isn't just a phrase that opens a magic portal so the Holy Spirit can come in. To say, "Jesus is Lord" is to say that nothing or no one else is Lord. No political leader, no preacher, no school, no career, no ideology, no philosophy ... *Jesus* is Lord. Jesus is the one whose life we seek to follow, Jesus is whose mission we seek to accomplish, Jesus is whose ministry we seek to emulate, and Jesus is whose character we seek to impersonate. Whoa! Wait a minute. Did you just say, "impersonate!?" We started the morning out talking about how we feel like imposters and how we're afraid that somebody is going to discover we're just a bunch of fakes, and you come along and tell us to *impersonate* Jesus!? What is wrong with you pastor? Same thing that's wrong with all of us I guess. I feel like an imposter too. I wonder whether I'm good enough. I wonder if I really do enough to be considered one who walks in the Spirit.

But here's the thing. I'm not alone. You're not alone. And we all know that to just say, "Jesus is Lord" is as easy as opening up our purple chorus books and picking out one of the many songs that contain that phrase. But to say, "Jesus is Lord" in the same way that folks who lived in Jesus' time said it ... to say it in a way that means, that "No one else is Lord" is a lot more difficult. But that's where we *all* come in. That's where being a community of faith is important. If you haven't noticed, I've been talking a lot about the importance of understanding that living a life in the Spirit is not something we can do successfully all on our own. It requires being loving and gracious to one another as well as accountable to one another. It requires us to get over ourselves and to know that we *can't* do it all ... that we're *never* going to feel like we're "enough." But when we work together, when we encourage one

another, when we have each others' backs, when we teach each other and learn from each other, when we bear one another's burdens and lift each other up ... we can experience the fullness of living in the Spirit.

It is here at this table that we come together in all of our imperfection in order to participate in a transforming experience. The journey of faith is not a race. We don't have to compete. And we certainly don't have to feel like a fraud or a failure. In 1 Corinthians 11, the chapter right before the text we studied this morning, Paul talks about coming to the Lord's table. In fact, that's where we find the words of institution that we most often use when we come to the table ... it's where we get the phrase, "This do in remembrance of me." He starts chapter 11 with these words – "Be imitators of me as I am of Christ." See, even Paul says it's okay to imitate Christ!

So we gather here at our *Lord's* table, calling upon Jesus to send his Holy Spirit to transform all things ... *including us*. To help us go into this world and offer ourselves as the embodiment of God's radical love. And it's by this love that the world might just see its own bitterness and be set free from its own hostility. At this table we look forward to the new day when Christ will spread his banquet before all the earth, inviting all to participate in the joyous celebration.