

# Epiphany: Wk 3

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Preacher: Fr. Caleb Evans

[0:00] In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. So, when I was a little guy, I spent most of my free time hanging out with my best friend Kevin, who lived across the street from me.

In the winter, we would sometimes play video games. In the summer, we were often outside playing with our cap guns. Anyone remember those? Oh man, those were the good old days, weren't they? Anyone, yeah, so, you do remember those. We'd also spend a lot of time playing with our action figures. Oh man, he was a big Star Wars fan, so we often found ourselves playing Star Wars. We had a lot of fun, but also had a lot of arguments. We'd argue over which character each of us would get to play. Boba Fett. So, we would argue, typically, for example, over who got to be Boba Fett.

Oh yeah. I'd relent, and I'd tell him, okay, I'll let you be Boba Fett if I get to be all the other characters. And he'd agree, but only with the caveat that Boba Fett be all-powerful and could beat every other character in a fight at the same time.

[1:24] Things usually went downhill from there. So, kids have goofy arguments over nothing important. But when we grow up and we join the church and we're respectable adults, these tendencies go away, right?

Right? Maybe not. The Bible does not typically warn us about something unless it's fairly likely to happen.

If we take the witness of the New Testament seriously, it would seem that we should be on constant guard against division and quarreling in the church.

So, we've all heard the story about the church that divided over the color of the carpet.

You've heard that one, right? I went to that one. Oh, you went to that one, Deacon Mark. Ouch. Yeah, that's too bad. Just to drive that point home, I decided to search the internet for real-life examples of stupid church fights.

[2:34] Here are a few that I found. A church argument and vote to decide if the clock in the worship space should be removed.

A business meeting argument about whether a church should purchase a weed eater or not. One that took two whole meetings to resolve. An argument over who has the authority to buy postage stamps for the church.

An argument over whether the fake dusty plant should be removed from the podium. And finally, some church members leaving a church because other church members hid the vacuum cleaner from them.

I could go on and on. But you get the point, don't you? It's kind of funny, but it's also very sad.

And if you have been involved in churches for any length of time, you have probably seen this kind of thing happen. Fair to say that this sort of thing does not bring glory to Jesus, isn't it?

[3:48] Fair to say that this sort of thing. So, what is the problem? Why does that happen? Well, let's start with problem number one. The church has people in it.

Right? We all have a tendency to quarrel. We all have a tendency to try to get our own way. And sometimes, that tendency expresses itself over things that don't really even matter.

Furthermore, we all seem to be better able to detect when someone else is causing division than when we are.

In addition, we have a tendency not to see quarreling and division as the serious and the destructive sin that it actually is. We might tell ourselves, okay, there are those really bad sins, like adultery or theft.

But we forget that the New Testament treats quarreling just as seriously as it does the sins we might tend to regard as the most heinous.

[4:55] Lest it seem like I am saying all of this from a soapbox, I'm going to begin by pointing out that being ordained does not exempt one from the temptation to quarrel.

For some reason, that temptation did not go away when the bishop put his hands on my head. The New Testament includes not being quarrelsome as an essential qualification for ordained ministry. In 1 Timothy chapter 3, we read that an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money.

So, it's interesting to note, being quarrelsome is a disqualification for ordained ministry, just like being violent is.

That being the case, it's a dangerous thing for clergy in the age of social media. It's very easy to disqualify yourself on Facebook, unfortunately.

[6:22] In 2 Timothy chapter 2, Paul instructs Timothy, We see a firm warning against quarreling in the Old Testament, too.

In Proverbs 20, we read this, It is an honor for a man to keep aloof from strife, but every fool will be quarreling.

If we find ourselves in the position of quarreling with others, we need to remember that God's word doesn't mince words about telling us fools when we're doing that. If we've quarreled with others, as I suspect most of us here have at some point or other, I'm going to raise my hand and say I've been there, we have acted as fools.

In today's epistle reading, we see that the church in Corinth had a problem with quarreling. We think of the New Testament church as this pure, pristine, and perfect thing, but the truth is, guess what? They were redeemed centers just like us. They dealt with all of the same problems that churches in the year 2020 face. Paul writes this, Divisions, disagreement, disunity, quarreling.

[8:23] Have any of you ever encountered these kinds of things in a church? I'm going to take that as a yes.

You know, from age to age, human sin has a way of taking the exact same forms and following the exact same patterns, and Christians are not exempt from that pattern.

One of my seminary professors used to say that there is no fight as ugly as a church fight. He was warning us about that, of course, because guess what?

It tends to be a perennial problem. And it's so ugly because brothers and sisters who belong to the same Lord and are children of the same Father in Heaven are called to live together in love and unity.

Paul elaborates on the problem. 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.

[9:35] Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? Well, so the Corinthian church had divided themselves into competing camps.

I follow so-and-so, I'm in his camp. That guy over there, he follows this other guy, he's in this other guy's camp. Is that a problem?

You know, I often say that Christianity is a team sport. And it is.

The problem is that it's too easy for us to forget that we're all on the same team. And, in addition to that, we have the same captain and coach.

His name is Jesus. The stakes are really high when we forget that, on a couple of fronts.

[10:40] The first is that it hurts our witness and paints a picture that completely undermines the message of the gospel, the message of the cross. It gives the false impression that Christ is indeed divided.

In our epistle reading, Paul goes on, I thank God that I baptize none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one may say that you were baptized in my name.

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. 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.

So what we see here is that Christ did not send Paul to build his own brand, but to preach the cross. And my brothers and my sisters, Christ never sends any of us to build our own brand, but to proclaim the word of the cross and to do it together.

What does the word of the cross say to us? Well, in Ephesians chapter 2, Paul tells us that we who were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

[12:07] So as believers, we know that the blood of Christ has reconciled us to God. Through the blood of Christ, our sins have been forgiven, and we now know God as our Father.

But the blood of Christ, the cross of Christ, also reconciles us to each other. In Ephesians chapter 2, Paul talks about the cross of Christ breaking down the hostility between Jewish and Gentile believers.

If it breaks down that kind of hostility, it really breaks down hostility. The cross breaks down hostility between believers so that through Christ, we all have access in one spirit to the Father.

So then we are no longer strangers and aliens, but we are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God. Here's the thing.

Unity and love between believers is ultimately a gospel issue. What does it say to the watching world when our witness is one of quarreling and division?

[13:25] To be blunt, it gives unbelievers the sense that the gospel that we believe isn't actually true. And the reality is that there are lost and broken people who need Jesus.

Christians do not have time to quarrel amongst ourselves. The stakes are too high. We have a gospel to proclaim. The personal stakes are high too.

Quarreling, division, hurting our brothers and our sisters. Our Lord Jesus reminds us that these things are a danger to our own souls when we do them.

In Matthew chapter 5, Jesus says this, You have heard that it was said to those of old you shall not murder and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.

But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment. Whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council and whoever says you fool will be liable to the hell of fire.

[14:38] So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go.

First, be reconciled to your brother and then come and offer your gift. Come to terms quickly with your accuser while you are going with him to court, lest your accuser hand you over to the judge and the judge to the guard and you be put in prison.

Truly I say to you, you will never get out until you have paid the last penny. Stakes are high, aren't they? But I want to emphasize when I preach about sin, which every gospel preacher must.

I make a point of not exempting myself from the duty of examining my heart and confessing and repenting of any sin that I find there. That's why I began with the biblical charge that those in ordained ministry are not to be quarrelsome.

And I make the point of not exempting myself because, guess what? It's usually easier for us to spot someone else's sins than it is our own. So please don't let your takeaway from this morning sermon be that you're hoping that the man or woman in the next pew, a person that you find annoying, hears this sermon and takes it to heart.

[16:21] If you find that you have acted in a quarrelsome or divisive way towards other believers, please confess and repent this morning.

Let's be honest. There are people all around us who are in danger of dying in their sins. We must always be on guard against quarreling and against division, lest we be unfaithful in proclaiming the gospel.

Let's keep constant watch, brothers and sisters, that we all agree that there are no divisions among us and that we are united in the same mind and the same judgment.

It is essential that we do so if we're going to be faithful to the Lord who has saved us. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.