

NEW TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

Lesson 41

I Corinthians – Part Three

Particular Problems and Questions Among the Corinthians

Chapters 4–11

I. BACKGROUND

As we discussed in the earlier Corinthian classes, there was considerable back and forth between Paul and the church before this letter was written. Both by this back and forth and the previous letters, Paul was well apprised of what was happening within the Corinthian church. The Corinthians also asked Paul to address certain questions.

In the last class, we looked at the problems of divisions and schisms in the church that Paul addressed immediately in his letter. Paul's approach to the church (setting one teacher against another as worthy of following) centered on teaching the church the key to real wisdom versus human approaches to what is wise. Paul explained that God's wisdom, while it might seem foolish to the world and those without God's Spirit, is in fact the key to salvation – Christ crucified. By its very nature, this wisdom of God makes the divisions of the Corinthian church improper and wrong.

Paul then concludes his concerns over the schisms in chapter 4 writing that the people should drop their pride and respect the teaching received from Paul and Apollos. With biting irony, Paul reminds the people that they are in Christ through the teaching of Paul, that Paul in a spiritual sense is their father, and that Paul will be returning to them soon and will confront the prideful and arrogant among them directly and powerfully if they do not change on their own.

Beginning in Chapter 5, we see Paul starting to deal with other issues in the church. As we look at those issues, we see some teaching specific to very particular problems. Nevertheless, we find principles behind those teaching very important to others and us with our own different set of particular problems! Also, we will see much of the same self-centered pride issues in the Corinthian church that manifested itself in the schisms bubbling over to manifest itself in many other ways! As is so often with sinful attitudes and dispositions, they seem to surface in all sorts of ways!

II. PROBLEMS

A. *Allowed Immorality*

In Chapter 5, Paul addresses one of the individual problems within the church of which he has become aware. Paul received a report that “there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that does not occur even among pagans: a man has his father’s wife” (5:1). Apparently, this references a man who is living carnally with his stepmother -- a type of incest. In the Roman world, incest was illegal. Hence, Paul notes that the immorality being allowed in the church was of a kind not even found among the pagans!

For Paul, the attitude of the church is as equally appalling as the incest itself. Rather than being filled with grief, the church was somewhat proud over the mess. Early church commentary explained that the man living in this sin was actually a leader within the church itself.¹ Whether the early church father writing this was correct, Paul was certainly of a different mindset than the Corinthians. Paul declares that fellowship should be withdrawn from the man and the man should be handed over to Satan so that “the sinful nature may be destroyed and his spirit saved on the day of the Lord” (5:5).

Paul taught that removing fellowship from such a person might drive the person to heed God’s Spirit’s call and bring salvation as opposed to reinforcing the man in his depravity. Paul is concerned, however, not only for the man and his soul, but also for the effect on the whole church. Paul taught that the permissive attitude, of which the Corinthians were evidently proud, undermined the work of God in the church as well as the individual involved. The ignored sin would permeate the church much like yeast permeates a loaf of bread. Paul says the church is not to associate with those who claim to be Christian brothers yet live in such clear sexually immorality.

¹ John Chrysostom (347-407) wrote a sermon series on Corinthians which was a verse-by-verse exposition. In it, he wrote, “there was another sin committed there, namely, a person who had slept with his stepmother not only escaped rebuke but even became a leader of the people and gave them occasion to be conceited.”

B. *Lawsuit Problems*

In chapter 6, Paul deals with an issue in the church involving lawsuits. In the Corinthian congregation, the brothers were taking their disputes with each other to the pagans' courts for resolution. This maneuver is absurd to Paul. The church has authority over its members. The church has authority to judge the world and angels in a day to come. Why cannot the church judge the disputes among the brothers?

Can you imagine a dispute among folks in a church going before unbelievers for resolution? Paul says it is better to be cheated than to take intra-church disputes outside the church. Certainly, it does nothing for the name of God and the family of believers in the eyes of the pagans when such disputes are brought forth. Church disputes should not be resolved in this way.

C. *Prostitution and Sexual Immorality*

In the later half of Chapter 6, Paul addresses prostitution and general sexual immorality, as opposed to the particular incest addressed in chapter 5. Evidently, the Corinthians wrote or said "everything is permissible for me" and used this precept as an excuse for sexual sin (6:12). Paul quoted this saying, but he added an explanation that stopped the saying from use as an excuse for sin. Paul explained that the question is not whether something is permissible, but whether it is right and useful. Hence, Paul says that prostitution is not right, but destructive.

While all sin separates us from God and no sin (in an ultimate salvation sense) is more wrong than another, the effects of sin on the sinner and in this world are often different from one sin to another. So, for the sin of prostitution, when two unite sexually, there is a unity of spirit forged that takes the sin to a deeper level with more profound effect upon the spirit of the sinner. Paul explains that we are to unite in holiness to God, not in carnal relations with a prostitute.

This area of concern for Paul takes on greater significance when we remember that Corinth was a town notorious for its sexual laxity. In fact, one of the pagan temples in Corinth had prostitutes that serviced the temple. This underscores Paul's statement that our

uniting with the real God and creator of the universe is not some prostituted union that brings temporary fleshly gratification. It is, rather, a uniting in Spirit with the powerful Lord who raised Christ from the dead.

D. Marriage

Chapter 7 concerns the marriage situation in Corinth. Historically, the church struggled with a good bit of Paul's writings in this chapter. The writings have served as the reason for disdain on marriage as well as justification for celibacy among the Catholic priesthood. A good fair reading of the chapter, however, helps clear up some misunderstanding of some, if not all, of what Paul wrote.

Paul begins by setting out the problem of what the Corinthians were saying. The Corinthians wrote to Paul, "It is good for a man not to marry" (7:1).² Paul explains that because of rampant immorality, people should marry. In marriage, it is right and good for couples to enjoy each other conjugally. Paul considers the sexual aspect of marriage one of the duties the spouses have for each other. The husband's body is not his alone, nor is the wife's hers alone. Each spouse is there to help, love, and assist the other. That finds expression in availability for sexual unity as well as other areas.

Paul says that if married people are to be celibate, then there are key restrictions in place (7:5). The celibacy is to be (1) by mutual agreement, (2) for a limited time, (3) to devote to prayer, and (4) with a return to normal sexuality in a way as to prevent the temptation to sin out of a lack of self-control.

Paul also notes there is not an absolute law that all are to marry and so fulfill sexual needs. Paul explains that some have a gift of celibacy, as Paul evidently did (7:6-7). Paul considered it fine and appropriate for unmarried and widowed Christians to remain celibate. However, Paul was emphatic that if the gift of celibacy did not exist, then it was better to marry than to burn with Passion.

² Some have seen this statement as an affirmative one by Paul rather than a quotation from the church to Paul that Paul was starting to address. The passage can also be translated as "it is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman." Because Paul saw sexual relations only proper within a marriage, this alternate translation means little different from the translation that it is "good for a man not to marry." Either way, Paul uses the passage as an introduction to the teaching that follows as a fuller explanation of what is right before God.

Paul was dealing with first generation believers in a newly converted church. We must remember that there would have been a number of mixed marriages where one spouse was a Christian but the other was not. Paul saw that there was great concern over whether some stayed with their spouses or separated from them. Paul did not pull those Christians away from their unbelieving spouses. Instead, Paul tells them to remain together. This union could have the effect of bringing holiness (and maybe one day salvation!) to the other spouse. The children are also affected by the choices the Christian spouse makes in this regard.

For Paul, the key seems to lie in accepting the place God has for you. If you are married, God calls you to be holy and a good spouse in the marriage. If you are single, God calls you to be holy in your celibacy. If you are singled but meant for marriage, then Paul wants you to find the marriage that is right for you. Paul recognized that particular circumstances in the Corinthian church at the time made marriage more difficult for service in Christ than remaining single. People were to weigh their calling and service to God and make holy decisions.

E. Food Sacrificed to Idols

There was a concern within the church that much of the non-kosher meat available would no doubt have come from a pagan priest/butcher and hence have been “meat sacrificed to idols” (Chapter 8). Paul reminds the church that there is no truth behind an idol. There is certainly no other “God” who has received such a sacrifice. For Paul, the pagan sacrificial ritual was effectively a nullity. Nothing really happened beyond the fanciful imagination of those involved who thought some pagan god was pleased with the butchering (8:4-5). So, Paul saw nothing wrong with eating such meat, unless it bothered one’s conscience. If the conscience was bothered, one should refrain. Similarly, one should not offend a brother or sister by forcing consumption of such meat on them.

Still, Paul does not leave folks with the impression that Paul is satisfied with leaving the impressionable with a state of abstinence from such meat. Paul calls these folks’ conscience “weak” (8:7). Certainly, when those people would read this letter, they would seek to grow beyond the level of having a “weak” conscience. In the meantime, however, Paul expresses the obvious – don’t cause a brother to violate his conscience just so you can have a good meal!

F. Ministry and Money

In Chapter 9, Paul explores the propriety of a minister earning a living from the church as opposed to laboring outside the church and preaching at the same time. Paul teaches that it is right for a church to support those who lead it and teach it. By the same token, however, Paul explains that Paul has chosen to support himself while teaching – not because his ministry was too inadequate to generate support, but because Paul wanted no one to question the motives of his outreach. Paul was never into ministry for his own gain. Paul sought at all times to win the hearts of people for God.

III. POINTS FOR HOME

- Genuine Christian Faith
 - Genuine At Home
 - Genuine At Church
 - Genuine In Ministry