

PAUL'S LIFE AND TEACHINGS

Lesson 21

1 Corinthians

Have you ever witnessed a church with problems? Not just fussing over carpet, but real problems? Like, disputes over theology and doctrine? Problems with cliques and fellowship? Problems with women's issues? Problems with worship and leadership? Problems with personalities and fellowship?

You have probably found a few churches with some of those problems. But get ready – today, we are working through a letter Paul wrote to a church loaded with all those problems and even more! This was a church from which many would want to run, but we see Paul running *to* the church! What is perhaps even more surprising is we see Paul address this church as, “the church of God” and the letter to “those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 1:2).

As we study Paul's life, we are taking Paul's letters to read and digest in one setting. We have made it through Galatians and 1 and 2 Thessalonians each in one setting. Now, we will do so with 1 Corinthians. It is not that these letters are unworthy of careful scrutiny on a verse-by-verse basis. Rather, we recognize that by reading the letter as a whole, we find themes, points of emphasis, and other important contextual lessons that we lose when we simply study a passage here or there. After all, Paul originally wrote the letters for reading!¹

We will not fully review the background behind Corinth and Paul. But we should remember that Paul founded the church in Corinth. Paul stayed there over 18 months and knew the people extremely well. Also while Paul was in Ephesus for several years, there were points of contact with the Corinthian church as emissaries were sent (Apollos and Timothy) and letters were exchanged (even before our letter of 1 Corinthians).

This means we step into the middle of an unfolding drama to some degree. This helps us understand some passages that otherwise make little sense. It also means some passages are extra-difficult to understand *because* we are missing the context of the drama they were written to address.

¹ An arguable exception to this is actually the Corinthian correspondence. A considerable number of scholars have offered some good reasons to suspect that the Corinthian letters might actually have undergone an editing process whereby other letters of Paul to the Corinthians were combined into the two big letters we now have.

With that background and understanding, we plan to come back in the second half of our study and more carefully consider Paul's teaching on a variety of subjects. Now, we launch into 1 Corinthians.

1 CORINTHIANS

Chapter 1

Paul writes to the church, not simply as its "founder" or as its mentor. Paul writes under his authority as an apostle, called to such position by the very will of God. Paul includes Sosthenes in his letter. As we noted before, Paul addresses the church with its accolades that came from its role as the body of Christ, "sanctified," "called," and "saints." The Corinthians had not earned these titles; they were given by God's grace.

Paul thanks God for the grace given to the Corinthians in Christ. It is the grace that enriched their speech, their knowledge, and their lives through spiritual gifts. This grace was from the faithful God who would sustain the Corinthians holding them guiltless in judgment day. This same God also called the church into the common bond they shared in Jesus.

While the Corinthians were called to a common fellowship, they were not living in it! Paul appeals to them to drop their petty groups where they label themselves as "following Paul," or "Peter," or "Apollos." They should follow Christ! That was the power of Paul's message. Who baptized them, or who was their core leader was not the issue. The issue was the cross of Christ that gave meaning to baptism and teaching!

The cross might seem silly to the unsaved, but it is the very means where God forgives sin and saves those who believe. While Jews trip over the gospel and Greeks think it silly, it is God's wisdom that will bring shame to those who do not learn it in this world.

It is just like God to use something that seems weak and foolish to save the lost. It certainly keeps people from ever claiming that they saved themselves! While the Corinthians are quarreling over who was saved or better taught by Paul, or Apollos, or Peter, or anyone else, they should remember that God brings the things that are taught. Similarly it is God who removed all boasting from man, and made Jesus our wisdom, righteousness, sanctification and redemption. That is our boast!

Chapter 2

That is why Paul never came trying to show off his eloquence. Paul came in weakness, fear and trembling, armed only with a message of a crucified Savior. Paul's power was not the turn of a phrase, but the very Spirit of God.

Now, all this is not to say that Paul, or God's message, is that of a simpleton. In fact, there is wisdom behind what God has done and Paul has preached that many, if not most, never can grasp. There is a great depth to this that proceeds from the

very depths of God. It is not something most people grasp because it takes the Spirit of God to grasp it. Most people live by the flesh and never grasp the spiritual truths of the age-old secret wisdom of God redeeming the world in Christ.

Chapter 3

Paul cannot expect even the saved Corinthians to really grasp what he is trying to say. Their petty bickering shows they are not ready for this spiritual meat. Their respective jealousies over relationships with Paul and Apollos are a good case in point. Paul and Apollos are nothing more than God's instruments to bring the Corinthians along. If we use agricultural terms, God used Paul to plant the church, Apollos watered the church, but God is the one who grew the church.

To use construction terms, Paul laid the foundation for the church, while others are building the walls. The foundation Paul laid, of course, is Christ. God is ultimately in charge of not only the foundation but the building as well. Anyone who builds on the foundation out of their own merit or work, rather than God's, is simply building out of wood, hay, and kindling that will burn up on judgment day. Much better to build as God directs which is the same as using gold and silver that will show their metal in the fires of judgment. This is Paul's reward! He will get to see the fruit of his labor for God endure through eternity. Think of those whose labor will burn rather than endure! What a loss they will suffer.

By the way, the Corinthians as a building are no ordinary building. They are the very temple of God! God's Spirit indwells them. That is yet another reason to build up and honor the church, not destroy it!

To recap, no one should put themselves over someone else as "wise" or "followers of the wise teacher." Paul and Apollos both serve the Corinthians because they both serve God. The Corinthians in turn serve Christ, who in turn is God's way to salvation.

Chapter 4

Paul lives for God to regard him as a trustworthy servant of Christ (Paul really does not care how others judge him. His focus is on what God thinks!). Actually, Paul is writing in the first person about how he and Apollos are to be regarded because a lesson needs to be learned here by the Corinthians. They have a tendency to gloat over being "rich" spiritually, if not also economically. It is as if they have totally forgotten the way that Paul has worked in their midst for almost two years. Paul is not out for riches. He gladly suffers hunger, thirst, homelessness, slander, and money problems. Paul is treated like the "scum of the world," yet he is God's apostle.

Do the Corinthians not see the irony? They term themselves "strong" while Paul admits he is "weak." They consider themselves worthy of "honor" while Paul is fine being held in disrepute for the sake of the gospel. Paul does not mean to shame the Corinthians, but he does want them to grow up! He finds he must treat them a bit like children.

Paul had already sent the Corinthians Timothy to help iron out some of these issues. Unfortunately, some of the Corinthians gave Timothy quite an arrogant reception. Those folks better watch out. Paul is coming to see them and can come in gentleness or with power. Paul will then have a chance to see if they just talk arrogant or if they have some way to back it up!

Chapter 5

There is another issue that needs correction in the church. There is one in the church who is living in horrible sexual sin. Paul wants that person removed from the assembly and delivered over to Satan. Paul sees that if Satan can have his way with the man's body, perhaps the man's spirit will come around to God. This sexual sin reinforces the point about the Corinthians wrongly boasting in their spirituality. Just as a little bit of yeast works through an entire batch of bread, so a little sin works into a group of people. The boasting, the acceptance of offensive and flaunted sexual sin, these likewise grow into massive proportions if not handled properly.

The Jewish Passover is celebrated with removal of all leaven from the house. In the same way, Jesus marks a permanent Passover sacrifice for the Christian and we should clean out our houses from all sin/leaven. The church should not be a place for the display of evil or immorality. It is the kingdom of God and should function that way.

Chapter 6

Because it should function as the kingdom of God, disputes among its members should be resolved internally, not by outsiders. The church should never take its disputes into the public arena or courts. Better to suffer loss than to say that the world's courts must judge the kingdom of God!

When we became Christians, we left the ways of this world. We are no longer immoral, greedy, drunkards, swindlers, etc. These are not the people in the kingdom. We have been cleaned up, declared righteous, and made holy! That is the work of Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

In an earlier letter, the Corinthians had written, "all things are lawful." But, that does not mean that everything is helpful. It is not a reason to be out of control. We must remember that our bodies serve a purpose in God's kingdom. He will, after all, raise us up bodily. Really our bodies belong to him. Which, by the way, is the reason a Christian should never visit a prostitute. It is taking God's temple and joining it to horrendous sin.

Chapter 7

Now, Paul addresses some sensitive matters of sexuality, and marriage about which the Corinthians had written him. The Corinthians had said, "It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman." Paul explains that actually the reason people should marry is *because* of sexual temptation. It provides a holy and proper expression for sexuality. In this way a husband can serve his wife and a wife her husband. So, if some believe it right to abstain from sexual relations for

a time of prayer, it should be limited in time and by agreement. It should end soon so that Satan's temptations do not become too great.

It is fine for others to be single like Paul, but if these are folks who have strong sexual desires, then they should marry rather than be inflamed with passion. Married people should not try to separate from their spouses under the guise of holiness. Mixed marriages of a Christian with a non-Christian spouse should also be upheld rather than dissolved. This may be a way for the unbeliever to be saved! Some unbelieving partners may leave their Christian mates. If so, the Christian has no choice in the matter and can move on peacefully. But, that should not be the goal of a believer! The goal is to see your spouse saved!

On the issue of circumcision, the Corinthians should just leave it alone. If they were circumcised, fine. If not, fine. This is a freedom issue. People now belong to Christ, not the nation of Israel.

As to folks engaged for marriage, Paul offers his personal judgment (as opposed to a "Thus saith the Lord"). There are some difficulties in Corinth that make Paul want the people to consider staying in their current status. Those married, stay married. Those single, stay single. That should not be construed as saying it is sinful to marry! That situation was already covered! There will be times the sin might come about from *not* getting married! It is just that things will be more difficult with marriage.²

Marriage is a lifetime commitment. It is a wonderful thing. Singlehood is a wonderful thing too, and in some ways, provides even better opportunities for service for God. While married people properly have the commitment to each other, with all the time and energy that takes, single people are more freed up to serve God with time and energy.

Chapter 8

There is another area that needs addressing, namely the eating of food sacrificed to idols.³ The Corinthians had written Paul on this subject, which had become a point of dispute among the church there. In the Corinthians letter, they had said, "everyone should know...there is no reality behind the idea of idols...there is only one real God, etc." These were written in a tone that came across as arrogantly

² We do not have the benefit of knowing what the local problem was that Paul was concerned over. That hurts our ability to put this issue into a fuller context.

³ We do well to think through the process of the day. Most non-kosher animals needing slaughter were not simply taken to a butcher. They were taken to a temple. There the animals were butchered as a sacrifice to the gods of the temple. The owner would then take most of the meat home with that meat dedicated to the gods to whom it had been sacrificed.

running over the conscience of some of the church. There were some who thought that just maybe by eating the food, they were smart in that they were hedging bets in case there is truth to their lifelong worship of other gods.

Paul saw this in plain terms of love. Love of convenient meat versus love of brothers and sisters in the church. Paul would rather be a vegetarian than contribute to the spiritual harm of someone else.

Chapter 9

It's not that Paul was abdicating the freedom in Christ that he had taught, nor was Paul stepping away from his role as an apostle. Paul had seen the resurrected Christ and if *anyone* should recognize his apostolic authority it should be the church at Corinth where Paul's role was clear. But Paul is a great example on the point of living for others. Paul had every right to be married, every right to have others pay for his mission efforts rather than moonlighting as a tent maker. (God even forbade stopping working oxen from eating to help us realize it is proper to pay those who work for our spiritual good).

Yet, Paul would never assert such rights because Paul wanted, more than anything, to see the salvation of all he could. Paul would live as a Greek if it helped Greeks see Jesus. Paul would live as a Jew if it helped Jews see Jesus. Paul used his "freedom" to serve as many as he could.

The Corinthians hosted the Isthmian games;⁴ they should consider the actions of racers as a good metaphor. Lots of folks will run a race, but only one comes in first. To do so, the athlete will train very hard and very carefully, using the utmost self-control. If they train hard simply for the earthly prize of winning, how much more would Paul endure to see the eternal prize of winning souls. How could Paul sanction preaching the good news only to live in such a way afterwards as to hurt the very cause he lived for?

Chapter 10

Another metaphor is found in the Old Testament. All the Israelites went through the Red Sea, in a sense like all in the church went through the waters of baptism. As the Jews sought the Promised Land, they all ate the manna, much like the church all partakes of communion. Yet, God was displeased because of the actions of most of these people while on the journey.

What actions displeased God? The sacrifice to animals with attendant sexual immorality! God put many to the sword. This should serve as an example to us. Temptation is out there – for all of us. God is faithful; and he always leaves a way out of temptation. But the way out is to *flee* from the idolatry, not dabble out of "freedom." This applies to everyone.

⁴ See lesson 16 downloadable on the class web site at www.Biblical-Literacy.com.

If we again consider communion, when we partake of the bread, we are partaking of the body of Christ. While going to a temple and eating food sacrificed to gods is not joining one to gods (for there is no such thing), it is not without effect! There are demons that pose as gods. The Corinthians who go to a temple and eat the meat there are actually sharing the table with demons! Does someone really want to do that?

This is no longer a question of “everything is lawful” as the Corinthians had written. This is much more serious. Bottom line: don’t eat at temples; eat with a clear conscience what you buy in the market without worrying where it was slaughtered, but when you are told it is meat sacrificed to idols, leave it alone and don’t hurt those who are still too sensitive on the subject. This is living to God’s glory, not man’s desires, just like Paul would!

Chapter 11

Another subject needing addressing concerns the roles, actions, and place of men and women. God is the head of Christ. Christ is the head of man. Man is the head of woman. When men pray or preach, they never cover their head (physically with a hat, or symbolically through “covering” Christ and praying directly to God without do so through Jesus and in His name!) By the same token, no woman in Corinth in that day would ever be seen with her head uncovered while praying, preaching, or even walking about! This is also true physically and spiritually. A woman physically wore long hair and a head covering and spiritually a woman never approaches God through her “head,” her husband. A woman approaches God through Jesus just as a man does.

This is born out from the way God has made things from the start. Woman proceeded forth from man in the Garden of Eden. Yet every living man came from a woman in birth! So live accordingly!

On another subject, the Corinthian church needs to adjust the way they are taking communion. They are coming at scattered times, eating a full meal at different times as part of the communion service, and doing so in cliques that leave many feeling left out.

That defeats part of the purpose of communion. We the many all join together in Christ and partake of the one. We are not doing so to fill our bellies. We are doing so because Chris told us to do so. Jesus taught us that this was our sharing in and proclaiming his sacrificial death and expectant coming again. To partake of this in any manner without recognizing the real purpose is flat out wrong. God takes this seriously and so should the church.

So think about it, each time you partake. Use your home for eating meals; this is much more sacred. Do it as a united church body, not just with your friends. Paul will go into more details on this when he visits.

Chapter 12

On a new subject of spiritual gifts, things have clearly gotten out of hand. The Holy Spirit is not like the old useless idols many of the Corinthians had previously worshipped. The idols were mute. They never said anything. The Spirit of God, however, speaks of Jesus as Lord; and he does so in a variety of ways through the church. These are spiritual gifts.

There are a number of different ways the Spirit speaks through these gifts. The Spirit does so to build up the church, and so glorify Christ. This is the point behind gifts that range from speaking words of wisdom and edification, healing, prophecies, different languages, etc.

The Spirit dispenses these gifts as needed for the body and the gifts should be used *for* the body. That there are a number of different gifts does not make any one gift better or worse than another. They all go to the good of the church. No one is more spiritual or worthy because the Spirit has dispensed such a person a more “showy” gift. As the church is the body of Christ, we can see these gifts as parts of the body. Our bodies need differing parts to be whole. Eyes, ears, noses, all these differing parts work toward a whole person and that is the key. The church is one body. The gifts work for the good of that one body.

Chapter 13

That said, it is possible, in one sense, for someone to get the *superstar deluxe greatest* gift of all, to really shine as brightly as possible. Might any want to know the way to that gift? It is the way of love!

Without love, talk is noise (regardless of the language used!). Without love, preaching, knowledge, even faith is useless. The greatest human deeds, if done without love, are wasted.

We speak here of a godly love, one that is patient and kind. One that doesn't boast, or is self-centered, is not arrogant or rude. This love is truly caring and is pleased with God's truth. A love that hangs in there, even when it is hard to do so, knowing the God of love will work things out.

This love is not temporary; it is eternal. All the other gifts are temporary, but God's love is eternal. Now, we may not see it fully, but there will come a day when we can clearly see God's love pervades everything. To think otherwise is simply a sign of immaturity. Want the greatest gift? Get love!

Chapter 14

In conclusion on spiritual gifts, the showy gifts are fine, as long as getting love is the real pursuit! Some seem caught up in, for example, speaking in some incomprehensible language (at least to most!). These folks risk missing the point. Spiritual gifts are for the church.

A gift of speaking in an unknown language is not useful to the church when compared to, for example, a special word from God. If there is someone who

understands the unknown language and can translate, then maybe there can be a mutual benefit, but absent that, no! One might say that the unknown language is personally edifying to one's soul, but the same one should be seeking to consciously know what is being said! This is not only true with praying, but also with singing or anything else. Engage not just your spirit but also your mind!

There is a place for speaking in tongues, but not in front of others! Better to say five words folks can understand than ten thousand they cannot! Think of it from an outsider's view. If a visitor comes to church and hears the people speaking in unknown languages, is it not likely the visitor will think the Church nuts? But if that visitor comes in and hears the gospel – he might fall down in worship perceiving the sins of the heart and the need for God!

Worship needs to be orderly. People should use their gifts for the common good. Don't have too many speaking, certainly not at once! If there is going to be any tongues, then there better be someone who knows what the words mean so they can translate for the congregation! Part of orderly worship needs to discourage the vocal Corinthian women who are disrupting things with questions they should be asking at home. The way they are speaking out and disrupting the assembly is shameful.

Chapter 15 Before Paul closes, Paul reminds the Corinthians of the core of our faith. Jesus Christ died for our sins, was buried, and resurrected. This is the good news in which we stand and by which we are saved. It is not rumor. It is not speculation. It is fact. Paul saw the resurrected Jesus, as did more than 500 others, most of who were still living and subject to cross-examination!

Because Christ was raised from the dead we have the confidence that we who are in him shall also be raised after our deaths. This is core to who we are and what we believe. If there is no resurrection, if Paul were not utterly convinced he had interacted with the real risen Jesus, then his life and that of any believer is an entire waste of time.

But time is not wasted because Jesus is real. He will come again and destroy even death. He will raise those who have died in him and put all enemies under his feet. There will be a change, a transformation. In a moment, a twinkling of an eye, the dead shall be clothed with immortal bodies. We shall bear the image of heaven!

Death has lost its ultimate power over believers! Amen!

Chapter 16 Some closing notes: Per Paul's instructions, the church has been setting aside each week a collection so that Paul could send the money to the church in Jerusalem where it was needed. The church should continue to do so.

Paul would be visiting again soon with the Corinthians, hopefully for a more than momentary visit. Paul is staying in Ephesus, however, as long as that door is open so wide. Timothy is visiting soon and should be treated with love and care. Apollos wishes he was in Corinth but cannot break away at the moment. Others, including Priscilla and Aquila, send their love and best. Paul closes with his love.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. “To those sanctified...called to be saints” (1 Cor. 1:2).

The Corinthian church was loaded with problems from stem to stern, yet Paul saw them as God’s people. Because they were God’s people, Paul was not content to let them continue on in their sin and immaturity. Paul worked hard to help them understand and grow beyond where they were to where God wanted them to be. May we similarly seek to grow ourselves and other believers before our God, so that we may serve him as best as we can while in this life.

2. “Let no one deceive himself” (1 Cor. 3:18).

Arrogance is a horrible thing. May we fully discard any conception that any of us is better, more spiritual, or more important to God than anyone else. We should seek to serve in humility and kindness with a heart to God’s work in the church.

3. “Pursue love” (1 Cor. 14:1)

There is a reason Jesus pointed to the commandment to love God and neighbor as the two most important commandments (Mark 12:29-31). From these flows the entirety of the law. We should seek to be people of love. By putting God and others first, we will find fulfillment and live out the expression of God in our lives.

4. “I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel...in which you stand, and by which you are saved” (1 Cor. 15:1-2).

Jesus Christ “died for our sins.” That is our hope. That gives our lives meaning and purpose. That is the truth that enabled Paul to say, “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2). This changes everything – everything we live for, and what happens when we die. Thank God for this reality. May we never lose sight of it!