

Faith Foundations Study Guides

United in Christ

*A Journey of Discovery in the Book of
First Corinthians*

© Alan Perkins 2014
All rights reserved. Printed in U.S.A.

Scriptures taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION® NIV®
Copyright© 1973, 1978, 1984, 2010 by Biblica, Inc™.
Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

How to Use This Book

Welcome to the Faith Foundations study guide on First Corinthians! Whether you are just beginning your new life with Christ, or have been a Christian for many years, this study guide is for you. It is designed to help you discover, through personal study and group discussion, the incredible riches of God's Word, and to help you grow in your walk with God by applying what you learn. This book is divided into 26 lessons, each of which contains the full NIV text of the Scripture passage, several study and discussion questions, and a verse-by-verse commentary. So, together with a Bible to look up cross-references, you have everything you need for your "journey of discovery" in First Corinthians.

Why Small Groups?

These materials can be used profitably in personal study or in an adult Sunday School class. But their value will be best realized when they are used in small groups, meeting either at church during the Sunday School hour or in homes during the week. There are several reasons for this.

First, no one has perfect insight into every passage of Scripture; we can all benefit from hearing the perspectives of other believers as we seek to understand and apply the Bible. A small group gathering, using the discussion questions included in this book, is an ideal way to stimulate a sharing of observations and ideas.

Second, a small group provides a community of fellow travelers who, along with us, are seeking to follow Christ in the midst of family responsibilities, job pressures, and personal struggles. In today's fragmented and mobile society, the natural networks of neighborhoods and family no longer provide the support they once did. We need some way of making connections with others for mutual support, people with whom we can share our joys and sorrows—people who will listen, who will pray with us, who will offer a helping hand and a word of encouragement, and who will confront us in love when we've gotten off track.

Finally, a small group combines the benefits of Biblical insight and community support by keeping us accountable. If we only study the Scriptures alone, or listen to them taught in a large group, it's easy to let them go "in one ear and out the other". But when a small group of people are learning the same things at the same time, they can help one another to apply the things they are learning.

How Are the Groups Organized?

The groups should be composed of 6-14 people; if they are smaller, any absences can make it difficult to maintain the discussion; if they are larger, not everyone can participate. You can meet from two to four times a month; if the group meets less than twice a month, the members aren't spending enough time together to build relationships. Some groups find that meeting three times a month during the school year, with a break during the summer, provides a good rhythm of involvement and time off.

You may choose to include a mix of married and single, older and younger members, or you may organize your groups by age or marital status. There are benefits to homogeneous groups in which the members are going through similar life experiences, but there are also benefits of a diverse group in which the younger members can benefit from the experience of the older.

Each group needs to have a recognized leader, preferably one selected and trained by the pastor or church leadership. This person's role during the meeting is not primarily to teach (although preparation of the lesson is a must), but to guide the discussion and keep the group from getting bogged down on side issues. He or she does not need to be the host; in fact, it is preferable that group responsibilities, such as providing a home in which to meet and organizing refreshments, be shared among the members.

Finally, membership in the group should be based on three commitments: To prepare for each meeting by completing the lesson in advance, which takes from 1/2 to 2 hours (but come to the meeting even if you haven't done the lesson); to place a high priority on regular attendance and come to the meetings except in case of emergency; and to keep confidential anything of a personal nature which is shared during the meetings (except when it is necessary to communicate concerns to the pastor).

What Is the Group Meeting Like?

Each group meeting should last from 1 1/2 to 2 hours, and provide time for discussion of the lesson, prayer, and fellowship. A problem in many groups is for the lesson to take up most of the time, with only a few minutes left over for prayer and fellowship. This must be avoided for the goal of building relationships to be achieved.

Here is a suggested schedule:

| | |
|----------------|--------------------------|
| 15 minutes: | Gathering |
| 30-45 minutes: | Discussion of the lesson |
| 20-30 minutes: | Prayer |
| 15-30 minutes: | Refreshments |

As for child care, experience has shown that in order to receive the maximum benefit from time spent in the meeting, all members of the group need to be free to focus on the discussion, rather than caring for children. Therefore, with the possible exception of infants under one year, parents should make arrangements for child care during the meetings. Some options include "trading" child care with parents whose group meets on a different night, having a baby sitter care for children in another room during the meeting, or providing child care for all the groups at the church.

Introduction to 1 Corinthians

Author

The author of this epistle is “Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God” (1:1).

Destination and Recipients

This letter is addressed to “the church of God in Corinth” (1:2), which was founded by Paul during his second missionary journey (Acts 18:1-18). Corinth was an ancient city, destroyed by Rome in 146 B.C. and re-established under Julius Caesar in 44 B.C. It was located on the Isthmus of Corinth, a narrow stretch of land only a few miles wide at its narrowest point, that connects the Peloponnesus peninsula with the rest of Greece. The Gulf of Corinth and the Saronic Gulf lie to the west and east.

Due to its excellent harbors and its strategic position along major trade routes, Corinth was a large, wealthy, cosmopolitan, and notoriously decadent city, with a mixed population of Romans, Greeks and Jews. It had been the site of a large temple of the goddess Aphrodite, and every other year it hosted the Isthmian games, which were second only to the Olympics. Corinth was also the seat of government of the Roman province of Achaia.

Paul made at least two, and probably three, visits to Corinth. The first is described in Acts 18:1-18, the third is mentioned in 2 Corinthians 12:14; 13:1 and Acts 20:2-3; and a second, the “painful visit”, is alluded to in 2 Corinthians 2:1. These visits would have taken place between about A.D. 50 and 58.

Occasion and Purpose

Due to reports from “Chloe’s household” (1:11) and from Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus (16:17), and also on the basis of a letter from the church which contained questions about several matters of Christian life and conduct (7:1), Paul came to realize that there were serious problems in the Corinthian church; among them an open acceptance of sexual immorality, distorted views on eating and drinking, an uncritical acceptance of pagan philosophy and “wisdom”, an obsession with wealth, rank, and status, a sectarian spirit, confusion over spiritual gifts, and denial of the resurrection.

The fundamental problem was that the members of this congregation, most of them recent converts from paganism, had not discarded their previous beliefs, attitudes, and way of life. They were still living as comfortable members of Corinthian society, with an inadequate grasp of what a distinctively Christian lifestyle would look like, in contrast to their cultural background and context. Paul writes to address all of these issues, with an emphasis on the dangers of sexual immorality, greed, and idolatry.

Value For the Church Today

In addition to the matters of personal ethics and church practice which the letter addresses, and the exposition of key theological themes such as the Lord’s Supper and the Resurrection, the letter’s primary value today may be for believers living in a religiously and culturally pluralistic society, a society in which Christian norms are no longer universally accepted or even respected. How do we honor Christ in such a context? How do we find a proper midpoint between the extremes of withdrawal and disengagement on one hand, and moral and religious compromise on the other? This book helps us to answer those questions.

Unit 1 – United in Christ

1 Corinthians 1:1-17

Text

¹ Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes,

² To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be his holy people, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ— their Lord and ours:

³ Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

⁴ I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. ⁵ For in him you have been enriched in every way—with all kinds of speech and with all knowledge—⁶ God thus confirming our testimony about Christ among you. ⁷ Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. ⁸ He will also keep you firm to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ God is faithful, who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

¹⁰ I appeal to you, brothers and sisters,^a in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that

there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought. ¹¹ My brothers and sisters, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. ¹² What I mean is this: One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas^b"; still another, "I follow Christ."

¹³ Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized in the name of Paul? ¹⁴ I thank God that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, ¹⁵ so no one can say that you were baptized in my name. ¹⁶ (Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I don't remember if I baptized anyone else.) ¹⁷ For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with wisdom and eloquence, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

^a10 The Greek word for brothers and sisters (adelphoi) refers here to believers, both men and women, as part of God's family; also in verses 11 and 26; and in 2:1; 3:1; 4:6; 6:8; 7:24, 29; 10:1; 11:33; 12:1; 14:6, 20, 26, 39; 15:1, 6, 50, 58; 16:15, 20. ^b12 That is, Peter

Open

If you told someone you were a Christian, and they asked what “kind” of Christian you were, how would you answer?

Who would you identify as the greatest influences in your life as a Christian?

Discover

1. What does this passage tell us about Paul?

2. What does it tell us about the Corinthian believers?

v. 2

vv. 4-8

vv. 10-12

-
3. Paul assures the Corinthians that their future is secure in Christ. What is the basis of this confidence? (vv. 8-9; see Phil. 1:4-6; 2 Tim. 1:12).

4. What part, if any, do we play in ensuring that we remain in the faith? Are we active or passive in this process? (see 1 Cor. 15:58; Jude 1:21)

5. How do these ideas complement one another? (see Phil. 2:12-13)

6. What fundamental problem is Paul addressing in vv. 10-16? What change does he want them to make?

7. What kind of agreement is he calling for in v. 10? (see Eph. 4:4-6)

8. How might “wisdom and eloquence” be viewed as emptying the cross of its power (v. 17)?

Apply

Does the church today face the same problems as Paul addressed in this letter? If so, what does this look like, and how could we apply Paul's remedy?

Would you say that you view other Christians, or other members of your church, as “brothers and sisters”? What does this mean to you?

Commentary

v. 1 **"Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God"** The author of this letter is Paul, a Pharisee who was transformed by his dramatic encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:1-19). Paul acknowledged his shameful past as one who put Christians to death and who sought to destroy the church (Acts 22:4; Gal. 1:13; Phil. 3:5-6). Nevertheless, he defended the legitimacy of his ministry as an apostle, for it was Christ who chose him and called him to that position; it was "by the will of God". Paul's background as an opponent of the gospel would have made him acutely aware that it was not because of his learning, or zeal, or righteousness that he was called to Christ and to apostleship, but only because of God's grace, or undeserved favor, toward him (1 Cor. 3:10; 15:9; Gal. 1:15; 2 Tim. 1:9). This sense of unworthiness did not make him tentative or indifferent in his labors, however; on the contrary, he "worked harder than all of them" (1 Cor. 15:10), and he spoke, wrote, and acted with boldness (Acts 9:28; 19:8; 28:31; Rom. 15:15).

"our brother Sosthenes" This is the only mention of Sosthenes in the letter; he was not its co-author, but may have been Paul's *amanuensis*, or secretary (1 Cor. 16:21).

v. 2 By using the singular "church" to refer to what were likely several communities of believers in that city, Paul emphasizes their common identity in Christ. Although each one is distinct, they are all part of a unified whole, the church of God, which is the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:12-27; Rom. 12:4-5; Eph. 3:6; 4:15-16, 25; 5:23, 29-30; Col. 1:18-24; 3:15). This theme is explicit in the phrase "**together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours**". Not only are the various groups of believers in Corinth joined with one another in Christ; they are also united with those who follow Him anywhere in the world. The fact that people throughout the earth would worship God was foretold by the prophet Malachi: "*My name will be great among the nations, from where the sun rises to where it sets. In every place incense and pure offerings will be brought to me*" (Mal. 1:11; see Jn. 4:21-24; Rev. 5:9; 7:9; 11:9).

"to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be his holy people" This refers to what the Corinthians are, and what they should therefore do. Through faith in Christ, they have been sanctified; i.e., they have been cleansed from sin and set apart, as those who belong to God and are dedicated to his purposes (1 Cor. 6:11). As a result, God calls them to live in a way that is consistent with their identity; to conform their conduct to his holy requirements (2 Cor. 7:1; Heb. 12:14; 1 Pet. 1:15-16).

vv. 4-7 **"I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus."** It might seem strange for Paul to begin his epistle by giving thanks for the Corinthian church, when so much of the letter deals with their failings as disciples of Christ. However, he is demonstrating wisdom that we would do well to emulate. Our natural tendency is to reject everything associated with churches whose practices or teachings we disagree with. The same could be said of individuals. Likewise, we tend to accept uncritically whatever comes from those whom we admire. But Paul understands that every church and every believer will be a mixture of worldly and godly influences, until Christ returns and brings to completion the work which he has begun in us (Rom. 8:29; 1 Cor. 13:10-12; 2 Cor. 3:18; Phil. 1:6; 1 Thess. 5:23-24; 1 Jn. 3:2). Therefore, Paul does not negate the genuine work of God that has occurred among them, even as he recognizes that they fall short of the mark in many ways (see Rev. 2:1-3:22). He is not merely tolerant of them, but genuinely thankful for them, in spite of their flaws and imperfections.

"For in him you have been enriched in every way" The reception of spiritual gifts by the Corinthians was a confirmation of Paul's witness to them concerning the power of the risen Christ. Through faith in him, they had been enriched "in every way"; that is, in everything of genuine spiritual value (see v. 7; Mt. 6:19-20; Lk. 12:21; 16:11; Rom. 2:4; 9:23; 11:33; Eph. 1:7-8, 18; 2:7; 3:16; Col. 2:2-3; 1 Tim. 6:18-19; Jam. 2:5; Rev. 3:17-18). Note that although they needed to be instructed in the proper attitude toward, and proper use of, the gifts of "speech and knowledge", Paul is nevertheless thankful that they have received them. Immaturity in handling the gifts does not diminish the value of those gifts.

vv. 8-9 **"He will also keep you firm to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful"** Our continuance in the faith is a cooperative effort between God and ourselves; we are responsible to "stand firm" (1 Cor. 15:58), to "keep yourselves in God's love" (Jude 1:21), to "continue in the grace of God" (Acts 13:43), and to "work out your salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil. 2:12). However, it is God who sovereignly ensures that we will remain faithful until the end. Our perseverance is not ultimately dependent upon our strength, or even upon our will, but upon "God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose" (Phil. 2:13; see Jn. 10:27-29; Rom. 8:35-39; Phil. 1:4-6; 2 Tim. 1:12). This is his work, and he will complete it. On the other hand, for those who do not continue, their departure demonstrates that they never truly had life at all (1 Jn. 2:10).

-
- In the first major section of the book, 1:10-4:17, Paul addresses one of the critical errors of the Corinthian church: an elevation of human wisdom and speech, and the devaluing of God's grace and power which follows. These are linked, because the more highly we think of ourselves, the less highly we will esteem God and his works. Likewise, the more we place our trust and confidence in human writers, preachers, denominations, or theological systems, the less we will tend to rely on God and his Word. This leads to factionalism, as we each contend for the superiority of our favored teacher or leader, and look down on those who support a "competitor".
- v. 10 **"I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ"**
Paul refers to the Corinthian believers as "brothers" (Gr. *adelphoi*). The NIV renders this as "brothers and sisters", to eliminate any confusion about the fact that both men and women are being addressed. However, many would argue that Paul's use of the masculine noun to indicate both male and female was both intentional and unlikely to be misunderstood, and should therefore be maintained in translation.
- Our family relationship is based on the fact that through Christ, we have all been adopted into a relationship with God as our Father (Jn. 1:12; Gal. 3:26; 4:4-6; Rom. 8:14-16). This connection is a strong argument for unity. As an analogy, although we may disagree with those who are our siblings according to physical birth, most would acknowledge that our common identity as members of the same family obligates us to stay in relationship with one another, to support one another, and to seek one another's welfare. The same is true of those with whom we are related according to spiritual birth (Jn. 1:12-13; 3:3-8; 1 Pet. 1:3, 23).
- What is Paul seeking when he asks that "*all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought*"? Is he requiring a uniformity of opinion on every question of theology, Christian living, or church governance? No; in fact, elsewhere he explicitly commands tolerance for diverse views on "disputable matters" (Rom. 14:1-12). Rather, he is asking that their speech ("what you say") be centered on Christ and their shared identity in Him, rather than on human teachers and their distinctive doctrines. Their testimony and conversation should be focused, not on their differences, but on what they have in common in Christ. The result will be a unity of faith and love, rather than a party spirit that builds walls and alienates (Jn. 17:22-23; Eph. 4:2-6; Phil. 2:1-5; Col. 3:13-15).
- On the other hand, when the gospel itself is at stake, Paul is anything but conciliatory (see 2 Cor. 11:1-4, 12-15; Gal. 1:6-9).
- v. 11 Elsewhere, Paul warns Timothy against those in the church who have "*an unhealthy interest in controversies and quarrels about words that result in envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions and constant friction*" (1 Tim. 6:3-5), and he appears to be facing a similar situation here. The term "quarrels" (Gr. *erides*), which can be translated as "strife", "dissension", "discord", or "rivalry" (Rom. 1:29; 13:13; Gal. 5:20; Phil. 1:15), indicates that these were not mere differences of opinion, but heated controversies which threatened the peace and unity of the fellowship. The seriousness of the matter is seen in Paul's later concern that he may find among them, not merely ongoing debates, but "*discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder*" (2 Cor. 12:20).
- v. 12 At the core of the problem was an over-reliance on human leaders and their "schools", following the model of secular Corinthian society. It was not that these believers had abandoned their faith in Christ, but that each one regarded himself primarily as a "Paulist" or "Apollonian" or "Cephist", and only secondarily as a Christian. How these divisions arose is not clear. We do not know what personal or theological differences between Paul and Apollos may have been used as a basis for identifying with one or the other. Nor do we know whether there was really a "Christ" group, perhaps made up of those who rejected the improper emphasis on mere men. Nevertheless, the application to the present day is easily made; one need only update the labels.
- vv. 13-16 The questions Paul asks highlight the absurdity of aligning themselves with men rather than with Christ, who died and rose to life for them, and in whose name they had been baptized. Christians all have the same master, Jesus Christ. Unlike the pagan religions, Christianity does not offer multiple deities to choose from. Nor is our faith merely a philosophy, to be shaped by human teachers. Rather, "*There is one body and one Spirit . . . one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.*" (Eph. 4:4-6).
- v. 17 Some at Corinth may have taken pride in having been baptized by an apostle or some other eminent person. But Paul makes clear that this means nothing at all. The only thing that matters is the simple and unadorned message of the gospel, a message which does not depend on human wisdom or eloquence for its power.

Unit 2 – Powerful “Foolishness”

1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5

Text

¹⁸ For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹ For it is written:

“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate.”^a

²⁰ Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹ For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. ²² Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom,²³ but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles,²⁴ but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

²⁶ Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth.²⁷ But

God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.²⁸ God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are,²⁹ so that no one may boast before him.³⁰ It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.³¹ Therefore, as it is written: “Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord.”^b

¹ And so it was with me, brothers and sisters. When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God.^c ² For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.³ I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling.⁴ My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power,⁵ so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power.

^a19 Isaiah 29:14 ^b31 Jer. 9:24 ^c1 Some manuscripts proclaimed to you God's mystery

Open

What contemporary figures does the world consider to be wise? Do you agree?

What characteristics would you identify as signs of true wisdom?

Discover

- What does this passage have to say about the “foolishness” of God?

v. 18

v. 21

v. 23

v. 24

v. 25

v. 27

- What point is Paul making by referring to the gospel as “foolish”?

3. What does this passage tell us about the “wisdom” of man?

| | |
|-------|-------|
| v. 19 | v. 22 |
| v. 20 | v. 25 |
| v. 21 | v. 27 |

4. How does this passage describe those whom God typically calls to himself? In light of this, what should be our attitude? (vv. 26-29)

5. How should this contrast between “foolishness” and “wisdom” affect the way we communicate the gospel? How should it affect our goals and priorities? (vv. 1-5)

6. Is it a good thing for a preacher or Christian leader to have a “charismatic” personality, to be the kind of person that others naturally want to follow? Why or why not?

7. What do these verses tell us about the difference between God’s wisdom and understanding and ours?

| | |
|------------|---------------|
| Job 11:7-9 | Isaiah 55:8-9 |
| Job 37:5 | Romans 11:33 |

Apply

- Do you think that most pastoral search committees would select Paul as their preferred candidate? Why or why not?
- Do you aspire to be viewed in the way that Paul describes himself in this passage? Why or why not?

Commentary

v. 18 The gospel message is not innocuous. On the contrary, it is challenging, provocative, polarizing, and divisive. There is no middle ground between those who are in the process of “perishing” and those who are in the process of “being saved”. For the first group, this story — that the Son of God became a man, lived a perfect life, was crucified and rose again so that we might be forgiven of our sins and have eternal life through faith in him — is not merely false, but ridiculous. It makes no sense to them; it is literally non-sense. They reject it, both because of its supernatural claims, and also because it turns the world’s values upside down, exalting humility and service over wealth and power (Lk. 22:24-27). They regard it as a tale which only a fool could believe; a fable for the naïve and gullible.

With the exception of those in whose hearts God is at work, this is the universal response of mankind to the proclamation of the gospel. Every man, woman, or child, apart from the enabling of the Spirit, is by nature unable to perceive the truth of the gospel (Jn. 6:44, 65; 14:16-17; 1 Cor. 2:14; 2 Cor. 4:4). Their eyes must be opened by God before they can believe (Lk. 24:45; Jn. 12:39-41; Acts 26:17-18). And our prayer is that he will do so, granting them repentance and faith, even as he did with Paul (Acts 9:18; 2 Tim. 2:25). The fact that someone is “perishing” does not mean they will ultimately be condemned: we were all at one time in that state (Eph. 2:9; Tit. 3:3).

Those whom God has called to himself, those who are “being saved” (2 Cor. 2:15; 3:18), have a very different view. But note that Paul does not contrast foolishness with wisdom; rather, he contrasts it with power. The gospel is true, not merely because it can be defended intellectually, but because it transforms lives. It has power that all the arguments in the world cannot overcome, power that was demonstrated in the resurrection of Christ (Rom. 1:4) and which will be seen by all when he returns (Mk. 13:26; 1 Cor. 15:20-26). This is the power which Paul is relying on, rather than the power of eloquent speech (1 Cor. 1:17; 2:1).

vv. 19-20 Paul quotes Isa. 29:14 to show that God’s judgment on the corrupt “wisdom” and “intelligence” of the world is in keeping with prophecy. As insightful as unbelievers may be in secondary matters, when it concerns the most fundamental questions of life, they are hopelessly confused. Their learning and erudition only serve to deepen their pride and increase their capacity for self-delusion. The more deeply they drink from the well of worldly philosophy, the more difficult it becomes for them to see the truths which are obvious to even the simplest believer (see Ps. 119:99).

v. 21 This verse contrasts two means of knowing God, both introduced by the word “through”. The first means, that of unaided human wisdom, fails utterly, because the human capacity for reason was fundamentally damaged by the Fall; we all inherit a corrupted human nature from our ancestor Adam (see Rom. 1:28; 8:7; 2 Cor. 4:4; Eph. 4:17-18). Thus, no matter how highly it is developed, natural reason will always lead away from God. The great variety of religions and non-religious ideologies in the world testify to the fact that human wisdom will point in every possible direction except to the one true God (Rom. 1:22-23). This is what John Calvin was referring to in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, when he called the human mind “a perpetual forge of idols”.

The second means, “the foolishness of what was preached”, was chosen by God to be effective; “God was pleased” that it should be so. Not only that, but it was also God’s will that human wisdom would be ineffective; it was “in the wisdom of God” that it should fail. Why? Because God desires that salvation be entirely of grace; that it depend on nothing in man; not knowledge, or wisdom, or good works, or wealth, or social standing, or any other quality. God shows no partiality (Lk. 20:21; Acts 10:34; Rom. 2:11; Gal. 2:6; Eph. 6:9). Thus, to be clever, or logical, or thoughtful, or educated confers no advantage in coming to know God. A person who holds a PhD in theology is on the same level as a person who never attended high school. Both are dependent on hearing and responding to the word of God preached (Rom. 10:14-15); all must come to him as “little children” (Lk. 10:21-22).

vv. 22-24 The gospel confounds our expectations and frustrates those who set preconditions on faith (see Mt. 16:1-4; Mk. 8:11-13). Only the humble, who are willing to receive God on his terms rather than theirs, can accept its message.

When unbelievers look at the cross, they see weakness and folly. Only those whom God has called, those whose eyes he has opened, can grasp its true power (Rom. 1:16). Only they can understand the wisdom of God which it represents (1 Cor. 1:30). This insight does not depend on race or ethnic identity; it is available to all, “both Jews and Greeks”.

v. 25 The wisdom and power of man are far inferior to those of God. And so if the works of God seem foolish or weak, it is because they are beyond human comprehension (see Job 5:9; 9:10; 11:7-9; 36:26; 37:5, 23; Ps. 145:3; Isa. 40:28; 55:8-9; Rom. 11:33).

v. 26 “**Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth.**” Paul continues to press his point — that the values of the gospel are at odds with those of the world — by pointing to the composition of the Corinthian church itself. If the message of the gospel were consistent with the values of the world, one would expect churches to be filled with the kind of people who are respected in the world: those with advanced degrees, those who wield economic and political power, those who come from well-known families. In short, the “movers and shakers” of society. But in fact the opposite is the case: churches tend to be populated with those who are of little account in the world, those whose names are not listed in the *Social Register* or *Who’s Who in America*.

Of course, this was more true in Paul’s time, when Christianity was considered a fringe religious movement, than today, when those in Western nations live in societies that have been shaped by centuries of Christian heritage. Unfortunately, what this means is that in our time, membership in a church may be viewed as a mark of social standing or respectability, and some churches are known as the “right” ones to attend if one wishes to rub shoulders with the elite. Joining a church, or choosing a specific church, for such reasons is an act of rank hypocrisy.

As Jesus taught, wealth and power in this world are a hindrance to repentance and faith (Mt. 13:22; 19:16-24). Those whose material needs are fully supplied tend to be less concerned with their spiritual needs (Rev. 3:17), and those who receive honor from men are less likely to seek honor from God (Jn. 5:44). There are exceptions, however. Note that Paul says “not many”, rather than “not any”. The Countess of Huntingdon, a British noblewoman in the 18th century who was converted to Christ, is said to have remarked that she was “saved by an ‘m’.”

vv. 27-29 “**But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.**” The “shame” Paul refers to here is not temporal, but eschatological; it refers not to being ashamed before men in this present world, but to being ashamed before God at the return of Christ (Dan. 12:2; 1 Jn. 2:28). Those who are wise, and strong, and successful in this world, but who do not know God, may go to their graves content, with the accolades of men ringing in their ears. But when Christ returns and they stand before him to be judged, they will be humiliated and mortified, and will bear that shame for ever and ever (Ps. 83:16-17; Pr. 6:33; Jer. 17:18; 23:40). In contrast, those who are regarded as foolish or weak, but who have placed their trust in Christ, will receive honor and glory and power at the resurrection (Rom. 8:18;

9:23; 1 Cor. 15:43; Col. 3:4; 2 Thess. 2:14; 2 Tim. 2:10; Heb. 2:10; 1 Pet. 1:7; 2:7).

Note that Paul repeats the phrase, “God chose” three times, emphasizing that it was at God’s initiative, and according to his sovereign design, that the wise and powerful should be confounded by the “lowly” and the “despised”. His purpose in doing so was to ensure that no one could have any justification for boasting; no one could claim that they were accepted by God because of their own insight, or skill, or determination, or virtue. This is further emphasized by the statement in verse 30 that we are in Christ “because of him” and not because of ourselves (see Eph. 2:8-9); therefore, we have no grounds for boasting in anyone other than the Lord (v. 31; see Jer. 9:23-24; 1 Sam. 2:1-10).

vv. 30-31 “**Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.**” This verse underscores the difference between the world’s view of wisdom and God’s view. That difference concerns the proper goal, or object, or wisdom. The world views wisdom in various ways; for example, as understanding, serenity, harmony, or right living. Aristotle, for example, taught that the purpose of philosophy was the “good life”; by which he meant not a life devoted merely to pleasure, but a life of moderation, lived in pursuit of what was inherently good and virtuous. And the world’s view does have some truth in it. But ultimately, it falls short, because it is not directed toward God. Therefore it does not have as its aim true *righteousness* as defined by God, true *holiness* in the sight of God, or *redemption* from the sin and death which separate us from God. All of these things we possess because we are “in Christ,” united with him through faith. And therefore, we possess true wisdom, not merely the world’s pale imitation of it.

vv. 1-5 Just as the message of the gospel is a message about God’s power and wisdom rather than our own, so the form of its proclamation must also depend on His power, rather than on human eloquence or personality. Paul recognized his own weakness and inability, as a mere man, to accomplish the supernatural purposes of God. Thus, in his preaching and ministry he relied exclusively on the power of God, and on the simplicity and power of the gospel. Personally, he was anything but impressive (1 Cor. 4:9-13; 2 Cor. 10:10). He had no interest in demonstrating his own learning or erudition, but was determined to know “**nothing . . . except Jesus Christ and him crucified**”. For Paul, the cross and its implications were sufficient to fill a lifetime of ministry, and to satisfy the breadth and depth of every Christian’s spiritual needs.

Unit 3 – The Wisdom of God

1 Corinthians 2:6-3:4

Text

⁶ We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. ⁷ No, we declare God's wisdom, a mystery that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. ⁸ None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. ⁹ However, as it is written:

“What no eye has seen,
what no ear has heard,
and what no human mind has conceived”^a—
the things God has prepared for those who
love him—

¹⁰ these are the things God has revealed to us by his Spirit.

The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. ¹¹ For who knows a person's thoughts except their own spirit within them? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. ¹² What we have received is not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may understand what God has freely given us. ¹³ This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit,

explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words.^b ¹⁴ The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit. ¹⁵ The person with the Spirit makes judgments about all things, but such a person is not subject to merely human judgments,^c for,

“Who has known the mind of the Lord
so as to instruct him?”^c

But we have the mind of Christ.

¹ Brothers and sisters, I could not address you as people who live by the Spirit but as people who are still worldly—mere infants in Christ. ² I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. ³ You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere humans? ⁴ For when one says, “I follow Paul,” and another, “I follow Apollos,” are you not mere human beings?

^a9 Isaiah 64:4 ^b13 Or Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual ^c16 Isaiah 40:13

Open

- What would be your favorite way to spend a Saturday afternoon: (a) read a book, (b) go shopping, (c) watch sports on TV, (d) other?
- What do you understand now that you didn't understand as well five years ago?

Discover

1. What two kinds of “wisdom” are being contrasted here? (vv. 6-7)

2. What is the essential requirement for understanding the wisdom contained in the message of the apostles? What do the following verses tell us about this?

| | |
|-------|-------|
| v. 10 | v. 13 |
| v. 11 | v. 14 |
| v. 12 | v. 16 |

3. What do these passages tell us about the need for God to grant understanding?

John 6:65

Ephesians 1:17-18

Colossians 1:9

2 Timothy 2:25

4. What does the wisdom of God consist of? (vv. 7, 9-10; see 1 Cor. 1:24, 30; Colossians 2:2-3)

5. What do these passages tell us about the fundamental newness of these truths?

1 Corinthians 2:7

Romans 7:6

Jeremiah 31:31

Ephesians 3:2-6

Matthew 9:16-17

Hebrews 9:15

6. What should be our response(s) when we find the teachings of the Scriptures to be in conflict with the opinions of the world around us? Why?

7. How would you describe the Corinthians' conduct in 3:1-4? What did this indicate about them?

Apply

To what extent would you say that your judgments and attitudes are shaped by the wisdom of the world versus the wisdom of God?

Is the conduct of the Corinthian believers "normal" church life, or an aberration? What would you do if you found yourself in a church like this?

Commentary

v. 6 Paul's arguments in the preceding verses could give the impression that he is opposed to wisdom, but that is not the case. Rather, he is opposed to the foolishness of this world which masquerades as wisdom, and which views true wisdom as foolishness.

In this letter, the pronouns "we" and "us" sometimes refer to all believers. However, they can also refer only to the apostles (including Apollos and Barnabas), especially when referring to the ministry of preaching and teaching (1 Cor 1:8-13; 3:9; 4:1, 6, 9; 9:3-6, 12; 15:11, 14-15, 30-31). And that is likely the meaning here.

The term "mature" is not a synonym for "believer," in contrast with an unbeliever. Rather, this term denotes a believer whose life consistently reflects the truth of the gospel. This is in contrast to an immature believer; i.e., one who has genuinely exercised a saving faith in Christ, but whose life still contains significant remnants of their former unregenerate self. And so the "message of wisdom" which is spoken to the "mature" is not the basic content of the gospel, the "elementary teachings about Christ" (Heb. 6:1). Rather, it is more advanced teaching; i.e., "solid food" as opposed to "milk" (1 Cor. 3:1-2; 14:20; Heb. 5:11-6:2; Eph. 4:13; Phil. 3:15; Col. 1:28).

It is important to understand that this is not some kind of Christian Gnosticism, in which there is a secret knowledge available only to the spiritual elite. Rather, the maturity Paul is speaking of refers to putting into practice the truths of the gospel and coming to understand fully, through experience, the implications of those truths in how we live our lives and walk with God.

"but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing." Both the ungodly human beings who exercise power according to this world's values, and the spiritual forces who stand behind them (Eph. 2:1-3; 6:12), are destined for destruction (1 Cor. 7:31; 15:24). Thus, the world's "wisdom" is a dead end, and living according to its precepts is the spiritual equivalent of investing your life savings in a company that is soon to go bankrupt.

v. 7 The wisdom of God consists of the full revelation of the person and work of Christ, and also its application to us as his people. It is a "mystery" in the sense that it was previously "hidden" but has now been revealed (Rom. 16:25-26; Eph. 3:2-6; Col. 1:25-27). However, it was hidden in plain view, not only in the writings of the ancient prophets, but in Old Testament types, or pictures. These include the Jewish sacrificial system, which pointed forward to the sacrifice of Christ, and the lives of the patriarchs, whose experiences anticipated Christ (e.g., Abraham, Gen. 22:1-18)

vv. 9-10 The "wisdom of God" in verse 7, the mystery which was previously hidden, is now described more fully, as "*What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived*". In other words, it is something entirely new, something completely distinct from what came before (Isa. 43:19; 48:6-7; Jer. 31:31; Ezk. 11:19; 18:31; 36:26; Mt. 9:17; 13:52; Mk. 1:27; 2:21-22; Lk. 22:20; Rom. 7:6; 2 Cor. 3:6; Eph. 2:15; 3:5; Heb. 9:10, 15; 10:20). Not only is it new, it is beyond the ability of mere human reason to comprehend (Rom. 11:33-34; 1 Cor. 2:14).

This quotation ("as it is written") is likely a reference to Isa. 64:4,

*"Since ancient times no one has heard,
no ear has perceived,
no eye has seen any God besides you,
who acts on behalf of those who wait
for him."*

In the original context, this statement is part of an appeal to God to return and to act on behalf of his people. It extols the uniqueness and supremacy of the Lord, and expresses the hope that in spite of our sin and mortality, there will come a time when he will relent of his wrath and reconcile us to himself. This hope is reiterated and expanded in Isa. 65:17-25, which speaks of a "new heavens and a new earth". Christ refers to this when he states, "*I am going . . . to prepare a place for you*" (Jn. 14:2-3; see Mt. 22:2-4; Heb. 11:6; 2 Pet. 3:13), and those future blessings are "**the things God has prepared for those who love him**".

It is true that we experience the blessings of knowing Christ in the present, and not only in the future. However, our present blessings look ahead to the future. They represent an advance on our inheritance, a foretaste of what is to come (Rom. 8:18-25; 2 Cor. 1:22; 5:5; Eph. 1:14).

" . . . these are the things God has revealed to us by his Spirit." It is not superior human insight or spiritual sensitivity that grants access to these truths; they are received only through the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit (see Mt. 16:16-17). The fact that the Spirit "**searches . . . even the deep things of God**" testifies to his divinity; only God could fully know the mind of God.

v. 12 **"What we have received is not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may understand what God has freely given us."** In contrast to those who are outside of Christ, and whose thoughts and actions are therefore guided by the "spirit of the world," believers have received the "Spirit who is from God". As a result, they are able to comprehend the things of God in a way that others cannot (2 Cor. 4:4; see Jn. 14:16-17; Gal. 4:3; Eph. 2:2; 6:2; Col. 2:8, 20).

- v. 13 Here again, “we” refers to the apostles (see v. 6). Their message, although not based on human wisdom, does represent true wisdom. Even if it is inconsistent with the teachings of human philosophers, that difference is not a defect. On the contrary, the message of the apostles is superior because it comes from a superior source: from God, rather than man. Not only does it differ in presentation, it also differs in content; it concerns “spiritual realities” rather than the things of this world (see Col. 3:1-2). Thus, the manner in which it is presented, although seemingly foolish, is appropriate to its substance.
- Note that another translation of the phrase “*explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words*” is possible. The Greek term *pneumatikois* could be understood as referring to spiritual *people*, rather than *words*. In that case, Paul’s meaning would be that the apostles are interpreting spiritual realities to spiritual people (those who possess the Spirit; i.e., believers, v. 15). Thus, it should not be surprising that their teaching is difficult for those without the Spirit (i.e. unbelievers, v. 14) to comprehend.
- v. 14 The “person without the Spirit” is an unbeliever. Such a person does not have the Holy Spirit dwelling in him (or her), and thus does not belong to Christ (Rom. 8:9, 11; see John 14:17). This person is not merely resistant to the message of the gospel, but is actually incapable of receiving it. Not because he is unable to understand the narrative of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection, or because he is unable to follow the logic of Christian doctrinal statements. But because these stories and doctrines seem like fables and nonsense to him. Unbelievers view them as we might view the mythology of the ancient Greek gods, or the folktales of primitive peoples. They regard the account of Christ’s death and resurrection as we might regard the death-and-rebirth myth of the Egyptian god Osiris. Can we understand it? Yes. Would we take it to be literally true, and embrace it as a guide for our lives? Of course not. And this is how unbelievers respond to the gospel, unless God graciously grants them repentance and faith by his Spirit (John 6:65; Acts 11:18; Eph. 1:17-18; 2 Tim. 2:25).
- v. 15 A believer, through the Spirit, has the capacity to understand “all things,” that is, to comprehend not merely the things of this world, but also those pertaining to the world to come. Judgments which are “merely human” cannot accurately assess the actions of believers, because they live according a philosophy of life that is foreign to those who lack the Spirit. Ultimately, the only judgment that matters is God’s (1 Cor. 4:3-5). But this does not mean that Christians are above the law (Rom. 13:1-7), or that they can ignore the opinions of unbelievers (see Rom. 12:17; 1 Thess. 4:11-12; 1 Tim. 3:7).

v. 16 “*for, ‘Who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?’ But we have the mind of Christ.*” Paul is quoting here from Isa. 40:13. The basic message, in that passage and here, is that the saving plans and purposes of God are beyond the reach of unaided human wisdom; they are inaccessible to worldly logic or calculation. As Isa. 40:14 continues,

*“Whom did the LORD consult to enlighten him,
and who taught him the right way?
Who was it that taught him knowledge,
or showed him the path of understanding?”*

The answer, of course, is “no one”. The Lord did not consult anyone, nor was he taught by anyone, because his wisdom and knowledge excel all others. Therefore, we should not evaluate His revelation by comparing it to conventional wisdom. Nor should we be troubled when we discover a conflict between Biblical teaching and the judgments of cultural thought-leaders, those whom the world considers to be right-thinking people. The Scriptures are the standard of truth, not the latest Gallup poll.

Instead, through the Spirit of Christ who lives in us, we have the mind of Christ; our thoughts and judgments are guided by his Spirit (see Rom. 8:5-6; 12:2).

vv. 1-2 The Corinthians were doing exactly what Paul warns against: judging the apostles and their message by a worldly standard. Note that he addresses them as genuine believers; they are “brothers and sisters” and are “in Christ”. However, their conduct (see vv. 3-4) reveals that they are terribly immature, “still worldly” and “mere infants”. As a result, they are unable to stomach the “solid food” of strong teaching. Paul’s tone makes it clear that this is not normal; their spiritual infancy has lasted much longer than it should (see Heb. 5:12). A newborn drinking from a bottle is charming, but a five-year-old doing so is not.

vv. 3-4 This is a searing indictment of the Corinthians’ spiritual condition. They are acting as if they had never come to know Christ; they are behaving just like unbelievers, “mere humans”, would do. As babies, they welcome the warmth and security of God’s love. But they don’t want to grow up. They refuse to embrace the responsibilities of Christian maturity, and so are languishing in a state of arrested development. One aspect of that immaturity is the party spirit which has arisen among them, exalting one teacher over another and encouraging loyalty, not primarily to Christ, but to flawed human beings. The result is squabbling instead of unity.

Unit 4 – All Things Are Yours

1 Corinthians 3:5-23

Text

⁵ What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. ⁶ I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. ⁷ So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow.⁸ The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labor. ⁹ For we are co-workers in God's service; you are God's field, God's building.

¹⁰ By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a wise builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should build with care. ¹¹ For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. ¹² If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw,¹³ their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person's work. ¹⁴ If what has been built survives,

the builder will receive a reward.¹⁵ If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved—even though only as one escaping through the flames.

¹⁶ Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst?¹⁷ If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person; for God's temple is sacred, and you together are that temple.

¹⁸ Do not deceive yourselves. If any of you think you are wise by the standards of this age, you should become "fools" so that you may become wise.¹⁹ For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight. As it is written: "He catches the wise in their craftiness"^a,²⁰ and again, "The Lord knows that the thoughts of the wise are futile."^b²¹ So then, no more boasting about human leaders! All things are yours,²² whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas^c or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours,²³ and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God.

^a Job 5:13 ^b Psalm 94:11 ^c That is, Peter

Open

Do you enjoy gardening or working with plants? Why or why not?

Have you built anything recently (or ever) with your own hands?

Discover

- Paul makes several points about the work of the ministry, using an agricultural metaphor. In the space below, identify what you think he is saying in each of these verses.

v. 5

v. 6

v. 7

v. 8

v. 9

2. In the second metaphor (vv. 10-15) what is the “foundation” and what is the “building”?

3. What does it mean to build on the foundation using “wood, hay or straw”? (v. 12) Give some examples. What would be the result of doing so? (v. 15)

4. What kind of building is the church? What makes it this kind of building? (v. 16)

5. Why does the church matter so much to God? What are the consequences of actively harming the church? (v. 17)

6. How does your attitude toward the church compare to God’s? Do you value it as he does?

7. In the space below, summarize what Paul is saying about how we should regard pastors, teachers, and Christian leaders.

Apply

How would you describe your work for the church? Gold, silver, and costly stones? Wood, hay, or straw? Or nothing much at all? Is change needed?

In what specific ways are you at risk of viewing the world’s foolishness as wisdom? How important is it to resist this? How can you do so?

Commentary

- vv. 5-9 Paul uses an agricultural metaphor to explain to the Corinthians why their over-valuation of some leaders, and the corresponding under-valuation of others, were misguided: to “rank” preachers and teachers in this way assumes that the results of their ministries are due to their own personal qualities, when in fact, the one who brings growth and harvest is God.
- v. 5 The word translated “servants” here is *diakonoi*, and connotes one who does menial work, such as waiting on tables, or digging in the dirt (v. 6). How ridiculous it was, then, for the Corinthians to proudly associate themselves with this or that “superstar” preacher! These men were no more deserving of exaltation than any common laborer. They were simply carrying out the commands of their master, as a servant or slave would do. Wonderful things happened when they preached—people came to faith and lives were changed—but these results were accomplished *through* them, not *because* of them. They were merely God’s tools, his instruments. Note that Paul includes himself and Apollos as examples of such servants. He is not demeaning others in order to exalt himself, but placing himself and all other gospel ministers in the same category.
Does this mean that pastors, teachers and Christian leaders can be treated with contempt or disrespect? Certainly not! This would be to err in the opposite direction. They are to be honored for their service to Christ (1 Tim. 5:17-18). However, respect and honor are not limited to vocational Christian workers; all believers, and especially those who serve Christ faithfully and diligently, should be regarded in this way (Rom. 12:10; Phil. 2:29; 1 Tim. 3:8, 11; Tit. 2:2; 1 Pet. 2:17; 3:7).
- v. 6 Paul’s point here is one that we need frequent reminders of: there will be no fruit, or life, or growth, unless God is pleased to bring it about. We can exhaust ourselves in ministry-related activities, but unless the Holy Spirit is at work, our labors will be entirely for naught. Results in ministry are not ultimately attributable to the skill, or education, or sincerity, or hard work, of any human agent. They are the result of God’s gracious decision to bless our labors. If this was true of the apostle Paul, it is certainly true of us. Does this mean that we need not, or should not, work hard in ministry? No. Paul often spoke of how hard he and others worked (Acts 20:35; Rom. 16:6, 12; 1 Cor. 4:12; 15:10; 2 Cor. 6:5; 11:23; Col. 4:13; 1 Thess. 2:9; 5:12). But he understood that no amount of hard work can guarantee results. Those results are spiritual, and are accomplished by the power of Holy Spirit, according to his sovereign will (Jn. 3:8; 2 Thess. 2:13-14).
- v. 7 The whole process of bringing life and growth is of God, from beginning to end. We each have our part, and hopefully, by God’s grace, we perform it well. But we do not determine the outcome; God does. We are not the source of the power, we are only its conduit. This power, the “force that through the green fuse drives the flower”, in the words of the poet Dylan Thomas, is from God and not us.
- v. 8 When God bestows rewards, he will do so on the basis of our labor, not our giftedness or the results that we or others perceive. The “reward” here is not salvation, because it is based on our work, rather than faith alone (see Mt. 16:27; Mk. 9:41; Eph. 6:8; Rev. 22:12). However, Paul is not specific about what it might be, because that is not his point. His point is that what God values and rewards is our faithful and obedient (and thus diligent) labor. We judge by appearances, by apparent results (1 Sam. 16:7). Thus, we highly esteem megachurch pastors and best-selling authors, and little esteem those who labor in small parishes, or who toil in obscurity ministering to the poor and sick. But God judges by faithfulness. Many will someday be surprised to learn how widely those two valuations differ (Mt. 19:27-30).
- vv. 10-11 Paul now changes metaphors, from the church as a field being worked, to the people of God as a building under construction. He begins by emphasizing that his own ministry, and by extension the work of all Christians ministers, was “by the grace God has given me” (see 1 Cor. 15:10). And so the rewards which come as a result (vv. 8, 14) are the results of grace as well. In other words, we cannot take credit even for what we have “earned”, for the capacity to labor, and the opportunity to do so, both come from God.
Paul is not distressed that others are building on the foundation that he laid; rather, he welcomes it. But they must take care that their work does in fact build on that foundation, which is Jesus Christ. They must not undermine the foundation, or seek to build their ministry on some other foundation; the results would be spiritually disastrous (see Lk. 6:46-49).
- v. 12 The building Paul has in mind is not just any structure, but a temple (v. 16). The reference to “*gold, silver, costly stones*” brings to mind the glorious temple of Solomon, which was constructed of such materials (1 Chron. 29:1-7; 2 Chron. 3:1-9).
- v. 13 The fire of judgment referred to here is not the judgment unto salvation or damnation, which will separate the people of God, the “sheep”, from the unbelievers, or “goats” (Mt. 25:31-46). Rather, it is a judgment in which the works of believers will be assessed in order to assign rewards (see Rom. 14:10; Jam. 3:1; Rev. 11:18). This assessment will

consider not only actions, but motives as well (1 Cor. 4:5; see Jer. 17:10). Thus the true character of our works, taking into account both our deeds and the heart attitudes behind them, will be known.

The statement that our works will be tested and revealed by “fire” speaks to the absolutely penetrating nature of this examination. As Luke 12:2 states, “*There is nothing concealed that will not be disclosed, or hidden that will not be made known*” (see Heb. 4:13). Until that day comes, we should be wary of prematurely judging the works of others, or even our own (1 Cor. 4:3-5). Lacking the Lord’s perfect wisdom and insight, we are likely to draw inaccurate conclusions.

v. 14-15 These verses make clear that the judgment in view is not the one which leads to heaven or hell. Even if one’s works are “*burned up, the builder will suffer loss but yet will be saved*”. If we have trusted in Christ, then even if our labors for the kingdom are few or of little value (meaning that they focus on something other than Christ), our lives will still be preserved. But we will enter heaven empty-handed, like someone who has barely escaped from a fire that consumed everything they own, with nothing to show for our lives. Will heaven still be glorious and full of joy? Yes. But the loss of potential reward will nevertheless be real.

vv. 16-17 Paul’s rhetoric now ratchets up, from a warning concerning the consequences of building the church with shoddy materials (i.e., loss of reward), to the consequences of actively harming the church. Those are more dire: personal destruction. Given the future tense of the verb “will destroy”, and the future-looking, or *eschatological*, context of this passage, the destruction in view is likely that which is to come on the last day (Mt. 7:13; 10:28; Lk. 6:49; Phil. 1:28; 2 Thess. 1:9; 2 Pet. 3:7). Note that harming the church is not an unforgivable sin; Paul himself was guilty of it before his conversion (Acts 8:3; Gal. 1:13). But a pattern of actions destructive to the church over a period of time, without repentance, would certainly indicate a soul in peril.

Why is this such a serious matter? Because God himself dwells in the church; he lives in and among his people as they are formed into a community of faith. And so we see that the Jewish temple of the Old Covenant, in which the Spirit of God was personally present, served as a *type*, or picture, of the greater reality to come in the church age. Just as that temple was sacred due to the presence of God within it, so also the church is sacred, for the same reason. And just as the consequences of defiling the physical temple were severe, so also the consequences of harming God’s New

Covenant dwelling-place, the church, will be severe. This is a sobering thought, as we each consider our relationships with other church members, as well as our attitudes and conduct as they affect the life of our own church fellowship.

v. 18 Paul’s admonition, “*Do not deceive yourselves*”, should cause us to reflect on the ever-present risk of self delusion, of thinking ourselves to be wiser and more perceptive than we really are (see Rom. 12:3). Ironically, it is often those who have achieved some degree of erudition and insight, who have attained a measure of mastery in philosophy, or history or psychology, who are most subject to this temptation. By the “*standards of this age*”, they have become wise. But in order to become truly wise, we must stand in judgment of the world’s wisdom (or, more accurately, accept the Scriptures’ judgment of it), and embrace a competing world view, one which is considered foolish by those who reject Biblical truth.

This is a difficult balancing act, to study the world’s point of view deeply enough to truly understand it, while not becoming seduced by it. Which is why the more common response to the world is either capitulation or avoidance; either subjecting theology to the judgment of the world and thus corrupting it, or doing theology in a vacuum, with no attempt to engage the wider culture. But Christ calls us to engagement, to being “in” the world without being “of” it (Jn. 17:14-18; see Acts 17:16-34).

vv. 19-20 Paul buttresses his statement that “*the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God’s sight*” by quoting Job. 5:13 and Ps. 94:11. In both cases, the point is that the plans of those whom the world considers to be wise are ultimately futile and self-defeating. As Tolkein observed in The Two Towers, “*Oft evil will shall evil mar.*” One only has to open the newspaper to find corroborating examples of this truth.

vv. 21-23 We should not exalt one leader over another, as if our connection to them as their followers would enhance our status by association. On the contrary, it is not we who belong to them, but they who belong to us, the church, as its servants. And not only they, but all things are ours—including victory over this world (Jn. 16:33; 1 Jn. 4:4; 5:4-5), possession of the world to come (Mt. 5:5; 2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 2:11) and even power over death itself (1 Cor. 15:26; 55-57; Rom. 8:38-39). Ultimately, we do not belong to any human leader, but we “are of Christ”, we belong to him (1 Cor. 6:20), and he in turn belongs to God the Father, serving Him in love and obedience (Jn. 5:16-30; 14:31; 15:10).

Unit 5 – Fools for Christ

1 Corinthians 4:1-17

Text

¹ This, then, is how you ought to regard us: as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the mysteries God has revealed. ² Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful. ³ I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. ⁴ My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. ⁵ Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait until the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of the heart. At that time each will receive their praise from God.

⁶ Now, brothers and sisters, I have applied these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, so that you may learn from us the meaning of the saying, “Do not go beyond what is written.” Then you will not be puffed up in being a follower of one of us over against the other. ⁷ For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?

⁸ Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! You have begun to reign—and that without us! How I wish that you really had begun to reign so that we also might

reign with you! ⁹ For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like those condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to human beings. ¹⁰ We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are honored, we are dishonored! ¹¹ To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. ¹² We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; ¹³ when we are slandered, we answer kindly. We have become the scum of the earth, the garbage of the world—right up to this moment.

¹⁴ I am writing this not to shame you but to warn you as my dear children. ¹⁵ Even if you had ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel. ¹⁶ Therefore I urge you to imitate me. ¹⁷ For this reason I have sent to you Timothy, my son whom I love, who is faithful in the Lord. He will remind you of my way of life in Christ Jesus, which agrees with what I teach everywhere in every church.

Open

- How do you think you are like your (human) father? How are you different?

Discover

1. What erroneous beliefs and attitudes is Paul addressing in this passage?

2. What is the primary responsibility of a servant (v. 2)? What does this look like? What other characteristics of a servant should someone who is serving Christ exhibit?

-
3. Paul exhorts the Corinthians to stop rating and ranking those who were ministering to them. Why shouldn't we do this? (vv. 3-5)

Reason 1 (see 1 Sam. 16:7; Jer. 17:9):

Reason 2 (see Rom. 14:4):

Other reasons:

4. Does this mean vocational Christian workers should not be given performance reviews? Why or why not?

5. Why shouldn't we be "puffed up" with pride concerning our own abilities or accomplishments, or those of someone we associate with? (vv. 6-7) What should be our attitude instead?

6. For personal reflection: List below some qualities or achievements of your own that you feel pride or satisfaction in.

Now circle the ones which were dependent on God to provide ability, opportunity, or resources.

7. How would you characterize the attitude Paul describes in verse 3? Should everyone adopt this attitude? What would happen if they did?

8. What does honor, prosperity, or success indicate about a minister or Christian worker? (vv. 9-13)

Apply

Does your heart attitude and way of life indicate that you view yourself as a servant?

How faithful have you been with what God has entrusted to you?

Commentary

- v. 1 This verse summarizes Paul's point concerning Christian leaders: what matters is not the messengers, but the one whom they serve and the message that they bring. Thus, a proper view of Paul, and Barnabas and Cephas (1 Cor. 3:5), and by extension, Christian leaders in general, will not emphasize their personal qualities, nor rank them as greater or lesser than one another. However, that is exactly what the Corinthians were doing. They were focusing on apostles and pastors and teachers, when they should have been looking past them to Christ. They were debating who was the more skillful orator, when they should have been seeking to understand and apply the revelation of God in the gospel message. They were aligning themselves with one or another human leader, when they should have been seeking a closer relationship with Christ. The result was division rather than unity.
- v. 2 There is one requirement for those who have been entrusted with a task; that they carry out their responsibilities according to the instructions of their master, in order to advance their master's interests. In other words, their loyalty must be to the one who commissioned them, and not to themselves or to any other person. Their master is the one to whom they are accountable (Rom. 14:4,12). There is no requirement that ministers be "successful", but only that they be "faithful". The outcome of one's ministry is in God's hands. Often it is not apparent for many years, and in fact may never be known prior to the final judgment.
Note that faithfulness includes not only actions, but motives as well (v. 5).
- vv. 3-4 Why did Paul care so little how he was viewed by the Corinthians, or by people in general? (see Gal. 1:10; 1 Thess. 2:6) Not because he was arrogant, but because their opinions didn't affect the truth of the matter. If they judged him to be wise, and skilled, and diligent, it didn't actually mean that he was so. Likewise, if they evaluated him harshly, it had no bearing on whether he was truly worthy of admiration. The only one whose judgment matters is God, because he sees things as they truly are; while we see things as they appear to be. "*People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart*" (1 Sam. 16:7; see 2 Cor. 10:7). In fact, we cannot entirely trust even our own assessment of ourselves, because our hearts are deceitful (Jer. 17:9; 1 Cor. 3:18; Gal. 6:3; Jam. 1:22, 26; 1 Jn. 1:8).
Even though the acclaim or scorn of men is ultimately meaningless, the desire to be well thought of by other people is a snare, not only for leaders, but for everyone (Jn. 5:41, 44; 12:42-4; Eph. 6:6; Col. 3:22). We have to choose between seeking the approval of God or of man (Gal. 1:10).
- v. 5 Given that we cannot reliably judge even our own hearts (v. 4), it is foolhardy for us to think that we can accurately judge the work of others. Nor is it our place to do so (Rom. 14:4, 10-12; Jam. 4:12). Such a judgment will take place, but it will be conducted by God, rather than us, and it will be based on all the facts, both seen and unseen, rather than on how things appear (Job 28:11; 34:22; Ps. 44:21; 69:5; 139:1-12; Eccl. 12:14; Dan. 2:22; Mt. 10:26; Mk. 4:22; Lk. 8:17; 12:2; Heb. 4:13).
- v. 6 Paul has taken the principle that all human teachers and leaders are subordinate to Christ and to the gospel message, and has applied it to himself and Apollos as a case study for the Corinthians. He and Apollos do not regard themselves as worthy of veneration or glorification, and so those in Corinth who have been highly exalting them or other leaders should cease doing so.
The command that they "*not go beyond what is written*" is difficult to interpret. However, in the context it seems reasonable to understand it as an exhortation against disregarding what is written in the Old Testament Scriptures concerning God's supreme wisdom, power and glory. If the Corinthians heed this reminder, then they "*will not be puffed up in being a follower of one of us over against the other*", because they will be exalting, following, serving, and trusting in God rather than men.
- v. 7 These questions are devastating to a false self-esteem which relies on personal qualities or accomplishments as a reason to think highly of oneself (see Rom. 12:3). Our true value does not come from these things, but from Christ and our union with Him (2 Cor. 5:17; Eph. 1:11-12). Paul does not deny that we differ from one another in gifts and abilities. But who is responsible for those differences? Not us, but God. They are a gift of his grace; therefore there is no room for boasting (1 Cor. 1:4-7, 30-31; 15:10). He created us and he sustains us, every minute of every day. Apart from his grace, even our gifts and abilities would be worthless and would ultimately come to nothing (Jn. 15:5; Rom. 3:12; 1 Cor. 2:6; 3:15; Phil. 3:3-8).
- v. 8 There are two views of this verse. One is that the Corinthians were mistaken in their *eschatology*, i.e., their theology of future events. In this view, the Corinthians believed that the return of Christ, and the resurrection and glorification of believers, had already taken place, but in a figurative rather than a literal sense. Thus, they saw themselves as having fully received the things promised to the followers of Christ, including reign (Mt. 19:28; Lk. 19:17; 22:30; 1 Cor. 6:2-3; 2 Tim. 2:12; Rev. 5:10; 20:4, 6; 22:5) and riches (Mt. 6:20; 19:21; Lk. 12:33; 16:11; 1 Tim. 6:18-19).

This approach to prophecy is known as *realized eschatology*. It interprets Biblical statements about the inauguration of the kingdom of God at the time of Christ (Mt. 12:28; Mk. 1:15; 9:1; Lk. 10:9; 1 Cor. 10:11) and the blessings which believers now enjoy in Christ (Eph. 1:3) as if these were the whole story, and no greater fulfillment of God's promises remained.

Another view of the verse is that Paul is referring to their pride, in thinking that they had attained such a high degree of wisdom and spiritual maturity that they could pass judgment even on the apostles. In holding this opinion they were very wide of the mark, like the church of Laodicea, whom Christ rebuked (Rev. 3:17):

"You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked."

- v. 9 Paul's comment at the end of the previous verse, "*How I wish that you really had begun to reign so that we also might reign with you!*" makes the foolishness of the Corinthians' view painfully clear. For if they truly had begun to reign, this would mean that Christ had returned, and thus Paul and the other apostles would also be reigning. But nothing of the kind had taken place. Instead, the apostles were suffering; they had been put "*on display at the end of the procession, like those condemned to die in the arena*" and had been made "*a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to human beings*".

The Corinthians viewed this suffering as an aberration, as if it indicated that Paul and the other apostles had gotten the Christian life wrong, while they themselves had gotten it right. But suffering is normative for believers (Mt. 5:10-12; 24:9; Lk. 21:12; Rom. 8:17-18; 2 Cor. 1:6-7; Phil. 1:29-30; 3:10; 2 Tim. 1:8; 2 Tim. 3:12; 1 Pet. 4:12-13). Since Christ suffered, those who seek to follow him should expect to suffer also (Jn. 15:20; 1 Pet. 2:21). Therefore, a lack of suffering is not evidence of spiritual maturity; it may actually be evidence of the opposite.

- v. 10 The apostles were hated, scorned and reviled. They were dismissed as foolish by the world (1 Cor. 1:18, 23; 2:14). And they were "weak", depending on God's power rather than their own (1 Cor. 1:25, 27; 2 Cor. 12:10; 13:4). In contrast, the Corinthians considered themselves to be wise and spiritually strong. They were honored and highly regarded. But rather than being proud of this contrast, the Corinthians should have been rebuked by it, because it exposed the fact that they were unlike Christ, who was "*despised and*

rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain" (Isa. 53:3).

- vv. 11-13 These verses illustrate in graphic terms the contrast between the kind of life which the Corinthians regarded as evidence of spiritual maturity and the favor of God, and the experiences of the apostles as the "*scum of the earth, the garbage of the world*". Anyone who is tempted to view prosperity and success as evidence of faith and of God's approval, or who views poverty and disgrace as evidence of sin or of God's disapproval, should reflect on these verses.

- vv. 14-15 "***I am writing this not to shame you but to warn you as my dear children.***" As strongly worded as the previous verses have been, Paul's purpose is not to crush their spirits or humiliate them; his goal is redemptive, rather than punitive. He is seeking their repentance and reformation, not merely their sorrow (2 Cor. 7:8-11). He does this out of a sense of parental love and concern, as the one through whom they first received the gospel and experienced the new birth. These are not the words of someone who views the ministry as a profession. No one regards the care and instruction of their own children as merely a job or occupation.

- v. 16 "***Therefore I urge you to imitate me.***" Paul is not instructing the Corinthians to imitate everything about him; rather, he is referring specifically to the attitudes and actions about which he has been writing; i.e., they should regard themselves as servants (4:1), they should refrain from judging (4:5), they should be willing to endure deprivation and harsh treatment for Christ (4:9-13), and they should respond with humility and patience to insults and persecution (4:12-13). By following his example in this way, they will be following the example of Christ (1 Cor. 11:1; see Jn. 13:15; Eph. 5:1; Phil. 3:17; 2 Thess. 3:7, 9; 1 Pet. 2:21).

- v. 17 Paul's promise to send Timothy does not mean that he was the bearer of this letter, verse 16:10 indicates that his visit to Corinth would still be in the future. But when Timothy does come, he will remind them of Paul's "*way of life in Christ Jesus*", which they are to imitate (v. 16) and which is entirely consistent with his teaching. Paul's goal, for the Corinthians and for all who read this letter, is not merely knowledge, but a worldview and way of life which are integrated and consistent, centered on Christ and the gospel.

Unit 6 – Expel the Wicked Person

1 Corinthians 4:18-5:13

Text

¹⁸ Some of you have become arrogant, as if I were not coming to you. ¹⁹ But I will come to you very soon, if the Lord is willing, and then I will find out not only how these arrogant people are talking, but what power they have. ²⁰ For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power. ²¹ What do you prefer? Shall I come to you with a rod of discipline, or shall I come in love and with a gentle spirit?

¹ It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that even pagans do not tolerate: A man is sleeping with his father's wife. ² And you are proud! Shouldn't you rather have gone into mourning and have put out of your fellowship the man who has been doing this? ³ For my part, even though I am not physically present, I am with you in spirit. As one who is present with you in this way, I have already passed judgment in the name of our Lord Jesus on the one who has been doing this. ⁴ So when you are assembled and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, ⁵ hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh,^{a b} so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord.

⁶ Your boasting is not good. Don't you know that a little yeast leavens the whole batch of dough? ⁷ Get rid of the old yeast, so that you may

be a new unleavened batch—as you really are. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. ⁸ Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old bread leavened with malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

⁹ I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—¹⁰ not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. ¹¹ But now I am writing to you that you must not associate with anyone who claims to be a brother or sister^c but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or slanderer, a drunkard or swindler. Do not even eat with such people.

¹² What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? ¹³ God will judge those outside. "Expel the wicked person from among you."^d

^a5 In contexts like this, the Greek word for flesh (*sark*) refers to the sinful state of human beings, often presented as a power in opposition to the Spirit.

^b5 Or of his body ^c11 The Greek word for brother or sister (*adelphos*) refers here to a believer, whether man or woman, as part of God's family; also in 8:11, 13.

^d13 Deut. 13:5; 17:7; 19:19; 21:21; 22:21,24; 24:7.

Open

- What is the best party you ever attended?

Discover

1. Why is it important for the church to take a strong stand against blatant sin among its members? What will be the consequences if it does not do so?

2. What sins does Paul specifically identify as requiring such a response by the church? (vv. 11)

3. What action does Paul indicate is required? (vv. 2, 7, 13)

4. How should this action be taken? (v. 4)

5. What possible reasons can you think of to explain why the church hadn't take action already? Do churches today face the same issues?

6. What sins should the church not judge? (vv. 9-10, 12-13) Why not?

7. What does the metaphor of yeast indicate about sin? (vv. 6-8; see Matthew 16:5-12)

8. What does it mean to abandon someone to Satan? What is the desired outcome? (vv. 4-5)

Why would Satan cooperate in accomplishing God's purposes?

Apply

Isn't sin a private matter between the individual and God? Isn't it a violation of privacy for the church to openly condemn sins in this way?

Are there any risks the church must consider when seeking to carry out Paul's instructions in this passage? How can they be addressed?

Commentary

Paul now transitions from the issue of divisions in the church (1:10-4:17) and turns his attention to the problem of gross immorality among professing believers at Corinth. This section contains two parts: the first, 4:18-6:20, consists of a denunciation of immorality and greed; the second, 7:1-40, presents a contrasting, positive model of the Christian life.

v. 18 “**Some of you have become arrogant, as if I were not coming to you.**” Those who do not expect that they will be called to account for their actions, either by man or God, tend to become arrogant. They indulge and exalt themselves, and they mistreat others (see Ps. 14:1-3; Mt. 24:45-51; Lk. 12:42-46; 2 Pet. 3:3-4). Such were some at Corinth: rejecting Paul’s apostolic authority, they set themselves up as independent arbiters of spirituality and morality, and presumed to judge him instead of submitting to his judgment (1 Cor. 4:3; 10:29; 2 Cor. 10:8; 13:10).

vv. 19-20 Upon his arrival, Paul intends to conduct an investigation. Ignoring the Corinthians’ words, he will search out whether the power of Christ is working in and through them. This “power” is the power of the Spirit and the gospel to transform lives, consistent with Paul’s use of the term throughout the letters to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 1:17-18; 2 Cor. 4:6-7; 6:6-8; 10:4-5; 12:9-10; 13:4). As for the kind of power which was manifested in “signs, wonders, and miracles”, these had value in attesting to the genuineness of Paul’s apostolic calling (2 Cor. 12:12). However, they could also be performed by “false christ and false prophets” (Mt. 24:24; Mk. 13:22; see Mt. 7:21-23; Rev. 13:11-14). Thus they were not conclusive proof of godliness, but required the confirming evidence of true doctrine and holiness of life (Rom. 16:17; Gal. 1:8-9; 2 Thess. 3:6; 1 Tim. 6:3-4; 2 Tim. 3:10; Tit. 1:7-9; 2:7-8).

v. 1 Paul does not provide the specifics of the situation he addresses here, as it was already well known to his readers. Concerning the woman’s identity, it seems likely that she was the man’s stepmother, for if she were his biological mother, we would expect Paul to have stated this explicitly, rather than referring to her as “his father’s wife”. And so we conclude that this is the case of a man who has married his stepmother or is living with her out of wedlock, she having been divorced from his father. It is also possible that the man in question is conducting an illicit affair with his stepmother while she remains married to his father; we cannot be certain.

What we do know is that Paul was outraged by this blatant flouting of God’s moral law, and even more so by the fact that the Corinthians had taken no action in

response. He underscores the severity of the offense by noting that even pagan unbelievers regarded this kind of sexual relationship to be unacceptable. However, for Paul, the judgment that this kind of relationship is immoral did not come from the prevailing Roman or Greek culture, but from the teaching of the Old Testament concerning family and sexual relationships (see Lev. 18:7-8; 20:11; Deut. 22:30; 27:20).

v. 2 Now Paul focuses his condemnation on the church’s shocking response, or rather their lack of a response. What they ought to have done was to repent and grieve over this heinous sin, and to have expelled from their fellowship the man who was guilty of it (see 2 Cor. 12:21). Why? Because God does not regard sin as merely an individual matter. He holds the whole community responsible for how they respond to it. And so by doing nothing, the church had become complicit in the sin, and subject to God’s judgment as a result.

For an example of a corporate response to the sins of individuals, see Josh. 7:1-26, in which the Lord tells Joshua that “*Israel has sinned*” (v. 11) because one man had committed theft, bringing God’s judgment on the people. In this case, God’s wrath was turned away only after Achan and his family had been executed, and thus removed from Israel. See also Ezra 10:1-6 and Neh. 1:1-7.

vv. 3-4 Paul’s statement that he is with them “in spirit” is likely an indication of the intensity of his personal concern for them; i.e., that his focus and attention on their circumstances is as great as if he were standing right in their midst (see Col. 2:5). Thus, he is able to pass judgment as if he were physically among them. And he has done so, with the authority he possesses as an apostle commissioned by Christ. Paul’s judgment was to be ratified by the entire church gathered together, so that the decision would represent a repudiation of the sin by the body as a whole. Note that in the case of such flagrant, egregious sin, there is no intermediate step between discovery and expulsion.

v. 5 One possible interpretation of this verse is that Paul, acting on his authority as an apostle, is consigning this man to physical decay or illness, ultimately resulting in death. This would be consistent with the use of the term “destruction” (Gr. *olethron*) elsewhere in the New Testament (1 Thess. 5:3; 2 Thess. 1:9; 1 Tim. 6:9) and in the *Septuagint*, the Greek translation of the Old Testament in use in Paul’s day. However, it is difficult to see how physical death could be spoken of as resulting in the man’s salvation “on the day of the Lord”. Only the death of Christ can accomplish this (Rom. 5:10; 6:4; 8:10; Phil. 3:10-11).

Another interpretation is that the term “flesh” (Gr. *sark*) refers here, not merely to the man’s physical body, but to his whole being, as corrupted by sin and rebellion against God. This would be consistent with passages in Paul’s letters which speak of the flesh as needing to be “crucified” (Gal. 5:24), and exhorting that the deeds of the “earthly nature” be “put to death” (Col. 3:5; see Rom. 8:5-17; Gal. 5:16-24). In this view, Paul’s intent is that the man’s exclusion from the community of believers, and the resulting exposure to Satan’s attacks, would produce sorrow and grief, resulting in his repentance and salvation.

We see that Satan is being used here to accomplish God’s purposes. Many people erroneously think of Satan as an independent being, outside of God’s control. But in fact Satan can do only what God permits him to do; see, for example, Satan’s dialogue with God concerning Job (Job 1:12; 2:6-7; also Lk. 4:1-2; 22:31; Jn. 6:70-71; 13:27; 2 Cor. 12:7; 1 Tim. 1:20). In the same way, God uses ungodly rulers both to discipline and bless his people (e.g., **Pharaoh**, Ex. 4:21; 14:8; **Nebuchadnezzar**, Jer. 25:8-9; 27:6; 43:10; 51:12; **Cyrus**, 2 Chron. 36:22-23; Ezra 1:1-3; Isa. 45:13; see also Lev. 26:14-17; Prov. 21:1). In fact, even the death of Christ, which was carried out by “wicked men”, was according to “God’s set purpose” (Acts 2:23; see Isa. 43:10; Acts 4:27-28). Note, however, that Satan, ungodly rulers, and wicked people are still responsible for their actions and will be punished for their sins against the people of God (see Isa. 10:5-12, 24-25; Jer. 25:12; Mt. 26:24; Mk. 14:21; Rev. 20:10).

v. 6 Not only must the man be removed from their fellowship for his own sake, he must be removed in order to prevent his example from corrupting the whole body, even as a small amount of yeast works its way through an entire batch of dough. The insidious nature of sin and falsehood, and their tendency, if not addressed, to spread and permeate the whole, is likened to the action of “leaven” throughout the Scriptures. This comparison is implied in the Old Testament laws which required the use of unleavened bread, and is made more explicit in the New Testament (Mt. 16:5-12; Mk. 8:15; Lk. 12:1; Gal. 5:7-9; 1 Cor. 5:8).

vv. 7-8 Under Old Testament law, for the duration of Passover week no bread prepared with leaven could be eaten, and all leaven had to be removed from the Israelites’ homes. For this reason Passover is also called the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Ex. 12:1-27; 13:3-8). In the same way, the church and the individual believer should rid themselves of the sin that so easily spreads and corrupts, so that they may observe the Festival in purity and wholehearted faith. The “Festival” which

we celebrate is not the Old Covenant Passover, which commemorated the Israelites’ protection from the angel of death and their escape from oppression under Pharaoh. Rather, we celebrate the Lord’s Supper, which commemorates the sacrifice of our Passover Lamb, Jesus Christ (Jn. 1:29; 1 Pet. 1:19; Rev. 5:6-14; 12:11; 13:8), and our freedom from the tyranny of sin and death (Rom. 6:18, 22; 8:2; Heb. 2:15).

vv. 9-11 This is not actually Paul’s first letter to the church at Corinth. He wrote an earlier letter, now lost to us, in which he instructed them “*not to associate with sexually immoral people*”. Here he clarifies that he was not referring to the immoral people “of this world”, as that would require them to have no dealings with unbelievers whatsoever (see Jn. 17:11, 15-18). Rather he is speaking of any person who claims to be a Christian, but who is “*sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or slanderer, a drunkard or swindler*”. He commands that they not extend to such people even the most basic sign of fellowship and hospitality, that of sharing a meal with them. This prohibition would have had three effects: (1) it helped to separate the faithful believer from a corrupt influence, (2) it shamed the transgressor, with the goal being their repentance, (3) it signaled to the watching world that these sins are not accepted and tolerated in the Christian community.

Paul does not state that a person who is guilty of such conduct cannot be a Christian; however, his use of the phrase “who *claims* to be a brother or sister” indicates that their behavior has put their spiritual condition in serious doubt.

vv. 12-13 These verses contradict those who object to any form of church discipline on the grounds that we are not to judge one another. Paul explicitly states that in matters of gross sin, the church is in fact required “to judge those inside”, i.e., those within the church, by putting them out of the fellowship. However, this requirement does not extend to unbelievers; Paul indicates that we have no business attempting to compel them to behave in a moral fashion, or subjecting them to sanctions when they transgress the commands of Scripture. God himself will judge them at the appropriate time (see Rom. 1:18-27; 2:8-9, 12). In other words, the church, as *the church*, has no right or responsibility to impose Christian morality on the wider culture. It is the responsibility of the state, not the church, to maintain civil order and promote right conduct in society at large (Rom. 13:1-5). On the other hand, under a democratic form of government, the obligation to “do good to all people” (Gal. 6:10) may well involve working to bring about the passage and enforcement of laws through which the state can effectively fulfill its responsibility.

Unit 7 – Judging Disputes

1 Corinthians 6:1-11

Text

¹ If any of you has a dispute with another, do you dare to take it before the ungodly for judgment instead of before the Lord's people? ² Or do you not know that the Lord's people will judge the world? And if you are to judge the world, are you not competent to judge trivial cases? ³ Do you not know that we will judge angels? How much more the things of this life! ⁴ Therefore, if you have disputes about such matters, do you ask for a ruling from those whose way of life is scorned in the church? ⁵ I say this to shame you. Is it possible that there is nobody among you wise enough to judge a dispute between believers? ⁶ But instead, one brother takes another to court—and this in front of unbelievers!

⁷ The very fact that you have lawsuits among you means you have been completely defeated already. Why not rather be wronged? Why not

rather be cheated? ⁸ Instead, you yourselves cheat and do wrong, and you do this to your brothers and sisters. ⁹ Or do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor men who have sex with men ^a ¹⁰ nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. ¹¹ And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.

^a9 The words men who have sex with men translate two Greek words that refer to the passive and active participants in homosexual acts.

Open

- What was your favorite class in high school?

Discover

1. In this passage, Paul recognizes that disputes will arise among believers, and he identifies two acceptable ways of handling them. What are they? (vv. 5, 7)

2. What method for handling disputes does he reject? Why?

3. What types of disputes does Paul have in mind? (v. 7) Give some examples.

-
4. When Paul says that we will judge the world, and will judge angels, what is he referring to? (see Matthew 19:29; Jude 1:6; Rev. 2:26-28) What does this have to do with lawsuits between believers?

5. In what sense is filing a lawsuit already a defeat? (v. 7)

6. What conclusions do unbelievers draw when they see Christians opposing one another in court?

7. Is there ever a time when it is appropriate to involve civil authorities in a legal matter? (see Rom. 13:1-4)

8. Would obeying Paul's commands result in the weak and powerless continually being mistreated by the strong and powerful? Why or why not?

9. How do you reconcile verses 9-10 with the grace of God? Can't God forgive all kinds of sin?

Apply

- What is the key spiritual issue in this passage?
How does that issue affect you? What do you see as the practical challenges in applying this passage? How can they be overcome?

Commentary

Paul now addresses the issue of believers at Corinth who were engaging in litigation against one another. This is unacceptable for four reasons: First, it implies that the wisdom which God supplies to his people is inadequate, so that we must depend on the understanding and discernment of unbelieving judges. Second, it exposes, and contributes to, a rupture in fellowship among those who share a spiritual kinship. Third, it implies that “the things of this life” have paramount importance, and must be protected at all costs. And fourth, by insisting on justice in this world, it reflects a lack of confidence that the perfect justice of God will ultimately prevail.

This is a difficult passage, and not only because it challenges those of us who live in a litigious society, in which the courts are often the first recourse. It is difficult because our legal system differs from that of first-century Rome in significant ways. For example, in American courts the principle of equality before the law is honored as an ideal, even if it is not always achieved in practice. This was not true of Roman courts, in which bribery and corruption were commonplace, and the wealthy and powerful routinely received preferential treatment. In addition, our laws and legal system are ultimately derived from Scriptural principles. This heritage is illustrated by the fact that judges typically place their hand on a Bible when being sworn into office. Not to mention that many judges in this country are in fact Christians. And so it would be inaccurate to characterize our own civil courts, and the judges who preside over them, in the same starkly negative terms that Paul uses here. In addition, there are practical hurdles to overcome in applying this passage to present-day believers who attend different churches in different denominations, and whose leaders may have conflicting understandings of Biblical authority and conflict resolution. However, none of this relieves us of the obligation to take seriously this portion of the Word of God and to submit to it.

v. 1 The phrase “do you dare?” indicates that Paul does not view the practice of suing other believers merely as an inferior means of dispute resolution; he considers it to be an act of presumption, an affront to God. At root, it represents an attempt to remove a matter from the realm of God’s authority, as mediated through the church, and to place it instead under man’s authority.

Note that we are speaking only of civil matters; in criminal cases, i.e., matters in which it is not merely property or contracts which are at issue, but “punishment,” God has explicitly delegated this authority to the state (Rom. 13:1-4)

The term “ungodly” is used here in contrast to “the Lord’s people”, and so it has the primary meaning of “unbeliever”. But it also connotes unrighteous conduct and a lack of true wisdom. Earlier in the letter, Paul stated that those whom the world considers to be wise, but who do not know Christ, are in fact fools (1 Cor. 1:20-21, 25; 2:6; 3:19). It is the “fear of the Lord” which is the beginning of wisdom (Prov. 9:10), not a law degree. Therefore, choosing to take a matter before unbelieving judges for resolution represents an implicit rejection of God’s wisdom, and an embrace of the world’s foolishness and unrighteousness.

vv. 2-3 It is appropriate to take civil disputes before fellow believers, because God has entrusted to them the judgment of matters having much greater eternal consequence. On the last day, they will “judge the world” (see Dan. 7:22, 27; Mt. 19:28, Rev. 2:26-27, 20:4) and they will “judge angels” (i.e., the fallen angels who rebelled against God; Jude 1:6). If that is true, then surely they are competent, as they are aided by the Holy Spirit, to judge the comparatively minor concerns of this life. Consider that the wisdom and understanding required for such future judgments will come from the same God who promises wisdom now to those who ask (Jam. 1:5).

v. 4 There are two possible translations of this verse. The 2010 NIV, with the ESV, renders it as a question, “*do you ask?*”, and as referring to ungodly judges, “*those whose way of life is scorned in the church*”. In this rendering, Paul is expressing disbelief that they would submit questions of right and wrong to those whose immoral lives reflect a lack of true wisdom. The 1984 NIV renders it instead as a command, and as referring to believers, “*appoint as judges even men of little account in the church*”. In this reading, Paul is suggesting ironically that in matters of such relative unimportance, they could select even the least highly regarded church member to judge, and that would be quite sufficient.

vv. 5-6 Another reason that Christians should not take one another to court is that it is shameful to make public a family dispute. It is detrimental to the gospel and dishonoring to God, because it gives the watching world the impression that his people are not so different after all, raising doubts about his power to transform lives (see Jn. 13:35; 17:23). When we hear of a son suing his father or brother, we conclude that something has gone badly wrong in that family, and the same is true of spiritual brothers and sisters in the church. A better alternative is for the church to appoint someone from within the body to act as an arbitrator in such matters.

v. 7 Paul now delves more deeply into the spiritual issues at stake, questioning even the assumption that disputes must be resolved, reparations must be made, and things made right, in this world. God has promised a final accounting in which perfect justice will be done (Mt. 12:36; 16:27; Rom. 12:19; 14:10-12; 2 Cor. 5:10; Heb. 4:12-13). And so, even if we do suffer some temporary loss or injustice, even if we are wronged or cheated, what does it matter? If that happens, we can say with Paul that,

"I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ" (Phil. 3:7-9).

The fact that we often do not respond in this way indicates that we have already been "completely defeated," i.e. by Satan, as he has convinced us that the things of this world are what matter, rather than those of the world to come (Lk. 12:13-34; see Mt. 5:39-42). Even if we "win" a lawsuit against another believer, we have lost in the eyes of God.

On the other hand, perhaps we seek justice now because we know that our brother or sister will ultimately be forgiven by God, and if we do nothing, they will never have to pay! This was the response of Jonah, who became angry when God forgave the Ninevites (Jon. 4:1-2). But this attitude does not please God; nor does it recognize the truth that we are just as dependent on God's grace as they are (1 Jn. 1:8-10). If we are unwilling to extend forgiveness to others, we risk not receiving it ourselves (Mt. 6:14-15; Lk. 6:37).

v. 8 Rather than being willing to suffer wrong, or to be cheated without seeking recourse in the courts, Paul accuses the Corinthians of actually being guilty of wrongdoing themselves, and cheating others, even their own brothers and sisters in Christ. This indicates that the lawsuits at issue were not without merit; they were likely the result of real offenses.

vv. 9-10 Paul moves from the topic of willingly suffering wrong rather than going to court, to the more serious issue of those who were committing the wrongs in the first place. Several observations can be made here. First of all, that there is a standard of conduct for those who desire to enter heaven, and to consistently violate that standard is to render the hope of heaven more and more remote. Paul could not be more clear: those whose lives are characterized by the kind of evil acts listed here "**will not inherit the kingdom of God**". A "faith" which does not result in the

cessation of such behavior is a faith in name only; it has no power to save (see Mt. 7:21-23; Jn. 14:15, 21-24; Gal. 5:19-21; Eph. 5:5; Jam. 2:14-26; 1 Jn. 3:10). This is not because good deeds, or the lack of evil deeds, can save us or make us worthy of salvation; Paul is very clear on that point (see Rom. 3:9-23; Eph. 2:8-9; Titus 3:5; 2 Tim. 1:9). It is because genuine faith inevitably produces a change in our behavior. If there is no change in behavior, then there has been no transformation, no new birth, no essential change in our heart (Jn. 3:3; see Ezek. 11:19; 36:26).

Another observation is that some of the actions which Paul identifies as being so sinful that they prevent one from entering heaven are considered by our culture to be quite otherwise. Drunkenness, for example, is viewed as the result of an illness, for which the offender cannot be held morally responsible. Homosexual conduct is viewed as the product of a genetic predisposition, for which one should not be condemned. Others, such as sexual immorality or adultery, are regarded as minor transgressions which should be excused as the result of "needs" which cannot reasonably controlled, especially in the case of young people. And so we must heed Paul's caution that we not be "deceived". All of us are subject to wrong thinking on these matters. Thus, we need to be careful that we are not taken in, that our opinion of these things is derived from the Scriptures, rather than being shaped by the corrupt culture in which we live.

v. 11 Paul's identification of these vices as inconsistent with genuine Christian faith is underscored by his statement that such a lifestyle is in the past: "**that is what some of you were**". These sins are not unforgivable. But neither can one who has come to faith in Christ continue to live in them. Having been cleansed of the guilt of sin, having been set apart to God, having been declared righteous by God, we cannot return to our former way of life. If we do, then we reveal that we were not in fact changed at all (see 2 Pet. 2:20-22).

Note that Paul identifies salvation as being the work of all three Persons of the Trinity; we are justified "**in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ**", and "**by the Spirit of our God**".

Unit 8 – You Are Not Your Own

1 Corinthians 6:12-20

Text

¹² So I have the right to do anything,” you say—but not everything is beneficial. “I have the right to do anything”—but I will not be mastered by anything. ¹³ You say, “Food for the stomach and the stomach for food, and God will destroy them both.” The body, however, is not meant for sexual immorality but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. ¹⁴ By his power God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us also. ¹⁵ Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ himself? Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute? Never! ¹⁶ Do you not know that he who unites himself with

a prostitute is one with her in body? For it is said, “The two will become one flesh.” ^a ¹⁷ But whoever is united with the Lord is one with him in spirit. ^b

¹⁸ Flee from sexual immorality. All other sins a person commits are outside the body, but whoever sins sexually, sins against their own body. ¹⁹ Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; ²⁰ you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies.

^a16 Gen. 2:24 ^b17 Or in the Spirit

Open

- When you think of heaven, what do you picture in your mind?

Discover

1. What is the fundamental conflict at issue in this passage? (vv. 12, 19-20)

2. What do most people today believe concerning this issue? What does your life indicate that you believe?

3. What gives God the right to claim ownership over our us and our bodies? (vv. 19-20; Acts 20:28; Gal. 2:20)

4. What difference does it make to our lives that we were “bought with a price”? (vv. 19-20; see Rom. 6:16-22; 1 Pet. 2:16)

-
5. Where does the “freedom” to do whatever we want ultimately lead? (v. 12; see Jn. 8:34; 2 Pet. 2:19)
Can you think of any examples?

6. According to these verses, what kind of freedom do Christians have?

Acts 13:39

1 Cor. 9:21

Gal. 5:13

Eph. 5:12

7. What other kinds of freedom do we enjoy as followers of Christ?

8. What is the argument of Corinthians in verse 13? What is Paul’s response? (vv. 13-14)

9. Why is “casual sex” a contradiction in terms? (vv. 15-18)

10. How do we “flee” from sexual immorality? (v. 18) Is this really necessary?

Apply

- How would it affect your attitude toward sin and personal holiness to fully grasp the truth that your body is a part of Christ (v. 15), and that the Holy Spirit lives in you (v. 19)?
- Is your attitude toward sex shaped more by the Scriptures, or by popular culture (i.e., movies, television, novels, secular music)?

Commentary

v. 12 The Greek text which our translation is based on does not contain quotation marks, nor does it include the words, “you say”. These have been added by the translator to indicate that Paul is responding to the words of the Corinthians themselves, who are defending their “right” to do whatever they wish. Taken at face value, the statement, “*I have the right to do anything*”, is an assertion of radical independence, in which there are no external limits on behavior. The Corinthians are essentially declaring themselves to be free of external moral restraint.

Paul does not attack their flawed view of “rights” directly; that comes in vv. 19-20. Instead, he raises two objections which illustrate the poverty of their thinking. First, he answers that “*not everything is beneficial*,” i.e., beneficial to the community. The Corinthians were thinking only of themselves and their own rights. But everything that we do, even if done in private, affects others; at a minimum, it changes us, and that alters how we treat others. Second, Paul declares that “*I will not be mastered by anything*,” which cuts to the heart of the freedom which the Corinthians are claiming to have. Christ tells us that “everyone who sins is a slave to sin” (Jn. 8:34; see Rom. 6:17, 20). The “freedom” to do whatever one wishes leads ultimately to compulsion and bondage.

The specific situation that Paul is addressing concerns sexual immorality (Gr. *porneia*), specifically prostitution (vv. 15-16). This could refer to the sacred prostitution which is thought to have been a part of Roman religion. For example, the temple of the fertility goddess Aphrodite, which stood in Corinth until it was destroyed in 146 B.C., was described by the ancient writer Strabo as having 1,000 prostitutes. The use of the phrase “I have the right to do anything,” both to defend engaging in sex with prostitutes, and also to defend eating meat offered to idols (10:23), suggests such a link between idolatry and prostitution.

However, recently some have argued that cultic, or religious prostitution was not commonly practiced at Corinth or elsewhere. If so, then the prostitution Paul refers to would simply be that which was associated with feasting and revelry in general, which was connected only incidentally with pagan temples. In either case, the reference which Paul makes to the “temple” of our own bodies (v. 19) is likely an oblique reference to the Roman temples in and around which these sexual practices took place. In contrast to those, we are to keep the temple of our own body pure and undefiled, because it is the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit (Jn. 14:17; Rom. 8:9).

For us, the significant issue is not the question of whether it is acceptable to visit prostitutes in pagan temples. What is truly

at stake is the more fundamental question of whether we do in fact “own” ourselves and our bodies, having the right to do whatever we wish with them, or whether God owns us and our bodies, thus having the right to establish standards for how we use them. The answer, clearly, is the latter (see vv. 19-20).

v. 13 The Corinthian statement, “*food for the stomach and the stomach for food, and God will destroy them both*” contains two false arguments. First, it is an appeal to doing whatever comes naturally; i.e., that as God created us with stomachs and provided food to fill them, so also he created us as sexual beings and expects that we will freely express that sexuality. In this view, sex is simply a bodily function like eating, with no moral significance, and should be enjoyed as freely as one enjoys a good meal. Just as we feel no guilt in satisfying our appetite for food, we should feel no guilt in satisfying our appetite for sex. This argument, which sounds very familiar to modern ears, is an expression of body-spirit duality, in which deeds done by the body are thought not to affect one’s essential, spiritual, self. The emotional and spiritual damage suffered by those who follow this philosophy are tragic evidence of its falsity.

The second Corinthian argument is that all physical things, including our bodies and what we do with them, are temporary, and therefore have no lasting significance, “*God will destroy them both*”. Or, in other words, “*Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die*” (Isa. 22:13; see 1 Cor. 15:32). A 17th-century poetic expression of this view can be found in Andrew Marvell’s “*To His Coy Mistress*”, which begins,

*“Had we but world enough, and time,
This coyness, lady, were no crime.”*

And concludes,

*“The grave’s a fine and private place,
But none I think do there embrace.
Now therefore, while the youthful hue
Sits on thy skin like morning dew,
And while thy willing soul transpires
At every pore with instant fires,
Now let us sport us while we may;”*

The fact that these arguments continue to reoccur throughout the centuries demonstrates that, as Eccl. 1:9 tells us, there is “nothing new under the sun”.

Paul’s counter-argument is straightforward: that God did not merely create our bodies and leave it up to us what to do with them; rather, he created them for a purpose. That purpose is to serve and worship him, not to indulge in immorality. And whether or not we fulfill that purpose will have consequences which extend past the end of this world and into the next (2 Cor. 5:10).

v. 14 This verse refutes the idea that our bodies, and what we do with them, are insignificant. On the contrary, these very bodies will be raised to life, just as Jesus Christ was resurrected bodily. Recall that when the women went to the tomb where his body had been interred, they found it empty; his resurrection was not merely spiritual, but physical as well (Lk. 24:1-6, 36-42; Jn. 20:1-7, 26-27). So also will ours be (Rom. 8:9-11, 23; 2 Cor. 4:14; 1 Jn. 3:2).

v. 15 The phrase, “Do you not know?” is used here (and five other times in this chapter) to indicate that the Corinthians are either willfully ignoring, or simply denying, what they have been previously taught. Just as no one can tell them how to behave (v. 12), so no one can tell them what to believe. They are an authority unto themselves.

As for the point at issue, Paul reminds them that their bodies are “*members of Christ himself*”. Because we have been brought into union with Christ, our bodies, as part of our selves, are now part of Him, and all believers together are corporately the body of Christ (Rom. 12:4-5; 1 Cor. 12:12-27; Eph. 5:23; Col. 1:24). In this context, the term “member” does not indicate a relatively weak type of association, such as membership in a club or civic organization. Rather, it implies a much stronger connection, the kind of union that we have with the “members” of our physical body: our arms, and legs, and internal organs. That membership is not incidental or trivial; on the contrary, it is essential to our existence and identity. Thus, when Paul asks, “*Shall I then take the members of Christ and unite them with a prostitute?*” he is likening that form of adultery to cutting off Christ’s arms and legs and attaching them to a prostitute. This grotesque imagery, which is dramatic and even shocking, expresses Paul’s outrage at what the Corinthians were doing, and it represents his attempt to jolt them into an awareness of how depraved their values had become.

v. 16 Paul’s argument here is based on a quotation from Gen 2:24, “*the two will become one flesh*”, which describes the result of a man leaving his father and mother and being united with his wife in marriage. Elsewhere, Christ refers to this verse to emphasize the indissolubility of the marital bond, stating (Mt. 19:5),

“*So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.*”

Paul also refers to this passage to explain how marriage illustrates the relationship between Christ and the church (Eph. 5:25-32).

Here, his point is that, contrary to the false view of the Corinthians, sexual union is not casual or insignificant. It is not merely a matter of giving and receiving pleasure. It does not merely provide comfort, or express friendship. It is something far deeper and more profound. It joins the participants in a fundamental union, regardless of whether they intended that to be the case, or whether they even recognize this to be the case. In other words, there is no such thing as casual sex, although many foolishly approach it as such. The husband caught in adultery may protest to his wife that “she means nothing to me,” and may even mean it. But he is mistaken. And so even a seemingly unimportant encounter with a prostitute, with whom one has no intention of maintaining a “relationship”, has far-reaching spiritual implications.

v. 17 Not only are we one body with Christ, we are one spirit with him as well (Jn. 17:11, 20-23). This union comes through the Person of the Holy Spirit, who lives in us, and who is the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Christ, (Rom. 8:9, 11; 1 Cor. 3:16; 6:19; 2 Cor. 6:16).

v. 18 Paul’s word choice emphasizes the urgency of the matter: given the profound significance of sexual acts, it is not sufficient merely to “avoid” sexual immorality; we must “flee” from it, as Joseph fled from Potiphar’s wife (Gen. 39:6-12). This implies both an intentional decision to avoid known risk areas, as well as an immediate response to temptations that spontaneously arise. This is necessary because, against the false view of Roman culture, and our own culture as well, sexual immorality is not innocuous or harmless. It is self-destructive. The phrase “*against their own body*” regards the body as representative of the whole person. Thus, Paul is saying that because of the unifying nature of sexual conduct, sexual sin defiles us in a uniquely damaging way, both bodily and spiritually.

vv. 19-20 Because the Holy Spirit lives in us, we are a “temple”, or dwelling-place, of God (Rom. 8:9, 11; 1 Cor. 3:16; 2 Cor. 6:16). Therefore, to sin against our bodies through sexual sin is to desecrate the temple of God. Instead of defiling our bodies, we are to use them to honor God, who has the right to demand our obedience. In fact, we do not “own” ourselves at all. We are obligated to obey the one who saved us and who gave his life in exchange for ours (Acts 20:28; Rom. 6:16-22; Gal. 1:4; 2:20; Eph. 5:2, 25; 1 Cor. 7:22-24; 1 Pet. 1:18-19; Tit. 2:14).

Unit 9 – Marital Advice

1 Corinthians 7:1-16

Text

¹ Now for the matters you wrote about: “It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.”² But since sexual immorality is occurring, each man should have sexual relations with his own wife, and each woman with her own husband.³ The husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise the wife to her husband.⁴ The wife does not have authority over her own body but yields it to her husband. In the same way, the husband does not have authority over his own body but yields it to his wife.⁵ Do not deprive each other except perhaps by mutual consent and for a time, so that you may devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again so that Satan will not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.⁶ I say this as a concession, not as a command.⁷ I wish that all of you were as I am. But each of you has your own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that.

⁸ Now to the unmarried^a and the widows I say: It is good for them to stay unmarried, as I do.⁹ But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion.

¹⁰ To the married I give this command (not I, but the Lord): A wife must not separate from her husband.¹¹ But if she does, she must remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband. And a husband must not divorce his wife.

¹² To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her.¹³ And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him.¹⁴ For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.

¹⁵ But if the unbeliever leaves, let it be so. The brother or the sister is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace.¹⁶ How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?

^a8 Or widowers

Open

- Would you say that the last forty years of changes in our culture have been beneficial for marriages? Why or why not?

Discover

1. In the space below, summarize Paul’s instructions to husbands and wives concerning their sexual relationship (vv. 2-5).

2. Does this passage give a husband or wife the right to demand sex from their partner? Why or why not?

-
3. Paul himself was single, and he extols the spiritual benefits of the celibate life. Does this mean that marriage is an inferior choice for the committed Christian? (vv. 6-9; see 7:25-35)

4. In Ezra 10:1-17, the Jews were required to send away their non-Jewish wives, lest their hearts be turned away from Yahweh (see 1 Kings 11:1-6; Neh. 13:26; Ex. 34:11-16). Yet here Paul instructs Christians who are married to unbelievers to remain married (vv. 12-16). Why? What is different now?

5. What difficulties will believers who are married to unbelievers likely face?

6. How does the Bible elsewhere recommend dealing with this situation? (see 1 Pet. 3:1-4)

7. Is there any other counsel you would offer to a believer who is married to an unbeliever?

8. How do the views on sex and marriage expressed in this passage compare to the views which most people hold today?

Apply

- What would you say to someone who considers Paul's instructions in this passage to be unrealistic and uncaring?

Commentary

v. 1 Here, quotation marks have been added by the translator to indicate that the statement, '***It is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman***' is an assertion made by the Corinthians, which Paul is responding to in the following verses. We cannot be certain that this interpretation is correct, since we do not have access to the Corinthian letter which Paul refers to, but it is consistent with the pattern in 6:12-13, 8:1-6, and 10:23, in which he quotes a Corinthian statement, then responds with an adversative "but" or "yet" that introduces his own thoughts on the matter.

This interpretation is not without difficulty. Paul does speak approvingly of celibacy, at least for those who are able to experience it as a gift which relieves them of worldly concern, rather than as a hardship or deprivation (vv. 7-9, 28, 32-35). Thus, it would not be out of character for him to state that celibacy is "good". But this verse is not referring to sex in a generic sense, despite the way it is translated in the NIV.

In other ancient Greek literature, "touching" someone (here, Gr. *haptō*, rendered as "*to have sexual relations with*") has the connotation, not of having sex in general, but of using another person to gratify one's own sexual desires. It is sex that one does *to* someone, rather than *with* them. And so this statement by the Corinthians is unobjectionable, taken by itself; avoiding such exploitative sex *is* good. However, their statement also reflects a warped cultural perspective, in which there are only two kinds of sex: sex which is motivated by a desire for self-centered pleasure or dominance, and sex which is intended solely for procreation. In vv. 2-7, Paul offers a better alternative: sex in which the husband and wife are both committed to meeting one another's needs.

v. 2 One of the striking things about Paul's response is that it is nuanced and pastoral. He does not lay down one standard for everyone; e.g., that all should be married or that none should be, or that all should be sexually active or that none should. Rather, he reasons from principles which are applied to various life situations. Here, he argues that a man and his wife should have sexual relations with one another (and no one else), because attempting to abstain can lead to acts of sexual immorality (such as resorting to prostitutes; see 6:15). Note that this counsel is directed to both partners in the marriage; both have legitimate sexual needs and both should satisfy those needs within the marriage relationship. Note also that Paul is addressing the situation in which a marriage already exists; his thoughts on the advisability of entering into marriage in the first place are stated in vv. 8-9, 25-38.

v. 3 The responsibility specified here is mutual; the husband and wife both have an obligation to meet the sexual needs of the other. Note that the focus for each member of the marriage is on what they should do, not on what their partner ought to be doing. The requirement that each partner fulfill his or her marital duty does not imply a corresponding right to demand sex from the other, or to coerce them in any way; the consent must be voluntary. Recognizing sex as a legitimate "need" does not guarantee that this need will be met, or confer a right to demand that it be met, even in marriage.

All this talk of "duties", and of marital sex as a protection against immorality, may strike us as rather functional and unromantic, but it is undeniably realistic. Also, keep in mind that this does not represent the entirety of Paul's teaching on marriage, which elsewhere extols love, and the mystical "one flesh" union of husband wife (see Eph. 5:22-33; Heb. 13:4).

v. 4 Two things are striking about this verse. First, its mutuality. Unlike the common view in the ancient world, in which it was the husband who had unilateral authority over his wife and all members of his household, here both husband and wife are to yield to the other. In the matter of sex, both are to relinquish their "right" to do whatever they wish with their own bodies. The second thing to note is that this is a voluntary action. Paul does not say that the husband possesses authority over his wife's body as an inherent right, but that the wife voluntarily yields that authority to her husband. Similarly, the wife cannot simply assert authority over her husband's body; he must yield it to her as an act of obedience to God.

vv. 5-6 The word "deprive" (Gr. *apostereō*) means "to take away by unjust means"; it is translated elsewhere as "defraud" (Mk. 10:19), "cheat" (1 Cor. 6:7-8) and "rob" (1 Tim. 6:5). Thus Paul's command that the husband and wife not "deprive each other" strongly implies that to withhold sex is to deny one's partner of something that is rightfully theirs. Paul does allow for an exception when the purpose is to remain undistracted for the purpose of prayer. But even in this case, the decision to abstain must be mutual, rather than imposed by the more "spiritual" partner, and must be of limited duration. In this sense, abstaining from sexual activity could be viewed as a form of fasting. However, even this exception is "**a concession, not . . . a command.**" Paul is not requiring that couples abstain from sex during times of dedicated prayer, but allowing this as an exception to the general principle that they not deprive each other.

v. 7 Although he values the benefits of his own lifestyle (7:32-35), Paul recognizes that not all will be able to live as he does, in contented singleness and sexual abstinence. This ability must be given by God (see Mt. 19:10-11).

v. 8-9 Remaining unmarried has many practical benefits, as Paul indicates in vv. 25-35. Because of those benefits, the single life is a good choice for those who have been granted the gift of contented celibacy (see v. 7). However, for those who do not possess this gift, singleness is not the best option. Paul's direction to those who experience compelling sexual desires is that "**they should marry**". For such persons, which experience tells us is likely the majority, marriage is not a spiritually inferior choice, but a wise and prudent choice which pleases God. There is no advantage in remaining single when one is distracted by sexual desires, and at risk of being tempted by them into immorality.

The phrase "**with passion**" has been added by the translator to Paul's statement that "**it is better to marry than to burn**", to indicate what kind of "burning" Paul is referring to. This is likely correct, although it is possible that Paul is speaking of burning in hell, as a consequence of untamed sexual desires which lead one into immorality (see 1 Cor. 3:15; 6:9-10). However, in the context, the focus is not on judgment for sin; moreover, "burning" was a common metaphor for sexual desire in other ancient literature.

vv. 10-11 Several suggestions have been made as to why Paul chose to address the issue of divorce. Some may have been questioning whether his command not to associate with immoral people (1 Cor. 5:11) required a Christian to divorce his or her unbelieving spouse (see vv. 12-16). Perhaps some were advocating divorce in order to enjoy the spiritual benefits of singleness (vv. 25-35). And others may simply have been seeking divorce for the more pedestrian reason of wanting to marry someone else. The answer in all of these cases is that neither the husband nor the wife should separate from (i.e., divorce) their spouse. Paul's reference to this as a "command" emphasizes that he is now addressing, not merely a question of wise counsel, but a fundamental issue of right and wrong. Moreover, this command comes directly from the Lord; i.e., we have specific teachings of Christ to guide us (see Mt. 5:31-32; 19:3-12; Mk. 10:2-12; Lk. 16:18).

The statement, "But if she does," might seem to weaken the prohibition against divorce. Why give a command, and then follow it with instructions on how one should act if they disregard it? But in fact, this strengthens the command, because it tells us that even if one chooses to divorce, they still cannot do whatever they wish. They have an obligation to remain single indefinitely, or to reconcile with their partner. And so one of the strongest reasons to disregard the command not to divorce; i.e., the desire to marry another, is eliminated.

Does this prohibition against divorce, and against remarriage after divorce, admit

of any exceptions? The one which Paul identifies explicitly is that of abandonment by an unbelieving spouse (see v. 12). In addition, since he identifies this directive as the command of Christ, any exceptions which Christ acknowledged in his own teachings on divorce and remarriage would also be assumed here.

vv. 12-13 Should a believing husband or wife divorce an unbelieving spouse? Elsewhere, Paul writes of the inadvisability of establishing a close union with unbelievers (2 Cor. 6:14-17), and earlier in this letter he refers to his prior instruction against associating with immoral people (1 Cor. 5:11). We also have the example of Ezra requiring the Jews to put away their non-Jewish wives (see Ezra 10:1-17). But here Paul tells us that when a marriage is already in force, it must not be dissolved for the reason of religious incompatibility, assuming that the unbelieving partner is willing to remain married. The fact that Paul distinguishes this command as coming from him, rather than from Christ, does not mean that it is any less authoritative; it merely means that Christ did not specifically address this issue in his own teaching.

v. 14 Addressing concerns that in a mixed marriage, the believing, or "holy" partner would be defiled by the unbelieving, or "unholy" one, Paul indicates that the reverse is actually true. But in what sense is the unbelieving spouse "sanctified" through marriage to a believer? Clearly, this does not mean that they are saved, since Paul indicates in verse 16 that this is only a hope, not an accomplished fact. They have not experienced the new birth. However, by virtue of their union with a spouse who is united with Christ (vv. 15-17), they have been "set apart" to receive the influence of the Spirit, working through the prayers, the testimony, and the example of their husband or wife (see 1 Pet. 3:1-2). The implication is that they have entered a sphere of God's focused attention and power; that he is working in their lives in a uniquely personal way. And that is also true of their children.

v. 15 Although the believer is not to initiate a separation, he or she is free to consent if the unbelieving partner wishes to separate, and is also free to remarry (i.e., is not "bound") if this occurs. The statement that "God has called us to live in peace" could indicate that one should allow the unbelieving spouse to leave peacefully, without fighting them over the dissolution of the marriage. Or, it could be linked to the next verse, to indicate that continuing to live in peace with an unbelieving spouse may lead to their salvation.

Unit 10 – Advice on Marriage

1 Corinthians 7:17-40

Text

¹⁷ Nevertheless, each person should live as a believer in whatever situation the Lord has assigned to them, just as God has called them. This is the rule I lay down in all the churches. ¹⁸ Was a man already circumcised when he was called? He should not become uncircumcised. Was a man uncircumcised when he was called? He should not be circumcised. ¹⁹ Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing. Keeping God's commands is what counts. ²⁰ Each person should remain in the situation they were in when God called them.

²¹ Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you—although if you can gain your freedom, do so. ²² For the one who was a slave when called to faith in the Lord is the Lord's freed person; similarly, the one who was free when called is Christ's slave. ²³ You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of human beings. ²⁴ Brothers and sisters, each person, as responsible to God, should remain in the situation they were in when God called them.

²⁵ Now about virgins: I have no command from the Lord, but I give a judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy. ²⁶ Because of the present crisis, I think that it is good for a man to remain as he is. ²⁷ Are you pledged to a woman? Do not seek to be released. Are you free from such a commitment? Do not look for a wife. ²⁸ But if you do marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. But those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this.

²⁹ What I mean, brothers and sisters, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they do not; ³⁰ those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; ³¹ those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away.

³² I would like you to be free from concern.

An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs—how he can please the Lord. ³³ But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world—how he can please his wife—³⁴ and his interests are divided. An unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord's affairs: Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world—how she can please her husband. ³⁵ I am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord.

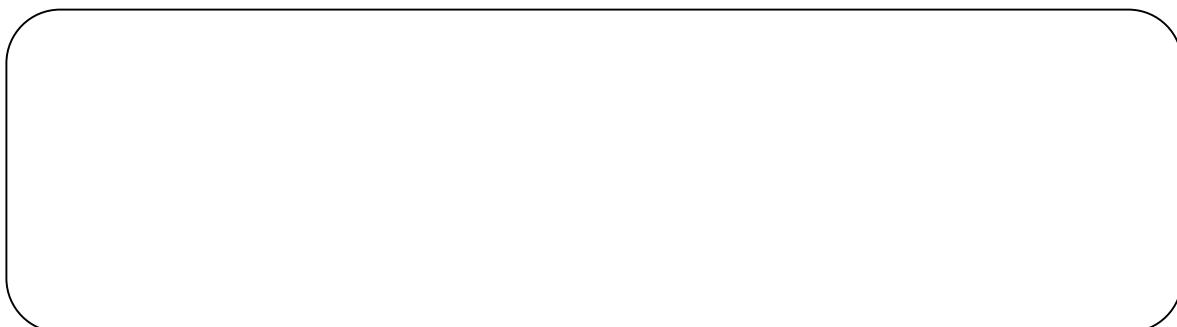
³⁶ If anyone is worried that he might not be acting honorably toward the virgin he is engaged to, and if his passions are too strong ^a and he feels he ought to marry, he should do as he wants. He is not sinning. They should get married. ³⁷ But the man who has settled the matter in his own mind, who is under no compulsion but has control over his own will, and who has made up his mind not to marry the virgin—this man also does the right thing.³⁸ So then, he who marries the virgin does right, but he who does not marry her does better.^b

³⁹ A woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, but he must belong to the Lord. ⁴⁰ In my judgment, she is happier if she stays as she is—and I think that I too have the Spirit of God.

^a36 Or if she is getting beyond the usual age for marriage ^b38 Or If anyone thinks he is not treating his daughter properly, and if she is getting along in years (or if her passions are too strong), and he feels she ought to marry, he should do as he wants. He is not sinning. He should let her get married. But the man who has settled the matter in his own mind, who is under no compulsion but has control over his own will, and who has made up his mind to keep the virgin unmarried—this man also does the right thing. So then, he who gives his virgin in marriage does right, but he who does not give her in marriage does better.

Discover

1. In the space below, list some of the key life circumstances that describe you, i.e., "I am married to _____", "I am a manager at _____", "I live in _____", etc.



Discover

2. What does this passage say about life circumstances that we may desire to change in order to fully serve and please God? Why does it matter that our circumstances were “assigned” to us? (v. 17)

3. Now look back at the answers from question 1. From a spiritual point of view, are they hindrances? Helps? Both? Neither?

4. When Paul advises that “Each person should remain in the situation they were in when God called them” (v. 20), is he forbidding all changes of employment, marital status, etc? What is his point?

5. What advantages of the single life does Paul identify? Is he saying that remaining single is the best choice for everyone? Only for some people? Why?

6. Should people who are married consider divorcing in order not to be distracted from serving God? Why or why not? Is the answer different if the partner is an unbeliever?

7. In what way is a slave truly “free”? In what way is a free citizen a “slave”? (v. 22)

Apply

Are you facing any decisions regarding a change in your life circumstances? How does this passage affect your thinking?

How might this passage help you deal with regrets about past decisions?

Commentary

The theme of this passage is that altering one's life circumstances—whether the change involves circumcision, or slavery and freedom, or singleness and marriage—is unnecessary. None of these things ultimately matters to God; the only thing that matters is “faith expressing itself through love” (Gal. 5:6; see 1 Cor. 7:19; Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11). This does not mean that change is prohibited. In many situations, if we have a preference for one state over another, we are free to make a change (v. 28), and even encouraged to do so (v. 21). But we don't have to alter our external circumstances in order to faithfully serve and please God.

- v. 17 In this verse we find a truth that will help us to accept our circumstances, and to serve God within them rather than seeking to escape them. Our situation, whatever it may be, was “assigned” to us by the Lord. It is not merely the result of random events, nor is it solely the product of the decisions and acts of human beings. God is sovereign, and in his sovereign wisdom and love, he has chosen these circumstances as the context in which we are to glorify him with our lives. This does not mean that we should never seek a change. Nor does it mean that we and other individuals had no part in shaping our present circumstances. What it means is that over and above all human causes, God has arranged our lives, with the intention that we should honor him through the specific circumstances in which we now find ourselves (see Gen. 45:5, 7; 50:20; Esth. 4:14; Ps. 105:16-17; Prov. 16:9; 20:24).
- vv. 18-19 As an example, Paul cites the Jewish rite of circumcision. Whether one had come to faith as a circumcised Jew or an uncircumcised Gentile, there was no need to make a change. Rather, “[c]ircumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing.” This is consistent with his teaching in Rom. 2:28-29 that,

A person is not a Jew who is one only outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code.

This does not mean that physical circumcision was never important. Under the Old Covenant it was absolutely required (Gen. 17:10-14). However, even under the Old Covenant, circumcision had no value in and of itself, but only as a sign of the internal, spiritual reality of faith (see Dt. 30:6; Jer. 4:4; 9:25; Rom. 4:9-12). And under the New Covenant, the need for this external symbol of faith has been eliminated (Gal. 5:6; 6:15; Phil. 3:3; Col. 2:11).

Note that when Paul continues, “*Keeping God's commands is what counts,*” he is not referring to the Law of Moses. Paul teaches elsewhere that the Old Covenant law has been superseded by the work of Christ (see Eph. 2:15; Gal. 5:18). Rather, he is referring to the teachings of Christ and the apostles (Mt. 28:19-20; Jn. 14:15, 21; 15:10; 1 Cor. 7:10; 14:37; Gal. 5:14; 2 Thess. 3:4, 6, 12). He makes this explicit in 1 Cor. 9:20-21,

To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law.

We are under an obligation to obey God's law. But that law is not the law of Moses, it is the law of Christ; i.e., the teachings of Christ and his apostles.

- v. 21 Slavery is an extreme case of a life circumstance which constrains one's ability to choose how they will serve God. Paul is not arguing that slavery is desirable, either for individuals or societies; he advises those who are able to gain their freedom to do so (see also v. 23). However, when that is not possible, he counsels slaves to not “let it trouble you”. In other words, they should not think that their indentured state has made them less acceptable to God, less able to serve him, or less able to be used by him. The same principle applies to those who feel limited by their job, marriage, family situation, or other circumstances.
- v. 22 The power and authority structures of this world, and the social strata it assigns to us, are not what matter; what matters is who we are in Christ (see Gal. 3:28). And so the fact that one is a slave is much less important than the fact that Christ has set us free from the Law and from sin (Jn. 3:32-36; Acts 13:39; Rom. 6:6-7; 8:2; 2 Cor. 3:17). Likewise, the fact that one is a free citizen is much less significant than the fact that we have become slaves to Christ (Mt. 20:26-28; Rom. 6:17-20; 1 Cor. 9:19). What defines us is our relationship to Christ, not our class, or caste, or status.
- v. 23 The admonition not to become “slaves of human beings” is fundamentally an appeal not to allow the judgments or demands of others to determine how we see ourselves, or take from us the right and obligation of making our own choices. Each of us, even one who is legally bound to obey another person, is an independent moral agent; each of us is “responsible to God” (v. 24). That responsibility trumps all others (Acts 5:29).

vv. 25-28 Here Paul addresses the question of whether those who have never been married should seek to marry, or whether they should remain single. Note that he does not present his words as an authoritative command, but as a trustworthy judgment: he refers to his preferred choice as “good” rather than required, and he makes clear that if one chooses to do otherwise, they “have not sinned”. However, this does not mean that we should disregard what he has to say on the matter; advice from Paul is certainly worth listening to!

His argument for remaining single is that marriage (and the children who would likely result) brings with it “many troubles”, especially in the present time of “crisis”. What was the nature of the crisis? We cannot say with certainty. Paul could have been referring to a famine, or to other economic or social problems of the time which would have placed stress on a marriage. He may also have viewed the tempestuous political events of that era as a gathering storm; i.e., as part of the upheavals that would precede the end of the world (vv. 29-31; see Mk. 13:3-5). Under such trying circumstances, Paul judges it best not to incur additional responsibilities and life complications. In other words, his advice here is driven by practical, rather than theological, concerns. A corollary today is that many young people delay marriage and family for four years while in college, and some may choose not to marry in the midst of an economic recession, or during a time of war or religious persecution.

On the other hand, with respect to those who are already “pledged,” i.e., betrothed or engaged, Paul advises them to follow through on their commitment.

vv. 29-31 Paul now provides a second reason for those who are unmarried to remain single: that “the time is short”. In other words, the days remaining until the return of Christ are limited; the countdown to the end has begun. As he states, “this world in its present form is passing away”. Note that the issue here is not the absolute length of time until the end, but the attitude we ought to have as those who are living in the final era of human history. We are to view the things of this life, including marriage, as temporary, contingent, and limited, rather than regarding them as having ultimate significance (Col. 3:1-2; Heb. 13:14).

In contrast to Thoreau’s stated purpose in *Walden*, to “live deep and suck out all the marrow of life”, it should be the intention of the believer, with regard to anything which they possess or have opportunity to experience, to treat these things “as if they did not” have them. This does not mean that we should abandon families, or refuse to go on vacations, or never enjoy a nice meal in a restaurant. What it means is that

we live moderately, that we choose to take less than full advantage of all this world has to offer, because our focus is on the world to come. The paradox is that by denying ourselves in this way, we will be the most fully alive of all people (Mt. 10:39; 16:25).

vv. 32-35 Paul is not saying it is wrong for a married person to be concerned about meeting the needs of their partner; on the contrary, it is entirely proper that they do so. And that’s the problem. A married man or woman, conducting themselves as they ought to do, is less able to focus solely on spiritual matters and must concern themselves more with the “affairs of this world”—things like providing for one’s family, and planning meals, and taking children to the doctor. Married people undeniably have less flexibility to do things like go on mission trips or spend time alone in prayer and Bible study. Paul is not prohibiting marriage for this reason (see v. 35). But he wants us to be realistic about the trade-offs involved.

vv. 36-38 The two leading views of this passage are that it concerns: (1) a father considering whether to give his daughter in marriage (see NASB translation); or (2) an engaged couple decided whether to go forward with their marriage. The first option is less likely, since the rest of the chapter deals with those who are directly involved in making a decision, and not a father making a decision on behalf of a daughter. Also, the term “his virgin” (NASB) is used nowhere else to refer to a man’s daughter. Instead, the phrase “his virgin” should be taken as referring to an engaged man’s fiancée. The concern that he is not “acting honorably” toward her could indicate either a difficulty in maintaining sexual purity, or that he is extending the engagement period beyond what is customary, “stringing her along”, as it were.

In any case, Paul affirms that to proceed with the marriage is permissible. However, it would be preferable for the engaged man to delay the marriage or end the engagement entirely, but only if he has a settled personal conviction that he should do so. In other words, he must take responsibility for his own choice.

v. 39 The statement that “A woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives” should not be taken as excluding any and all grounds for divorce. In context, this chapter is not a discussion of when it is permissible to divorce, but when it is permissible to marry. Here, the audience is widows; and the instruction is that they are no longer bound in any way to their deceased husband; they may marry anyone they like, as long as it is to a believer.

Unit 11 – Food Offered to Idols

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

Text

¹ Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that “We all possess knowledge.” But knowledge puffs up while love builds up.² Those who think they know something do not yet know as they ought to know.³ But whoever loves God is known by God.^a

⁴ So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that “An idol is nothing at all in the world” and that “There is no God but one.”⁵ For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”),⁶ yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.

⁷ But not everyone possesses this knowledge. Some people are still so accustomed to idols that when they eat sacrificial food they think of it as having been sacrificed to a god, and

since their conscience is weak, it is defiled.⁸ But food does not bring us near to God; we are no worse if we do not eat, and no better if we do.

⁹ Be careful, however, that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak.¹⁰ For if someone with a weak conscience sees you, with all your knowledge, eating in an idol’s temple, won’t that person be emboldened to eat what is sacrificed to idols?¹¹ So this weak brother or sister, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge.¹² When you sin against them in this way and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ.¹³ Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother or sister to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause them to fall.

^a3 An early manuscript and another ancient witness think they have knowledge do not yet know as they ought to know. But whoever loves truly knows

Open

If you could be granted PhD-level knowledge in one academic area, what would it be? What would you do with that knowledge?

What do you value more highly – that which is physical, intellectual, or emotional?

Discover

1. Do idols have any real existence, or are they all just creations of the human imagination? (vv. 4-5)

2. What are some key differences between the true God, and the inferior spiritual beings who are worshiped as idols?

| God | Idols |
|-------------------|--------------------|
| Jeremiah 32:17 | Isaiah 45:20 |
| Romans 11:33 | Isaiah 44:18 |
| Psalm 90:1-2 | Colossians 1:16 |
| Deuteronomy 10:17 | Philippians 2:9-10 |

-
3. In the space below, summarize what his passage tells us about “knowledge”. To prepare, circle each occurrence of the word “know” or “knowledge” in the text.

4. Although this passage is concerned specifically with the practice of eating food offered to idols, the principles can be applied to other practices. What are some examples?

5. Who is the “weak” in this passage? The “strong”? Which would you consider yourself to be?

6. How could the exercise of your freedoms in Christ actually become a “stumbling block” to someone else? What is the risk to them? To you?

7. How would you summarize Paul’s attitude toward our right to participate in activities about which believers have different opinions?

Apply

- If you believe that a certain practice is permissible, but another brother or sister in Christ feels otherwise, should you encourage them to participate in it? Why or why not?

Commentary

Beginning in this chapter, and continuing through chapter ten, Paul addresses the issue of whether it would be acceptable for Christians to eat food which had been offered to idols. This was not a trivial question. The Old Testament background to this passage includes Num. 25:1-3, in which the people of Israel participated in an idolatrous feast and provoked God's anger, which resulted in a plague (see Ex. 32:1-6; 34:15; Rev. 2:14).

Today many Christians do not live in cultures in which idolatry is widely practiced, such that the specific issue of eating food offered to idols might arise. However, the principles Paul lays out in this passage are useful in navigating a wide variety of circumstances concerning matters of Christian liberty and individual conscience. Paul's approach here, where no specific command applies, is not to create a new regulation, nor to focus on who is right and who is wrong. His teaching is far more radical: that we should begin by considering, not what would please us, but what would demonstrate love for our neighbor (see Lev. 19:18; Mt. 22:34-40; Rom. 13:8)

vv. 1-2 **"Now about food sacrificed to idols: We know that 'We all possess knowledge.' But knowledge puffs up while love builds up."** The phrase, "now about" indicates that Paul is responding to a question raised in the Corinthians' previous letter to him (see 7:1). The "food sacrificed to idols" could have been food served during a pagan religious celebration; or food served in a private home, which the host had 'blessed' by making an invocation to a pagan god; or even food used in a pagan ceremony, which was later sold in the market. It would not be a simple matter for a conscientious believer to avoid such foods; generally, one would have to inquire of the host or butcher in order to establish the spiritual provenance of one's meal.

The "knowledge" referred to here is the theological truth that there exists only one true God, and that all other spiritual entities are created beings who are subject to Him (see vv. 4-6; also, Deut. 4:35, 39; 6:4; Neh. 9:6; Isa. 43:10; 44:6-20; Ps. 86:10; 115:3-8). This monotheism was central to both Judaism and Christianity (Mk. 12:28-32; Jn. 1:18; 10:30; Rom. 3:30; Eph. 4:6; 1 Tim. 2:5; Jam. 2:19). But such knowledge, if it is not accompanied by love, is worthless (1 Cor. 13:2). It tends to result in pride, arrogance, and an inflated sense of one's own importance. Those who possess such sterile knowledge "**think they know something,**" but "**do not yet know as they ought to know,**" that is, they know *about* God, but they do not know him as they should; otherwise, they would love as he does (1 Jn. 4:7-21). The opposite of such self-exalting knowledge is not ignorance, but a humble love which seeks the welfare of others.

v. 3 **"But whoever loves God is known by God."** Even for those who do truly know and love God, what matters most is not that they know him, but that he knows them, and has known them from "before the creation of the world" (Eph. 1:4-5). His love for us is primary; our love for him is a response to his initiative in seeking us and calling us to himself. Thus, "we love because he first loved us" (1 Jn. 4:19).

A 19th-century hymn by an anonymous author expresses this truth:

*I sought the Lord, and afterward I knew
he moved my soul to seek him, seeking me;
it was not I that found, O Savior true;
no, I was found, was found of thee.*

v. 4 A logical consequence of *monotheism*, the belief in one God, is that the myriad of other "gods" which have been worshipped throughout human history are simply false. The Corinthians are making the argument that since these 'gods' don't really exist, there is no harm in participating indirectly in their worship by eating meat offered to them. Paul does not dispute their basic premise, that "**An idol is nothing at all in the world and that 'There is no God but one.'**" But he rejects their conclusion, i.e., that therefore any incidental participation in the worship of a false deity by Christians is harmless and meaningless.

vv. 5-6 Paul is not saying that the "gods" and "lords" which are worshipped in pagan religions have no existence whatsoever; on the contrary, he acknowledges that "**indeed there are many**". However, they are not genuine deities; they do not possess the divine attributes which characterize the true God. He is unlimited in power and strength (Isa. 14:27; Jer. 32:17; Lk. 1:37), while they are weak and unable to save (Isa. 45:20; Jer. 2:28; 11:12). His wisdom and knowledge are boundless (Job 5:9; Isa. 40:28; Rom. 11:33; Col. 2:3), but they lack understanding (Isa. 44:18). He is eternal and self-existent, while they are mere created beings (Col. 1:16). And most of all, he rules over them as an absolute sovereign; he is "God of gods and Lord of lords" (Deut. 10:17; see Ps. 135:5; 136:2; Dan. 2:47; 1 Tim. 6:15). Note that the reference to gods in "heaven" and "earth" is likely a comprehensive way of referring to all of these spiritual beings, wherever they might be (see Eph. 1:10; Phil. 2:10; Rev. 5:3, 13).

However, for the Christian, there is only God with whom we need to concern ourselves, eternally existing in three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He is the creator and sustainer of all things, the One through whom we have our life and for whom we live (see Isa. 4:25-26; Job 12:10; Acts 17:28; Col. 1:16; Heb. 1:2; 2:10; Rev. 4:11).

v. 7 Paul's point here is that a given act, such as eating food offered to idols, can be morally permissible for some while being impermissible for others, because their experience of it would contradict the dictates of their own conscience. In other words, the same act can be morally pure from an objective point of view, while being subjectively impure for some people. The person whose conscience is "weak" is the person who, although they may have been instructed that eating food offered to idols is not offensive to God, cannot do so without a lingering sense that they are doing something wrong. Although their head may be telling them it is perfectly fine to do so, they still feel guilty if they partake (see Rom. 14:14, 23).

Concerning the issue of eating food offered to idols, the "weak" would likely be a person with a personal history of having participated in idolatry before they came to faith, and who cannot, in their own heart, separate the eating of such food from the act of idol worship. In our day, the "weak" might be someone who was raised in a strict religious home where certain practices were considered to be sinful. Or it could be someone from a secular background whose views of right and wrong have been shaped by that culture.

The response of many "mature" Christians would be an attempt to persuade such a person to ignore their subjective feelings and to go ahead and partake. They would view this as a step toward theological maturity. Such persuasion might include the argument, valid in itself, that we should order our lives according to what the Bible says, rather than allowing our feelings to direct us. But Paul counsels the opposite. Rather than encouraging the one whose conscience is weak to violate their subjective sense of right and wrong, he urges those whose conscience is stronger to voluntarily restrict their freedom (see vv. 9-13; also Rom. 14:19-21). In this way, they will avoid leading the weak brother or sister into the spiritually dangerous territory of violating their own conscience. The term "destroyed" in v. 11 (see Rom. 14:15, 20) tells us that this is a very serious matter.

v. 8 This verse is likely a restatement of the general principle that eating, or not eating, food offered to idols is in itself a morally neutral act. But it has also been suggested that Paul is responding to an argument by the Corinthians, claiming that it is actually beneficial for them to eat idol food, since that will help them establish relationships with their non-Christian neighbors. In that case, Paul would be saying that to do so is unnecessary, as there are other ways to reach out to our neighbors which do not put the spiritual welfare of our Christian brothers and sisters at risk.

v. 9 It is important to understand that a "stumbling block" in the New Testament is not a minor impediment, but a serious threat concerning one's salvation. In other passages, one who stumbles over a stumbling block is revealing a lack of faith; for example, the Israelites who pursued salvation by works (Rom. 9:30-33), or unbelievers in general (1 Pet. 2:6-8). In addition, the urgent need to act decisively in removing a stumbling block, even to the point of (metaphorically) cutting off a hand, or foot, or eye (Mt. 18:8-9; Mk. 9:43-47), testifies to the great spiritual danger that a stumbling block presents. Thus, we cannot be cavalier about the effect of our actions on those who are less mature; rather, we must be mindful that we not create such an obstacle to faith. The consequences of doing so could be dire (Lk. 17:1-2).

For an Old Testament example of the seriousness of a stumbling block in the context of idolatry, see Ezek. 14:1-7. In that passage, the stumbling block causes the people of Israel to abandon God and return to the worship of idols. In response, they receive this prophecy:

"I will set my face against them and make them an example and a byword. I will remove them from my people. Then you will know that I am the LORD."

Note also that the exhortation to "be careful" frequently introduces a grave warning involving one's eternal destiny (see Lk. 21:34; 1 Cor. 10:12; Heb. 4:1).

vv. 10-11 This verse makes clear what risk Paul is concerned with. It is not that someone will take offense; Jesus was not overly concerned when the Pharisees took offense at his teachings (Mt. 15:1-13). The risk is that the weaker brother or sister will be led to imitate the actions of the more mature believer, even though doing so violates their conscience. Such an action would be sin for them (Rom. 14:23), and could potentially lead them into other idolatrous and sinful practices, since they lack the discernment to distinguish between what is acceptable to God and what is not. The ultimate consequences would be spiritually disastrous.

vv. 12-13 Not only is the "weak" brother or sister sinning by acting against their conscience, but by leading them to do so, whether intentionally or carelessly, the "strong" believer is also sinning, both against the "weak" and also against Christ. In order to avoid this, Paul would choose to "**never eat meat again**", rather than to cause another "**brother or sister to fall into sin**" by flaunting his freedom. In other words, for Paul, love trumps rights. Is that our attitude as well?

Unit 12 – Rights

1 Corinthians 9:1-23

Text

¹ Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not the result of my work in the Lord? ² Even though I may not be an apostle to others, surely I am to you! For you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.

³ This is my defense to those who sit in judgment on me. ⁴ Don't we have the right to food and drink? ⁵ Don't we have the right to take a believing wife along with us, as do the other apostles and the Lord's brothers and Cephas ^a? ⁶ Or is it only I and Barnabas who lack the right to not work for a living?

⁷ Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat its grapes? Who tends a flock and does not drink the milk? ⁸ Do I say this merely on human authority? Doesn't the Law say the same thing? ⁹ For it is written in the Law of Moses: "Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain." ^b Is it about oxen that God is concerned? ¹⁰ Surely he says this for us, doesn't he? Yes, this was written for us, because whoever plows and threshes should be able to do so in the hope of sharing in the harvest. ¹¹ If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you? ¹² If others have this right of support from you, shouldn't we have it all the more?

But we did not use this right. On the contrary, we put up with anything rather than hinder the gospel of Christ.

¹³ Don't you know that those who serve in the temple get their food from the temple, and that those who serve at the altar share in what is

offered on the altar? ¹⁴ In the same way, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel.

¹⁵ But I have not used any of these rights. And I am not writing this in the hope that you will do such things for me, for I would rather die than allow anyone to deprive me of this boast. ¹⁶ For when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, since I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! ¹⁷ If I preach voluntarily, I have a reward; if not voluntarily, I am simply discharging the trust committed to me. ¹⁸ What then is my reward? Just this: that in preaching the gospel I may offer it free of charge, and so not make full use of my rights as a preacher of the gospel.

¹⁹ Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. ²⁰ To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. ²¹ To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. ²² To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means I might save some. ²³ I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.

^a5 That is, Peter ^b9 Deut. 25:4

Open

How many of the Bill of Rights in the U.S. Constitution can you identify? Which is most significant to you?

In general, would you say that people in our society are too focused on rights, or not enough?

Discover

1. This passage deals with the choice of whether or not to claim one's rights. What rights could Paul claim as an apostle and as a preacher of the gospel? (vv. 4-6, 11-14)

2. Where did Paul's rights as an apostle come from? What was his evidence that this was true? (vv. 1-2; see Acts 26:1-23; Gal. 1:11-12)

-
3. What other arguments and analogies does Paul use to persuade the reader of his right to financial support? (vv. 7-14)

4. Given the above, what are Paul's reasons for choosing not to accept financial support?

5. How does Paul's attitude compare to that of the Corinthians?

6. Should we always give up our rights, or are there times we should not? (see Gal. 2:3-5, 11-14; 5:1-4; Col. 2:16-23)

How can we tell whether we should claim our rights in a given situation?

7. What kind of "slavery" is Paul referring to in vv. 19-23? Is this a good thing or a bad thing? Are you this kind of slave?

Apply

How do you respond when your rights are not recognized?

Are there any rights that you need to consider relinquishing? What would be the benefit of doing so?

Commentary

The connection between this passage and the preceding one is not immediately obvious. What does Paul's right to material support as a minister of the gospel have to do with eating food offered to idols? But in both cases, a fundamental issue is at stake, which is that there are times when it is appropriate to relinquish our rights, even those which are granted to us by God and central to the gospel, in order to advance the gospel.

In the case of eating meat offered to idols, what we are giving up is the freedom to eat what God has graciously provided. We are voluntarily limiting the exercise of our rights, because of the spiritual significance that others would (wrongly) attribute to the act of consuming such food. Here, it is Paul's right as an apostle, to earn a living from the work of ministry, that he is giving up. In both cases, we see that the mere possession of a "right" to do something is not sufficient. We must also ask ourselves whether exercising that right is the best, and wisest, and most loving course of action in a given circumstance. There are times when we must defend our rights for the sake of the gospel (see Gal. 2:4-5; 5:1; Col. 2:20-23), and there are times when we should relinquish them for the same reason.

vv. 1-2 “Am I not free? Am I not an apostle?”

Paul now builds the case that he has the right to be supported by those to whom he ministers the gospel. After all, one must actually possess a right before one can voluntarily give it up! He first appeals in a general sense to our shared freedom in Christ (see 1 Cor. 7:22; 9:19; 10:29; Gal. 4:26; 5:1, 13). All of us are free to live according to God's call on our lives, even when that clashes with societal norms, the expectations or demands of others, or the laws of men (Acts 5:29). Ultimately, we are accountable to God alone. And since God had not prohibited preachers from being paid for their services, he was free to do so.

But Paul's right to be supported by the ministry is even more firmly established, because he is an apostle, one who was called to that work by Christ himself (Acts 9:1-18; 22:1-21; 26:1-23; Gal. 1:11-12). And his apostleship is vindicated by the results of his labor among the Corinthians. Their faith is the evidence of his calling, it is the seal of his apostleship; they are God's “stamp of authenticity” on his ministry. Although others might deny the validity of Paul's calling, they could not do so, since they themselves were the fruit of it.

v. 3 “This is my defense . . . ”

The reference here is to the verses which follow, which detail Paul's reasons for refusing to accept financial support from the Corinthians for his work among them. This refusal required a defense, because it seemed to contradict his status and rights as an apostle.

vv. 4-6 These verses identify the rights that Paul has given up, while also giving us some information about the apostles along the way. The first right, that of being financially supported so that he would not have to work, is identified as “the right to food and drink”. Paul could have described financial support in terms of several material things he might need, such as clothing or a place to live. But this choice of phrasing brings home the contrast between Paul's attitude and that of the Corinthians, who were arguing for the full exercise of their right to consume “food” that had been offered to idols. Paul, on the other hand, was giving up his right to “food,” i.e., the provision of his physical needs.

Paul was also giving up the right to be accompanied by a wife, thus relinquishing the right to have his needs for sexual and emotional intimacy met (see chapter 7). His assessment of this as a “right” is bolstered by noting that the other apostles, including Peter, did not limit themselves in this way.

The drumbeat of repeated rhetorical questions, “**Don't we have the right . . . ?** **Don't we have the right . . . ? Or is it only I and Barnabas who lack the right . . . ?**” provoke in the reader an affirmative response: of course Paul and Barnabas have these rights! Thus, they were giving up these things not out of necessity, but as an act of voluntary sacrifice. The implicit message is that we should likewise be willing to give up our own rights.

v. 7 Again, the use of repeated rhetorical questions engages the reader as Paul appeals to common sense and common practice. A soldier does not support himself, but is supported by those who benefit from his service; i.e., the populace of his country. Likewise, a farmer, or the owner of sheep or cattle, is expected to benefit from the fruit of his labors. In the same way, ministers of the gospel have every right to expect that their material needs will be met through the faithful exercise of their ministry, by those who receive the benefits of that ministry. This is the principle; the details of its application are not here addressed, such as the appropriate level of support, or the specific means by which it is to be provided.

vv. 8-10 Paul's case is not based solely on everyday experience; he appeals to Scripture as well. The cited text, Deut. 25:4, is relatively obscure, and not obviously on point for Paul's argument. But he draws out its implications, reasoning from the lesser to the greater (compare Mt. 6:26-30; 10:29-31; Lk. 12:6-7, 24-28): if God takes care to ensure that even animals receive the fruits of their labor, shouldn't human beings benefit from their own work? In other words, shouldn't ministers be treated at least as well as oxen?

v. 11 Paul now argues from the greater to the lesser: He has labored to sow among them that which is “spiritual,” i.e., that which belongs to the realm to come, and which will produce in their lives a glorious, eternal, and imperishable result (1 Cor. 15:35-54). Certainly it is not too much to ask, then, that he be permitted to reap in the present age a harvest of those things which are merely perishable and temporary (see Rom. 15:27).

v. 12 Paul was the Corinthians’ “father” in the faith (1 Cor. 4:15), and so had as much right to be supported by them as anyone else would have. However, he had not claimed this right, nor was he doing so now (v. 15). He would rather “put up with anything,” such as the need to earn his own living, the lack of marital companionship, and other dangers and sufferings (2 Cor. 11:23-32), rather than risk hindering the gospel.

Why might Paul be concerned that accepting financial support from the Corinthians could negatively affect the progress of the gospel among them? He does not say, but in 2 Cor. 11:12-13 writes,

“I will keep on doing what I am doing [e.g. refusing to accept support from the Corinthians; see 2 Cor. 11:9-10] in order to cut the ground from under those who want an opportunity to be considered equal with us in the things they boast about. For such people are false apostles, deceitful workers, masquerading as apostles of Christ.”

Paul wants to make clear that he is not like those religious hucksters who are peddling their false teachings for the purpose of self-enrichment (see 1 Tim. 6:4-6; Tit. 1:11; 2 Pet. 2:3). He is not saying that to accept financial support from those whom one is serving will always pose a risk to the gospel. But in this specific situation, Paul felt a need to distinguish himself from those who were seeking to exploit the Corinthians financially. And he was willing to give up one of his rights in order to do so.

vv. 13-14 Paul now makes another argument for the financial support of gospel ministers; i.e., that this is consistent with the pattern established in the Old Testament, in which those whose vocation was full-time temple ministry were supported through that ministry (see Lev. 6:14-18, 24-29; 7:6-10, 14-16; Num. 5:9-10; 18:18-20; Deut. 18:1-5; 2 Chron. 3:14). His citation of the Lord’s command, that preachers should likewise receive their living from the gospel, is a reference to Jesus’ instructions in Lk. 10:7 (see Mt. 10:10; 1 Tim. 5:18), in which he sends out seventy-two evangelists to preach the good news, telling them to eat whatever they are given because “the laborer deserves his wages”.

vv. 16-18 When Christ called Paul to preach, it was an offer he couldn’t refuse; he was not invited, but appointed (Acts 26:9-19). His only choice was whether to do so “voluntarily,” in which case he would have a reward, or “not voluntarily,” in which case, although technically fulfilling his commission, no reward could be expected. We are reminded of Jonah, who initially sought to evade God’s call, but who came to understand, through a series of unfortunate events, that he could not do so (Jonah 1:1-3:3; see Ex. 4:10-17; Jer. 4:19; 20:9).

What is Paul’s reward for ministering voluntarily? A large income? No, his reward is the privilege of offering the good news of salvation “free of charge”, the opportunity to incarnate the gospel of grace by giving without receiving anything in return. Note that this is not normative; in many cases, an attempt to be completely self-supporting would be a hindrance to ministry. The point is not that all should follow Paul’s lifestyle, but that Paul considered it a gift and a privilege to be able to minister in this way, rather than a curse or a burden.

vv. 19-23 Verses 19-23 further develop this theme, as Paul explains that his choice to make himself a servant of others, even to the point of adopting their cultural and religious practices, was voluntary. It was an intentional strategy, with the goal of winning “as many as possible” to the faith. Thus, when he chose to comply with Jewish dietary laws, it was not because he had a personal obligation to keep the Law of Moses (see Rom. 6:14-15; 7:6; Gal. 3:23-25; 5:18; Eph. 2:14-16; Heb. 7:11-12; 8:13; 10:8-9); it was so that he could avoid giving offense to those who still lived by that law.

On the other hand, when among Gentiles, he took the opposite tack, freely adopting their lifestyle (to the extent possible without violating the commands of Christ), in order not to create artificial barriers to communication. By doing so, he made clear that the Christian faith is not bound to any specific national or ethnic culture, but transcends culture.

Paul was also willing to become “weak”; i.e. to accommodate those whose faith was weak, by refraining from doing things which would scandalize them, even though he knew God had not forbidden them. In every context, whether among Jews, unbelieving Gentiles, or young Christians, he was willing to give up his right to be personally comfortable, in order to bless others.

However, that when the integrity of the gospel was at stake, Paul did refuse to comply with demands that he obey Old Testament laws (Gal. 2:3-5; 11-14; 5:1-4; Col. 2:16-23).

Unit 13 – Run to Win

1 Corinthians 9:24-10:13

Text

²⁴ Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. ²⁵ Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever.

²⁶ Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. ²⁷ No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.

¹ For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. ² They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. ³ They all ate the same spiritual food ⁴ and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ. ⁵ Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered in the wilderness.

⁶ Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did. ⁷ Do not be idolaters, as some of them

were; as it is written: “The people sat down to eat and drink and got up to indulge in revelry.”^a ⁸ We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did—and in one day twenty-three thousand of them died. ⁹ We should not test Christ,^b as some of them did—and were killed by snakes.

¹⁰ And do not grumble, as some of them did—and were killed by the destroying angel.

¹¹ These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the culmination of the ages has come. ¹² So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall! ¹³ No temptation^c has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted^d beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted,^e he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.

^a7 Exodus 32:6 ^b9 Some manuscripts test the Lord

^c13 The Greek for temptation and tempted can also mean testing and tested. ^d13 The Greek for temptation and tempted can also mean testing and tested. ^e13 The Greek for temptation and tempted can also mean testing and tested.

Open

Have you ever won any medals or ribbons in sports competition, either as an individual or as part of a team?

What is your favorite sport to play? To watch?

Discover

- How is the Christian life similar to sports competition? How is it different? (vv. 24-27)

- Do you feel that you approach the Christian life in the way Paul describes in vv. 24-27? Why or why not?

- What are the benefits of living this way? What are the costs? What are the risks of failing to do so?

4. What point is Paul making in his appeal to the example of the Exodus generation?

5. What reasons did the ancient Israelites have to think that they were safe from God's judgment? (vv. 1-4)

6. How did they provoke God? What was the result? (vv. 5-10)

7. List some reasons you might have for thinking that you are "standing firm" (v. 12).

8. What is Paul's warning to us when we grow complacent in the Christian life? (v. 12)

9. What promise does this passage offer to those who are struggling with temptation or trials? (v. 13)
Have you found this to be true in your own life?

10. What do you think the "way out" that God provides might look like in various situations? How can we find God's "way out" in a given circumstance?

Apply

Are you as committed to your spiritual life as you are to your career? Your family? Your sports or hobbies?

What is one thing you can do this week to improve your spiritual "fitness"?

Commentary

Against a cultural backdrop of libertinism, Paul has been arguing for restraint and self-discipline among believers. The freedom we enjoy in Christ should be used to bless and serve others to the glory of God, not to indulge our own unbounded appetites (1 Cor. 10:23-24, 31; Gal. 5:13).

In 10:1-10, we will see that a failure to exercise self-restraint was spiritually disastrous for the ancient Israelites, who yielded to the surrounding culture's idolatry and moral decadence with fatal results. But here in vv. 24-27, Paul offers a counter-example to emulate: that of an athlete preparing for competition, whose gaze is so fixed on the hope of glory that he willingly denies himself anything which does not assist him in achieving that goal.

vv. 24-25 “Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize?” Paul’s athletic references would be very familiar to the Corinthians; their city sponsored the Isthmian games, one of the four major athletic tournaments in ancient Greece along with the Olympic, Pythian, and Nemean games. Although we may think of the modern Olympic games as a spectacle unique to our time, those games were just as famous in the ancient world, just as much a grand stage on which political rivalries and commercial interests were played out, elevating to star status the athletes who participated in them.

It is important to understand the metaphor Paul is using. His point is not that we are in competition with one another, or that the prize which we seek can only be attained by a few. The point is that we cannot be spiritually complacent, but must strive for holiness and self-mastery (1 Cor. 6:12). To do otherwise is to risk failure, as surely as would a professional athlete who carelessly neglected his or her training regimen. Yes, we recognize that the power to persevere in faith and obedience comes from the Holy Spirit (2 Tim. 1:7). But that does not relieve us of the need to discipline ourselves to make use of that power.

It is also important to note that for Paul, there is no conflict between the need for us to continually “work out” our salvation, even as God works in and through us (Eph. 2:12-13), and the fact that we are saved by grace alone through faith alone, and not on the basis of any works (2 Tim. 1:9; Titus 3:5-7). We are assured that God will finish the work he started in us (Phil. 1:6; 2 Tim. 1:12); both the initiation and the completion of our salvation are due to his grace and his power (Gal. 3:3). Yet we have a responsibility to cooperate with the work that God is doing by actively yielding to his Spirit, and this requires us to labor, and to strive, and to discipline ourselves for the purpose of godliness (1 Tim. 4:7-10).

“Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training.” What is the “strict training” that a Christian should practice? Physical exercise for the purpose of enhanced athletic performance is not what Paul has in mind; the goal is godliness, not gold medals. The term he uses here carries the connotation of self-control or self-mastery (see Gal. 5:23; 2 Pet. 1:6; Tit. 1:8). In light of the issues at Corinth, bodily discipline is certainly in view; i.e., abstaining from sexual immorality, sensuality, gluttony and drunkenness. Moreover, not only our bodies, but all aspects of our being need to be brought under subjection to Christ, including our speech (Jam. 1:26), our emotions and our wills. As Paul writes in 1 Tim. 4:7-8,

“... train yourself to be godly. For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.”

But against the error of libertinism as modeled by the Corinthians, some have gone to the opposite extreme of ascetism, abstaining from pleasure and even seeking out physical suffering. This is spiritually fruitless; as Paul writes in Col. 2:23, regulations concerning eating and drinking,

“have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence.”

Remember that even Christ was accused of gluttony (Mt. 11:9; Lk. 7:34).

As in many aspects of the Christian life, the key is our heart motivation. Are we humbly exercising self-control for the purpose of knowing and pleasing God? Or are we exalting ourselves through self-abasement, seeking to establish our own righteousness by abusing and denying our bodies? See Mt. 6:16 for an example of the latter.

“They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever.” The praise and honor lavished on even the most idolized athlete are fleeting and ephemeral, while the glory we seek by disciplining ourselves to serve Christ is eternal and indestructible (see 2 Tim. 4:8; Jas. 1:12; 1 Pet. 5:4; Rev. 2:10; 3:11).

v. 26 “Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly” Christians must exercise self-discipline in a purposeful and intentional manner, rather than haphazardly. This implies planning and thoughtful self-evaluation.

-
- v. 27 This verse is both shocking and sobering. Paul himself, the great apostle to the Gentiles, did not consider it impossible that he could fall short of an eternal reward, even after he had preached the gospel to others. He never considered that he had "arrived", but continued to strive for personal holiness (see Phil. 3:12-14).
- All of us, and especially those in vocational Christian ministry, need to take this warning to heart. Our vocation, our preaching and witnessing, our acts of service, and even our sacrificial support of Christian causes, will not save us if our hearts are not right with God (Mt. 7:21-23). We must be vigilant, lest self-indulgence beget spiritual laxity and ultimately apostasy (Mk. 4:16-17). As the following verses indicate, such was the tragic fate of many of the Exodus generation (vv. 1-12; see also Heb. 3:12-4:2).
- vv. 1-5 The key point in these verses is that membership in the visible people of God, participation in the blessings of God, and even an experience of miraculous deliverance and provision — none of these is a guarantee that one is truly right with God. The example Paul cites is God's condemnation to exile and death of those who were brought out of Egypt:
- "As surely as I live, declares the Lord, I will do to you the very thing I heard you say: In this wilderness your bodies will fall . . . They will meet their end in this wilderness; here they will die."*
(Num. 14:28-35)
- All of these people had been "under the cloud," having witnessed God's personal and continual presence in their journey from Egypt to Canaan (Ex. 13:21-22; Num. 9:15-23; 14:14). They had seen God part the Red Sea to allow them safe passage out of Egypt, then close it over the heads of their pursuers (Ex. 14:1-31). They had been "baptized into Moses," that is, united as a nation under Moses' leadership, and brought into a covenant relationship with God, of which Moses was the mediator (Deut. 5:1-5).
- In addition, they were cared for by Christ, who supplied them with food and water in the desert (Ex. 17:1-6; Nu. 20:2-11). Note that the food (quail and manna) and water were "spiritual", not in the sense that they were non-material or had sacramental powers, but in the sense that they were provided by the Spirit of God.
- The people experienced all of these wonders, and yet none of them, with the exceptions of Joshua and Caleb, entered the Promised Land, because at a critical juncture, they demonstrated their unbelief by failing to obey God's command to enter Canaan.
- v. 6 In the same way, some of those today who enjoy the blessings of membership in a church community, who have been baptized and consider themselves followers of Christ, and who may have experienced deliverance from some earthly trial or even witnessed miracles, will fail to enter heaven due to unbelief and disobedience (see Mt. 7:21-22; Heb. 4:1-3, 11; 6:4-8; 2 Pet. 2:20-22).
- vv. 7-11 Paul now lists the sins of the Exodus generation, that we may take heed of their tragic example and avoid their fate. First, we must shun idolatry (see Ex. 32:6). We should be especially be wary of the close association between adherence to a false god and the sins of drunkenness, gluttony and "revelry" (a term which implies sexual debauchery). Although most people today do not literally bow down before carvings of stone or wood, whenever we place our ultimate trust and hope in someone or something other than the true God—such as pleasure, wealth, power, comfort, security, influence, or reputation—we are committing idolatry (see Mt. 6:19-21; Lk. 12:32-34; Eph. 5:5; Col. 3:5).
- Likewise, we must not engage in sexual immorality (Num. 25:1-9), nor test Christ by accusing him of acting faithlessly toward us (Num. 21:4-9), nor grumble against God (see Ex. 15:24; 16:2; 17:3; Num. 14:2; 16:41). The penalty in the Old Testament for defying God in this manner was death, and unless we repent, the spiritual consequences of such disobedience in the present era will be no less severe (Heb. 2:1-3; 10:26-31).
- vv. 12-13 These verses contain a stern warning and a precious promise. The warning is that we must never imagine ourselves to be so spiritually strong that we cannot fail, and fail utterly. All of us, without exception, are subject to the same temptations, the same human frailties. If we rely upon our own strength of will, or wisdom, or knowledge, the result will be denying Christ, either by word or by deed (see Mt. 26:31-33, 69-75).
- However, the promise is that because God has given us his Spirit, we will never face a situation in which it is beyond our ability, by his power, to persevere in faith and obedience. Despite how we may feel, there is no such thing as an irresistible temptation, no such thing as an unbearable burden (Mt. 6:13; Rom. 15:13; Eph. 3:15-20; 6:10-11; Col. 1:9-12; 2 Thess. 1:11; 2 Tim. 1:7). But we must acknowledge our weakness and our need, as Paul did (2 Cor. 12:8-10; 13:4). If we do not, pride and self-confidence will surely make fools of us.

Unit 14 – Flee From Idolatry

1 Corinthians 10:14-11:1

Text

¹⁴ Therefore, my dear friends, flee from idolatry. ¹⁵ I speak to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say. ¹⁶ Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? ¹⁷ Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all share the one loaf.

¹⁸ Consider the people of Israel: Do not those who eat the sacrifices participate in the altar? ¹⁹ Do I mean then that food sacrificed to an idol is anything, or that an idol is anything? ²⁰ No, but the sacrifices of pagans are offered to demons, not to God, and I do not want you to be participants with demons. ²¹ You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too; you cannot have a part in both the Lord's table and the table of demons. ²² Are we trying to arouse the Lord's jealousy? Are we stronger than he?

²³ "I have the right to do anything," you say—but not everything is beneficial. "I have the right to do anything"—but not everything is constructive. ²⁴ No one should seek their own good, but the good of others.

²⁵ Eat anything sold in the meat market without raising questions of conscience, ²⁶ for, "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it."^a

²⁷ If an unbeliever invites you to a meal and you want to go, eat whatever is put before you without raising questions of conscience. ²⁸ But if someone says to you, "This has been offered in sacrifice," then do not eat it, both for the sake of the one who told you and for the sake of conscience. ²⁹ I am referring to the other person's conscience, not yours. For why is my freedom being judged by another's conscience? ³⁰ If I take part in the meal with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of something I thank God for?

³¹ So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. ³² Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God—³³ even as I try to please everyone in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved. ¹ Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.

^a26 Psalm 24:1

Open

If you could eat only one food for an entire year, what would it be?

If you had a one-way time machine that would allow you to live in any era from the past, where would you set the dial? Why?

Discover

- How did Paul make decisions about how to live? Describe his purpose in life and the principles which guided him (vv. 23-24, 31-33).

- How does this compare to the Corinthians' primary goal when making such decisions?

- Which of these two perspectives reflects the goals and principles which guide your life?

-
4. Case study: A friend from work is getting married, and you have been invited to the wedding. The bride and groom are devout Hindus, and their wedding will be a Hindu religious ceremony. Should you attend? What factors would influence your decision?

5. Paul says that he tries “to please everyone in every way” (v. 33; see Rom. 15:1-3). Yet elsewhere, he states that he is not trying to please people (Gal. 1:10; see 1 Thess. 2:4). How can these statements be reconciled? When is it appropriate to seek to please people, and when is it not?

6. Case study: when travelling to Japan on business, your Japanese host invites you to visit a famous Shinto shrine. Should you go? Why or why not?

7. In what sense are the gods of other religions (such as Hinduism or Shinto) real? In what sense are they not real?

8. How could eating, drinking, or other actions cause a Jew or a “Greek” (a secular or religious non-Jew) to “stumble” (v. 32)? What does “stumble” mean in this passage?

Apply

- Is there an area in which you have been seeking your own good, rather than the good of others, so that they might be saved (vv. 23, 33)? What change can you make this week?

Commentary

In verses 14-22, Paul makes a comparison between sharing in the Lord's Supper and eating food sacrificed to idols. He does this to make the point that for us to participate in a pagan ritual is displeasing to God, even though in our hearts there may be no intention of actually worshiping a false deity. Just as the Lord's Supper has a spiritual significance that transcends the simple act of eating and drinking, so also taking a meal in a pagan temple has a spiritual significance that cannot be separated from the act itself, and which is offensive to God. The broader lesson is that good intentions are not sufficient. Our actions must be guided by love and zeal, but also by wisdom and understanding (Col. 1:9-10; 2:2-3; Rom. 10:2).

- v. 14 This verse follows the promise that God will provide "a way out" when we are tempted, and it reminds us that often the wisest thing to do when facing temptation is to "flee"; that is, to remove ourselves from the situation as quickly as possible. As Shakespeare's Falstaff observed, "the better part of valor is discretion." There are times when it is necessary to remain steadfast and resolute in the face of temptation, and in such circumstances God will grant us the strength to persevere (Jam. 1:2-3). But to intentionally place oneself in a spiritually perilous situation, or to remain there once the danger becomes evident, can be a sign of pride rather than faith, a failure to acknowledge that the "spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak" (Mt. 26:41). It may be enjoyable to flirt with temptation while assuring ourselves that we will never succumb, but it is not wise.

- v. 15 "**I speak to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say.**" This verse is instructive in terms of how we should engage with those we deem to be in the wrong. Although the Corinthians are badly in error, both in their conduct and in their theology, Paul does not consider them to be beyond the reach of rational discussion and persuasion. He does not merely issue commands on the basis of his authority as an apostle, nor does he throw up his hands in despair. Instead, he marshals arguments and evidence to support his case, seeking to bring about a change of mind and heart (see Acts 18:4; 28:23; 2 Cor. 5:11). This does not mean that persuasion is solely a human effort; without the work of the Holy Spirit, our words would be ineffective in bringing about true spiritual change (see Acts 1:8; 1 Cor. 2:3-5, 12; Eph. 1:17).

- vv. 16-17 Paul's point in these verses is that when we partake in the Lord's Supper, we are not merely sharing a meal with friends, or satisfying our need for sustenance; we are participating in the very life of our God, Jesus Christ, through the ritual act of consuming his body and blood. We are

affirming that Christ is the source of our life, he who died, and rose again to life eternal. We cannot separate the spiritual significance of the meal from its social and physical aspects; they are inextricably linked. And thus, neither can we separate those components in the matter of eating food sacrificed to idols. We should not think that we can enjoy the non-religious aspects of a shared meal organized around pagan worship without becoming spiritually compromised.

In a secular Western culture, sacred celebrations are often distinct from everyday events, and so abstaining from non-Christian worship is a fairly straightforward matter. However, in cultures in which religion is interwoven into all aspects of daily life, it is more difficult to avoid participating in meals or other events which involve an invocation to a pagan deity. There may be a fine line between respecting the values of another culture and actually affirming or joining in its false worship. But it is a line we must take care not to cross.

- v. 17 "**Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body**" By sharing the bread of the Lord's Supper, we are indicating that we are joined together with other believers and with Christ Himself (Rom. 12:5; 1 Cor. 12:27; Eph. 1:22-23; 4:25; 5:29-30; Col. 1:18). Similarly, sharing a meal in the context of honoring or worshiping a pagan deity implies a union, not only with those gathered together and sharing the meal, but with the false god as well (see vv. 20-22).

- v. 18 Likewise, when the people of Israel consumed food which had been sacrificed on the altar, the meal was considered a part of the worship experience, rather than something entirely separate and distinct. Thus the principle, supported by both the examples of the Lord's Supper and Israelite worship, is that eating food which has been consecrated as part of a religious ceremony is an act of worship.

- v. 19-22 The argument being made by the Corinthians is that the "false gods" to whom the meat had been offered weren't even real. And so how could the eating of food offered to non-existent deities constitute worship? Is Paul claiming that the "gods" which the pagans bow down to are real gods? No (1 Cor. 8:4-5). However, they are real spiritual beings, i.e., demons, or fallen angels (see Rev. 9:20). These demons masquerade as gods in order to deceive people. Thus, if we participate in their worship, we are complicit in that deception, and we provoke God to anger (Deut. 32:16-17, 21). We cannot have it both ways, participating in the Lord's Supper and also joining in meals which imply worship of false "gods", or demons.

vv. 23-24 In these verses, the Corinthians assert a general right to do “anything,” including consuming meat offered to idols. We might expect Paul to contradict this false assertion, but instead, he replies that they are asking the wrong question, and thus revealing that their problem goes deeper than mere theological misunderstanding. Theirs is not fundamentally an issue of wrong thinking, but of wrong motives. Their focus is on self, and their goal is to carve out the greatest possible latitude to act in whatever way they please. But their, and our, focus should be on serving others, rather than on pleasing ourselves (see Rom. 15:2-3; Phil. 2:3-4). That goal will lead to a very different set of questions.

vv. 25-30 These verses make clear that animal flesh does not become contaminated spiritually by having been offered in sacrifice to a false god. Nothing evil or impure attaches to the meat itself. Rather, it is the connection which is known to exist between the meat and the religious ceremony which requires that we abstain. If there is no known association, there is no problem: if we unknowingly eat meat previously offered to idols, we cannot be judged by anyone to have participated in the worship of those idols. Therefore, when purchasing meat, we are not required to establish its source and religious history. In such a case, ignorance is indeed bliss.

In fact, to be overly scrupulous would be to violate Paul’s directive: he does not merely say that making such inquiries is unnecessary; he instructs us not to do so. This may seem contradictory: given his strong warning against eating meat offered to idols, wouldn’t we want to avoid any possibility of committing such an offense? But not only is Paul granting as much leeway as possible to maneuver in social situations, he is also guarding an important theological truth. We, as believers, have the freedom to eat any kind of food. We are no longer under the dietary regulations of the old covenant, and we cannot be spiritually contaminated by what we eat (see Mt. 15:11; Acts 10:9-16; Rom. 14:14-21; 1 Tim. 4:1-4). Therefore, it is not necessary to establish the ceremonial purity of a meal before we partake, and we should not, by attempting to do so, imply that it is.

vv. 27-28 These verses deal with the question of how to respond to a dinner invitation from someone who worships a false god, or idol, given the possibility that any food served at the meal could have been previously offered in sacrifice to that deity. Here Paul treads a fine line between being “in” the world but not “of” it (Jn. 17:6-18). As long as the believer is unaware of any connection between the food and the idol worship, he or she can partake freely. Even if the host knows that such a connection exists, as

long as that fact is not communicated, it has no bearing on whether the believer should eat what is served. However, if the believer is informed of such a connection, the food must be (politely) declined, as consuming it could be construed as participating in the worship of the host’s false god.

vv. 29-30 Here, the “I” does not refer to Paul himself; he is using the personal pronoun in a universal sense to refer to any believer. These verses appear to express the Corinthians’ view that the partaking of meat offered to idols was ethically acceptable. But if that were the case, we would expect Paul to offer a rejoinder, as he does elsewhere after quoting the Corinthians (see 6:12-13; 8:1, 4-7; 10:23). In this case, it is better to view the rhetorical questions as asking, “what good does it accomplish if . . .” or “how does it benefit anyone if . . .”. And so Paul is asking the Corinthians to consider the effect of their actions on others. How does it benefit the watching world if the Christian consumes food offered to idols, knowing that unbelievers (and perhaps other less enlightened believers) will see that as an act of worship? What positive result will come from doing things that cause others to condemn the Christian as a hypocrite? The answer is, “none at all”. On the contrary, by openly flaunting the expectations which unbelievers have of Christians, we lead them to regard us and our faith unfavorably, and create unnecessary barriers to the gospel.

vv. 31-33 These verses address the purpose which should be served by the freedom we have in Christ. We must not regard that freedom as a license to please ourselves; rather, we should view our freedom as giving us the flexibility to please others, for their ultimate and eternal benefit. Unlike many religions, which are defined by a strict set of rules and regulations, ours is defined by a radical freedom, one which allows us to accommodate the cultural norms and social expectations of others, whether they are adherents of Judaism or another non-Christian religion, or pagan or secular, or even other Christians. We do this, not from a servile, obsequious fear of man, nor from a desire to be liked and accepted, but in order to eliminate anything which may stand in the way of someone considering and accepting the claims of Christ (see 1 Cor. 9:19-23). And so paradoxically, while we are the most free of all people before God, yet, for the sake of his glory, we willingly constrain our freedom for the sake of others.

Our ability to yield to the opinions and mores of others is not unlimited, however. We are not so free to please others that we can transgress God’s moral law in doing so (1 Cor. 9:21); nor can we bend when the integrity of the gospel is at stake (see Gal. 2:1-5, 11-14; 5:1-2).

Unit 15 – Head Coverings

1 Corinthians 11:2-16

Text

² I praise you for remembering me in everything and for holding to the traditions just as I passed them on to you. ³ But I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, ^a and the head of Christ is God. ⁴ Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head. ⁵ But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head—it is the same as having her head shaved. ⁶ For if a woman does not cover her head, she might as well have her hair cut off; but if it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, then she should cover her head.

⁷ A man ought not to cover his head, ^b since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man. ⁸ For man did not come from woman, but woman from man; ⁹ neither was man created for woman, but woman for man. ¹⁰ It is for this reason that a woman ought to have authority over her own ^c head, because of the angels.

¹¹ Nevertheless, in the Lord woman is not independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. ¹² For as woman came from man, so also

man is born of woman. But everything comes from God.

¹³ Judge for yourselves: Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered?

¹⁴ Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him, ¹⁵ but that if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For long hair is given to her as a covering.

¹⁶ If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice—nor do the churches of God.

^a 3 Or of the wife is her husband

^b Or ⁴ Every man who prays or prophesies with long hair dishonors his head. ⁵ But every woman who prays or prophesies with no covering of hair dishonors her head—she is just like one of the “shorn women.” ⁶ If a woman has no covering, let her be for now with short hair; but since it is a disgrace for a woman to have her hair shorn or shaved, she should grow it again. ⁷ A man ought not to have long hair

^c 10 Or have a sign of authority on her

Open

- Do you dress differently today than you did ten, twenty, or thirty years ago? In what way?
- If you could make one rule regarding clothing, which everyone would have to follow, what would it be?

Discover

1. Paul's argument is that wearing a head covering in worship represented acceptance of a God-ordained authority structure, in which the roles of men and women differ because of their gender. How does our society respond to such an idea? How do you feel about it? Why?

2. One objection to a distinction in gender roles is that submission to authority is inherently demeaning to women. What do the following passages tell us about Christ's submission to authority?

Matthew 26:39

John 6:38

1 Corinthians 15:28

-
3. Does this mean that the Son has less dignity, worth, or power than the Father? Why or why not? (see John 1:18; Hebrews 1:3)

4. What does Paul mean by the statement, “the head of the woman is man”? (v. 3; see Eph. 1:22; 5:22-23; Col. 1:18; 2:10)

5. What does Paul mean by the statement, “woman is the glory of man”? (v. 7; see vv. 8-9; Genesis 1:26-28; 2:20-23)

6. What observation does Paul make about what is “natural” for men and women, concerning length of hair? (vv. 13-15) How does he apply this observation to the wearing of head coverings in worship?

7. What elements of this passage, if any, do you think are culturally limited, and which, if any, are universal? Why?

8. Are there practices in our culture which would have the same significance today as the wearing of head-coverings did in ancient Corinth?

Apply

- What would you say to someone who says, “What difference does it make? It’s just a scarf!”
- As a woman, what do you believe this passage calls you to do?

- As a man, what responsibility do men share for the negative response many people have to the idea of male headship? What does God call you to do to address that?

Commentary

In this passage, we encounter first-century social practices which were familiar to Paul and to his readers, but which are obscure to us, such as the use of head coverings (vv. 4-10). Other interpretive problems, such as the meaning of the term “head” in verse 3, or the cryptic reference to angels in verse 10, also present challenges. However, these difficulties should not distract us from the essential message of the text: that there are distinctions between men and women, distinctions which are not merely cultural, but which are founded in God’s design in creation. And we are to respect these distinctions in both practical and symbolic ways.

- v. 3 **“. . . the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God.”** The key interpretive question here is the meaning of “head”. It has been suggested that this term (Gr. *kephalē*) should be read as “source”. However, that meaning is not attested in any New Testament Greek lexicon. The examples sometimes cited from other Greek literature to support a translation of “source” refer to a river’s origins. However, the term is also used to indicate a river’s mouth. In other words, it can indicate either end of a river. This is consistent with the most common literal usage of the term in extra-Biblical Greek: to indicate the end(s) of a physical object, such as the top of a column. But when used figuratively, as here, it always indicates authority or leadership.

More significantly for our understanding of this passage, in Paul’s use of the term, the sense of “authority” is clear and consistent (Eph. 1:22; 5:22-24; Col. 1:18; 2:10; also Eph. 4:15; Col 2:19). This is also the meaning when the term is used in the LXX, or *Septuagint*, the Greek translation of the Old Testament used in Paul’s day (see Jdg. 11:8-11; 2 Sam. 22:44; Ps. 18:43).

Note that in the relationship between Christ and God, this hierarchy in function does not imply any inferiority in identity, dignity, or worth. Although the Son submits to the Father’s authority (1 Cor. 15:28; John 4:34; 6:38, 8:42; Gal 4:4; Phil. 2:5-11), he is nonetheless fully God, and co-equal with the Father (Jn. 1:18; 10:30; 12:45; 14:1; 17:21; Phil. 2:6; Heb. 1:3). Christ is not diminished in any way by his submission to the Father’s authority. Likewise, no distinction in value or significance is implied here regarding men and women.

The second question has to do with the Greek term translated as “man”, which can also be translated as “husband” (see Eph. 5:23). In this passage, Paul seems to move between the two meanings, here referring to the distinct identities of men and women generally, and then applying that principle to the husband and wife relationship specifically (v. 5).

vv. 4-6 **“Every man who prays or prophesies with his head covered dishonors his head. But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head—it is the same as having her head shaved.”** Later in this letter, Paul will provide general guidance on the purpose and practice of prophecy (see ch. 14). Here, he is addressing a more limited question, whether there is any difference between how men and women should conduct themselves when they pray or prophecy in public worship. For now, we will define the prophecy in view as bearing witness to the character and works of God, and note that it is something which both men and women are expected to do, unlike teaching adult men (1 Tim. 2:12; see Joel 2:28-29; Rom 12:6-7; 1 Cor. 12:28-29; Eph. 4:11; 2 Tim. 1:5; 3:14-15; Titus 2:3-5).

But what is the “covering” which women are to wear when praying or prophesying, and which men are not to wear? The meanings which have been suggested include the hair itself (i.e., long hair rather than hair that is short or shaven), or a piece of clothing, such as a scarf or veil. Recent scholarship favors the view that this was an actual garment, worn by married women to indicate their status as wives under the authority of their husbands.

Therefore, for a woman in that culture to remove her scarf when praying or prophesying in public would not be an appropriate exercise of Christian freedom, but a brazen rejection of male-female distinctions. This “uncovering” would be as scandalous as actually shaving her head, which is something that only a prostitute would do, or that an adulteress would be subjected to as a punishment. Removing the scarf in public worship would bring shame on her “head,” i.e., her husband. Conversely, a man who wore a head-covering when praying or prophesying would not be demonstrating appropriate humility before God, as he may have supposed. Instead, he would be acting in an unseemly manner, by failing to demonstrate respect for God-ordained gender distinctions.

This interpretation helps to explain why some at Corinth may have thought that women should forego wearing a scarf or veil in worship, perhaps taking literally Paul’s teaching that we all worship the Lord “with unveiled faces” (2 Cor. 3:18).

Does this mean that Christian women today should wear a head covering in church? Paul’s concern was not with head coverings *per se*, but rather with the cultural significance of wearing a head covering. And so the answer would seem to be no, at least not in societies where the wearing of a veil or scarf no longer carries the same meaning as it did in first-century Rome. However, there may be other practices which in our own culture indicate respect for male-female distinctions, and which this passage would encourage us to follow.

vv. 7-9 Paul now makes an argument that is based on the order of creation as recounted in Genesis. Note that he does not say woman is the “image” of man, implying that she is not made in God’s image; that would contradict Genesis 1:27, “*God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.*” Rather, she is the “glory” of man, which refers to Eve’s origin as being created from Adam’s body (Gen. 2:21-23), and to her status as having been created to be his “helper” (Gen. 2:20). She was created “for” man, not in the sense of being his servant or plaything, but in the sense that she was needed to help him accomplish his work. Together with Adam, she was charged by God with the responsibility of filling the earth, ruling over it, and subduing it (Gen. 1:26-28). Woman is the glory, or reflected radiance, of man because she derives both her physical being and her God-ordained purpose from his.

v. 10 “*... a woman ought to have authority over her own head, because of the angels.*” Paul does not elaborate on this statement, and so any interpretation of this verse will be somewhat speculative. However, we know that angels do observe, and deeply care about, the actions of God’s people (1 Cor. 4:9; Lk. 15:10; 1 Pet. 1:12). And writing to Timothy, Paul cites this fact as a reason to follow his instructions on matters of church order and discipline (1 Tim. 5:21). We also know that angels were viewed (correctly) in the ancient world as beings of great power and authority; the author of Hebrews even deems it necessary to prove from Scripture that the Son was greater than angels (Heb. 1:4-13). When they appeared to men, the common response was fear (Mt. 28:5; Luke 1:11-12; 1:30; 2:10; Acts 10:4).

Thus, although there are certainly other interpretations, it seems most natural to read this verse as Paul telling his readers that the issue of head-coverings is not a trivial one, since angels—these majestic and awe-inspiring beings—are paying close attention to whether we are honoring God with our worship practices. When persons of great dignity and worth are watching, we should be even more careful to conduct ourselves appropriately (see Heb. 12:1).

vv. 11-12 Lest the discussion of male-female distinctions tempt anyone to pride or discouragement, Paul reminds us that neither man nor woman, as a gender, is self-sufficient. To the contrary, men and women are dependent on one another, beginning with the most fundamental aspect of their existence; their origin. Gen. 2:21-23 tells us that the first woman was created from the flesh of the first man,

but ever since that time, every man has come from the body of a woman (see Gen. 3:20; 4:1). Nor is that the final word, because both men and women proceed from God as our Creator, and depend upon him as our Provider.

vv. 13-15 “*Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him, but that if a woman has long hair, it is her glory? For long hair is given to her as a covering.*”

The argument in these verses is based on “nature”, a God-given sense of what is right and fitting, which is common to all of us as human beings. This innate sense is broader than culture, which is specific to a given society or people-group; it is a gift of common grace, something shared by people generally. In contemporary Western societies, the distinction between what is natural and unnatural has been greatly obscured. But even in today’s world, most people in most places, upon seeing someone with long hair, would assume it was a female rather than a male. The universal prevalence of this practice—of women wearing longer hairstyles and men wearing shorter ones—indicates that something more fundamental than local cultural norms is at work.

So here is the argument: people everywhere view long hair as appropriate to women, and short hair as appropriate to men. In other words, in comparing the hair styles of men and women, we see that men’s heads are relatively exposed, while women’s heads are relatively covered. Paul uses this observation to argue that in worship, a similar distinction should be practiced: women’s heads should be covered (by a scarf or veil), while men’s heads should have no such covering.

v. 16 “*If anyone wants to be contentious about this, we have no other practice—nor do the churches of God.*” Paul concludes with a final argument, based on the unanimous teaching of the apostles, and the universal practice of the churches of his day. The fact that no other fellowship had chosen to abandon the custom of women wearing head-coverings in worship should have been a clear indication to the Corinthians that such a course would be contrary to right order. Unlike many today, Paul did not view innovation in church doctrine or practice as creative and refreshing, but as disruptive and dangerous (see 1 Cor. 11:2). Thus, someone who chose to take a different course, even after Paul had clearly addressed the matter, would not be courageous, but “contentious”. Such a person was not to be admired, but shunned (see Tit. 3:10).

Unit 16 – The Lord’s Supper

1 Corinthians 11:17-34

Text

¹⁷ In the following directives I have no praise for you, for your meetings do more harm than good. ¹⁸ In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. ¹⁹ No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God’s approval. ²⁰ So then, when you come together, it is not the Lord’s Supper you eat, ²¹ for when you are eating, some of you go ahead with your own private suppers. As a result, one person remains hungry and another gets drunk. ²² Don’t you have homes to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God by humiliating those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? Certainly not in this matter!

²³ For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, ²⁴ and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me.” ²⁵ In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in

remembrance of me.” ²⁶ For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.

²⁷ So then, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸ Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup. ²⁹ For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves. ³⁰ That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. ³¹ But if we were more discerning with regard to ourselves, we would not come under such judgment. ³² Nevertheless, when we are judged in this way by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be finally condemned with the world.

³³ So then, my brothers and sisters, when you gather to eat, you should all eat together.

³⁴ Anyone who is hungry should eat something at home, so that when you meet together it may not result in judgment.

And when I come I will give further directions.

Open

- What were mealtimes like in your family growing up?

Discover

1. In this passage, Paul is addressing a problem with the practices of the Corinthian church. Describe the problem.

2. Based on this passage, what would you identify as the root cause(s) of this problem?

3. What should they be doing instead?

-
4. Why does Paul write that, “it is not the Lord’s Supper you eat” (v. 20)? Why not?

5. What could be the result of taking the Lord’s Supper in an “unworthy manner” (v. 27)? In the context of this passage, what does this phrase mean?

6. In what sense is the Lord’s Supper a “remembrance” (vv. 24, 25)? What are we to remember?

7. In what sense is the Lord’s Supper a proclamation (v. 26)? What are we proclaiming?

8. What is meant by the phrase “which is for you” (v. 24)? (see Romans 5:8-10; Colossians 2:13-14)

9. Jesus indicated that the cup of the Lord’s Supper represents a “new covenant”, one that was put into effect by his blood. What was the old covenant based on? In what sense is the new covenant “new”? (see 2 Corinthians 3:6-11; Hebrews 8:6-13; 9:13-15)

Apply

- Are there any practices in your church which tend to segregate people on the basis of class or socioeconomic status? On some other basis?
- Do you tend to fellowship primarily with people who are like yourself?
- What can you do personally to model the principles which Paul gives us in this passage?

Commentary

Paul returns to another aspect of worship, celebration of the Lord's Supper (see 1 Cor. 10:14-22). His concern is that the manner in which the Corinthians are observing this meal is not fostering unity within the body. On the contrary, it is accentuating class divisions between the rich and the poor. His response is to remind them of their common identity as members of the body of Christ.

- v. 17 Unlike in the previous passage, Paul can find nothing to commend in the Corinthians' manner of celebrating the Lord's supper. In fact, it is so defective that their meetings "do more harm than good"! The "harm" they have experienced as a consequence of improper Communion practice includes disunity (vv. 18-19), the humiliation of those without means (v. 22), sinning against the body and blood of the Lord (v. 27), bringing judgment upon themselves (v. 29), and even sickness and death (v. 30).

Note that in the following verses, Paul seems to assume that when the church came together as a body, they would share a meal; i.e., that this would be a standard element of their gatherings (see Acts 2:42; 20:7). However, neither he, nor Christ, nor any other New Testament writer, provided specific directions regarding the frequency of the Lord's Supper.

- vv. 18-19 When the Corinthians "come together" as a church, they are really not coming together as a unified body. On the contrary, there are stark divisions among them, based on socio-economic standing. And amazingly, some in the church regarded these distinctions as necessary and beneficial! In their minds, such practices as eating with those of the same class would make clear which among them enjoyed God's approval (i.e., the wealthy, whom they believed had been blessed by God due to their exemplary lives). Thus, to see the wealthy enjoying a sumptuous meal would be an incentive for the poor to strive for greater holiness! We may scoff at their foolishness, but it is the logical consequence of a form of "prosperity gospel" that equates financial blessing with godliness (see 1 Tim. 6:5).

- vv. 20-21 We do not know exactly what the Communion meals of the Corinthian church looked like. We do know that the believers were not eating together as one group (v. 33). Nor, according to this verse, were they eating at the same time, or eating the same quantity (or perhaps even quality) of food. The discrepancy was so great that some drank to become inebriated, while others went away hungry. In other words, their meals resembled feasts at the temples of pagan gods, or dinner parties at private homes, in which the wealthy would be served first, and served superior food, while the poor would receive what was left over.

Paul makes clear that such a meal cannot properly be referred to as a "Lord's Supper". The Lord who became poor for our sakes (2 Cor. 8:9) and who became a servant, rather than one to be served (Mt. 20:28; Phil. 2:6-8), would not be honored by a meal in which each one cared first and foremost for his own needs.

- v. 22 Perhaps the wealthy were underwriting the cost of the meal, and expected praise for this. Perhaps they thought it only fitting that, as the ones footing the bill, they should have the best and the most food. But Paul is not impressed by their generosity. Not only was the behavior of wealthy individuals creating artificial distinctions within the body of Christ, but it was humiliating those who were less fortunate. Paul is appalled by this. He directs that those who wish to eat and drink freely, without being concerned about the effects of their behavior on others, should do so privately, in their own homes, rather than at a public meal whose purpose is to bear witness to the death of Christ.

Note that Paul is not addressing here the issue of gluttony or drunkenness per se. Rather, he is concerned with the effects of eating and drinking on the gathered community.

- vv. 23-24 The "For" introducing these verses indicates that Paul is explaining why the meal being practiced by the Corinthians is not a true Lord's Supper. The form of the communion meal is not arbitrary, so that we may observe it in any way that seems good to us; rather, it was established by the Lord himself. Paul did not initiate or modify it, but took what he "received" from the Lord (either directly in a vision, or via the apostles), and faithfully "passed" it on, to the Corinthians and to us.

Paul's identification of the occasion as the night of Christ's betrayal may be simply an historical reference. Or perhaps he wishes to remind the Corinthians that not all who claim allegiance to Christ are truly his disciples (see 2 Cor. 11:13, 26; Gal. 2:4).

From a lexical and grammatical sense, the phrase, "this is my body," could be understood either literally or figuratively, and different Christian traditions have understood it in various ways. The Roman Catholic doctrine of *transubstantiation* holds that the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ when consecrated by the priest, although they retain the physical properties of bread and wine. Lutherans affirm the real presence of the body and blood of Christ "in, with, and under" the bread and wine; Reformed churches affirm a spiritual presence of Christ in the elements. Other Protestant denominations take a "memorial" view, and consider the elements to be only representative of the body and blood of Christ, rather than possessing any special physical or spiritual qualities.

The number of words, and the quantity of ink, which has been expended over the centuries to advocate one or another of these views indicates that it is not a trivial question. Its resolution is beyond the scope of this commentary. But even more important is the next phrase, “***which is for you***”, by which Christ indicated that his broken body and death were to be sacrificial and substitutionary; their saving benefits applied, not only to the apostles who first heard the words in Christ’s presence, but to any who would come to Him (see Jn. 10:16; 11:51-52; 17:20-21). By his death, Christ paid the penalty for sin, on behalf of all who are united with him through faith (Rom. 3:21-26; 5:8-10; 17-19; 8:32; 10:13; 2 Cor. 5:15, 21; Gal. 2:20; 3:13; Col. 2:13-14; 1 Jn. 4:8-10).

The command, “***do this in remembrance of me***,” affirms that we are to recall regularly the words and deeds of Christ, and especially his death and resurrection. But more than that, we are to consider the continuing effects of his work in our lives, so that his supreme act of sacrifice may bear fruit in and through us (see Jn. 15:1-8; Eph. 2:11-22; Heb. 12:1-4).

v. 25 “***This cup is the new covenant in my blood***” Through his death, represented by the shedding of his blood, Christ instituted a new covenant, or basis for relationship, between God and his people. This covenant is superior to the former covenant, which was established through Moses at Sinai on the basis of the Law, and it has superseded that covenant (Heb. 8:6-13; 9:13-15; see 2 Cor. 3:6-11; Heb. 9:16-28; 12:23-24).

v. 26 The Lord’s Supper is a public testimony to the self-sacrificing love of the Son of God. As Christ said, “*Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends*” (Jn. 15:13; see Jn. 10:11; Rom. 5:8; 1 Jn. 3:16). Thus, the way in which we celebrate the meal should be consistent with its inherent meaning; it should be done in a way that models love and self-denial, rather than callous selfishness.

The fact that the Lord’s Supper is to be observed “until he comes” provides a sober reminder that we need to be watchful and faithful, since the Jesus who rose from the grave as Savior will one day return as Judge (Acts 1:11; Mt. 16:27; 24:36-51; 25:1-46; Mk. 13:32-37; Lk. 21:34; 1 Cor. 3:12-15; Rev. 22:12).

v. 27 This verse warns against receiving the bread and cup in “***an unworthy manner***”. Many suggestions could be made as to what might constitute an “unworthy” celebration of the Lord’s Supper. However, in the context of this passage, it refers to taking the Communion meal in a self-centered way that demeans other believers and harms unity within the body.

vv. 28-29 These verses are sometimes taken as an appeal for each communicant to examine themselves in a general way, seeking to identify and repent of any sins which may be impairing their walk with God. But in the context, the focus is on our relationship with other believers, who, together with us, constitute the “body of Christ”. This recalls the words of Jesus, who taught that before coming to God in worship, we should seek to be reconciled to any brother or sister with whom we have a strained relationship (Mt. 5:21-24). This interpretation is also consistent with Paul’s summary statement in vv. 33-34.

Failing to do this may result in being judged by God. If we find this warning shocking, it may indicate that we do not attach the proper significance to the Lord’s Supper, or that we do not have an adequate appreciation for the holiness of God.

vv. 30-31 The fact that Paul is referring here to literal, physical weakness and sickness, rather than to spiritual lassitude, is made clear by the clause, “and a number of you have fallen asleep,” which is a figure of speech for death. Does this mean that all sickness and death among believers is due to this sin? No. Nor does it mean that those who are judged in this way are more guilty than others (see Lk. 13:1-4). But since “many” at Corinth were afflicted for this reason, it should at least prompt us to consider, if we are suffering from illness, whether this may be the cause.

v. 32 The purpose of this judgment, like the purpose of all God’s judgments toward believers, is not punitive, but redemptive. It is not intended to exact payment for sin, for Christ already paid the full price for the sins of God’s people. Rather, it is intended to bring us to repentance, so that we may not be condemned in the final judgment.

Someone might object that if we truly are believers, then there is no risk of being condemned, and thus no need for this discipline. They would be half correct. It is true that God will certainly save all who come to Christ in faith, and that none who belong to Him will be lost (Jn. 6:37; 10:27-30; Rom. 8:28-39; Phil. 1:6; 2 Thess. 3:3; 2 Tim. 1:12). But it is also true that God acts through means, and that discipline is one of the means he uses to keep us in the faith until the end (Heb. 12:5-11; Rev. 3:19).

vv. 33-34 In conclusion, Paul reiterates that the purpose of the Lord’s Supper is best served when it is celebrated together as one body, rather than in subgroups segregated by wealth or class, and when its focus is not the mere satisfaction of physical hunger, but the reinforcement of unity within the body.

Unit 17 – Gifts of the Spirit

1 Corinthians 12:1-11

Text

¹ Now about the gifts of the Spirit, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed. ² You know that when you were pagans, somehow or other you were influenced and led astray to mute idols. ³ Therefore I want you to know that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, “Jesus be cursed,” and no one can say, “Jesus is Lord,” except by the Holy Spirit.

⁴ There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. ⁵ There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. ⁶ There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work.

⁷ Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. ⁸ To one there

is given through the Spirit a message of wisdom, to another a message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, ⁹ to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, ¹⁰ to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, ^a and to still another the interpretation of tongues. ^b ¹¹ All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he distributes them to each one, just as he determines.

^a 10 Or languages; also in verse 28 ^b 10 Or languages; also in verse 28

Open

- Can you remember a favorite birthday gift or Christmas gift from your childhood? Why was it so special?

Discover

1. In the text above, circle each occurrence of the words “different” and “another”. What does the repetition of these words tell us about spiritual gifts?

2. Now underline each occurrence of the word “same” and “one”. What does the repetition of these words tell us about spiritual gifts?

3. Why is it significant that all three members of the Trinity are identified in verses 4-6?

4. What is the purpose for which God distributes spiritual gifts (v. 7)? What does this mean?

5. What do the phrases “in everyone” (v. 6) and “to each one” (vv. 7, 11) tell us about the gifts? Why is this significant?

6. In the space below, list the gifts that are mentioned in these New Testament passages:

Romans 12:6-8

1 Corinthians 12:8-10

1 Corinthians 12:28

Ephesians 4:11

1 Peter 4:10-11

7. What do you conclude from the similarities and variations among the lists? Do you think there could be gifts not identified in any of these lists? Why or why not?

8. How would you describe the problem(s) that Paul is addressing in this passage? In other words, how did the Corinthians’ attitude toward spiritual gifts need correcting?

9. How does this passage tend to correct those attitudes?

Apply

- How might this passage affect how you view the other members of your church?
- How might this passage affect how you view your responsibility to other believers?

Commentary

v. 1 Paul's statement that he did not want the Corinthians to be "uninformed" about gifts of the Spirit implies that they lacked knowledge and understanding in this area. This would be startling to them, if not offensive, as they were quite proud of their supposed insight in matters of religion and spirituality (1 Cor. 8:1, 10-11; 2 Cor. 11:6; also 1 Cor. 13:2, 8). But the Corinthians' intellectual and religious lives had been shaped by a pagan, polytheistic culture and were still influenced by that culture. Thus, their notions about spiritual matters needed to be examined and revised. Although we live today in a different culture, one which is aggressively materialistic and anti-supernatural, we have a similar problem and a similar need (Rom. 12:2).

The phrase "gifts of the Spirit" is an interpretive translation, but one that is accepted by most modern versions ("spiritual gifts" in ESV, NASB, NRSV). The meaning of the Greek adjective *pneumatikos* is literally "spiritual things", and is used by Paul elsewhere to refer to spiritual matters in general (1 Cor. 2:13) and to spiritual persons (1 Cor. 3:1), as well as to spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 14:1). For other examples of the use of this term, see Rom. 1:11; 7:14; 15:27; 1 Cor. 2:15; 9:11; 10:3-4; 15:44, 46; Eph. 1:3; 5:19; 6:12; Co. 1:9; 3:16; 1 Pet. 2:5.

v. 2 Although they are no longer pagans (this is something they *were*, not something they *are*), that background must still be taken into account. The fact that they were led astray reminds them that they share an hereditary susceptibility to deception (see 2 Cor. 11:3), which ought to engender humility. It also suggests that they have imported into their new life some false assumptions regarding spiritual matters, beliefs which seem reasonable based on past experience, but which come from the world, rather than from God. The phrase "somehow or other" indicates that this is true in general, regardless of the specific false gods or false ideologies they previously followed.

Paul's reference to the idols as "mute" underscores the fact that those false gods could provide no reliable revelation or guidance, a critique of idolatry which has ancient roots (see Ps. 115:2-8; Jer. 10:5; Hab. 2:18-19). It also implies that in seeking to understand such phenomena as prophecy and speaking in tongues, the Corinthians cannot rely on their past religious experiences with idols, which had no capacity of speech.

v. 3 Beginning at the most basic level of discernment, Paul states that "***no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says, 'Jesus be cursed'***". Was this warning really needed? Were people actually cursing Christ and claiming that they were led to do so by

the Holy Spirit? In the spiritual disorder of Corinth, that possibility cannot be excluded. However, it is more likely that Paul is making a point about the source and content of religious utterances. Statements which truly proceed from the Spirit of Christ will be consistent with the teachings of Christ, and with the apostolic revelation concerning Christ, because God is One and does not contradict Himself. Any teaching which differs significantly from that revelation (such as declaring Christ to be accursed) cannot be from the same Spirit (2 Cor. 11:1-4, 12-15; Gal. 1:6-9; also Jn. 12:49; 14:12; 16:13).

By contrast, no one can authentically identify Christ as Lord, both acknowledging his lordship and pledging personal allegiance to Him as sovereign, unless the Holy Spirit has enabled them to do so (see Jn. 6:44, 65; Acts 11:18; 16:14; 1 Cor. 2:12-14; Phil. 1:29; 2 Tim. 2:25). Although godliness does not imply infallibility, a trustworthy proclamation of the truth will be accompanied by a life which demonstrates submission to the Lordship of Christ, and thus the indwelling presence of the Spirit who reveals the truth about Christ (Jn. 15:26; 1 Cor. 4:17; 1 Thess. 1:5; 1 Tim. 4:16; 2 Tim. 3:10).

vv. 4-6 In a pagan context, the worshiper may go to many different "gods" for the benefits they seek; to one for relief from sickness, to another for success in business, and to still another for protection when traveling. But in Christianity, there is one God from whom all blessings flow (Jam. 1:17), and who exists eternally in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The variety of gifts, services, and workings do not indicate therefore a multiplicity of deities, but rather, one God working in many different ways. He is all-sufficient for our needs, "*able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us*" (Eph. 3:20).

The fact that, "***There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord***" ennobles the service of every believer, because it tells us that the worth of each person's service is defined, not by its apparent usefulness, but by the worth of the God who enables it. The statement that "***There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work***" reminds us that spiritual growth and fruitfulness in ministry come from God. We cooperate with Him in exercising faithful stewardship of the gifts he provides, actively seeking to employ them for his glory, but the result is the sovereign work of God. As Paul writes elsewhere, "*So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow.*" (1 Cor. 3:7; see Rom. 9:15-16; 1 Cor. 15:10; 2 Cor. 3:5; Phil. 2:13; Heb. 13:21)

v. 7 This verse contains several ideas. First, that the Spirit bestows gifts of ministry on “each one”. He does not limit the distribution of gifts to those of high economic and social status, or great wisdom or intelligence, or even deep piety. This is a profoundly egalitarian statement, bringing home the fact that we all stand equal before God, with no cause for boasting (1 Cor. 1:26-31; 4:7; Eph. 2:8-9; see Joel 2:28-29). His gifts are just that—gifts, not rewards—and are not based on presumed merit or worthiness.

The statement that they are given “for the common good” informs us that spiritual gifts are intended for ministry rather than the benefit of the recipient alone. But it also reminds us that each person in the church has a contribution to make, a contribution which has value, because God does not bestow worthless gifts. And finally, it reminds us that the exercise of these gifts in the life of the church is a manifestation of God’s presence and activity among us.

vv. 8-11 If we compare this passage with other such lists (Rom. 12:6-8; 1 Cor. 12:28-30; 13:1-3, 8-9; 14:26; Eph. 4:11; 1 Pet. 4:10-11), we see that none of them mentions all of the gifts or defines them with precision. Nor is a clear organizational structure evident. This tells us that it was not Paul’s goal to provide an exhaustive catalog, or a rigorous taxonomy, of spiritual gifts. Rather, he is illustrating the principle stated in vv. 4-7, that God has bestowed on his people a great variety of gifts, and that these gifts are distributed throughout the congregation.

The fact that Paul does not provide a complete list of gifts also leaves open the possibility that there are other gifts, other ways in which the Spirit may work through His people in the congregation, that are not mentioned in Paul’s letters.

In attempting to define the gifts, we should keep in mind that all of reality, which encompasses both the “natural” and “supernatural” realms, reveals the active hand of God (Ps. 135:6a; Mt. 6:10; 1 Cor. 8:5-6; Col. 1:15-17; Heb. 1:2-3). Therefore, a spiritual gift, although it comes from God, need not be a distinctly supernatural enablement. It can also be a natural ability which the Spirit sanctifies and directs, such as the gifts of serving and encouraging (Rom. 12:6-8; see also Ex. 28:2-3; 35:30-35; 36:1; Dan. 1:17).

Thus, a “message of wisdom” or a “message of knowledge” (v. 8) need not be a supernatural revelation of information, or a granting of insight not available by other means. It can also represent knowledge or understanding that is gained through the natural means of study and reflection, applied in a way that reflects Spirit-guided discernment.

v. 8 Although we usually distinguish between wisdom and knowledge, the latter being more concrete and practical and the former being more abstract and theoretical, they are linked together in the Scriptures as complementary and conjoined qualities (Ex. 31:3; 2 Chron. 1:10-12; Prov. 2:6, 10; 9:10, 21:11; Eccl. 1:16, 18; 2:21, 26; Isa. 11:2; 33:6; Rom. 11:33; Col. 2:3). Thus, Paul is likely not making a clear distinction between them here, but rather giving examples of the kinds of work that God does in and through human intellect.

vv. 9-10 **“faith . . .”** Since not all Christians have this gift, it is not saving faith. Nor is it the faith that calls upon God in prayer to act, in ways that are consistent with His ordinary Providence, as this is a common inheritance of the saints as well. Instead, it is a special kind of faith, in response to which God works miracles (1 Cor. 13:2; Mt. 17:20; 21:21).

“healing . . .” God is sovereign over the exercise of the gifts. And so someone with a gift of healing may not be able to heal every person of every disease. Paul exercised the gift of healing (Acts 14:8-10; 19:11-12; 28:7-9), and yet he was not able to rid himself of his own “thorn in the flesh” (2 Cor. 12:7-9; see also 2 Tim. 4:20).

“prophecy . . .” According to Paul’s description later in this epistle, the purpose of prophecy is “strengthening, encouraging, and comfort” (14:3); edification (14:4-5); conviction of sin (14:24-25); and instruction (14:31). The foretelling of future events does not seem to be in view here, but rather the proclamation of truth in a way that is specifically applicable to those hearing it.

“distinguishing between spirits . . .”

Prophecies are not to be accepted uncritically, but weighed carefully (14:29). This is likely the gift in view here; i.e., the ability to assess prophetic utterances to determine whether their source is indeed the Holy Spirit (see 1 Thess. 5:20-21; 1 Jn. 4:1).

“different kinds of tongues.” The usual meaning of the Greek term *glossa* is a known human language, such as was spoken under the Spirit’s influence at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-11). Although 1 Cor. 13:1 contains a reference to the tongues “of angels”, it does so in a passage in which the first example in each pair is a spiritual gift, and the second is an extreme, or even fantastical, extension of it. So for example, to exercise the gift of prophecy is a real possibility, but to “fathom all mysteries and all knowledge” (13:2) is not. And so, even if it were possible for someone to speak in angelic languages, 1 Cor. 13:1 would be an argument for it being a rare occurrence, rather than the common expression of the gift of tongues.

Unit 18 – One Body, Many Parts

1 Corinthians 12:12-31

Text

¹² Just as a body, though one, has many parts, but all its many parts form one body, so it is with Christ. ¹³ For we were all baptized by^a one Spirit so as to form one body—whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. ¹⁴ Even so the body is not made up of one part but of many.

¹⁵ Now if the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body.

¹⁶ And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason stop being part of the body. ¹⁷ If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? ¹⁸ But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be.¹⁹ If they were all one part, where would the body be? ²⁰ As it is, there are many parts, but one body.

²¹ The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you!”²² On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are

indispensable,²³ and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty,²⁴ while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it,²⁵ so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other.²⁶ If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.

²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.²⁸ And God has placed in the church first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, of helping, of guidance, and of different kinds of tongues.²⁹ Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles?³⁰ Do all have gifts of healing? Do all speak in tongues^b? Do all interpret?³¹ Now eagerly desire the greater gifts.

And yet I will show you the most excellent way.

^a 13 Or with ^b 30 Or other languages

Open

- Do you tend to be independent and self-reliant, or do you prefer to work with others to achieve your goals? What are the benefits and drawbacks of this approach?

Discover

1. What does it mean to say that the church is the “body of Christ”? (v. 27)

2. In the text above, circle each occurrence of the words “many” and “part(s)”. What do these words tell us about the people of God? (see v. 14) Why is this important?

-
3. Now underline each occurrence of the word “body” and “one”. What do these words tell us about the people of God? (see v. 20) Why is this important?

4. What are the body parts saying in vv. 15-20? Who do they represent? What is Paul’s response?

5. What are the body parts saying in vv. 21-26? Who do they represent? What is Paul’s response?

6. From questions 4-5, which group do you identify more with?

7. From this passage, which gifts should be more highly honored? Why?

8. What would be the results of following Paul’s teaching in this passage? What would that look like in the church? (see vv. 25-26)

Apply

- Are there any areas where your attitude or conduct might need to change as a result of studying this passage?
- As an exercise, go around the room and have the group tell each person what gifts they have seen them exercise, and how that has blessed the body of Christ.

Commentary

In this section, the interdependence of those who belong to Christ is emphasized, using the analogy of a physical body. Two subsections address the perspectives (both erroneous) of those who consider themselves to be inferior and thus unneeded (vv. 15-20), and those who consider themselves to be superior and thus self-sufficient (vv. 21-26).

- v. 12 One characteristic of cults and totalitarian states is an intolerance for variation of any kind. One must think, speak, and act in strict conformity with the group. However, in Christianity, unity does not require uniformity. In fact, the opposite is true: the variety of gifts and abilities represented among the people of God is an essential source of strength and blessing. Diversity is not a weakness to be overcome or a burden to be borne, but rather a gift to be celebrated. If anyone doubts the fact that God loves variety, they need only consider the millions of species which he created to inhabit the earth (Gen. 1:1-31).

Note that the metaphor of a body is not merely a convenient figure of speech to illustrate how the members of the church are to function, with each of the parts making its own unique and complementary contribution. It also tells us something about the nature of the church; i.e., that it was God's intention to make us one in Christ (Jn. 17:11, 21-22; see Eph. 3:1-6; 4:1-13), while still maintaining our individuality. When we are joined with Christ, we do not become part of an anonymous and undifferentiated state of being, as the Buddhist concept of Nirvana envisions. Nor is the individual merely a "drop in the great blue motion of the sunlit sea," as King Arthur declares in T. H. White's "The Once and Future King". No, even as we are corporately "*the body of Christ*", we are also "*individually members of it*" (1 Cor. 12:27 [ESV]; see 12:14).

- vv. 13-14 The phrase, "**baptized by one Spirit**" could also be translated "baptized into one Spirit" (ESV). The first option identifies the Holy Spirit as the agent of our baptism into Christ (see Rom. 6:3; Gal. 3:27), while the second identifies the Spirit as the medium or sphere into which we are baptized (see Mt. 3:11; Mk. 1:8; Lk. 3:16; Jn. 1:33). But in either case, the experience which this phrase describes is likely parallel with being "**given the one Spirit to drink**"; it is the divine act of regeneration, cleansing, and renewal that accompanies our conversion (Rom. 2:29; Titus 3:5), and which results in the Spirit's ongoing, life-giving presence in our lives (Jn. 4:13-14; 6:35; 7:38). Note that this is the experience of all believers: "we were all" baptized in this way, and "we were all" given the Spirit (see Rom. 8:9).

vv. 15-20 The imagery Paul uses here, i.e., talking body parts lamenting their lack of importance, is obviously absurd. His intention is to show how ridiculous it is for any person to regard themselves as less essential to the body of Christ than others. Several points can be made: First, every believer is an important part of the body, even if they do not see themselves as such. And so, if they neglect to exercise their gifts, they are withholding something which the rest of the body truly needs. God has put each of us in the body for a purpose; if we fail to carry out that purpose, the body will suffer as a result.

Second, the "grass is greener" phenomenon: no matter what contribution one is able to make, the tendency is to view others as being more significant, more authentically a part of the body of Christ. How many people in your church would consider themselves to be a part of the "core" or the "inner circle"? And yet, Paul tells us that all are important, not just a few.

Third, it is a very good thing that God doesn't allow us to choose our gifts, but instead distributes them according to His wisdom (vv. 11, 18). Otherwise, we would have ecclesiastical monsters, with several "hands" and no "feet", or a multiplicity of "eyes" but no "ears".

Note that this does not imply a fatalistic acceptance of who and what we are in the body of Christ. We should wholeheartedly embrace, and praise God for, the gifts he has bestowed on us. We should gladly use them and labor to serve God and his people with them. But we can also desire, and seek in prayer, other gifts (see 12:31; 14:1, 12-13). God, in his sovereign goodness, may grant what we request. Only let us keep in mind James' caution that we not "ask with wrong motives" (Jam. 4:3).

- v. 21 There have been attempts to relate the body parts mentioned here to specific functions in the church; relating, for example, the "eye" and "head" to those with leadership gifts, and the "hand" and "feet" to those with the gifts of service. In that scenario, Paul would be admonishing those with highly esteemed gifts to recognize their need of the more humble ones. That meaning is possible, but the broader point is that "no man is an island"; that none of us, regardless of our gifts, can survive and thrive spiritually without the contributions of those who are differently gifted. Note that it is not only the body as a whole which needs all the gifts to function properly, but that I as an individual am dependent on them. The eye and the feet are not saying, "the body doesn't need you," but rather, "I don't need you," a statement which Paul rejects. Every one needs every one.

-
- v. 22 “**those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable,**” The more we discover about human anatomy, the more this statement is validated. For example, the tiny ridges on our fingers that create fingerprints are essential to our ability to grip objects. And internally, we have many small bones whose importance is greatly disproportionate to their size, such as the “hammer”, the “anvil”, and the “stirrup”, structures in the ear which enable hearing. Many other examples could be cited.
- The point is that the “weaker” gifts are just as necessary as the “stronger” ones. In the second category we might include gifts of speaking, leadership, or miracles, while the first category might include gifts such as encouraging or showing mercy (Rom. 12:8). Note that those with the “weaker” gifts are not valued merely because the exercise of the other gifts requires a recipient, or because they represent an opportunity to exercise patience and charity. That is of course true, but it misses the point (and is also rather condescending). Those with the “weaker” gifts are indispensable because their gifts have value in and of themselves.
- vv. 23-24 The physical referent here seems obviously to be the sexual organs, which it is considered shameful to expose. They are clothed, thus honoring them with special treatment, while other parts of the body remain unclothed. Based on verses 24-25, it seems clear that these “honorable” vs. “less honorable” parts correspond to those in the body of Christ who are regarded as the elite vs. the common people; i.e., those of relatively high and low status.
- vv. 24-25 The point here is not that the hierarchy should be upended, with the common people being more highly honored than the elite, but rather, that the hierarchy should be done away with. All the members of the body should equally honor, and value, and care for one another. They should do this because they recognize that everyone’s gift is equally essential, both to the body as a whole and to themselves personally.
- How has God ensured this; how has he “**put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it?**” It may be that God tends to distribute the more desirable gifts to those of low social status, thus evening things out. Or perhaps Paul means that the greater care we render to those who are less capable is a way of honoring them, just as additional clothing honors the less presentable parts of our body. In either case, to publicly recognize and honor those whose faithful service would otherwise go unnoticed would certainly be a valid application of this verse.
- v. 26 This is a challenge to those who prefer to keep other members of the body at arms’ length. It is not sufficient for us to minister to other believers, or to pray for them, or to actively seek their welfare. All of those things are necessary, but this verse implies something deeper: an engagement at the emotional level which allows us to rejoice when they rejoice, but which also exposes us to suffering when they suffer. If the joys and sorrows of the Christians with whom we fellowship do not move us in this way, then we are probably distancing ourselves, not only from them, but from the Savior whose body they are.
- v. 27 While each of us may be a member of many different groups, none of them is as central to our identity, and to our temporal and eternal well-being, as our incorporation into Christ as a member of His body. And so our relationships with other members of that body are the most significant relationships in our lives (see Lk. 14:26).
- v. 28 Note that the sequence of the first three gifts likely reflects their relative value to the church, but this does not follow for the remainder of the gifts in the list.
- “**apostles . . .**” This designation is not limited to the Twelve (Lk. 6:13); it includes Paul (1 Cor. 1:1), Andronicus and Junia (Rom. 16:7), James (Gal. 1:19), Barnabas (Acts 14:14) and Jesus (Heb. 3:1). The “marks of a true apostle” include “signs, wonders and miracles” (2 Cor. 12:12).
- “**teachers . . .**” Teaching can be defined as proclaiming and explaining doctrine, including its practical implications, while prophecy focuses on the application of truth in specific situations. But these functions overlap, and one might well move freely between them in any given communication.
- “**helping . . .**” This may be the gift of providing assistance of various kinds to the people of God, in harmony with the work of the Holy Spirit (see Jn. 16:7 [ESV]; Rom. 16:2).
- “**guidance . . .**” The term used here is the same as that used for piloting a ship, and implies governance or leadership.
- vv. 29-30 The assumed answer to Paul’s rhetorical question is “no”. We do not all have every gift, and there is no gift that is given to every believer. Therefore, we must depend on one other.
- v. 31 The “greater gifts” are those which build up and edify the church (14:12). The “most excellent way” to do this is not by exercising any specific gift, but by following Christ’s command to love one another (Jn. 13:34; 15:12; see 1 Cor. 8:1; Eph. 4:16), as the next chapter will show.

Unit 19 – Love

1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Text

¹ If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. ² If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³ If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

⁴ Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. ⁵ It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. ⁶ Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. ⁷ It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.

⁸ Love never fails. But where there are prophecies, they will cease; where there are tongues, they will be stilled; where there is knowledge, it will pass away. ⁹ For we know in part and we prophesy in part,¹⁰ but when completeness comes, what is in part disappears.

¹¹ When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put the ways of childhood behind me. ¹² For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

¹³ And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

^a 1 Or languages ^b 3 Some manuscripts body to the flames.

Open

- Who do you know that personifies the kind of love described in this passage?

Discover

1. In your own words, state the main idea of this passage.

2. Why is love superior to spiritual gifts such as tongues, prophecy, and knowledge? (vv. 8-10)

3. Is it possible to exercise gifts of ministry without love? (vv. 1-3) What is the consequence of doing so?

-
4. What do gifts of ministry, even miraculous ones, tell us about someone's spiritual condition? (see Mt. 7:21-23; 24:23-24)

5. What does love indicate about someone's spiritual condition? (Mt. 7:15-20)

6. In the space below, restate in your own words the characteristics of Christian love that Paul identifies in verses 4-7. For each one, pray and consider whether your life reveals that characteristic. Place a check mark next to each one when you have done so.

7. How can we be, and do, these things? (John 15:1-17)

8. In verses 11-12, Paul compares our present level of understanding with what we will know in the future. Describe the three comparisons that he uses. What point is he making here?

Apply

Have you ever given, or served, out of motives other than love? What was the result? Are you doing so even now?

Choose one characteristic of love from this passage, and pray this week that God will enable you to express it more consistently.

Commentary

This is one of the most well-known chapters in the New Testament. Although it is frequently read at weddings, it does not deal with romantic love. Rather, it concerns the love that all believers are to show one another in Christ. In its context, placed between two chapters which address the issue of spiritual gifts (12 and 14), it emphasizes the superiority of love over all such manifestations. Not only is it love which gives those gifts their meaning (vv. 1-3), but love is eternal, while the gifts are temporary and limited (vv. 8-13).

This chapter echoes other statements in both the Old and New Testaments indicating that love for God, and love for one's neighbor, are at the core of what it means to live a life of faith and obedience (see Dt. 6:5; 10:12; 30:6; Lev. 19:18; Mt. 22:34-40; Mk. 12:28-34; Lk. 10:26-28; Rom. 13:8-10; Gal. 5:13-14; Jam. 2:8).

vv. 1-3 Paul uses himself as a hypothetical example, rather than the Corinthians, and so he avoids giving offense by implying that they are without love and are "nothing" (v. 2). In each of the examples given, he begins with a notable gift that is highly valued by the Corinthians, proceeds to a theoretical, intensified form of that gift, and concludes by stating that without love, even that more exalted form the gift would have no significance. In other words, love is so much greater than any spiritual gift that even if one were to exercise the gifts in a greatly heightened form, those displays would be meaningless unless accompanied by love.

v. 1 The usual meaning of the Greek term *glossa* is a known human language, such as those spoken at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-11). This does not exclude the possibility that God would enable one to speak in the language of angels; the Psalms refer to angels praising God (Ps. 103:20-21; 148:2; see Lk. 2:13). However, even if speaking in an angelic tongue were possible, the structure of verses 1-3 (see above) would argue for this being an extraordinary occurrence, rather than a common expression of the gift of tongues.

To speak in tongues without love as a motivation would render one merely "**a resounding gong or a clangy cymbal**", which is equivalent to saying that he or she would be "nothing" (v. 2); i.e., of no account as a servant of Christ.

Note that Paul does not say that the gifts themselves have no value when not exercised in love. The recipients may in fact benefit. But the one exercising the gift does not; he or she will "gain nothing" (v. 3). As an example of the principle that good can be done without spiritual benefit to the doer, consider those who cast out demons and performed miracles in Christ's name, but did not enter heaven because they were

not truly followers of Christ (Mt. 7:21-23). Consider also those who preached the gospel from "false motives"; Paul welcomed the fact that the gospel was being proclaimed, because its effects did not depend on the good will of those doing the preaching (Phil. 1:15-18). However, it is unlikely that such preachers would receive any reward from God for their labors (see Mt. 6:2, 5, 16; 1 Cor. 3:10-15; see 1 Cor. 9:27). The point is that ministry results are not always evidence of spiritual maturity, or even spiritual life (Mt. 24:23-24; 2 Thess. 2:9-11; Rev. 19:20).

v. 2 Paul had the gift of prophecy (Acts 13:1; 1 Cor. 14:37-38), and along with the other apostles was "entrusted with the mysteries God has revealed" (1 Cor. 4:1). However, he does not claim the ability to "**fathom all mysteries and all knowledge**", but states that "we know in part and we prophesy in part" (v. 9) and "now we see only a reflection as in a mirror . . . I know in part" (v. 12). Thus, the statement in this verse is a hypothetical, contrary-to-fact condition. Paul is saying that even if he were to have a greatly enhanced gift of prophecy, far beyond what he had actually experienced, it would not benefit him without love.

"and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing." The Greek text here reads, not "a faith", but literally "all faith" (ESV). Again, Paul is speaking hyperbolically: although he did have faith and did perform miracles (Acts 19:11; Rom. 15:19; 2 Cor. 12:12), he did not possess "all" faith, a faith so great that it could literally move mountains. But even if he did, it would be of no benefit to him unless exercised in love.

v. 3 **"If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast"** Charitable gifts are not always motivated by love. If the purpose is to "boast", i.e., to gain the approval of men, then exercising the spiritual gift of giving (Rom. 12:8; 1 Cor. 12:28, "helping") does not receive God's approval (see Mt. 6:2). Note that the original text does not include the phrase "to hardship". Omitting that phrase, the statement refers to giving all of one's possessions, or surpassing that, giving one's body, i.e. sacrificing one's life, for the benefit of others. But even this would have no meaning apart from love.

vv. 4-7 Paul now moves to a description of the type of love he has in view, a love which includes both feelings and actions. In living according to this kind of love, we are imitating Christ, who taught, "As I have loved you, so you must love one another" (Jn. 13:34; see Jn. 15:12; 1 Cor. 11:1; Eph. 5:2; 1 Jn. 4:11).

-
- v. 4 **"Love is patient"** Patience includes *forbearance*, i.e., tolerating the everyday faults and flaws of our brothers and sisters in Christ, rather than complaining about them, irritably rebuking them, or forsaking their fellowship (Rom. 15:1; Col. 3:13). Patience also includes *longsuffering*, the willingness to accept suffering over an extended period of time, rather than trying to escape it at the expense of others' welfare.
- "love is kind."** This is both passive and active; kindness sometimes involves meeting another's need in a compassionate way, and sometimes requires simply refraining from harsh words or actions, even when they could be justified.
- "It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud."** These negative qualities spring from a desire to compare oneself with others, which is foolish (2 Cor. 2:12).
- v. 5 **"it is not self-seeking"** Paul is not saying we should ignore own needs, whether they be physical, emotional or spiritual. But we are not to make those needs into absolutes which trump all other obligations. For example, we need adequate sleep, but we should be willing to sacrifice even well-earned rest on occasion (see Jn. 6:30-34). How do we know what God would have us do in a given situation? There are no simple rules, but the key question is whether our overarching goal is to serve ourselves, or to serve others.
- "it keeps no record of wrongs"** Love means being willing to live with an uneven "balance sheet," or better yet, not keeping a ledger at all.
- v. 6 Truth and righteousness are inseparable, as are wickedness and falsehood (Jn. 3:19-21; Eph. 5:9; 2 Thess. 2:12). If we abandon the weaponry of Christ (Eph. 6:14) and pick up the weapons of our enemy, we have already lost (see Jn. 8:44).
- And so, when we find ourselves employing falsehoods or concealing the truth, whether actively or passively, we are not acting in love, whatever we may tell ourselves about our motives. And if we find ourselves rejoicing when someone is treated unjustly, because we feel they deserve it, or because it brings about the outcome we desire, we are likewise not acting in love.
- v. 7 **"It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres."** The verb translated "protects" here would be better rendered with a sense of "endures" (as in 1 Cor. 9:12, "put up with"; and 1 Thess. 3:1, 5; see also ESV). Thus, it is parallel to the fourth quality in this verse, "perseveres". Love never loses faith in God or ceases to trust and hope in Him.
- v. 8 Love, unlike spiritual gifts, is permanent ("never fails"). It is a constant which links our life here and now with our life in eternity. The gifts, although wonderful, are only temporary. When Christ returns, prophecy, tongues, and special knowledge will be unnecessary; we will all see, and know, fully (v. 12). Therefore, we should focus more on what it means to live in love, because that will last forever (see v. 13; 2 Cor. 4:17-18).
- vv. 9-10 No matter how learned or gifted we may be, our knowledge of God in this life will always be partial and limited. Paul applies this to himself as well, even though he had been caught up to heaven and "heard inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell" (2 Cor. 12:2-4).
- In the context, it is clear that the time when the "completeness" comes is not, as some have argued, the completion of the writing of the New Testament. Rather, it is the time of Christ's return, when we shall see him "face to face" (v. 12).
- v. 11 History tells us that in 1273 the theologian Thomas Aquinas, author of *Summa Theologica*, suddenly stopped writing; he had a vision of heaven and declared that compared to the glory of God, his writing was "like straw". The difference between what is understood now by even the wisest and most learned, and what we will know and understand when Christ returns, is like the difference between a child's understanding and that of a mature adult; it is virtually beyond comparison.
- v. 12 At present, our knowledge of God is indirect. It is mediated through his self-revelation in Creation and His Word, and distorted by the limitations of our creaturely natures and by sin. But when Christ returns, we shall be utterly transformed. As John writes, "when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (1 Jn. 3:2; see 2 Cor. 3:18). In other words, we will see him in all his glory (Jn. 17:5, 24), a glory which he shares with the Father, a glory which was veiled in the incarnation, because in our present condition we cannot look upon it without being destroyed (Ex. 33:20).
- v. 13 Faith gives meaning to our lives here and now. Based on God's promises, it trusts him to govern and guide our lives according to his perfect wisdom and love, and believes that even our sufferings are part of his good purpose for us. Hope looks to the future, and the fulfillment of all God's promises (see Rom. 8:18-21; 28-30). With love, these are the greatest virtues of the Christian life, and greater than any spiritual gifts. But even they are temporary; when Christ returns, faith will turn to sight and hope will be fully vindicated (Rom. 8:24-25; Heb. 11:1). Only love will remain for all eternity.

Unit 20 – Prophecy Better Than Tongues

1 Corinthians 14:1-12

Text

¹ Follow the way of love and eagerly desire gifts of the Spirit, especially prophecy. ² For anyone who speaks in a tongue ^a does not speak to people but to God. Indeed, no one understands them; they utter mysteries by the Spirit. ³ But the one who prophesies speaks to people for their strengthening, encouraging and comfort. ⁴ Anyone who speaks in a tongue edifies themselves, but the one who prophesies edifies the church. ⁵ I would like every one of you to speak in tongues, ^b but I would rather have you prophesy. The one who prophesies is greater than the one who speaks in tongues, ^c unless someone interprets, so that the church may be edified.

⁶ Now, brothers and sisters, if I come to you and speak in tongues, what good will I be to you, unless I bring you some revelation or knowledge or prophecy or word of instruction? ⁷ Even in the case of lifeless things that make sounds, such as

the pipe or harp, how will anyone know what tune is being played unless there is a distinction in the notes? ⁸ Again, if the trumpet does not sound a clear call, who will get ready for battle? ⁹ So it is with you. Unless you speak intelligible words with your tongue, how will anyone know what you are saying? You will just be speaking into the air. ¹⁰ Undoubtedly there are all sorts of languages in the world, yet none of them is without meaning. ¹¹ If then I do not grasp the meaning of what someone is saying, I am a foreigner to the speaker, and the speaker is a foreigner to me. ¹² So it is with you. Since you are eager for gifts of the Spirit, try to excel in those that build up the church.

^a 2 Or in another language; also in verses 4, 13, 14, 19, 26 and 27 ^b 5 Or in other languages; also in verses 6, 18, 22, 23 and 39 ^c 5 Or in other languages; also in verses 6, 18, 22, 23 and 39

Open

- Do you play any musical instruments? If you could play any instrument, what would it be?
- Do you speak any foreign languages? How did you learn them?

Discover

1. If love is so much superior to gifts of ministry, as chapter 13 indicated, does that mean the gifts have little value? (v. 1)

2. What is the relationship between spiritual gifts and love?

3. Why is prophecy better than speaking in tongues?

-
4. What is the purpose of prophecy? (v. 3) How does this compare to the purpose of prophecy in the Old Testament? (see Jer. 25:29-31; 26:11-12)

5. What analogies does Paul make between speaking in tongues in church and musical instruments? What is the point of these comparisons?

6. What do you do that builds up the church? (v. 12)

7. Are you trying to “excel” at these things? How?

8. Is Paul saying that every Christian should speak in tongues? That every Christian should prophecy? (v. 5; see 1 Cor. 12:27-31)

9. How is the person speaking in tongues “edified” if they don’t know what they are saying? (v. 4; see 1 Cor. 12:14-15)

Apply

Did you use your capacity of speech this week to build up, encourage, and comfort others? How can you do so in the coming week?

Are you seeking to excel in one or more spiritual gifts to build up the church? Or are you a spiritual “spectator”?

Commentary

In this passage, and in the remainder of chapter 14, Paul responds to several problems with the practice of prophecy and tongues in the church. His response, as usual, is measured and thoughtful. He does not view the misuse of these gifts as a reason to ban them altogether. But neither does he permit them to be used in a manner that is disruptive and unedifying. The gifts must be exercised in love, for the purpose of building one another up. And their use must be regulated, so that they will benefit the church, rather than troubling it.

- v. 1 In the previous chapter, Paul extolled love as being superior to all the gifts. Having noted this, and considering the conflicts which can arise concerning them, the reader might be tempted to conclude that they are more trouble than they are worth. However, as Paul resumes his thought from 12:31, we see that this is not the case. They are from the Holy Spirit, and therefore good. In their proper place—i.e., when understood to be temporary, when viewed as subordinate to faith, hope, and love, and when appropriately governed—they are beneficial and desirable.

However, the gift most to be sought after is not the one which was apparently the most highly valued at Corinth, i.e. tongues, but rather prophecy.

- v. 2 This verse tells us several things about the gift of tongues. First, that it is a kind of prayer, a form of communication directed to God. This is in contrast to prophecy, which is communication directed to other people (v. 3). But the fact that tongues, as a form of prayer, are directed primarily to God does not mean they are not intended to be understood by people. On the contrary, public prayers are meant to be comprehended by the hearers, as well as by God (see Jn. 11:41-42; 17:1-26; Mt. 15:36; 26:26-27). Indeed, it is for this reason that tongues are to be accompanied by interpretation; because without interpretation, although understood by God, they are unintelligible to other worshippers (see vv. 5, 13, 27-28).

The statement that “no one understands them” does not mean that tongues are angelic languages which no human being could comprehend. Rather, it tells us that no one gathered in a worship service would be expected to understand them. Why? Because they are foreign languages, languages not spoken by those in attendance. In other words, this statement is not a definition of tongues, but a description of how they are experienced.

The things which are spoken “by the Spirit” are “mysteries”, not because the sounds are in another language and thus unintelligible, but because the content of the communication is a revelation from the

Spirit, as is the case with prophecy also. “Mysteries” in the New Testament are not things which cannot be understood, but things which previously were hidden in the mind of God, and which now have been revealed (see Rom. 16:25-27; 1 Cor. 2:7-10; 4:1; 15:51; Eph. 1:8-10; 3:1-6; 3:8-9).

- v. 3 Note that in the Old Testament, prophecy was often a word spoken in opposition to sin and disobedience, a message of rebuke or condemnation (see 2 Chr. 24:18-20; Jer. 25:29-31; 26:11-12); while in the New Testament, the purpose of prophecy is to strengthen, to encourage and to comfort.

Note also that great power is ascribed to our speech. James warns of the potential destructive force of words (Jam. 3:1-8), but here Paul focuses on their power to nourish, to build up, to motivate, and to heal. It really is quite amazing that merely by speaking, we can shore up someone’s faith, renew their hope, refresh their spirit, and influence them to walk with God in joy and obedience (Acts 11:23; 14:21-22; 15:32; 20:2; 2 Cor. 12:19; Eph. 4:29; 1 Thess. 3:2; 4:18; Heb. 3:13). Since that is the case, what prevents us from doing it more often?

- vv. 4-5 The fact that speaking in tongues is beneficial solely to the speaker is not a criticism of the gift, but rather a limitation. In fact, Paul would be happy if every believer possessed this gift! (v. 5) But tongues have no ability to edify others unless interpreted, and so should not be used in corporate worship when no interpreter is available, when the only benefit would be to the individual who is speaking (1 Cor. 14:27-28).

By contrast, the one who prophesies edifies not only themselves, but the entire gathered body of believers. And so the one who prophesies is “greater”, by virtue of the fact that they are exercising a more useful ministry.

We might ask how one who speaks in tongues is edified, if they do not understand what they are saying. Paul’s answer is that *“If I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful”* (1 Cor. 12:14-15). In other words, when speaking in tongues, there is a communion with God in one’s spirit which does not engage the mind. But by definition, such an experience is interior and private; it cannot be shared with others, and so is inappropriate for use in a group context unless accompanied by interpretation.

-
- v. 6 Paul again uses himself as a hypothetical example, in order to avoid aiming his criticism directly at the Corinthians. If he were to attempt to minister by speaking in tongues, what benefit would he be to them? The assumed answer to this rhetorical question is “none at all”. Although Paul did speak in tongues, and even “more than all of you”, he did not do so in the context of public ministry or worship (vv. 18-19).
The alternatives which he offers, *“revelation or knowledge or prophecy or word of instruction,”* are not to be strictly distinguished from one another. Paul is not using these as technical theological terms. Rather, they represent the various forms of intelligible speech by which we may minister to one another. The point is that speaking in a manner that can be understood has value to others, while speaking in tongues, or in an unclear manner generally, does not.
- One application of this verse is that preachers and teachers should always strive for clarity in communication. In some cases, this will mean explaining theological terms and concepts; at other times, it may require avoiding such terms and finding alternate ways of stating the truth, especially when speaking to those with little or no church background. There is a balance to be sought between passing on the rich theological heritage of the church, and adapting to the capabilities and understanding of one’s audience.
- v. 7 The uselessness of a musical instrument which cannot produce clear and distinct notes is obvious. Making random noises on a flute or a harp has no value to those who hear, because it communicates nothing. The one producing the sounds may be enjoying themselves, and may find it personally meaningful, but no one else can participate or even follow along, because there is no discernible melody.
It is possible that Paul has in mind here the use of musical instruments in a worship service. Many different instruments were used in Old Testament worship (2 Sam. 6:5; 1 Chron. 15:16; 2 Chron. 5:12; Ps. 33:2; 81:12; 150:4). And singing has been a part of Christian worship from the beginning (1 Cor. 14:15; Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16). However, some in the early church rejected the use of instrumental music in worship, due to its association with pagan religious ceremonies. Paul does not address this question, but it seems unlikely that he would use musical instruments as an example, within a larger context that deals with worship practices, if his view of their use was negative.
- v. 8 A bugler who attempts to sound a call to battle, but who does not have the knowledge or ability to play the correct notes, will not succeed in rousing anyone to action. No one will know if he is sounding a charge or a retreat!
- v. 9 Paul now makes the point of his examples explicit. Speaking in tongues, in the gathered assembly of believers, is like playing a musical instrument which produces only meaningless sounds. It doesn’t benefit the hearers. Note that the words spoken in a tongue are unintelligible, not because they lack genuine vocabulary, grammar, or syntax, but because they are unknown to the hearers. In other words, they are not inherently unintelligible, but are unintelligible to those present in the worship service, who don’t understand the language being spoken (see vv. 10-11).
- vv. 10-11 The problem with tongues-speaking in the church is not that the languages being spoken are “without meaning”. There are a great number of languages in the world, and they all have meaning to those who speak them. The problem is that, if I do not understand the language being spoken, then it is meaningless to me, and the speaker is, in effect, a foreigner to me (and vice versa). Thus, speaking in tongues in a worship service effectively makes brothers and sisters in Christ aliens and strangers to one another.
- v. 12 Paul does not criticize the Corinthians’ desire for spiritual gifts. But he does seek to redirect their zeal, toward those gifts which are most useful in building up the church. The purpose for which God has blessed the church with the gifts is not primarily self-edification or personal religious experience, but serving others.

Unit 21 – Prophecy Better Than Tongues

1 Corinthians 14:13-25

Text

¹³ For this reason the one who speaks in a tongue should pray that they may interpret what they say. ¹⁴ For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful.¹⁵ So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit, but I will also pray with my understanding; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my understanding.¹⁶ Otherwise when you are praising God in the Spirit, how can someone else, who is now put in the position of an inquirer,^a say “Amen” to your thanksgiving, since they do not know what you are saying?¹⁷ You are giving thanks well enough, but no one else is edified.

¹⁸ I thank God that I speak in tongues more than all of you. ¹⁹ But in the church I would rather speak five intelligible words to instruct others than ten thousand words in a tongue.

²⁰ Brothers and sisters, stop thinking like children. In regard to evil be infants, but in your thinking be adults. ²¹ In the Law it is written:

“With other tongues
and through the lips of foreigners
I will speak to this people,
but even then they will not listen to me,
says the Lord.”^b

²² Tongues, then, are a sign, not for believers but for unbelievers; prophecy, however, is not for unbelievers but for believers.²³ So if the whole church comes together and everyone speaks in tongues, and inquirers or unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind?²⁴ But if an unbeliever or an inquirer comes in while everyone is prophesying, they are convicted of sin and are brought under judgment by all,²⁵ as the secrets of their hearts are laid bare. So they will fall down and worship God, exclaiming, “God is really among you!”

^a 16 The Greek word for *inquirer* is a technical term for someone not fully initiated into a religion; also in verses 23 and 24. ^b 21 Isaiah 28:11

Open

In your view, does popular entertainment tend to engage the mind? Is this a good thing, a bad thing, or neither?

Give examples of forms of entertainment that do, or do not, engage the mind.

Discover

1. What is Paul’s primary purpose in this passage? What does he want the Corinthians to consider?

2. What are the two primary limitations of tongues (vv. 14, 17)? How should those limitations be addressed?

-
3. In verse 14, Paul describes an experience of communion with God that does not involve the mind. What are the benefits and drawbacks of this kind of experience?

4. What is the point of the phrase “But in the church” in verse 19? What comparison(s) are being made?

5. In what sense would tongues be a sign for unbelievers? (v. 22; see Acts 2:1-41)

6. Based on what Paul says in this passage, where and when should the gift of tongues be practiced?

7. How is prophecy a sign for believers? (v. 22) Where and when should it be practiced?

8. What is the benefit to “seekers” or unbelievers if they visit a church service in which prophecy is taking place? (vv. 24-25)

Apply

- After studying this passage, how would you evaluate the practice of “singing in the spirit” (i.e., singing in tongues) in a church service?
- What are the primary criteria we should use in evaluating tongues, prophecy, or any other spiritual gift?

Commentary

In this passage, Paul does not overtly direct the Corinthians in the matter of speaking in tongues. Rather, he refers to himself and to his own practice, graciously encouraging the Corinthians to follow his example. And what is that example? To govern one's use of spiritual gifts, and to order worship in general, according to what will edify others, rather than seeking primarily to edify oneself.

- v. 13 The reason why the person speaking in tongues should ask God for the ability to interpret is found in the preceding verse: because doing so builds up the church. This contrasts with the use of tongues without interpretation, which has the opposite effect, making the speaker and the hearer "foreigners" to one another (v. 11).

Note that the one who speaks in tongues is directed to pray and ask God for the spiritual gift of interpretation. This indicates one way in which an eager desire for "the greater gifts" (1 Cor. 12:31) might be expressed, not merely as a passive wish, but as an active seeking.

Is it expected that the one speaking in tongues be the one to provide the interpretation? Or would it be more common for someone else to do so? It is difficult to say; both scenarios are possible and acceptable (v. 28). Perhaps the exhortation for the tongues-speaker to seek the gift of interpretation is a practical one, as this would allow them to speak freely, knowing that an interpretation would be available (see vv. 27-28).

- v. 14 The "spirit" referred to here is not the Holy Spirit, but Paul's own spirit ("my spirit"). What he is saying is that when praying in a tongue, there is a spiritual connection, a heart-communion with God, that does not involve conscious thought. It bypasses the faculties of reason, understanding, and evaluation. Is this a good thing? Many people would consider it to be so, desiring the experience of losing oneself in spiritual ecstasy, of putting aside the burden of engaging the mind, of being free from the inner voice of self-judgment. This kind of direct, unmediated connection with the divine is sought after in many religions. But Paul makes clear that this kind of experience, unless accompanied by worship which engages the mind, is an inferior form of Christian worship. He does not say that speaking in tongues is not a real experience of worship, but cautions that it should be joined with practices that engage the understanding, so that the whole person is involved (v. 15). The dangers of failing to do so are anti-theological spiritual zealotry and a seeking of experience for its own sake, as seen in the early church heresy of Montanism and in other examples since.

v. 15 This verse raises two questions: First, are these practices expected to alternate, so that praying and singing with one's understanding serves as the interpretation of the praying and singing with the spirit which preceded? The question is difficult to answer, since Paul's purpose here is not to prescribe an order of service, but to emphasize the importance of engaging both the mind and the spirit in worship. However, verses 26-30 would suggest that the answer is "yes". Note that although Paul contrasts praying and singing with the spirit and with the understanding, this does not imply that worshipping with one's understanding does not also engage the spirit. Note also that although Paul speaks of practicing both, he directs that speaking in tongues be refrained from when no interpreter is present (v. 28). And so it is not necessary that both be practiced.

The second question is whether Paul is referring here to a worship service, or to his own private worship. Verses 16-17, which speak to the effects on others, indicate that a worship service is in view.

- vv. 16-17 The NIV translation, "someone else, who is now put in the position of an inquirer", implies that Paul is referring to other members of the congregation, who are made to feel like foreigners because they do not understand what is being said in a tongue (see v. 11). In other words, they fail to comprehend what is going on, and so are in the same position as an outsider or uninitiated person would be. This could also be translated as "anyone in the position of an outsider" (ESV), in which case it could refer to an unbeliever who is present in the worship service; i.e. a "seeker" or uncommitted person who is considering following Christ (see vv. 24-25). But in either case, the dilemma of this person is the same: they cannot understand what is being said, and thus cannot give their assent to the prayers offered (see Mt. 18:19), nor join in the praise and thanks given. And so, "No one else is edified".

- vv. 18-19 Paul's statement that he speaks "in tongues more than all of you" may refer to his personal devotions, or to another context; perhaps preaching to people of other languages during his missionary journeys. The latter would be an example of tongues as a sign for unbelievers (v. 22; see Acts 2:1-11). In either case, the contrast that follows, "But in the church" makes it clear that he is not referring in these verses to corporate worship. As beneficial as this practice may be to him in other situations, it has little value in a church meeting, where five words that can be understood are more useful than "ten thousand words in a tongue".

v. 20 Note that Paul does not merely exhort his readers to think like adults, he tells them to “stop thinking like children”. This would be shocking to the Corinthians, who considered themselves to be wise, mature, and advanced in religion (1 Cor. 3:18; 4:10; 8:1, 10; 2 Cor. 8:7; 11:19). But they were not; in fact just the opposite was true. Their thinking was childish in at least two respects: they were judging superficially, according to appearances, and were selfishly thinking only of themselves, rather than one another.

Ironically, those who possess intelligence and reasoning ability often think and act foolishly, not in spite of their gifts, but because of them. Their abilities allow them to construct elaborate arguments justifying their position, and make them unwilling to listen to counsel. They confuse their facility with words, and their capacity for logical argument, with understanding and wisdom.

v. 21 “In the Law it is written:

*‘With other tongues
and through the lips of foreigners
I will speak to this people,
but even then they will not listen to me,
says the Lord.’*

This is a quotation from Isaiah 28:11. The prophet Isaiah was issuing a warning to the people of Israel: since they had not listened to God’s words of guidance and correction in their own language, He would bring a foreign nation, the Assyrians, into their land to take them into exile. Hearing the language of their conquerors would be a constant and lasting reminder to them of the consequences of disobedience. But even this would not bring about repentance.

Note that Paul uses the term “the Law” in this verse, not to refer specifically to the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament, but as a synonym for the entire Old Testament (see Jn. 10:34; 12:34; 15:25).

v. 22 This explains how the quote from Isaiah fits into Paul’s argument. The foreign tongues of the Assyrians would be a sign to the unbelieving and rebellious Israelites that God was present among them in judgment. In the same way, tongues in the church age are a sign to unbelievers of God’s presence and activity, and especially his great work of redemption. This sign is both a warning and an invitation (see Acts 2:1-41).

The interpretive problem here is that the statement that tongues are “for” unbelievers seems to contradict the scenario in v. 23, in which unbelievers, hearing tongues being spoken in a church, respond by thinking that the speakers are insane, or perhaps under the influence of some religious frenzy. And so they are repelled, rather than attracted to the faith. Likewise, Paul’s statement that prophecy is “not for unbelievers” seems to contradict the scenario in vv. 24-25, in which

unbelievers, hearing prophesy, respond by falling on their knees and worshiping God.

Several explanations have been offered for this apparent discrepancy, and none are entirely satisfactory. But perhaps the simplest approach is to recognize that the ways in which people respond to God are not a reliable guide to God’s intentions. Thus, although the foreign tongues of the Assyrians were “for” unbelievers—faithless Israelites—this sign did not bring about repentance. As Paul notes, “even then they will not listen to me, says the Lord” (v. 21). Likewise, on the day of Pentecost, some of those who heard the disciples speaking in tongues concluded that they must be drunk (Acts 2:13). And so a lack of positive response by unbelievers does not mean the message was not intended “for” them, it just means that they failed to respond.

In the same way, people can benefit from a message or ministry that is not intended “for” them. For example, although Jesus protested that he had been sent “only to the lost sheep of Israel”, he nevertheless relented and healed the daughter of a Canaanite woman (Mt. 15:21-28). And so, although the primary purpose of prophecy is the building up of believers, rather than outreach, if an unbeliever should find themselves in a church where prophecy is taking place, they may respond in faith and repentance.

vv. 23-25 While the preceding two verses make a theological argument, these verses make a practical one. The theological argument is that tongues are not intended for believers, as Isaiah 28:11 illustrates. Therefore, when believers gather together, their worship should feature prophecy rather than tongues. The practical argument is that if worship follows this pattern, there may be an ancillary benefit; i.e., that any unbelievers or “seekers” who happen to come into the place of worship will hear the message in a language they understand, will be convicted of sin, and will repent. The message of the gospel will pierce their heart, and they will proclaim that “God is really among you!” (vv. 24-25; see Heb. 4:12). On the other hand, if the church is speaking in tongues when they enter, their response is more likely to be one of confusion (v. 23).

Note that in making this argument, Paul is encouraging the Corinthians, not only to transcend self-interest by being concerned for the welfare of other believers, but to also be concerned for the spiritual welfare of those who do not yet know Christ.

Unit 22 – Orderly Worship

1 Corinthians 14:26-40

Text

²⁶ What then shall we say, brothers and sisters? When you come together, each of you has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. Everything must be done so that the church may be built up.²⁷ If anyone speaks in a tongue, two—or at the most three—should speak, one at a time, and someone must interpret.²⁸ If there is no interpreter, the speaker should keep quiet in the church and speak to himself and to God.

²⁹ Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should weigh carefully what is said.

³⁰ And if a revelation comes to someone who is sitting down, the first speaker should stop.³¹ For you can all prophesy in turn so that everyone may be instructed and encouraged.³² The spirits of prophets are subject to the control of prophets.

³³ For God is not a God of disorder but of peace—as in all the congregations of the Lord's people.

³⁴ Women^a should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says.³⁵ If they want to inquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church.^b

³⁶ Or did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached?³⁷ If anyone thinks they are a prophet or otherwise gifted by the Spirit, let them acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord's command.

³⁸ But if anyone ignores this, they will themselves be ignored.^c

³⁹ Therefore, my brothers and sisters, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues.⁴⁰ But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way.

^a 34 Or peace. As in all the congregations of the Lord's people.^b 35 In a few manuscripts these verses come after verse 40.^c 38 Some manuscripts But anyone who is ignorant of this will be ignorant

Open

- Are you an organized person? What advantages does this have? What drawbacks?

Discover

1. What principle of worship is Paul seeking to establish in this passage? (v. 26)

2. What is necessary to achieve that goal? (vv. 33, 40)

3. What does the phrase “each of you” imply about a church worship service? (v. 26)

4. How should the use of tongues be regulated in church? (vv. 27-28)

5. How should the exercise of prophecy be regulated in church? (vv. 29-31)

6. How can someone inspired by the Holy Spirit be expected to restrain their speech? Doesn't this quench the Spirit? (vv. 32-33)

7. According to Paul, why is it that women "should remain silent"? (v.34; see 1 Tim. 2:11-13; Gen. 2:18)

8. In the context, what do you think he means by this? (see vv. 29, 35; 1 Cor. 11:5, 13) Should this same restriction apply today? Why or why not?

9. In your own words, state the point Paul is making in vv. 36-38.

Apply

Do you participate in worship in the way that this passage envisions? If not, what would you need to do to change that?

Is it possible for a worship service to be too "orderly"? What would that look like?

Commentary

v. 26 The introductory phrase, “**What then shall we say, brothers and sisters?**” indicates that Paul is now summing up his discussion on the use of spiritual gifts, and the phrase, “**When you come together**” makes clear that the discussion applies specifically to the use of those gifts in the context of a communal worship service.

The gifts identified here, “**a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation**”, do not represent a strict order of service, or imply that these, and only these, elements must be present in a worship service. Rather, this is an informal list, indicating that various speaking gifts will be part of a typical service. That “**each of you**” would participate does not require that literally every single person participate in one of these five ways, but rather indicates that participation is to be distributed among various members of the church, rather than limited to one or a few.

Note also that nothing in this passage requires, or assumes, that the exercise of the gifts be completely spontaneous or unrehearsed. A “hymn”, for example, could be composed and delivered on the spot, but would more likely be the result of time spent in composition and perhaps rehearsal. A “word of instruction” could be the fruit of many hours of study, reflection, and preparation. The Holy Spirit is certainly capable of working through human processes that occur over time, as well as through immediate inspiration.

vv. 27-28 The fact that Paul is providing guidelines on the use of tongues and prophecy implies that those who exercise speaking gifts are able to control the manner and timing of their use (see v. 32). The speakers are not being swept along by an irresistible force; rather, they have been entrusted with an ability which they have the power, and responsibility, to govern.

In the case of speaking in tongues, Paul does not assume that this will always be a part of the worship service, but speaks conditionally: “**if anyone speaks in a tongue**”. If present, this practice should not dominate the service, but should be limited to “**two—or at the most three**”. And finally, speaking in tongues should be permitted only if there is someone present who is capable of interpreting what was said. Otherwise, “**the speaker should keep quiet in the church**” (v. 28).

The phrase “in the church” indicates that this restriction on tongues applies to a church worship setting. In that context, when no interpreter is available, one who prays in tongues should do so either silently or *sotto voce*; i.e., “**to himself and to God**.” However, in one’s private worship, this limitation does not apply.

v. 29 In contrast to the previous directions on speaking in tongues (v. 27), this is not conditional, but prescriptive: “**Two or three prophets should speak**”. And so the portion of the meeting given to prophecy is not to be a free-for-all, in which anyone can speak and innumerable speeches might be given. Instead, it is a controlled setting, in which a limited number of speakers deliver a limited number of messages.

Paul does not specify who “should weigh carefully what is said,” only identifying them as “the others”. This could mean the other prophets, or it could mean the other members of the congregation, perhaps those who are considered mature and knowledgeable enough to do so. But the key point is that prophetic utterances are to be evaluated. The fact that prophecy is a gift of the spirit does not mean that prophetic utterances are to be regarded as infallible.

This evaluation would include an assessment of the quality of the teaching, i.e., testing it to determine whether it is consistent with what was previously delivered by the apostles (see Gal. 1:8-9; Acts 17:11; 1 Thess. 5:20-21; 1 Jn. 4:1). It would also likely include consideration of how the message should be applied.

vv. 30-31 In order for prophecies to be heard in an orderly manner, no one should monopolize this portion of the service. If someone stands up to indicate that they have something to say, the current speaker should bring their message to a close and yield the floor. In this way, the prophets can all take their turn, instead of contending for dominance.

The result of this kind of shared instruction is that “**everyone may be instructed and encouraged**. ” Multiple speakers, with different speaking styles and doctrinal emphases, are likely to be more effective in communicating to a diverse congregation than one person alone would be.

v. 32 See note on vv. 27-28. The recipient of a speaking gift, or for that matter, any spiritual gift, is responsible to use it in a manner that benefits the church.

v. 33 The phrase, “**as in all the congregations of the Lord’s people**,” is associated by some with verse 34 rather than verse 33. In either case, Paul is emphasizing that his teaching on good order in worship applies universally, and not just to the Corinthian church. Here, his point is that worship should be consistent with the character of God, who brings order out of chaos (see Gen. 1:2-31). Note also that he contrasts disorder, not merely with order, but with peace.

vv. 34-35 We know that this is not a blanket prohibition against women speaking in church: earlier, Paul explicitly refers to a woman who “prays or prophesies”, and commands, not that she stop doing so, but only that she do so with a proper head covering (1 Cor. 11:4). The situation that is probably in view is a time of group dialogue following a prophecy, during which the prophet’s message would be “weighed” (v. 29). The details of this process are not known, but it would likely involve a theological evaluation of the message, with various people giving their views on what was said, asking questions of one another, and even challenging one another’s positions. Perhaps we could think of it as an informal symposium or discussion forum.

And so Paul is saying that it would be unseemly, even “disgraceful” for a woman to participate in this discussion, because, by its very nature, it would involve openly agreeing or disagreeing with other men in the church (perhaps including her husband), and implicitly passing judgment on their opinions. Even restricting women to asking questions would be problematic, because one can easily communicate agreement or disagreement in the form of a query.

How do we deal with this? We should note that this statement is consistent with Paul’s teaching in First Timothy 2:11-12 that, “*a woman should learn in quietness and full submission. I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet.*” But then we have two options. We can observe that in first-century Greek and Roman society, women were generally less well educated than their husbands and did not participate in politics or public life. We can then argue that Paul’s purpose was to ensure good order in worship in that particular society, rather than to lay down universal rules for all churches at all times. The conclusion would be that in a different type of society, such restrictions would not necessarily apply. One who took that position would still need to explain how the principle of submission (v. 34) would be maintained in situations of open community dialogue.

The second option would be to conclude that Paul did intend for this restriction to apply to all churches, regardless of the culture that prevails around them. This option would view the phrase, “*as in all the congregations of the Lord’s people*” (v. 33), and other similar statements which refer to universal church practice (1 Cor. 7:17; 11:16) as implying such an intention. In that case, the prohibition on women participating in an open theological discussion in a worship service would still apply today, even in societies with progressive attitudes toward gender roles.

The Old Testament reference for the statement that women “must be in submission, as the law says,” is not apparent, but it may refer to the order of Creation (Gen. 2:18; see 1 Tim. 2:11-13; also notes on 1 Cor. 11:3, 7-9), and/or God’s decree after the Fall (Gen. 3:16). The principle that wives are to submit to their husbands is consistent in Paul’s writings (Col. 3:18; Tit. 2:5; Eph. 5:22; see also 1 Pet. 3:1-6).

vv. 36-38 **“Or did the word of God originate with you? Or are you the only people it has reached?”** This statement is a rebuke to the Corinthians, who judged themselves to be intellectually and spiritually advanced in comparison to their less enlightened brothers and sisters, and who were passing judgment even on Paul himself (1 Cor. 4:3). Paul corrects this arrogant attitude by reminding them that they did not come to faith independently, but through his ministry (1 Cor. 4:14). In addition, they are not independent and self-sufficient, but are part of a much greater work which the Holy Spirit is doing. Thus, they need to exercise humility, and give heed to the doctrines and practices common to all the churches.

It is notable that a similar statement, in 1 Cor. 11:16, also followed instructions concerning submission (1 Cor. 11:2-15). Perhaps this was an especially contentious issue for the Corinthian church, just as it is today in Western churches.

Paul goes on to affirm his authority as an apostle: **“If anyone thinks they are a prophet or otherwise gifted by the Spirit, let them acknowledge that what I am writing to you is the Lord’s command.”** This raises the stakes. Anyone who contradicts Paul’s teaching is contradicting the word of the Lord. They are therefore testifying against the validity of their own prophetic gifts, and their proclamations can justifiably be “ignored” (v. 38). There may also be an implied warning here that such a person will not be “acknowledged” or “recognized” as belonging to the Lord on the day of judgment (see Mt. 7:22-23).

vv. 39-40 These verses summarize and conclude the discussion on the gifts of prophecy and tongues. The first of these is to be eagerly sought, while the second is merely to be accepted; i.e., not forbidden. The overarching goal is that everything in worship be done in a “fitting and orderly way”, so that God may be honored and His people blessed (vv. 33, 27).

Unit 23 – The Gospel

1 Corinthians 15:1-19

Text

¹ Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. ² By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.

³ For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance ^a: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas, ^b and then to the Twelve. ⁶ After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, ⁸ and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

⁹ For I am the least of the apostles and do not even deserve to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. ¹⁰ But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked

harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me. ¹¹ Whether, then, it is I or they, this is what we preach, and this is what you believed.

¹² But if it is preached that Christ has been raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? ¹³ If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. ¹⁴ And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. ¹⁵ More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead. But he did not raise him if in fact the dead are not raised. ¹⁶ For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. ¹⁷ And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins. ¹⁸ Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ are lost. ¹⁹ If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.

^a 3 Or you at the first ^b 5 That is, Peter

Open

- How did you first come to believe the gospel?
Was it gradual, or sudden?

Discover

1. In this passage, Paul is defending both the truth of the resurrection, and its significance. What arguments does he give for why this doctrine is “of first importance”?

vv.13-14

v. 15

vv. 16-17

v. 18

v. 19

2. Why would denying the bodily resurrection of believers also imply denying the resurrection of Christ? (vv. 13, 16; see Romans 6:4-5; 1 Corinthians 15:20; 2 Corinthians 4:14)



3. Why would our faith be “useless” and “futile” if Christ had not been raised? (vv. 14, 17; see Romans 4:25; 6:8-10; 1 Corinthians 15:54-57).

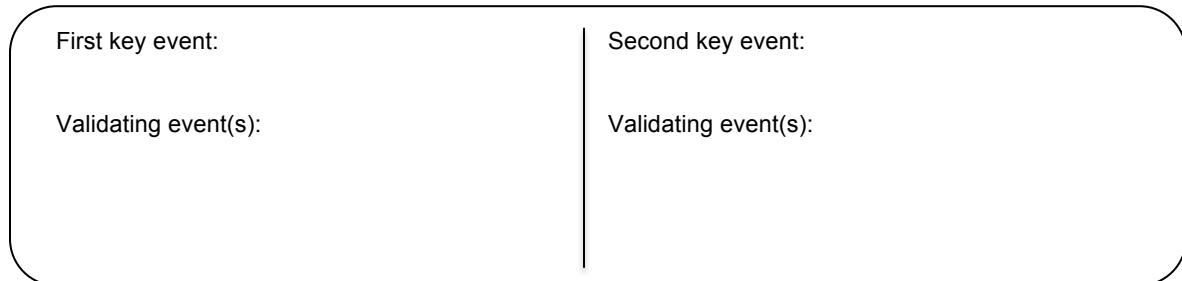


4. Why would a life of following Christ, without hope of resurrection, make us people to be pitied? (v. 19; see Hebrews 10:34; Romans 8:17-18)

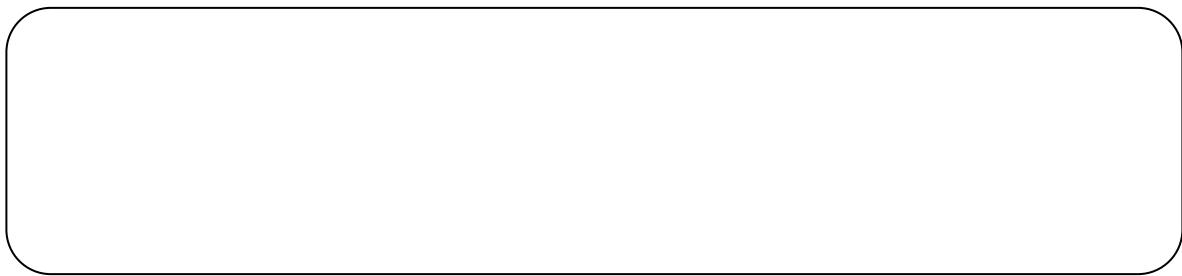


5. In verses 3-8, Paul describes the gospel in terms of two key events, each of which was proven to be true by one or more validating events. Identify each of them.

| | |
|----------------------|----------------------|
| First key event: | Second key event: |
| Validating event(s): | Validating event(s): |



6. What is it about these events which make them “the gospel,” rather than other events, such as the virgin birth or the miracles of Christ?



Apply

- If there were no resurrection, would your life make you someone to be pitied, compared to other people? Why or why not?
- If there were no resurrection, would your life really be any different? If so, how?

Commentary

v. 1 Three times in verses 1-3, Paul emphasizes his role as the one who brought the gospel to the Corinthians (see 1 Cor. 3:6; 4:15; 9:1; also Acts 18:4-11). As an apostle (9:1-2), and as their father in the faith, he claims the right to declare with authority the content of that message. This is the same message they believed when they first entered into the faith, the same set of truths upon which they have been standing. Paul is not asking them to accept anything new, but to understand fully and to reaffirm what they have believed all along, just as it was preached to them in the beginning (v. 11).

v. 2 ***"By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you."*** The gospel more than just a set of facts about Christ. It has power to bring about salvation—but only for those who continue in the faith. For those who do not, their initial “belief” will have no lasting effect, and they will be lost (Mt. 10:22; Col. 1:22-23; Heb. 3:14). Although Paul has confidence that the Corinthians will be kept “firm to the end” (1 Cor. 1:8), this denial of the resurrection on the part of some (1 Cor. 15:12) concerns him enough that he feels the need to issue this implied warning.

Does this mean that someone who has experienced the new birth, and who has genuinely placed their trust in Christ, can be lost in the end? Certainly there are some who initially respond favorably to Christ, and who give every appearance of following him, only to fall away later (see Mt. 7:21-23; 13:20-21; Lk. 8:13; Jn. 8:31-47; Heb. 6:4-6; 10:26-27; 2 Pet. 2:20-22). But appearances can be deceiving. According to John, when someone departs from the faith, it reveals that they were never truly saved in the first place (1 Jn. 2:19). Moreover, Christ has promised that those who are truly his will never be lost (Jn. 6:39; 10:27-29).

vv. 3-8 These verses relate the facts of Christ’s death, burial, resurrection, and post-resurrection appearances. Several things can be noted. First, that Christ is the subject throughout this passage: the gospel is the story of his work, his faith, his obedience, his suffering and sacrifice, his love, his victory. Second, that these facts are of “first importance”; i.e., they are not incidental, but central to the message. Christianity is not merely a philosophy, or a collection of stories; it is a faith which is established upon a set of historical events.

Third, that Christ died “for our sins,” that his death was required to make *atonement*, or payment, for our sin by suffering its penalty (Rom. 3:25), and was also necessary to make *propitiation*; that is, to appease the wrath of God toward us on account of our sin (Rom. 5:9).

Fourth, that these events were “according to the Scriptures,” i.e., that they were foretold in the Old Testament. They were not merely the unhappy result of man’s sin and unbelief reacting against the preaching of Christ, but were a part of God’s redemptive plan from the beginning (see Acts 2:22-24; 3:13-18; 4:27-28). Not only did the events of the crucifixion and resurrection fulfill specific Old Testament prophecies (see Isa. 53:1-12; Mt. 24:44-47), but they were also prefigured by Old Testament events, such as the experience of Jonah (Mt. 12:38-40), the sacrifice of the Passover Lamb (Ex. 12:1-13; 1 Cor. 5:7), and many others.

Fifth, the events of the gospel were empirically verifiable. The death of Christ was validated by the fact that he was buried, and the resurrection of Christ was proven by the fact that he appeared to many people, including not only the apostles, but “more than five hundred of the brothers and sisters”, most of whom were still living at the time this letter was written, and who could give personal testimony of what they had seen.

vv. 8b-9 Paul’s calling as an apostle was unexpected and undeserved. He was not even a follower of Christ, but was instead a persecutor of the church, an opponent of the gospel, and an enthusiastic participant in the murder and imprisonment of Christians (see Acts 8:1-3; 9:1-2; Gal. 1:13-14; Phil. 3:4-7). As a result, after his conversion, no one understood more clearly than Paul that “*while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son*” (Rom. 5:10).

v. 10 ***"But by the grace of God I am what I am."*** Paul recognized that his calling was a gift of God, an act of pure, unmerited grace (Eph. 3:7-9). As a result, he worked diligently to fulfill his commission, and even “harder than all of them”; i.e., than the other apostles (see 2 Cor. 11:23; Col. 1:29; 1 Thess. 2:9; 2 Thess. 3:8). But as much as he labored and suffered for the gospel, he recognized that not even his work was from himself, but rather was due to “the grace of God that was with me”. In short, all of his ministry was of God, from beginning to end.

v. 11 ***"Whether, then, it is I or they, this is what we preach, and this is what you believed."*** Regardless of who is proclaiming it, the message of the gospel is the same, and it is this message which the Corinthians have believed from the beginning. These teachings are not unique to Paul, but are shared by all of the apostles. Thus, to abandon them is not merely to reject Paul as a teacher, but to reject the gospel itself.

-
- v. 12 Contrary to what they had been taught concerning the resurrection of Christ, some in Corinth were apparently claiming that there would be no resurrection of believers, or that it would be merely a spiritual, rather than a physical and bodily, resurrection. Doubtless they considered themselves to be faithful followers of Christ who simply had a different point of view on this question. But the doctrine of bodily resurrection, far from being unnecessary or expendable, is absolutely essential to Christianity. In verses 12-19, Paul underscores the critical nature of this issue by identifying several negative consequences which would result if this doctrine were found to be untrue.
- v. 13 Christ's victory over the grave was not intended to be unique, or one of a kind. On the contrary, his resurrection was only the "firstfruits", the initial harvest of what will be a great ingathering of all who are in Christ (1 Cor. 15:20, 23). Christ's resurrection was the paradigm for the future resurrection of all who are united with him by faith; he was the "firstborn from among the dead" (Col. 1:18; see Rom. 6:4-5, 8; 8:29; 2 Cor. 4:14; Phil. 3:10-11; 1 Thess. 4:14; 2 Tim 2:11; Rev. 1:5). Thus, to deny the bodily resurrection of believers is to deny the bodily resurrection of the Lord as well (see v. 16).
- v. 14 Paul is not willing to compromise on this doctrine, or allow that it can be abandoned while still holding on to faith in Christ. Simply put, without the resurrection, there is no Christian message; everything that matters (forgiveness of sins, victory over death, eternal life, reconciliation with God, the redemption of creation) depends on it. Any "faith" which remained after eviscerating the gospel of its central event would be empty and meaningless.
- v. 15 If the doctrine of resurrection were false, then Paul and the other apostles, who preached it as a true historical event, would be guilty of giving false testimony. This was a very serious offense under the Mosaic law (Ex. 20:16; 23:1; Dt. 5:20; Prov. 19:5, 9). And in this case, they would not be guilty of mere perjury, but of perjury against God Himself, aggravating their guilt. On the other hand, if Christ was in fact raised from the dead, then those who are claiming otherwise are themselves guilty of this sin.
- v. 17 By raising Christ from the dead, God the Father declared his sacrifice for sins to be acceptable (Rom. 1:4). The resurrection broke the power that sin and death held over mankind (Rom. 6:8-10; 1 Cor. 15:54-57; Rev. 1:18). It is the resurrection by which we are justified (Rom. 4:25), and it is through the resurrection that all of God's promises are made effective (Acts 13:32-33). But if Christ had not been raised from the dead, then none of these things would be true: our faith would be futile, and we would stand before God guilty and condemned.
- v. 18 If there were no resurrection, then there could be no salvation for those who had already died, and who were trusting in Christ for salvation. On the contrary, we would have to conclude that they were deceived, and are now irredeemably lost. There would be no hope for them of forgiveness of sins or eternal life.
- v. 19 Paul is not saying that the Christian life has no present benefits, or that the earthly sojourn of a believer is nothing but unrelenting misery. Much to the contrary: in many places Paul writes of the joy and peace which Christians experience in this life (Rom. 5:1; 8:6; 14:17; 15:13; Gal. 5:22; Phil. 4:7). What he is saying is that the joy and peace which we now experience are dependent on our hope of resurrection, because present blessings are often accompanied by suffering (2 Cor. 8:2; 1 Thess. 1:6; Heb. 10:34; Jam. 1:2-3). We are only able to view our present trials as "light and momentary troubles", and rejoice in the midst of them, because we look forward to "an eternal glory that far outweighs them all" (2 Cor. 4:17-18; see Rom. 8:17-18; 1 Pet. 1:6-7). But if we did not have this hope, then all of our sorrows, our deprivations, our sacrifices, and our persecutions would be pointless; they would have no redeeming value. The weeping that lasts "for the night" would not be followed by the rejoicing that "comes in the morning" (Ps. 30:5); it would only be followed by more weeping, and then death. Thus, the doctrine of bodily resurrection is important, not only for our future happiness, but for our present happiness as well.

Unit 24 – Christ Has Indeed Been Raised

1 Corinthians 15:20-34

Text

²⁰ But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. ²¹ For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. ²² For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. ²³ But each in turn: Christ, the firstfruits; then, when he comes, those who belong to him. ²⁴ Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. ²⁵ For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. ²⁶ The last enemy to be destroyed is death. ²⁷ For he “has put everything under his feet.”^a Now when it says that “everything” has been put under him, it is clear that this does not include God himself, who put everything under Christ. ²⁸ When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all.

²⁹ Now if there is no resurrection, what will those do who are baptized for the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized for them?^b ³⁰ And as for us, why do we endanger ourselves every hour? ³¹ I face death every day—yes, just as surely as I boast about you in Christ Jesus our Lord. ³² If I fought wild beasts in Ephesus with no more than human hopes, what have I gained? If the dead are not raised,

“Let us eat and drink,
for tomorrow we die.”^b

³³ Do not be misled: “Bad company corrupts good character.”^c ³⁴ Come back to your senses as you ought, and stop sinning; for there are some who are ignorant of God—I say this to your shame.

^a 27 Psalm 8:6 ^b 32 Isaiah 22:13 ^c 33 From the Greek poet Menander

Open

- What things in your life would not make sense if there were actually no resurrection?

Discover

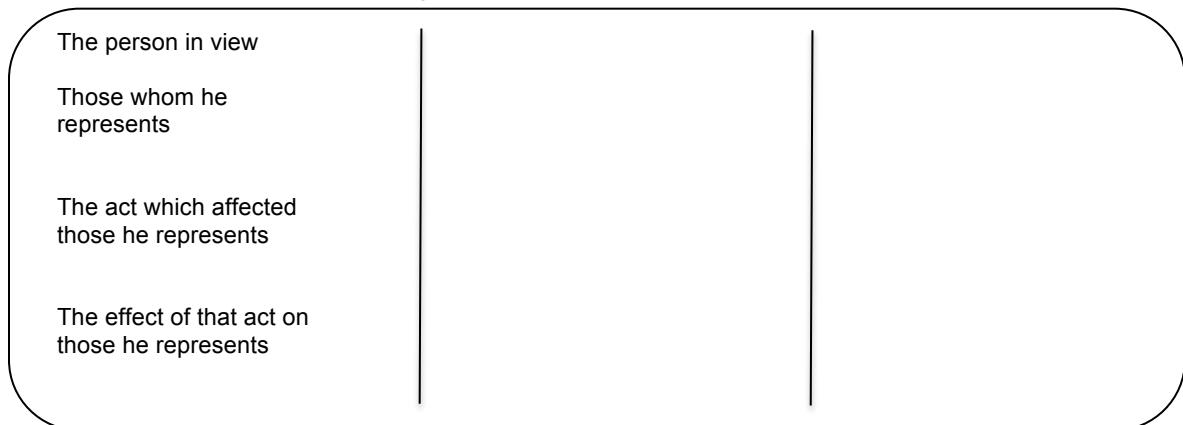
1. In verses 20-28, Paul gives a chronology of future events surrounding the resurrection. Identify them below, in your own words.



2. What does the term “firstfruits” signify in this passage? (vv. 20, 23; see Deut. 26:1-11; Rom. 6:4-5)



3. Paul draws a parallel between the effects of Adam's disobedience, and the effects of Christ's obedience. How do these two things compare? (vv. 21-22; see Rom. 5:12-19)



4. Christ will one day destroy "all dominion, authority and power" and will put "all his enemies" under his feet (vv. 24-25). What are some of the things that are included in these two phrases?

5. What will be the result of this victory? (v. 28; see Dan. 7:14, 18, 27; 2 Tim. 2:11-12; Rev. 11:15)

6. In vv. 30-32a, Paul makes an argument for the truth of the resurrection, based on his own experiences. Paraphrase that argument.

7. How would rejecting the doctrine of the resurrection tend to affect one's behavior? Why? (vv. 32b-34).

Apply

- Do you agree with the connection Paul makes between a belief in the resurrection and one's behavior?
- Do you find it encouraging to know that all who oppose God will someday be utterly and eternally defeated? Why or why not?

Commentary

v. 20 Christ's resurrection was not an isolated event, but part of a larger whole. It was an initial fulfillment of God's promises which anticipated the complete fulfillment yet to come. That greater fulfillment is the resurrection of all believers; all who are united with Christ by faith (see Rom. 6:4-5). The term *firstfruits* is an allusion to the Old Testament sacrificial system, in which the first and best part of the harvest was offered to God as an act of worship and thanksgiving, a representative sample which signified that the whole harvest was from his hand (Lv. 23:9-14; Dt. 26:1-11).

vv. 21-22 The story of redemption is the story of Christ restoring, through his obedience, what Adam had ruined by his disobedience. These two men stand as the representatives of two distinct groups of people; this is known as the doctrine of *federal headship*. Those who are in Adam are united with him in sin, condemnation, and death. And all people are born in Adam. By contrast, those who are joined with Christ by faith are united with him in holiness, justification, and resurrection (see Rom. 5:12-19; 8:1; 2 Cor. 5:17).

Note that the "all" who "will be made alive" are all those who are "in Christ", rather than all mankind. This is clear from v. 23, which defines those who are raised to life as "those who belong to him" (i.e. Christ). Does this mean that those who die apart from Christ will not be raised? No, but they will be raised to "shame and everlasting contempt" rather than being raised to "everlasting life". They will not "rise to live", but will "rise to be condemned" (Dan. 12:2-3; Jn. 5:28-29; see Mt. 25:46; Acts 24:15; Rom. 2:5-8).

v. 23 This verse tells us several things about the resurrection of believers. First, that it has not already happened, but is still future. Thus, any doctrine of *realized eschatology* which teaches that the return of Christ and the resurrection of believers, perhaps redefined as some kind of spiritual renewal, have already taken place, is to be rejected (2 Thess. 2:1-2; 2 Tim. 2:17-18). Second, it tells us that the resurrection will take place at Christ's return, the *parousia*. We will be raised to life when Christ comes for us and comes to judge the world. And third, that all believers will be raised to life together, as part of one unitary event.

As for those who are still living when Christ returns, they will join the resurrected believers:

"...the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever." (1 Thess. 4:16-17)

v. 24 In verse 23, the word "then" does not indicate something which immediately follows; there is a gap of at least twenty centuries between the resurrection of Christ and his second coming. However, the Greek text does not tell us this; we know it only because we are living two millennia after Christ's resurrection and he has not yet returned. Likewise, the word "then" in verse 24 does not tell us whether there will be a delay between the resurrection of believers, as described in verse 23, and the consummation of history.

Premillennialists believe there will be such a delay. They interpret Rev. 20:1-10 as describing a literal thousand-year period separating these events, during which Satan will be bound and Christ will reign personally on the earth. According to this view of *eschatology*, or future events, Satan will be released at the end of this time and will make war against the people of God, only to be defeated and cast into hell. By contrast, the postmillennialist and the amillennialist consider this thousand year period to be symbolic, rather than literal. They view it as describing either the gradual progress of Christianity throughout the earth, as more and more of the world's peoples are converted, or as representing the reign of Christ in the hearts of his people during the present church age.

However, all agree that there will come a time when the history of this world comes to an end, and that Christ will defeat, not only Satan and his demonic agents (Eph. 6:12; Col. 2:15), but every competing power, including ungodly human rulers and kingdoms, and even death itself (v. 26). He will destroy and annihilate "*all dominion, authority and power*". Thus, in the end, there will only be one ruler and one kingdom, eternally (2 Sam. 7:16; Ps. 89:4, 36-37; 145:13; Dan. 2:44; 7:14, 18, 27; Zech. 14:9; Isa. 9:7; Lk. 1:30-33; Heb. 1:8; Rev. 11:15).

v. 25 This verse alludes to the prophecy of Psalm 8:6, and also 110:1, which states,

*The Lord says to my lord:
"Sit at my right hand
until I make your enemies
a footstool for your feet."*

The fact that Christ reigns "until" he has defeated his enemies does not mean that he then stops reigning. Rather, at this time, he will deliver all things over to God the Father (v. 24), having forever crushed the rebellion of angelic powers and of the human race, and having restored all that was ruined by the Fall (Rom. 8:19-22).

v. 26 The reign of death, which was brought into the world by sin, will be brought to an end; death, the destroyer, will be destroyed (see Rom. 5:12-17).

-
- v. 27 The quote is from Psalm 8:6, in which David marvels at the dominion which God has given mankind over his creation. Paul reinterprets the Psalm with Christ as the representative of redeemed mankind; he is the one to whom “authority, glory and sovereign power” is given (Dan. 7:14; see Eph. 1:19-23; Heb. 2:5-9). Through our union with Christ, we will participate in this eternal dominion over all that God has made (see Rev. 5:9-10; 2 Tim. 2:12; 1 Cor. 3:21-23; 6:2-3; Rom. 8:32).
- Paul also clarifies that when the text refers to “everything” being put under the rule and authority of Christ, the term does not include God the Father himself, since he is the one who subjected all things to Christ. In other words, the hierarchical relationship among the members of the Trinity will not change when all of creation is made subject to Christ; Christ will still be subject to God the Father (see v. 28).
- v. 28 Note that the phrase “will be made subject” does not imply that Christ is not already in subjection to the Father. On the contrary, Christ explicitly declared his submission to the Father’s will (Lk. 22:42; Jn. 5:19; 7:28; 8:28-29; 12:49-50; 14:10; 14:24). Note also, however, that although the Son is functionally subordinate to the Father, this does not mean he is any less divine, any less God, than the Father (Jn. 1:18; 10:30).
- “so that God may be all in all.”*** When Christ hands over the kingdom to the Father, having destroyed all the enemies of God (v. 24), he will also explicitly subject himself to God the Father, and so there will be no independent authority, no parallel kingdom, no question of any rival claim to dominion.
- v. 29 This is a puzzling verse, and many explanations have been proposed. Paul is either referring to a practice which is otherwise unknown to us, or he is using cryptic language to refer to believer’s baptism. The first option could be a reference to living believers being baptized on behalf of those who had come to faith in Christ, but who had died before being baptized, perhaps due to martyrdom. And so it would be a public witness to the departed believer’s faith. But we have no record of such commemorative baptisms being practiced in the early church.
- In the second option, Paul would be referring to those who are baptized because of, or on account of, the dead; i.e. those who, having learned that those who died in the faith will be raised to life, have themselves come to faith and been baptized. They are baptized “for” the dead in the sense that they have been influenced to trust in Christ by those who previously died in the faith, joyfully looking forward to a resurrection.
- vv. 30-31 If there were no resurrection, then all of Paul’s labors and sufferings, and the dangers to which he had exposed himself again and again, would be for nothing. It would make no sense to risk death if there were nothing to be gained by it. But instead, his willingness to undergo trials attests to the reality of the resurrection (see Acts 14:19; 1 Cor. 4:9-13; 2 Cor. 1:8-10; 4:7-12; 6:4-10; 11:23-29; 12:10). Paul understood that whoever loses their life for Christ’s sake will find it (Mt. 10:39; 16:25).
- v. 32 It is unlikely that Paul was literally condemned to face wild animals in the arena; his status as a Roman citizen, which he appealed to in other situations (Acts 16:37-38; 22:25-29), would almost certainly have protected him from such a sentence. It is more likely that he is speaking metaphorically of human opponents, whose opposition was savage and potentially deadly (see Dan. 7:1-28). But in either case, if he had undergone such a perilous trial with only human, or earthly, goals in view, it would have gained him nothing. Such struggles are worth the cost only because a reward awaits on the other side of the grave (Mt. 5:11-12; 16:27; Lk. 6:22-23; 2 Cor. 5:10; Eph. 6:8; 1 Pet. 1:3-6; 4:12-13).
- If the dead are not raised, “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.”*** This is a quote from Isaiah 22:12-14, in which the people of Jerusalem, when faced with imminent destruction, chose to spend their final days in gluttony and drunkenness. Paul’s point is that, without a hope of resurrection, we might as well seek pleasure and self-gratification during the brief time we have on the earth. If death is the end, there is no reason to live a righteous life. Thus, to deny the resurrection leads to a dissolute lifestyle, as the world around us abundantly demonstrates.
- v. 33 ***Do not be misled: “Bad company corrupts good character.”*** Here Paul quotes a well-known line from a play by Menander, a 3rd-century B.C. Greek playwright. The fact that his argument is supported even by an astute pagan observer would give it added validity in the eyes of the Corinthians. Paul is not saying that they should avoid all contact with unbelievers (see Lk. 15:1-7; 1 Cor. 5:9-11). But the word translated “company” implies more than casual acquaintance or friendship; it connotes close fellowship. And so Christians should be wary of spending excessive time with those who do not share their values or their conviction of an afterlife, lest they be morally corrupted by that worldview (v. 32). We must balance the need to be salt and light (Mt. 5:13) with the need to guard our hearts (Prov. 4:23).

Unit 25 – Raised Imperishable

1 Corinthians 15:35-58

Text

³⁵ But someone will ask, “How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?”³⁶ How foolish! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies.³⁷ When you sow, you do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed, perhaps of wheat or of something else.³⁸ But God gives it a body as he has determined, and to each kind of seed he gives its own body.³⁹ Not all flesh is the same: People have one kind of flesh, animals have another, birds another and fish another.⁴⁰ There are also heavenly bodies and there are earthly bodies; but the splendor of the heavenly bodies is one kind, and the splendor of the earthly bodies is another.⁴¹ The sun has one kind of splendor, the moon another and the stars another; and star differs from star in splendor.

⁴² So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; ⁴³ it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power;⁴⁴ it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.

If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body.⁴⁵ So it is written: “The first man Adam became a living being”^a; the last Adam, a life-giving spirit.⁴⁶ The spiritual did not come first, but the natural, and after that the spiritual.⁴⁷ The first man was of the dust of the earth; the second man is of heaven.⁴⁸ As was the earthly man, so are those who are of the earth; and as is the heavenly man, so also are those who are of

heaven.⁴⁹ And just as we have borne the image of the earthly man, so shall we^b bear the image of the heavenly man.

⁵⁰ I declare to you, brothers and sisters, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.⁵¹ Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—⁵² in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.⁵³ For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality.⁵⁴ When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: “Death has been swallowed up in victory.”^c

⁵⁵ “Where, O death, is your victory?
Where, O death, is your sting?”^d

⁵⁶ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.⁵⁷ But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

⁵⁸ Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

^a 45 Gen. 2:7 ^b 49 Some early manuscripts so let us

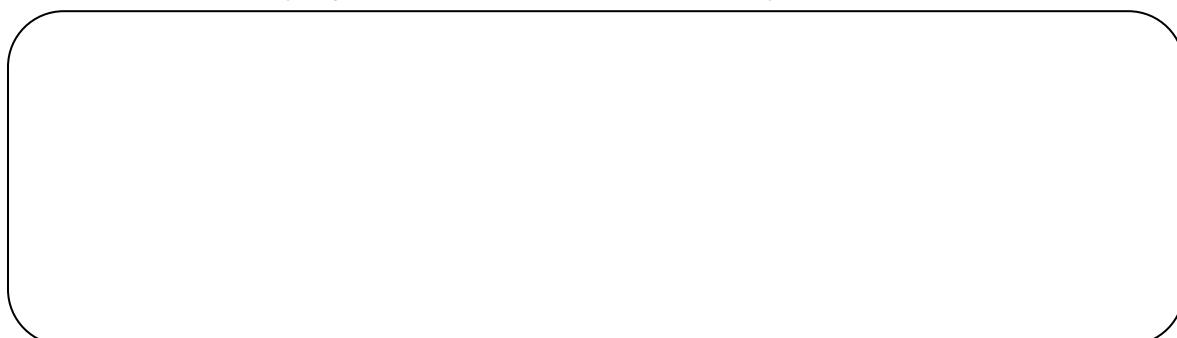
^c 54 Isaiah 25:8 ^d 55 Hosea 13:14

Open

- If you could have the physical abilities of any one kind of animal, what would it be?

Discover

1. This passage is a response to someone who considers the whole idea of a physical, bodily resurrection to be foolishness. Why might this idea seem difficult to accept? Do you find it difficult to accept?



-
2. In this passage, Paul uses various analogies from the natural world to help us understand the difference between our present bodies and our resurrection bodies. What does the example of the seed indicate about our resurrection bodies? (vv. 36-38)

What does the example of the different kinds of animals tell us? (v. 39)

What does the example of the heavenly “bodies” tell us? (vv. 40-41)

3. Paul identifies several ways in which our resurrection bodies will be different. What are they? (vv. 42-44)

4. What does the comparison between Adam and Christ have to do with resurrection? What point is Paul making here? (vv. 45-49)

5. In vv. 54-57, Paul makes a statement about death and the law. Rephrase this in your own words.

Apply

- Do you ever feel that your attempts to serve Christ with your life are “in vain”? Why? How does this passage address that?
- Do you find the idea of a bodily resurrection, as described in this passage, to be exciting? Encouraging? Frightening? Why?

Commentary

- v. 35 These questions are a verbal challenge, from an inquirer who considers the whole idea of bodily resurrection to be nonsensical. We all know that when people die, their bodies decompose and become part of other living organisms! Will those molecules somehow be reassembled? Will we come to life as reanimated corpses? The skepticism here expresses a sense that what Paul is suggesting is simply ludicrous; that this is something which no thinking person could accept. And many today share such a view.
- v. 36 Paul responds that it is not he who is speaking foolishly, but rather the questioner, because he fails to consider the power of God (see Mt. 22:29; Mk. 12:24). The skeptic can imagine only a limited set of possibilities. But God is able to do "immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine" (Eph. 3:20). Jesus uses a similar analogy, of a seed falling to the ground and dying, to describe the abundant and eternal life which result when the believer chooses to die to self and follow him (Jn. 12:24). In both passages, death and loss are not the end, but rather are the pathway to a glorious future.
- v. 37 In this verse, we see that there is a clear continuity between our present bodies and our resurrection bodies, but also great discontinuity. Our resurrection bodies are genuinely related to our current ones, but the alteration will be fundamental and comprehensive, like the transformation of a seed into a mature plant. No one, looking at a sunflower seed or an acorn, could possibly predict what the fully grown flower or tree would look like. And likewise, we cannot predict the form of our resurrection bodies by thinking of them as simply stronger or more capable versions of our present physical selves. They will be radically different.
- v. 38 "**But God gives . . . He gives . . .**" In both cases—the transformation of a seed into a mature plant, and the transformation of our bodies in resurrection—the final form is not the result of mindless, impersonal processes, but is the result of God bringing to fruition his design and plan (Ps. 104:13-15; Gen. 1:11-13).
- v. 39 The idea that our resurrection bodies will be very different from our current physical bodies should not be difficult to accept. After all, when God created the various kinds of birds, fish, and other animals on the earth, he gave them completely different forms and capabilities. A blue whale has a very different anatomy than a butterfly! And yet both were created by God to dwell on this earth. How much more different might bodies be that are designed to exist in a "new heavens and a new earth"! (Isa. 65:17; 66:2; Rev. 21:1).
- vv. 40-41 Here, "heavenly" refers, not to the place where angels dwell, the immediate presence of God (Mt. 18:10), but to that part of creation which is above, and distinct from, the earth. And so these are the astronomical "bodies" which were spun into place on the fourth day: the sun, moon, and stars (Gen 1:1-3, 14-19; see 1 Cor. 15:41). Paul's point is that, as we consider the profound differences between our present and future bodies, we need to consider that God has made, not only various forms of terrestrial life (v. 39), but also countless stellar and planetary "bodies" of immensely varying size, and shape, and luminosity. The one who conceived of, and who brought into being, this huge diversity of physical entities is the same one who will re-create our own bodies. This affirms the testimony of the Scriptures, that the glory of the bodies which God has planned for us is literally beyond comprehension (Rom. 8:18; 1 Cor. 2:9; 2 Cor. 4:15-18; 5:1-3; Eph. 3:20; Phil. 3:20-21; 1 Jn. 3:2).
- vv. 42-44 The contrasts in these verses apply both to us, and to Christ as the "firstfruits" of the resurrection (vv. 20, 23). Our bodies will be similar to his; he "will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body" (Phil. 3:21; see Rom. 6:5; 1 Cor. 15:48-49). Thus, the fact that he could eat, and could be physically touched, should dispel any notion that we will exist as disembodied spirits (see Lk. 24:36-43; Jn. 20:27). Note also that Christ was recognizable as himself (Lk. 24:31), and that his resurrection body bore the signs of crucifixion (Jn. 20:20), and yet it also possessed the ability to appear and disappear (Lk. 24:31; Jn. 20:19). And so we see both continuity and discontinuity.
- "The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable"** The term "perishable" refers not only to the physical corruptibility of our bodies, the decline of strength and vitality due to sickness and age. It also refers to the fact that they are subject to sin (see Gal. 6:8). The resurrection body will be free, not only of disease and physical decay, but also of any taint of moral corruption. And so both the physical and spiritual death which were the result of Adam's fall (Gen. 2:16-17) will be eradicated in us.
- "it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory"** If we desire honor and glory, we should not seek them in this life; in fact, we are told to expect the opposite if we follow Christ (Mt. 5:11-12; 10:16-25; Lk. 6:26; Jn. 15:18-21). But in the resurrection, those desires will be fulfilled, eternally (Rom. 2:6-7; 8:18; Col. 1:27; 3:4; 1 Pet. 1:7; 5:10).

"it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power" The kind of power that the world trusts in—political, economic, and military—is not what ultimately matters. Paul does not lament our lack of worldly power, but rather rejoices that the power of God is far greater (2 Cor. 10:4; 11:30; 12:9-10). In the resurrection, our apparent weakness will be transformed into great strength, just as the seeming helplessness of Christ, hanging on the cross, became the power to destroy death, and sin, and Satan (Rom. 1:4; 1 Cor. 6:14; 15:26, 54; 2 Cor. 13:4; Col. 2:13-16; Heb. 2:14-15; 2 Tim. 1:9-11)

"it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body." The contrast here is not between a present physical body and some future immaterial and ethereal form; our future body will be physical also (see notes above). Rather, it is between bodies that are subject to the natural forces of this world (see Rom. 12:1-2), and bodies which are wholly under the influence of God's Spirit.

- v. 45 By referring to Christ as “the last Adam”, Paul identifies him as the progenitor of a new race: those who are “in Christ” through spiritual rebirth, rather than being “in Adam” through physical birth. Christ, the second Adam, came to undo all the evil that resulted from the sin of the first Adam (Rom. 5:12-19; 1 Cor. 15:21-22; 2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 3:26-27). And so the serpent's victory in Eden is annulled.

The greater power of the second Adam is seen here, in that the first Adam only received the breath of life (Gen. 2:7), while Christ has the power to give life through the Spirit (Jn. 4:14; 5:21, 26; 6:33, 35, 63; 10:28; 11:25; 17:2).

- v. 46 The transition from the first to the second Adam, a past event in redemptive history, will be mirrored in our own future transition from a “natural” body to one which is “spiritual” (see notes on v. 44).

- vv. 47-48 Paul continues the contrast between the first and second Adam by focusing on their respective origins. The first Adam was formed “from the dust of the ground” (Gen. 2:7), while Christ came from heaven (Jn. 3:13, 31; 6:38, 51). The implication is that the natures of these men, as well as the natures of their progeny, reflect those origins. Thus, the first man and his children are “earthly”; that is, driven by the desires and influences of this world; while the second man and his offspring are “heavenly”, i.e., living according to the realities of the world to come.

- v. 49 In the beginning, Adam was created in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:26-27). That image has been defaced by sin, but not eradicated (see Gen. 5:3; 9:6; 1 Cor. 11:7). Christ, the second Adam, is the flawless and

complete image of God; he is “the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being” (Heb. 1:3; see Jn. 14:9; 12:45; 2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15). As we now grow in Christlikeness, we are reflecting that image more and more (2 Cor. 3:18; Col. 3:10), but at the resurrection we will bear his image fully and without blemish (Rom. 8:29; 1 Jn. 3:2; Eph. 5:27; Col. 1:22).

- v. 50 The bodies that we now possess are mortal, and subject to decay, disease, and death. They are not capable of entering into, enjoying, or even surviving, the immediate presence of God (Dt. 5:26; Ex. 33:20; Jdg. 6:22-23; 13:22; Isa. 6:5; Jn. 1:18; 5:37; 6:46; 1 Tim. 6:16). They must be changed, and they will be.
- vv. 51-52 When Christ returns, a great trumpet blast will sound. Those who have died in Christ will be raised to new life, and they, along with the believers who are still living, will be transformed (Mt. 24:30-31; 1 Thess. 4:13-17). This will not be a gradual metamorphosis, but an instantaneous transformation from one state to another (see Isa. 29:5-6; Lk. 21:34; 1 Thess. 5:2-3).
- vv. 53-54 Paul uses the imagery of putting on a new garment to describe the change that will take place; we will be “clothed” with immortality and imperishability (see 2 Cor. 5:1-4; compare also Lk. 24:49; Rom. 13:14; Gal. 3:27). The fact that death will be “swallowed up” speaks to its utter annihilation. It will disappear completely, with no trace remaining. Here Paul is citing a passage from Isaiah in which the prophet foretells the coming of the Lord, a time when He will destroy death, “the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations”. At that time, God will “will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove his people's disgrace from all the earth” (Isa. 25:7-8).
- vv. 55-57 Verse 55 is a reference to Hosea 13:14, in which death is called upon to punish Israel. But now, because of Christ, physical death no longer has any “sting”. The sin that would lead to eternal punishment has been forgiven, our debt nailed to the cross (Col. 2:13-15). Likewise, the law, which provoked and exposed sin (Rom. 5:20; 7:7-13), has lost its power, Christ having released us from the law through his death (Rom. 6:14; 7:4-6; 8:2).
- v. 58 In the resurrection, every unseen sacrifice, every unheralded act of obedience, and every ounce of “blood, toil, tears, and sweat” expended in the service of the gospel, will be rewarded. Even if we come to the end of our days without having seen any apparent fruit from our labors, we know that when Christ returns, it will be worth it all, and far more. None of it will be wasted, none of it “in vain”.

Unit 26 – Final Instructions

1 Corinthians 16:1-24

Text

¹ Now about the collection for the Lord's people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do.

² On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made. ³ Then, when I arrive, I will give letters of introduction to the men you approve and send them with your gift to Jerusalem. ⁴ If it seems advisable for me to go also, they will accompany me.

⁵ After I go through Macedonia, I will come to you—for I will be going through Macedonia. ⁶ Perhaps I will stay with you for a while, or even spend the winter, so that you can help me on my journey, wherever I go. ⁷ For I do not want to see you now and make only a passing visit; I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits. ⁸ But I will stay on at Ephesus until Pentecost, ⁹ because a great door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many who oppose me.

¹⁰ When Timothy comes, see to it that he has nothing to fear while he is with you, for he is carrying on the work of the Lord, just as I am.

¹¹ No one, then, should treat him with contempt. Send him on his way in peace so that he may return to me. I am expecting him along with the brothers.

¹² Now about our brother Apollos: I strongly urged him to go to you with the brothers. He was

quite unwilling to go now, but he will go when he has the opportunity.

¹³ Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong. ¹⁴ Do everything in love.

¹⁵ You know that the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and they have devoted themselves to the service of the Lord's people. I urge you, brothers and sisters, ¹⁶ to submit to such people and to everyone who joins in the work and labors at it. ¹⁷ I was glad when Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus arrived, because they have supplied what was lacking from you. ¹⁸ For they refreshed my spirit and yours also. Such men deserve recognition.

¹⁹ The churches in the province of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Priscilla ^a greet you warmly in the Lord, and so does the church that meets at their house. ²⁰ All the brothers and sisters here send you greetings. Greet one another with a holy kiss.

²¹ I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand.

²² If anyone does not love the Lord, let that person be cursed! Come, Lord^b!

²³ The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you.

²⁴ My love to all of you in Christ Jesus. Amen.^c

^a 19 Greek Prisca, a variant of Priscilla ^b 22 The Greek for Come, Lord reproduces an Aramaic expression (Marana tha) used by early Christians. ^c 24 Some manuscripts do not have Amen.

Open

- Do you stay in touch with old classmates and friends? If so, how do you do so?

Discover

1. What does Paul have to say about giving in this passage? (vv. 1-4)

Who was the gift for?

When was it to be collected?

How much was each person to contribute?

What does Paul tell us elsewhere about the purpose of such gifts? (2 Cor. 8:13-15)

-
2. In verses 5-9, Paul tells the Corinthians about his travel plans. Why did he want to visit them?

Paul expresses his plans in a tentative way ("perhaps", v. 6). What does this tell us about how he made decisions concerning his future ministry?

3. Why might Paul have been concerned about the reception that Timothy would receive? (vv. 10-11; see 1 Tim. 4:12; 2 Tim. 1:7)

What should their treatment of Timothy be based on?

4. In verse 13, Paul calls the Corinthians to watchfulness, courage, strength, and steadfastness. Why would they need such an exhortation?

5. Why was Paul glad to have received the emissaries from the Corinthians church? (vv. 15-18) What qualities in these men does he highlight as making them worthy to be respected and obeyed?

Apply

- Looking back on your study of 1 Corinthians, what insights or discoveries meant the most to you? How has your life been changed?
- How has the experience of participating in this study with other believers affected you?

Commentary

Having completed his teaching on the major themes of the letter, which climaxed in the previous chapter, Paul now concludes with instruction on various other matters—his travel plans, the procedure for taking up a collection for other churches, and personal endorsements.

We might be tempted to skim this passage quickly, as having less theological significance than what came before. But the concluding portion of Paul's epistle has its own value. It reminds us, first of all, that the Christian life is not lived primarily within the cloistered walls of theological schools or in the quiet of the pastor's study. It is lived in the daily life of God's people, a life which is often filled with mundane details and practical concerns. And those matters are just as much a part of a life lived for Christ as are Bible study and other "spiritual" activities. God is in the ordinary and the unexciting, as well as in the extraordinary and the thrilling. All of life belongs to him and matters to him.

This passage also reminds us that Paul's concern is not only with ideas, but with people. He is no mere theoretician, but is fundamentally a pastor, concerned with the application of truth to the lives of those to whom he is writing. This document is not a theological treatise but a letter, written to flesh-and-blood people who are in need of instruction and guidance. May we remember that the purpose for which God's word was given was not to provide source material for articles in theological journals, but to enable us to glorify God by loving him and loving our neighbor.

And third, it reminds us that Paul does love these people. In spite of the manifold ways in which they have fallen short of God's best for them, he sees them, not as a problem to be solved, but as God's beloved sons and daughters. May we have the same attitude toward our brothers and sisters in Christ, even when that love requires us to rebuke or correct.

- v. 1 Paul begins by giving instruction concerning a collection to be made in order to provide financial aid to believers in Jerusalem (see Acts 24:17; Rom. 15:25-32; 2 Cor. 8-9). Several notes can be made about this. First, this was pure economic aid. It was not money to pay for the salaries of Christian workers, or to purchase evangelistic tracts. It was money to help other believers purchase the necessities of daily life. How many churches today, even in the wealthy West, dedicate a portion of their budget for the relief of poor churches, whether in their own countries or around the world?

Second, it was intended to diminish economic inequality between rich and poor believers (2 Cor. 8:13-15). Regardless of one's political views on government

taxation and forced income redistribution, it is difficult to argue with Paul's teaching that, on a voluntary basis, those who are rich in material goods ought to be sharing what they have with the poor.

With respect to the church at Jerusalem specifically, Paul makes explicit that Gentile Christians have a special obligation to aid Jewish believers:

"Macedonia and Achaia were pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the Lord's people in Jerusalem. . . . and indeed they owe it to them. For if the Gentiles have shared in the Jews' spiritual blessings, they owe it to the Jews to share with them their material blessings." (Rom. 15:26-27)

- vv. 2-4 The fact that these gifts were to be "set aside" on the first day of each week; i.e. on Sunday, the day when they gathered together as a church, indicates that a private process of allocating one's income is not in view, but that Paul is referring to taking up a collection as part of their corporate worship experience. Despite the opportunity for abuse (Mt. 6:1-4; 1 Tim. 6:5), the giving of one's financial means to the Lord's work is a part of worship. If we are ashamed of this, we are yielding to the taunts and false accusations of the world.

Note that Paul instructs each to give "in keeping with your income". In other words, those who had more were to give more, but no specific amount or percentage is given. That is left for the individual to determine before God.

- vv. 5-9 In these verses, Paul communicates his travel plans. These include an intention to visit Corinth and to remain there for an extended time, which Acts 18:11 tells us he was able to do (see Acts 18:1-18). Although Paul sometimes received specific guidance from the Holy Spirit as to where and when he should travel (Acts 11:12; 13:2; 16:9-10; 20:22-23), here he expresses his plans as conditional and tentative. He apparently expected to adjust his plans according to the circumstances, as might seem best at the time (see Acts 15:24-26, 33-34).

Paul's intention in visiting the Corinthians was both practical and pastoral. He wanted to live out the gospel among them as a testimony (1 Thess. 1:4-6; 2:5-12; 1 Cor. 4:16-17; 2 Cor. 12:12-18), and he also desired that they would contribute to his personal support, so that he would be helped on in his journey (v. 6).

vv. 10-11 It speaks poorly of the Corinthians that Paul had to warn them not to treat Timothy “with contempt” or give him cause to fear! Elsewhere, Paul encourages Timothy not to “*let anyone look down on you because you are young*” (1 Tim. 4:12) and reminds him that “*the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline*” (2 Tim. 1:7). So Timothy was likely, compared to Paul, less self-assured and less authoritative in speech and manner. Paul must have been concerned that if the Corinthians had treated him with disrespect, Timothy bringing the same message would receive even worse treatment. And so Paul reminds them that Timothy is just as much a servant of Christ as he is, and exhorts them to receive him as such. Not only that, but they should tend to his material needs, so that he has the necessary provisions to be able to travel and rejoin Paul (v. 11).

v. 12 Paul gives no indication as to the reason for Apollos’ reluctance to visit Corinth, but indicates that this is a temporary situation, and that Apollos intends to go when circumstances permit. Perhaps Apollos felt that his presence would only encourage the cult of personality that had led some of the Corinthians to consider themselves “Apollonians” (1 Cor. 1:12; 3:4-6). Paul might have argued to the contrary, that for his own envoys (“the brothers”) to go to Corinth, leaving Apollos behind, would worsen the situation and lead the Corinthians to conclude that he was acting out of jealousy and preventing his rival from visiting them. Thus, his assurance here that this was not the case, but that he had “strongly urged” Apollos to go.

Whatever the situation may have been, what we see here is an example of a case in which godly men, Paul and Apollos, had a disagreement about the best course of action in ministry (see Acts 15:36-41). And yet this does not indicate that either one of them had a wrong attitude, or was acting in an unrighteous manner. They simply had differing, and strongly held, points of view.

vv. 13-14 Here we have a call to watchfulness, courage, strength, and steadfastness. Unlike other Christian communities, the believers at Corinth were not facing overt persecution, perhaps because they had become so comfortable with the ungodly world around them. And so these exhortations would seem to be referring to their internal struggles, rather than conflict with opponents of the faith. This is, then, a reminder not to allow themselves to be seduced by the world’s values and opinions, as they were clearly at risk of doing. The greatest challenges to our faith often come not from without, but from within.

“Do everything in love.” Without love, nothing we accomplish has any true value (1 Cor. 13:1-3). It must motivate, guide, and control all of our actions.

vv. 15-18 Previously, the Corinthian church had sent these men—Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus—to Paul to minister to his needs, and Paul is grateful. They had encouraged him and provided material support. Note that the phrase “what was lacking from you” is not an implied rebuke for any previous inattention on their part, but a recognition that Paul was far removed from them, and thus could not enjoy their fellowship and sustenance. But those they sent to him had filled that need.

It is interesting to note that Paul encourages the church to “*submit to such people and to everyone who joins in the work and labors at it.*” In other words, a key criteria for leadership and influence in the church is the degree to which one works hard at ministry and serves others.

vv. 19-20 Aquila and Priscilla, who send their greetings through Paul, were at Corinth before him, having left Italy because of persecution against the Jews. Paul stayed in their home during his previous ministry there (Acts 18:1-3). When he left Corinth to travel to Syria, they accompanied him (Acts 18:18), and while in Ephesus, they gave Apollos his advanced instruction in the faith (Acts 18:24-26).

The greetings which Paul relays from “the churches in the province of Asia” are not merely a cordial postscript to the letter. They are a reminder that the church at Corinth is not an independent entity, but is part of a worldwide community of faith, with shared beliefs and practices (1 Cor. 7:17; 11:16).

Greeting friends, family, and close associates with a kiss was customary in Asia Minor in Paul’s day, as it is today in some countries in Europe and around the world. And so Paul’s exhortation to “greet one another with a holy kiss” should probably not be taken as a call to introduce this custom in churches where the larger society prefers a handshake or a respectful bow.

v. 21 “*I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand.*” This signifies that although Paul had dictated the letter to a secretary, or *amanuensis*, he was signing it to indicate that he had reviewed it and validated its contents.

vv. 22-24 The concluding verses of the epistle speak to the grace of God, and love for God and for one another, along with a desire for Christ to return. May that be the final note, not only to this letter, but to our lives, as well.

Acknowledgments

The primary commentary consulted in the preparation of this work was: *The First Letter to the Corinthians (Pillar New Testament Commentary)* by Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner. All views expressed, however, are those of the author.

About the Author

Alan Perkins is a graduate of Dallas Theological Seminary, where he received the Th.M. degree with honors and the Edwin C. Deibler award in historical theology. He has many years of experience leading small groups, as a pastor and church planter, and in parachurch ministry.