



A STUDY OF

# 1 CORINTHIANS

SERMON SERIES GUIDE

# INTRODUCTION

The church is in trouble. Facing a unique leadership challenge alongside the twin dangers of factions within and external pressure without, the church is in desperate need of a word from God. It was with these thoughts that the Apostle Paul set about writing a letter to the church he planted in Corinth around 50 AD. The resulting book, which we call 1 Corinthians, is as close as the New Testament comes in offering us a diagnostic and guide to develop healthy church culture.

*"Although written to a group of Christians whose social world was distinctly different from ours, its message is a powerful one for the church today; our problems are, in many ways, not so distant from theirs. We too must find our way between apostolic teaching and contemporary culture..."* (Burge, Cohick, Green 294)

It seems clear that much of the next 30 years at Parkview Church will be decided in the next 10 months. And the challenges in front of us are not insignificant. How should we respond? Or, to use a fitting phrase from the Bible, *"What then are we to do?"* (Luke 3:10) This was the question that the crowds asked in response to John the Baptist, when God sent him to prepare His people for the next phase of God's work in the world. John's response? Commit to public justice, personal holiness, and a culture of whole-hearted faithfulness. In a word: **renewal**. Into the fertile soil of that renewed people, the messiah appeared, and the gospel thrived.

So then, *'what then are we to do?'* at a time like this? In a word: **renewal**. We must commit ourselves to new personal and corporate patterns of living, that promote whole-hearted change in ourselves and in our church. It means we despair of our power to make Parkview what it ought to be and throw ourselves before Christ anew. This guide intends to be less of a Bible study of 1 Corinthians than it is a guide through a season of reflection and renewal for us as a church.

One of the most significant themes in the book of 1 Corinthians is power. Ray Ortlund says *"If our purposes rise no higher than what we can attain by our own organizing and thinking, then we should change our churches into community centers. But if we are weary of ourselves and our own brilliance, if we are embarrassed by our failures, then we are ready for the gift of power from on high."* (The Gospel, 104-105) Are you there yet? Are we there yet? What if we commit this year to navigating this new road together, with eyes wide open, and a heart full of the kind of courage and comfort that only the gospel can provide?

What if we became the kind of church that we have always wanted and wanted to be: *"a prophetic sign that points beyond itself... a model home of the new neighborhood Christ is building for eternity...a church that makes heaven real to people on earth so that they can put their faith in Christ now, while they still have the chance?"* (The Gospel, 51). Friends, it is possible. God is eager to do it. Are you? Join us as we use this guide to pursue this worthy task together.

# STUDY #1: 1 CORINTHIANS 1:1-9

This study is meant to guide us as a church while we go through 1 Corinthians this fall and spring. The weekly sessions will align with the preaching passage for each week. Each week's session is meant to lead from Bible study into Bible meditation, on through to Bible application and prayer. We hope that having a single task each week will allow you to set aside a dedicated, un-distracted time to complete these sessions.

**This week's passage is 1 Corinthians 1:1-9. To begin, take a few moments to read the passage slowly in your own Bible.**

As we will learn over the next several months, the church of Corinth does not belong in the "hall of fame" of churches in the Bible. The church was marked by a party spirit that divided the church based on allegiance to individual leaders. Rather than using their God-given gifts to serve, they used them as a measuring stick to boost their overblown egos. Underlying all of this seems to be a pervasive obsession with status and power, a trait they had learned from their pagan society and not from Christ. But it's for this very reason that Paul's letter is of such great help to us. It is a case study in the kinds of mistakes we are prone to commit as a church, and more significantly, the precious remedies that God provides to address our errors. If there is hope for the Corinthians, there is hope for us, too!

And this first passage gives us a glimpse of the source of that hope.

In verse 2, Paul addresses the church as those "...*sanctified in Christ Jesus...*" The word "*sanctified*" in this case is a past-tense verb; it refers to an action that has already been accomplished. If you have been around Parkview in the last 2 months, you know we have been working our way through a series of passages dealing with the concept that the Bible calls "*sanctification*"—often described as a process of growing in holiness. Yet in this case Paul doesn't refer to an ongoing process of sanctification but rather to a decisive once-and-for-all-time act of God which made the Corinthian church completely holy—something that has already been accomplished.

As we briefly outlined above, of all the churches in the Bible, the church in Corinth is probably the least "worthy" to have the word "*sanctified*" applied to them. And yet, Paul does. Before a single word about how to fix their unhealthy church, Paul reminds them that every ounce of their holiness (a) has already been accomplished (b) by Christ, not by themselves. What wonderful news. In fact, this is no more than Paul simply applying the gospel to the church, communicating to them that if they will make any of the necessary changes outlined in Paul's letter, it will be because of God's accomplished work in them through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. What effect do you think this would have had on the Corinthian church?

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# STUDY #1: 1 CORINTHIANS 1:1-9 (CONT.)

If God's decisive once-and-for-all-time declaration of holiness ("the gospel") can motivate the Corinthian church out of her mess, it certainly can also inspire us toward greater spiritual health in our church today. As Ray Ortlund says, "*We didn't ruin God's plan; we are his plan, his eternal plan to love the undeserving, for the display of his glory alone.*" **Take a few moments to pray that we would take hold of the gospel as our deepest hope and ultimate motivation as we journey through this time of renewal.**

*"Heavenly Father, make your grace amazing to me again. By your Holy Spirit, draw me so deeply into your heart of love and holiness that I find an inexhaustible well of motivation to live a holy life today and every day. When the challenges seem too great or I am tempted to pride or cynicism, turn my eyes afresh to this pulsating core motivation for all true change: that you looked at me and said 'he/she is worth everything.'"*

As we pray, we'll try to make it our habit to pray in an ever-expanding fashion, starting with ourselves and then radiating out in concentric circles:

- Yourself
- Fellow Community Group members or other Parkview friends
- Parkview's leaders (*Pastors, Elders, Staff, Women's ministry team, Deacons*)
- Your city (*especially that this specific truth would be acknowledged and applied to those who don't yet know Christ, leading to personal change and community revival*)

In verse 4, Paul gives the Corinthian church the privilege of overhearing his prayer of gratitude for them: "*I give thanks to my God always for you...*" This is another astounding statement in light of the criticisms that Paul will soon be lodging against the indulgent atmosphere of the Corinthians. Somehow, Paul still finds plenty to appreciate, and he makes it known! Affirmation is not stroking the ego, which was a go-to technique in Corinth; as Paul illustrates for us here, healthy affirmation means acknowledging God's Spirit at work among his people.

Walk into a holy church and you will immediately see that recognizing holiness on display is not primarily about pointing out flaws but about acknowledging and celebrating God's good work wherever it is. Sam Crabtree says "*A fire not stoked goes out. A refrigerator unplugged rots the eggs, which were perfectly good not too long ago. A garden not tended erupts with weeds, not vegetables. Affirmation is the fire-stoking, refrigerator-electrifying, garden-tending side of relationships.*"

This week, cultivate the habit of God-honoring affirmation that Paul models here. **Reach out to at least one person and affirm them for what you see God doing in or through them.** You can even literally follow Paul's example like a fill-in-the-blank: "*I give thanks to God for you because I have seen God's grace at work in your life. I've noticed how you \_\_\_\_\_.*" I just wanted to let you know that I've seen God at work in your life and I'm proud to call you my friend," etc.

This week, as you prepare to hear God's word preached from 1 Corinthians 1:1-9, let's let this thought unify, comfort, and thrill us: **Our church belongs to God, is built by God, and is beloved by God. See you on Sunday!**

# STUDY #2: 1 CORINTHIANS 1:10-17

This week's passage is 1 Corinthians 1:10-17. Take a few minutes to read it:

*<sup>10</sup> I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment.<sup>11</sup> For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers.<sup>12</sup> What I mean is that each one of you says, "I follow Paul," or "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Cephas," or "I follow Christ."<sup>13</sup> Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?<sup>14</sup> I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius,<sup>15</sup> so that no one may say that you were baptized in my name.<sup>16</sup> (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas. Beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.)<sup>17</sup> For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.*

Only ten verses into Paul's letter to the Corinthian church, we come to the first major issue that needs to be addressed. Paul's words in verse 10 seem to be a reflection on Jesus' words in John 17:11: "Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one."

Clearly, the unity of the church is precious to Jesus. But in Corinth, the unity of the church had been abandoned as they divided into battling factions based on allegiance to particular leaders.

In verse 13, Paul presents his entire argument for unity in the church using three pointed rhetorical questions. The assumed answer to each of the questions is "no." If we were to paraphrase Paul's argument in verse 13, it would sound something like this:

"There are three possible situations in which it would be permissible to form competing factions amongst yourselves. I will outline each of them in turn:

**'Is Christ divided?'** Answer: no, he's not. You have permission to become four competing factions just as soon as Jesus divides his body into four separate parts. He hasn't done that, so you must mend your church body in order to match his physical body.

**'Was Paul crucified for you?'** Answer: no. Your unity is based on Christ's unity, and furthermore, it's based on his single, unrepeatable sacrifice on the cross. Anyone to whom you offer ultimate allegiance must pass this one test: did they die for your sins, bringing you into life-giving fellowship with your creator? On this incredibly short list, there is only one name, and it's not 'Paul.'

**'Were you baptized in the name of Paul?'** You were not. Nor Apollos, nor Cephas. When you were baptized, you were not just making a public confession about a private decision. You were committing yourself before the gathered saints to join them under the source of all true unity: the three in one God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Since you were baptized into that name, you are permitted to divide yourselves only on the condition that God divides himself into three separate beings. He has not, so you shall not."

Before diagnosing the Corinthians' problem, he tells them what a healthy church looks like. He uses three phrases in verse 10 to describe it. What are they?

## STUDY #2: 1 CORINTHIANS 1:10-17 (CONT.)

Unity is vital for a church to be faithful to God's calling. We should not only avoid creating or exacerbating divisions in the church; we should be actively seeking to promote profound unity in the church. Let's consider how we can play a role in cultivating unity at Parkview.

What are some ways that you can help contribute to the unity of the church? First think positively: What are some ways that you can cultivate "agreement, harmony, and likemindedness" at Parkview?

Now let's think negatively, and go to God in prayer. This problem in Corinth is not merely a Corinthian problem. For each of us, there is a temptation toward division in our hearts. We may not express this tendency in our actions or with our words, but within us there is a tendency to divide. We would rather spend our time in a group where our preferences and ideas are the norm, where our opinions can be shared without internal examination or external criticism. But that is not the way of Christ.

Unity in the church is a big idea that boils down to something quite simple. We're people, with relationships with other people. When those relationships are healthy, without secret resentment or outward malice, there is an opportunity for unity. Is there someone at Parkview that you have had conflict with? Maybe it hasn't even become external to your own mind: maybe the rupture in unity lies only within your heart. Maybe you have felt hurt but decided not to bring it up, but you have still retreated from them relationally. Maybe you quietly look the other way when you see them. Unity at Parkview will be achieved when we begin healing these silent fractures. Today, we are going to pray for that person.<sup>1</sup>

Imagine that person. Try to put his or her face in your mind's eye. And then pray:

*Father, help me to see [insert name here] the way that you see him/her. Help me to love [insert name here] the way that you love them. Bless [insert name here] greatly. Show him/her the pleasure you have for him/her through the perfection of Jesus. Help me to truly desire these things for [insert name here].*

*Father, I acknowledge your desire for unity in your church, and I want to contribute to unity at Parkview. I offer this relationship to you: lead me in a path of reconciliation, and give me the peace to trust you wherever you might lead. Do all this for your glory through your church. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.*

Now, let's expand our prayer outward, and pray for our fellow members and leaders:

*Father, bless my fellow church members as they pray and consider your call to profound unity at Parkview church. Help us as a people to submit our hearts to you, to trust you, and above all to place your Son and his saving death at the core of our community.*

*Father, bless the elders of Parkview as they lead and guide us to healthy unity. Give them courage and wisdom, and help them to be "in agreement, harmonious, and singleminded" as they lead. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.*

<sup>1</sup> There are times when distance in relationships is appropriate. This is not the situation we are addressing in this time of prayer. We will not recommend that individuals remain in abusive relationships, especially when a demand for reconciliation is used by an abuser as a tactic of spiritual manipulation.

# STUDY #3: 1 CORINTHIANS 1:18-2:5

This week's passage is 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5. Open your Bible and read through the passage a few times.

The animating principle of any faithful church is the gospel of Jesus. The Holy Spirit brings us to new life by connecting us through mere faith to the perfect life, substitutionary death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the living son of God. God accomplishes that work not just to rescue individuals from the wickedness of earth, but to create a new kind of community, a new humanity—the Church, and through her to appeal to all of creation to reconnect to her creator. The church, then, exists by the gospel, lives *through* the gospel, and persists for the gospel.

It's easy to affirm this fact by putting it in our Church's statement of faith and by signing our agreement on the dotted line when we become church members. But it's decidedly difficult to cultivate a church culture that reflects the beauty and power of the gospel of grace. Ray Ortlund says, *"When the doctrine is clear and the culture is beautiful, that church will be powerful. But there are no shortcuts to getting there. Without the doctrine, the culture will be weak. Without the culture, the doctrine will seem pointless."*<sup>1</sup>

1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5 has something to teach us about how to become and remain a church where the gospel of Jesus is not just the foundation but also the organizing principle for every aspect of community life.

## 1. The Gospel is the true source of power in the church

*"For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." (1:18)*

In every other organization, you can inevitably find a merely human explanation for their success. Maybe their members all share the same set of interests. Maybe they are capitalizing on people's fears or hopes. Maybe they are led by figures with magnetic personalities or massive cultural appeal. It's easy to draw a crowd. Not so with the church.

When churches are really successful in God's eyes, that success will inevitably lead to a measure of head scratching by onlookers. What is the secret to their success? Why are people compelled by their ministry? I know: there must be a new attraction, a fantastic, transcendent worship experience, a speaker who makes people laugh and cry and think at the same time, or maybe they have made inroads with the culturally powerful in their city and leveraged that influence to draw people in. You know, young people, beautiful people, rich people, smart people. Get them, and you get the town. Well, according to Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:18, not so much. If you want to find the secret to a healthy church's power, you'll need to keep looking.

In the Kingdom of Jesus, a boring, balding middle-aged man is not "past his prime." In the Kingdom of Jesus, a poor, unremarkable woman might bring more power into the church than the athletes and CEOs that we tend to put at the top of the stack.

<sup>1</sup> Ray Ortlund, *The Gospel*

# STUDY #3: 1 CORINTHIANS 1:18-2:5 (CONT.)

In the Kingdom of Jesus, we aren't surprised when the things that are low and despised in the world prove to be our greatest assets. It's only evidence to the fact that our movement is not merely human. It's unexplainable. It's supernatural. It's from God.

Let's pray that this otherworldly dynamic would be foundational in the life of our church:

*Heavenly Father, restore and continually promote in our church a fundamental commitment to the gospel of grace. Reveal to us all of the ways that we tend to rely on worldly methods and means and look for earthly versions of success. Show us the beauty of trusting the example of your son, that life can truly come through death, and that you delight to use the most unlikely kinds of people and methods to accomplish your will. In Jesus' name, amen.*

*Pray the same thing for other churches in our area.*

*Pray along the same lines for our global workers serving Christ outside of the Iowa City area.*

## **2. The Gospel is always disruptive**

*"...Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God." (1:22-24)*

The gospel is a message of peace to those who trust Christ. But Jesus will accept no rivals on the throne of our hearts. You cannot serve God and anything. This is certainly true at the personal level, and this passage demonstrates that this is also true at the cultural level.

Every society upholds particular pictures of "the good life"—of what it means to really be free, successful, or worthy. In reality, that vision of "the good life" is a substitute for the salvation that Christ offers. And no matter which society we're talking about, that vision of "the good life" inevitably conflicts with the gospel.

At the heart of the Jewish society of Corinth was the desire for power, to be sure that they would never be overcome or subdued, that they could always have control of their situation. Could Christ promise that? Or could they have Christ *and* that kind of power?

At the heart of the Greek society of Corinth was the desire for intellectual superiority, to ascend the ranks of the wise until you could be sure that you knew it all. Could they follow Christ and still rejoice in their intellectual credibility?

The same power encounter that happened between the gospel and the prevailing cultures of Corinth has to happen in our church, too. Try filling in the blank: "Jews demand signs, Greeks seek wisdom, and [my neighbors] seek \_\_\_\_\_." What vision of "the good life" characterizes your neighbors? What keeps them from trusting Christ, or trusting Christ alone?

# STUDY #3: 1 CORINTHIANS 1:18-2:5 (CONT.)

Let's pray for the neighbor that came to mind just now, and in doing so pray for our church as well.

*Father, help my neighbor [insert name here] to see that trusting Christ is the only way her/his story can find a happy ending. By your power, reveal to him/her that the things that he/she is trusting can never really offer what they seem to promise. Help me to be a conduit of this truth. Provide me with an opportunity to speak with her/him about the hope that we have in Christ alone.*

*Father, help our church to be sensitive to these competing versions of "the good life." Give us a heart that grieves the lostness of our friends and neighbors. Give us a heart that rejoices in the true and beautiful vision of "the good life" that we see in your word. Make us a church that is serious about truth and just as serious about compassionate love for the lost. In Jesus' name, amen.*

# STUDY #4: 1 CORINTHIANS 2:6-16

This week we'll read 1 Corinthians 2:6-16 and consider its implications for our lives personally and for the life of our church. Begin by reading through it once:

<sup>6</sup> Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. <sup>7</sup> But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. <sup>8</sup> None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. <sup>9</sup> But, as it is written,

“What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,  
nor the heart of man imagined,  
what God has prepared for those who love him”—

<sup>10</sup> these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. <sup>11</sup> For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. <sup>12</sup> Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. <sup>13</sup> And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.

<sup>14</sup> The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned. <sup>15</sup> The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one. <sup>16</sup> “For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?” But we have the mind of Christ.

This passage continues to deal with an idea that the Apostle discussed in last week's passage. Paul ended that section by saying this: “And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.” (1 Corinthians 2:4-5)

Clearly, Paul is picking back up on the idea of *wisdom*. Remember that in Corinth in Paul's time, wisdom was not characterized by pithy proverbs and witty sayings (“a penny saved is a penny earned!”). Rather, the philosophers of the day gathered large crowds by spelling out elaborate ideologies with the claim that they could explain *everything*. Natural phenomena, the events of history, personal tragedies all could be explained by the so-called “wisdom” of these “wise men, debaters, scribes...” (1:20) in Corinth. As you can see, *wisdom*, as Paul is using it, was not about pithy one-liners. It was about a well-constructed system that offered to tell you everything you needed to know about history, science, ethics, *everything*. And these guys were on every corner, hawking this “wisdom.” What a place to plant a church!

If the Corinthians had stopped reading at 2:5, they might assume that Paul's evaluation of wisdom was fundamentally negative. Wisdom, they might think, is for the pagans, but not for Biblical believers. But Paul says, “among the mature **we do impart wisdom...**” It's understandable that Paul wants to separate himself from those in Corinth who were offering false answers in a pay-for-wisdom scheme. Yet Christianity does offer the wisdom that the Corinthians were looking for. It does offer an explanation for the events of history, natural phenomena, and personal experience. Yes, as Paul says in 1:24, [Christ crucified is]

# STUDY #4: 1 CORINTHIANS 2:6-16 (CONT)

“...the power of God and the wisdom of God.” But first, Paul makes a number of qualifications—‘Yes, God’s wisdom, but it’s not that kind of wisdom...’ Let’s read and pray through those qualifications now.

1. 2:6 – “Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, *although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away.*”
  - a. The systems of thought that appeal to a certain time and place may look and feel convincing, but in the end, their apparent “relevance” is actually their fatal flaw. Being cemented in the *present*, they are doomed to collapse when the fashion changes. One British pastor said, “If you marry the spirit of the age, you will find yourself a widower in the next.” Indeed.
  - b. The wisdom of the cross, on the other hand, is utterly timeless. Its origin is in eternity past, “...which God decreed before the ages...” Its destiny is in eternity to come, “...for our glory.” It is utterly inscrutable to the human senses—“What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined...”
  - c. A church founded on this vision will look utterly strange and strangely compelling at the same time. Can we be that kind of church? Only by God’s power. Let’s go to him now.
  - d. *Father, make us a church that is not charmed by the endless waves of thought that promise success but can only make us trendy now and soon obsolete. Give us a hunger for eternal significance. Make us content to accept the scorn that inevitably greets those who cling to the wisdom of the cross. Thrill our hearts with the thought that what you have prepared for us who love you is something that “no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined.” In Jesus’ name, amen.*
  
2. 2:11-12 – “Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God.”
  - a. The wisdom of the world comes naturally. Stumble around long enough, and you’ll learn a thing or two about what works and what doesn’t. Not so with the wisdom of God. The wisdom of God does not come through rational inquiry, life experience, or trial-and-error. Only the Spirit of God can reveal the hidden wisdom of God. This fact is at once humbling and exhilarating. On the one hand, all of our vaunted human effort, even our best reasoning, in the end will fall short of truly understanding God and his world. On the other hand, God in his mercy has bestowed upon us the most precious gift: himself. Only God can show us God. Only God can show us how to live in his world in a way that is sensible. God can show us by his Spirit how to operate *with the grain* of his creation. Only God can make us wise, by his Spirit.
  - b. We might be tempted to think that being filled by the Spirit is essential in *spiritual matters* but somewhat irrelevant for “everyday life.” This passage begs to differ. The presence of the Spirit in our lives means that the creator of every atom in our environment is present to us in every moment. And he has some thoughts about the way we do the dishes. And drive to work. And speak to our mothers. Let’s listen to him. Let’s be a church that listens to him. Let’s ask him to help us.
  - c. *Father, we ask that you would pour out a fresh measure of your Spirit upon us today. We recognize that apart from you, we are totally helpless to comprehend*

## STUDY #4: 1 CORINTHIANS 2:6-16 (CONT.)

*you, ourselves, one another, or the world you have created. If our church will be a location of spiritual significance, it will be because you have dwelt among us. Do so, we pray, for your glory. In Jesus' name, amen.*