



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?

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.

# 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.*



# STUDY #5: 1 CORINTHIANS 3:1-23

This week's sermon passage is all of 1 Corinthians chapter 3. Take a moment to read the whole passage in your own Bible. In this study, we'll focus on the concepts laid out in verses 5-17.

In this passage, Paul resumes his rebuke of the Corinthians that began in 1 Corinthians 1:10-17. His big concern is their tendency to divide into factions on the basis of individual leaders. In that passage, Paul exhorted them toward unity with three big questions: "Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?" In this passage, Paul takes a different tack.

Instead of focusing on the Corinthians' problematic behavior, in this passage Paul focuses on the faulty understanding that led to their divisive actions. Paul's point in the first part of this passage seems to boil down to this: if the Corinthians understood the actual source of power behind their chosen leaders' influence, they wouldn't be forming rival groups. In essence, their mistake is that they don't understand what really makes a church grow. What an important message for us to learn from!

Paul makes this point using two images: a field (vv. 5-9), and a building (vv. 10-17). Let's consider each image and apply it to ourselves and to Parkview Church.

*<sup>5</sup> What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. <sup>6</sup> I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. <sup>7</sup> So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. <sup>8</sup> He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor. <sup>9</sup> For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building.*

If you have ever taken a drive through the Iowa countryside in the spring, you have seen a familiar and beautiful sight. Loamy, onyx soil, carefully tilled and fertilized, surrounds tender green seedlings by the millions. At the perfect angle, you can see down an entire row and see 5,000 infant plants peeking out in a line that stretches to meet the horizon. No doubt it has taken an incredible amount of work to make that sight possible.

And yet, anyone who knows many farmers knows that there are two news items that interest them more than any other: the market update (will my harvest be worth much?), and the weather (will I have much of a harvest?). At the end of the day, no matter how much sweat the farmer pours out on the ground, his success is constrained by elements outside of his control. If it doesn't rain enough, or rains too much, or if the wind blows too hard (too soon?), his yield will either be ruined or greatly diminished. Paul presents a further point. If it weren't for the sun shining on the farmer's field, there would be no growth at all. The same is true when we think about the growth of a church.

We might have the slickest programs, the most dazzling leaders, world-class music and homey hospitality, but if the Spirit of God doesn't shine upon us, we will be like farmers who wake up one day to find that the sun never bothered to come up; nothing is going to grow. Therefore we must be constantly in a state of sheer desperation with regards to the power that the Spirit brings.

# STUDY #5: 1 CORINTHIANS 3:1-23 [CONT]

It is all too easy as individuals and as a church to operate in a way that denies this truth. We read books, hold meetings, form committees, hear their reports, make our plans, and then, finally, we ask God to bless our path. If we are as desperate for God's power and presence as this passage indicates, we will not just depend on God when our work is finished—we will look to him from the very beginning, and at every step along the way.

Let's pray now that the Lord will impress this truth upon our hearts and minds as we journey through this year focused on spiritual renewal.

*Heavenly Father, we recognize that apart from your presence and power, we are like a field that never sees the sun—we cannot grow without you. So let your presence be the defining desire of our hearts. Let us not put our hope in a magnetic leader nor a compelling strategy, but in power of your Spirit. Bring us the leader we need, even if it isn't the leader we want. Let us operate by your power from start to finish. In Jesus' name, amen.*

The second image in this passage is in vv. 10-17. Paul describes the work of ministry as analogous to a carpenter building a house from the ground up. First comes the concrete foundation, which is Christ. Then come some decisions about materials. Metal work is durable and beautiful, but expensive and slow. Cheaper materials can make a building just as impressive, but it will never last. Which way will the worker go?

Parkview church, we find out in this passage, faces a similar decision. Will we build our church using methods that are cheap, quick and easy? Or will we pay the price to build a church that will stand the test of time, as well as the fire of God's judgment? Many can draw a crowd, but only the Spirit can draw people back into a vital relationship with their creator. In the end, our choices will be exposed by the burning fire of God's judgment. He won't be fooled. If we are wise, according to Paul, we will make decisions today that will ensure that our church is composed of people that can withstand the fire of judgment by being connected to the one human who can stand it—Jesus Christ the righteous. Let's pray that God will make us that kind of church.

*Heavenly Father, lead us to make decisions today that reflect an eternal perspective, not based on 20 years from today, but on 20,000 years from today. Make us a church that prepares every person to meet their creator, both today in vital relationship with Christ and on the day when Christ returns to judge all people according to his perfect law. We confess that our natural way of thinking will not achieve this goal—we need you to do it for us. Do all this and more for your glory. In Jesus' name we pray, amen.*

# STUDY #6: 1 CORINTHIANS 4

This week's passage is 1 Corinthians 4:1-21 (the whole chapter). You can read it below or use your own Bible:

<sup>1</sup> This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God.

<sup>2</sup> Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful. <sup>3</sup> But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. <sup>4</sup> For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. <sup>5</sup> Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God.

<sup>6</sup> I have applied all these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brothers, that you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another. <sup>7</sup> For who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?

<sup>8</sup> Already you have all you want! Already you have become rich! Without us you have become kings! And would that you did reign, so that we might share the rule with you! <sup>9</sup> For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men. <sup>10</sup> We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute. <sup>11</sup> To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, <sup>12</sup> and we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; <sup>13</sup> when slandered, we entreat. We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things.

<sup>14</sup> I do not write these things to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children. <sup>15</sup> For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel. <sup>16</sup> I urge you, then, be imitators of me. <sup>17</sup> That is why I sent you Timothy, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach them everywhere in every church. <sup>18</sup> Some are arrogant, as though I were not coming to you. <sup>19</sup> But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I will find out not the talk of these arrogant people but their power. <sup>20</sup> For the kingdom of God does not consist in talk but in power. <sup>21</sup> What do you wish? Shall I come to you with a rod, or with love in a spirit of gentleness?

This week's passage brings us to the conclusion of a point that Paul started in 1:10—"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." Throughout the past five weeks, we have worked through each segment of Paul's lesson to the Corinthian church regarding the fundamental unity of Jesus' church. Today we'll review that line of logic and embrace a key application from later in the chapter. We'll start in verse 6.

## STUDY #6: 1 CORINTHIANS 4 (CONT.)

"I have applied all these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brothers, that you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another." This is Paul's way of putting a bow on his whole line of thought going back to chapter one. But what does Paul mean when he mentions that they not go *beyond what is written*? Whenever Paul uses the phrase "what is written," he is referring to a quotation from the Old Testament, and this occasion is no different. What is different is that rather than immediately citing a Bible passage, Paul is referring to the passages he has quoted throughout this line of reasoning from 1:10 to 4:5. Let's look at those passages together.

Passage	How should this passage promote humble unity in the church?
1 Corinthians 1:19	
1 Corinthians 1:31	
1 Corinthians 2:9	
1 Corinthians 3:19	
1 Corinthians 3:20	

Let's pray that the Lord would apply each of these passages to our hearts.

*Heavenly Father, write this word on our hearts. Help us to be a church that embraces your radical path of humility. We recognize that the only way we can be unified is if we lay aside any and all self-inflating thoughts and assumptions. Only you, by the power and presence of Jesus, can bring us to that kind of humility. Please do all this and more for the glory of Christ, amen.*

There is only one command in the section that follows—and it's one we ought to pay attention to. It's located in verses 14-16. It says this: "I do not write these things to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children. For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel. I urge you, then, be imitators of me."

Paul has just completed a fairly exhaustive critique of the Corinthian church. They are arrogant. They are egotistical. They are status-focused. At the core of their issues, Paul says, is that they have forgotten the radical humility of Jesus. If the greatest man in history became great by embracing worldly insignificance, they ought to follow the same pattern in the life of the church.

How will they get there? They need parenting. They need spiritual fathers. They need spiritual mothers. "I became your father *through the gospel*." If the Corinthian church will ever be marked by the kind of humble unity that Paul taught in these first four chapters, it will be a result of two components: good gospel thinking, and committed mentorship.



## STUDY #6: 1 CORINTHIANS 4 [CONT.]

Our church ought to be built together like a brick house, where each individual brick both provides support to a brick above it and is itself supported by one below. Envision a church founded on a web of Christian friendships that looks both ways. Imagine each person taking responsibility for at least one person who is somewhere “above” them—to whom they can support, challenge and encourage—and one person “below” them—to whom they can look for the same things. No matter where you are on the path of the Christian life, you can find someone who fits each of these categories for you.

Do you know who each of these people are in your life? If so, take a moment to reach out to them. A text, phone call, or email can go a long way. Share a passage of scripture with him or her. Share a prayer that you have brought before God on their behalf. Remind them of something you appreciate about them.

Don't know who these people are in your life yet?

Who could you reach out to in the role of gospel mentor? No need to define the role precisely—you don't have to officially “adopt” them as your gospel child. Just offer to get together or talk on the phone and see how it goes. Ask them about their spiritual life. Encourage them. See if they want to talk again.

Who could you reach out to in the role of gospel student? Again, no need to immediately define the relationship. Just ask to chat—invite them over for coffee or for a walk and see how it goes. Share your admiration for their spiritual savvy and ask how it happened. Think of some questions ahead of time. See if they want to talk again.

It might seem simple, but this is how a church is beautified and deepened. Let's do it together.

# STUDY #7: 1 CORINTHIANS 5

This week's passage is 1 Corinthians 5. Take a few minutes to read through the passage slowly.

*It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife.<sup>2</sup> And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.<sup>3</sup> For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing.<sup>4</sup> When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus,<sup>5</sup> you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.<sup>6</sup> Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?<sup>7</sup> Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.<sup>8</sup> Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.<sup>9</sup> I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—<sup>10</sup> not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world.<sup>11</sup> But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one.<sup>12</sup> For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church[b] whom you are to judge?<sup>13</sup> God judges those outside. "Purge the evil person from among you."*

What's the difference between a piece of fabric and a pile of loose threads? In a certain sense, there is no difference. A piece of fabric, even if it's tailored to form the most spectacular garment ever seen, will always fundamentally be no more than a bunch of thread. But in reality, there's a world of difference. A garment has purpose, beauty, and value. A pile of loose threads doesn't.

So what is the difference between a piece of fabric and a pile of loose threads? A piece of fabric is simply a pile of threads properly related to one another. Each thread has been woven in and out of every other thread around it, which in turn has been woven in and out of every thread around it—and so on. It's not in the individual threads that purpose, beauty, and value are realized—it's in the way they are woven together. This week's passage is about the fabric in the Christian community of a Church, and what happens when that fabric is disrupted.

The basics of the situation are spelled out in the first two verses, and we'll focus our attention there.

*<sup>1</sup> It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife. <sup>2</sup> And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.*

The issue is that there is a case of unrepentant sin in the community, specifically, a sexual relationship between a man and his father's wife—meaning either the man's stepmother or biological mother. The second issue is that the community, rather than being repulsed by this ungodliness, has given their approval and have even celebrated this sin.

# STUDY #7: 1 CORINTHIANS 5 (CONT.)

Just from these two verses there are a couple of lessons to learn. First, the Bible assumes and prescribes that the church is a place where we belong to one another and are accountable to one another in a way that is foreign to our typical ways of thinking. Too often, we import our ideas about individuality and community into the church rather than letting the Bible form and inform us. In this passage, Paul makes it clear that the sin of one individual lays a particular spiritual burden on the entire church to act in unison.<sup>1</sup> Translation: your spiritual life is not simply one in a pile of other spiritual lives that happen to meet in the same place every once in a while to sing songs and listen to spiritual pep talks. We are woven together. Whether you know it or not, your spiritual condition has an impact on the whole body of Parkview Church. And this is good news.

In a fractured world where people are starving for belonging, social significance, and communal value, the church should stand as a beacon of hope. There is a place to find these virtues in full supply, and the only thing it will cost you is your autonomy. Pastor Ray Ortlund says “We can be impressive, or we can be known. We can’t be both.” The church is the place where the search for belonging should end. But belonging means that we will have to recognize the negative—that our sin will inevitably impact those around us—and the positive—that our holiness will have an impact beyond what we could ever accomplish on our own.

One of the implications of this passage is that each of us should belong to the whole body of the church in a formal manner—as committed members, not just acquaintances. Church membership is the expectation of the New Testament and the only way that we can submit to several of Christ’s commands, including those in the passage we are reading today. Perhaps you have been attending Parkview for some time but have yet to formalize your membership. We urge you to take the next steps toward that goal. Reach out to our team by emailing the Parkview office at [office@parkviewchurch.org](mailto:office@parkviewchurch.org).

It’s not easy or convenient to cultivate this kind of community, but the Bible continually affirms the fact that the local church is the hope of the world. It’s worth it. Let’s pray that God would make us this kind of community.

*Father, lead us to be a people that takes seriously your call to belong to one another. When we are tempted to sin, remind us that we are not just impacting you or ourselves, but the very fabric of our church. Let this fact make us serious about sin, and also serious about holiness—for you also use our obedience to bless our church in abundant measure. Make us a place where we gladly submit to one another and invite inspection and accountability, and by doing so become a “city on a hill,” a beacon of light and hope for a world drowning in virtual connections without significant substance. In Jesus’ name we pray, amen.*

<sup>1</sup> It’s important to understand that the problem in this case is not that a church member has sinned, as if anyone who doesn’t act sinlessly should prepare for public shame. The Bible expects that even mature believers will never reach sinless perfection until they reach the presence of Christ in heaven. The problem is that even though this sin has been noticed widely and has even been identified as contrary to Scripture, the man in question refuses to turn his back on his sin. Sin itself is not the problem—the unrepentant, unconcerned response of the individual is the problem.

# STUDY #8: 1 CORINTHIANS 6:1-11

*Father, I long to meet with you through your Word. Grant me the Holy Spirit to activate your Word so that I behold the glory of Jesus and become more like him. Help my heart love what you love and hate what you hate. For your glory. Amen.*

This week's passage is 1 Corinthians 6:1-11. Take a few minutes to read through the passage slowly.

*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? <sup>2</sup> 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? <sup>3</sup> Do you not know that we will judge angels? How much more the things of this life! <sup>4</sup> 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? <sup>5</sup> I say this to shame you. Is it possible that there is nobody among you wise enough to judge a dispute between believers? <sup>6</sup> But instead, one brother takes another to court—and this in front of unbelievers!*

*<sup>7</sup> 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? <sup>8</sup> Instead, you yourselves cheat and do wrong, and you do this to your brothers and sisters. <sup>9</sup> 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 <sup>10</sup> nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. <sup>11</sup> 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.*

Reflect on this passage using the following questions. According to this passage:

1. What do we learn about God (His character and/or concerns)?
2. What do we learn about relating to God (what should we love/pursue? What should we hate/resist?)
3. What do we learn about People?
4. What do we learn about how People should relate to others (especially how we ought to relate to one another in the local church)?

In this passage Paul addresses another significant issue harming the fabric of church unity among these Corinthian Christians. Here the problem is two believers having a trivial lawsuit (vv. 2, 7) that is causing a substantial division between the two parties. Moreover, the disputing members of this church are unwilling to allow the church to wisely deal with this petty grievance and instead are pursuing legal help from non-Christian sources outside the church (v. 1, 4, 6).

Paul therefore lovingly rebukes them by reminding this church of two realities. First, they belong to one another in relationships in the local church that ought to be governed by helping one another toward godly relational unity through wise counsel. In the local church it should be wise people who help one another faithfully respond to “matters pertaining to this life”, especially issues of petty division and grievance, not secular sources outside the church (vs. 4).



## STUDY #8: 1 CORINTHIANS 6:1-11 [CONT.]

Second, those trusting in Jesus alone for rescue from sin and death are part of his kingdom (vs. 9), and therefore must act in accordance with his kingdom ethic by putting away sinful practices of the old life enslaved to sin (vv. 9-10) and to live according to the new life re-created through the washing, sanctifying, justifying mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ and the power of the Spirit (vs. 11). This kingdom reality is what motivates us to deal with one another in wisdom by giving Jesus-centered counsel to each other to live in accord with who we truly are in Christ.

This passage applies to us in two ways. First, we must be a people who deal with trivial/petty lawsuits, divisions, and/or relational conflict within the context of wise, godly relationships in the local church instead of pursuing the prevailing secular wisdom of our day. In other words, when in relational conflict our first thought should be: "What wise person at Parkview can I call to help me deal with this in a way that honors Jesus?" This means we must be committed to a depth of community life that gives opportunity for us to know and be known by wise, godly people. Additionally, the Lord shows us that a healthy church is one in which life together is nourished by biblical wisdom and relational accountability to those who are in conflict with one another. (Of course, there are certain situations in which the local secular authorities must get involved and it is unwise and unjust for a church to resolve those issues "in house." This passage is focusing on a matter that is "trivial" and petty.)

Third, we must be a people who relate and speak to one another based upon the finished work of Christ and the mighty power of the Holy Spirit. Yes we are weak. Yes there are still moral failings and messy relationships. Yet we are no longer who we once were before we received new life in Christ. Now in Christ we are washed, justified, and sanctified—made holy—through the finished work of the death and resurrection of Jesus. It is this new reality that compels us to speak and counsel one another in ways that motivate each other to pursue what is right in the Lord's eyes. Our kind Lord has filled us to overflowing with His very Spirit to empower us to live lives together of wisdom, love, and truth in a culture so often filled with division, hatred, and confusion.

*Father, may we be a church that grows in biblical wisdom and relational accountability, helping one another strive for holiness and unity in our relationships. If we have disagreements or conflict, help us partner together to help each other pursue love and unity. Thank you, Jesus, for fullness of forgiveness and acceptance before the Father through your death and resurrection. We are holy in Christ. Help us live true to that reality. Give us the Holy Spirit to live out the Lord's purposes for life together as a church. Amen.*

# STUDY #9: 1 CORINTHIANS 6:12-20

The Apostle Paul has steadily been making his way through the various wrong attitudes and sinful acts of the members of the church at Corinth. Thinking too much of themselves, thinking themselves wise, causing divisions in the church, only desiring the most basic studies of the Scriptures, looking the other way when people of wealth and importance are obviously violating God's laws, making a mockery of the church by taking each other to civil court before non-believers—and now Paul continues his expression of disappointment with this recalcitrant church.

*<sup>12</sup> "All things are lawful for me," but not all things are helpful. "All things are lawful for me," but I will not be dominated by anything. <sup>13</sup> "Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food"—and God will destroy both one and the other. The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. <sup>14</sup> And God raised the Lord and will also raise us up by his power. <sup>15</sup> Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! <sup>16</sup> Or do you not know that he who is joined to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For, as it is written, "The two will become one flesh." <sup>17</sup> But he who is joined to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. <sup>18</sup> Flee from sexual immorality. Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body. <sup>19</sup> Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, <sup>20</sup> for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.*

Let's think through this passage and answer the following questions together:

1. What does Paul mean when he writes, "All things are lawful for me..."? Is a Christian free to do anything he/she wants? What limitations might modify this statement?
2. It reads as if we will not always enjoy eating food once we're in heaven. Why do you think Paul is bringing this up at this place in his letter?
3. Christians are told not to have sex with a prostitute. What do we know about sexual practices in Corinthian culture in the first century? Why would the church members need to be told that this was not an acceptable practice? What are sexual practices of present day America that Christians need to be admonished about, and why do you think that is?
4. Paul's main argument is that whatever we do with our bodies, we do it with the Lord Jesus Christ being present, and our bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit. Since that is true, how should those truths shape our attitudes and behavior?
5. Finally, Paul commands Christians to "glorify God in your body." How can you do that?

## STUDY #9: 1 CORINTHIANS 6:12-20 [CONT.]

The Corinthian church in the first century lived in a culture that was notorious for sexual promiscuity and prostitution (among other sexual practices). In Corinth the temple of Aphrodite dominated the city skyline. One ancient source says that a rich patron donated 100 women to the temple for the purpose of prostitution. Since Corinth was a port city and a commercial trading center for the ancient world, hundreds of sailors and visiting business men regularly visited these temples. There was no shame in this and, in fact, was regarded as a worshipful act—a religious act dedicated to Aphrodite and other lesser gods. This sexual act was accompanied by the payment of coins. It seems those who reported to Paul had said some of the church attenders were visiting these prostitutes—just as they had done before they became Christians.

Despite the lack of temples dedicated to Greek gods in America, we see all too often Christians and even Christian pastors having their immoral sexual acts discovered and publicized. How can a person avoid dishonoring God with their bodies? Paul seems to also bring in the practice of eating food with the sexual immorality. Is there a connection?

The strength of Paul's argument is that whatever a Christian does physically, in his/her body, he or she does so with the Lord. We take Jesus with us when we eat and when we enjoy intimacy. As we shall see in chapter 7, Paul has personally forsaken such intimacy (possibly his wife had passed some time before) in order to more fully experience the Lord and be available for the ministry. In any case Paul argues in his letters that sex is to be reserved between a married man and woman—only! In heterosexual marriage, the Lord is honored by sexual intimacy and often blesses the couple with a spiritual unity that reflects the physical unity. To do anything else sexually is violating God's commandments and Paul says is a sin that has special consequences.

Paul states that every other sin we commit is outside of the body, but that when we sin sexually, we sin against our own bodies. Paul's theology states that all sins can be forgiven by the Lord. So what does he mean by this? Possibly Paul is saying that sexual sin, while forgivable, leaves a trail of memories, shame, and reproach in our hearts that also affects others. This would include browsing pornography followed by self-stimulation, because it takes on a life of its own in our soul. The body is something to protect and keep holy before God as seen by Paul's instruction to "glorify God" with what we do with our bodies.

It's often argued that pornography is a victimless sin. Is it truly? How does pornography hurt us? The Greek word for "sexual immorality" most commonly used by Paul is *porneia*. How can we avoid it and/or resist it? A great tool that one can use is the web protection called [Covenant Eyes](#). There are also other helps such as [XXX Church](#). Do not overlook the help that a formation group can be for those who are struggling in this area. Confession of sin and prayer is a huge help.

Paul is saying God re-created you at salvation. You now are adopted into the family of God (Ephesians 1). Live with this truth in mind. Find freedom from the bondage of sexual sin by giving an account to one another and asking for prayer.

# STUDY #10: 1 CORINTHIANS 7

For some reason the church at Corinth believed that it was “good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman.” New Testament scholars do not know precisely why this rule for life arose in this church—the result of a philosophical debate or a medical decision, a local religious cult or a theological assumption. This ascetic lifestyle choice which we often call celibacy was, in Paul’s mind, fornication. Not because celibacy was wrong, but because their reason(s) for demanding others to live in this manner was against God’s principles.

Paul will lay out his argument as to why being single is beneficial for the Christian, but it will be for the right reasons! Paul uses this part of his letter to argue that being celibate is spiritually beneficial for those who do not need to be married, BUT the Corinthians have a warped view of celibacy. They made it a distinguishing virtue—the result? They maligned marriage and sex. The church at Corinth believed the word “good” as in “it’s good for a man...” to mean it is a moral good—they thought abstaining made one closer to God than someone who gets married. Paul’s use of the word “good” would be that it is beneficial, honorable, and the result of special gifting from God.

What we need to understand to make sense of Paul’s commands regarding marriage and celibacy is that the Corinthians were not just arguing that a person should stay single, but rather they were practicing celibacy as married couples. Paul finds it necessary to give instructions to both the husband and wife in regards to fidelity in marriage. Biblically speaking (for Paul, the Bible was the Old Testament), sex between two people was only for if they were married. And if a couple was married, they had to submit themselves to each other (vs. 2-5).

Paul is being very counter-cultural in this section of the letter by addressing both the man and the woman. In first century households, only the man was typically seen as needing to be addressed on matters of ethics or marital relations. Paul breaks barriers by specifically mentioning the wife. It may have been that the report on the church in Corinth was focused on the practices of the wife, but we do not know the specifics. Paul is establishing that sex is reserved for married people and that married people should not abstain. Paul states that suspension of a physical relationship for a married couple should only be by mutual agreement and for a short period of time. To ignore this admonition would be to invite spiritual attack (v. 5)!

Paul continues with advice—not a command from the Lord—that he wished people could stay single. Paul’s reasoning? The single Christian has greater opportunities to serve Jesus than does a married Christian. Most New Testament scholars believe Paul was married at one time in his life. Did his wife die? Did she leave him once he became a Christian? No one knows for sure. But now that he is single, Paul has found great freedom in serving Christ. Think of all the experiences the Apostle Paul had as he spread the gospel to the gentiles. Name a few (e.g. being beaten—consider rereading 1 Corinthians 4:10-13). Why would being single make it easier to live this life over being married?

Paul next takes up the situation where a spouse becomes a believer in Christ and joins a church, yet their spouse refuses to follow (vs. 12-16). Paul’s argument is that unless the unbelieving spouse demands to leave, there is no obligation on the believing spouse to



# STUDY #10: 1 CORINTHIANS 7 [CONT.]

separate or divorce. In fact, Paul states his belief that the unbelieving family members are “sanctified” by the presence of the Christian spouse. Some believe that what Paul meant by sanctified is that the benefits of the Christian life would be extended to the unbelieving family members: God’s protection, God’s care, the church’s economic benefits, etc. This certainly does not refer to the unbelieving spouse’s salvation—no one is passively saved. But there is real benefit to the family by having a believer in their midst.

Paul next addresses the church members and challenges them to “lead the life the Lord has assigned to him” (v. 17). He uses two examples to get his point across. If you came to Christ circumcised, then live for Jesus as a circumcised man. If you were uncircumcised, then live as such. If you came to Christ as a servant in a household, then serve Christ in that capacity. If you were free, then stay free! God is sovereign! That’s basically what Paul is saying. God knew your circumstances before He called you to Himself. There is no need to change your status in life in order to serve Him. He repeats the phrase from chapter 6:20: “you were bought with a price.” Jesus is a wise buyer. He knew what he was getting ahead of time. The obvious application is: if you came to Jesus as a single person, stay single (if you are so gifted and are not “burning”). If you came to Jesus as a married person, then stay married. If you are a widow, then do not remarry. God can use you in whatever condition you find yourself when you come to Him. “Live as you are called!”

Paul finishes this chapter by restating his advice in verse 25. Stay single as you see the signs of the Lord’s return. “Present distress” and “appointed time” reference Paul’s belief that the Lord’s return is imminent. This is not unlike Christ’s instructions in his Olivet Discourse. When the second advent happens, it will be a time of great turmoil and distress for all. Better not to be married or pregnant or nursing a baby (Matthew 24:16-18). Marriage is a great thing and Paul gives good marriage advice in his letter to the church at Ephesus (Ephesians 5). But in Paul’s heart, he believes that staying single is the best way to serve Christ. Be like Paul. Be like Jesus.

Paul finishes this chapter by stating that marriage is a good thing—for some. Better to marry than to sin (v. 36)! If your calling is to be single, then that is good (beneficial), and if your calling is to be married, then that is also good. Both situations are callings and are a gift. It’s up to the individual Christian to determine which one is for them.

# STUDY #11: 1 CORINTHIANS 8

This week we will be looking at 1 Corinthians 8:1-13 (the whole chapter). Begin by reading the passage below or in your own Bible.

*Now concerning food offered to idols: we know that “all of us possess knowledge.” This “knowledge” puffs up, but love builds up. <sup>2</sup> If anyone imagines that he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. <sup>3</sup> But if anyone loves God, he is known by God.*

*<sup>4</sup> Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that “an idol has no real existence,” and that “there is no God but one.” <sup>5</sup> For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”—<sup>6</sup> yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.*

*<sup>7</sup> However, not all possess this knowledge. But some, through former association with idols, eat food as really offered to an idol, and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. <sup>8</sup> Food will not commend us to God. We are no worse off if we do not eat, and no better off if we do. <sup>9</sup> But take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak. <sup>10</sup> For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol's temple, will he not be encouraged, if his conscience is weak, to eat food offered to idols? <sup>11</sup> And so by your knowledge this weak person is destroyed, the brother for whom Christ died. <sup>12</sup> Thus, sinning against your brothers and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. <sup>13</sup> Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.*

Throughout the Bible, idols seem to lurk behind every corner. From almost the first page of the Bible, humans are tempted to devote themselves to things that are not God. In his letter to the Romans, the Apostle Paul describes our tendency toward idolatry like this: “Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.” (Romans 1:22-23). Rather than loving, honoring, and obeying our creator and redeemer, our hearts are now inclined to offer devotion to the things God has created.

As a modern person, you might be tempted to read a passage like Romans 1 or 1 Corinthians 8 and unconsciously file it away under “too weird to apply to me today.” After all, when is the last time you saw an idol? Have you ever been tempted to bow the knee, burn a stick of incense, or sacrifice a small bird in the name of Zeus? Do you know anyone who has? One of the foundational markers of our enlightened age is that we don't really believe in that kind of thing—there are no monsters under the bed, the woods are not full of nymphs or fairies, and an idol is just a piece of clay. Right?

This was, in a certain sense, the attitude of a sizeable portion of the church at Corinth. But for them, idolatry was not a far-flung danger—it was an ever present reality. You couldn't walk ten feet in Corinth without encountering the pervading religious environment. If you were a tradesman, you would need to be part of a guild (like an ancient union) to find work. And at your guild meetings, you would inevitably offer sacrifices to the emperor and possibly other deities. Do you want to be the guy that turns away the blessing of the gods from your entire industry? Were you going to turn down countless invitations to weddings, feasts, and parties for your closest friends and neighbors, all because they happened to be hosted in the

# STUDY #11: 1 CORINTHIANS 8 [CONT.]

temple of Apollo? Should we refuse, and lose our opportunity to share the gospel? Or should we go, even though we might be sending the wrong signal?

While we might not feel the pressure of these circumstances pressing in on us, the temptation to turn our hearts from full devotion to God is certainly not an ancient problem. In fact, the spiritual dynamics that tempted the Corinthian church in 50 AD are the same ones that plague us today. Author Rebecca Pippert says, "Whatever controls us is our lord. The person who seeks power is controlled by power. The person who seeks acceptance is controlled by the people he or she wants to please. We do not control ourselves. We are controlled by the lord of our life." Or, from a completely different perspective, David Foster Wallace (no relation to our beloved pastor) said, "in the day-to-day trenches of adult life, there is actually no such thing as atheism. There is no such thing as not worshipping. Everybody worships. The only choice we get is what to worship."

So, while we might not be able to point to Hermes, the greek God of (among other things) the market, and avoid the temptation to worship the idols of materialism and greed, we can take a look at our own hearts and discern the patterns in which our hearts tend to go astray.

As always in this series of studies on 1 Corinthians, our goal is that you come to worship on Sunday (whether at one of our campuses or in your home) with a heart that has already been marinating in the things that week's passage is focused on. So let's pray first of all that God would open our eyes to the danger of idolatry in our world and in our own hearts:

*Heavenly Father, thank you for the gift of this passage. Prepare my heart and mind today to hear this word, not only now as I seek to apply its principles to my life, but on Sunday as I hear this word proclaimed. Pour out your blessing on our preachers and leaders so that they confidently proclaim your words to us, your people. And now, as I direct my heart to consider the ways my wayward heart avoids obedience to you, please come by your Spirit to give me true sight into my own heart. But don't let me wallow in my weakness—point me all the more to Jesus my savior, who is drawn eagerly to pour out your love for me all the more, not in spite of my weakness and sin, but because of it. Do all this and more for me, my fellow believers, and for your glory forever, in Jesus' name, amen.*

Richard Keyes writes in his essay *The Idol Factory*,

"All sorts of things are potential idols... If this is so, how do we determine when something is becoming or has become an idol?... As soon as our loyalty to anything leads us to disobey God, we are in danger of making it an idol... An idol can be a physical object, a property, a person, an activity, a role, an institution, a hope, an image, an idea, a pleasure, a hero...

- Work, a commandment of God, can become an idol if it is pursued so exclusively that responsibilities to one's family are ignored.
- Family, an institution of God himself, can become an idol if one is so preoccupied with the family that no one outside of one's own family is cared for.
- Being well-liked, a perfectly legitimate hope, becomes an idol if the attachment to it means that one never risks disapproval."

# STUDY #11: 1 CORINTHIANS 8 [CONT.]

Consider these questions, which might begin to help you identify idols in your own life—try to take 30 seconds to a minute with each one, really thinking through what is being asked:

1. What is your greatest dream? What change in your circumstances would offer you real freedom and meaning?
2. When things go wrong in your life, how do you comfort yourself? What makes you say, “at least I still have...”
3. What are you most proud of? What thing about you, when it comes up in conversation, gives you the internal glow of pride?
4. What are you most scared of? What keeps you up at night? Is there a common source of conflict in your life?

Has the Lord brought something to mind through this reflection? The Lord loves nothing more than to meet us in our brokenness. Let's pray to him now.

*Father, I confess that in my heart I have set [insert the thing you have identified] in a place of significance where you belong. Please forgive me. Remind my heart that in Christ there is no condemnation. Assure me of your presence and of the exceeding joy you experience when you get to forgive me. Help me to walk in the path of true repentance. In Jesus' name, amen.*

Now, let's expand our prayer outward:

*Father, help us as a church to be a place where idols are recognized, confronted, and dismantled. Let us be fervent in the fact that you alone are worthy of praise. Give us your zeal for you to receive the glory that you alone deserve. Impress upon our hearts the fact that our idols cannot live up to their promises—that they will always disappoint us if they don't bleed us dry first. But you, O Lord—remind us that you keep your promises. That you are real. That you will always take care of us. In Jesus' name, amen.*



# STUDY #12: 1 CORINTHIANS 9

Welcome back to our weekly guide through the book of 1 Corinthians. The Global Outreach Conference this weekend served as a sort of halfway mark for us through this series. Each week we are sending this guide to help you prepare for our weekly worship gathering. Rather than coming together and encountering that week's passage for the first time (or the first time in a while), you will arrive having read, meditated on, and begun to apply the passage to your own life. We want to prepare our hearts and minds to be fertile ground that the Holy Spirit uses to grow us in new and extraordinary ways.

This week, our passage is 1 Corinthians 9. You can read the passage below.

*Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are not you my workmanship in the Lord? <sup>2</sup> If to others I am not an apostle, at least I am to you, for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.*

*<sup>3</sup> This is my defense to those who would examine me. <sup>4</sup> Do we not have the right to eat and drink?*

*<sup>5</sup> Do we not have the right to take along a believing wife,[a] as do the other apostles and the brothers of the Lord and Cephas? <sup>6</sup> Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working for a living? <sup>7</sup> Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard without eating any of its fruit? Or who tends a flock without getting some of the milk?*

*<sup>8</sup> Do I say these things on human authority? Does not the Law say the same? <sup>9</sup> For it is written in the Law of Moses, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain." Is it for oxen that God is concerned? <sup>10</sup> Does he not certainly speak for our sake? It was written for our sake, because the plowman should plow in hope and the thresher thresh in hope of sharing in the crop. <sup>11</sup> If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much if we reap material things from you? <sup>12</sup> If others share this rightful claim on you, do not we even more?*

*Nevertheless, we have not made use of this right, but we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ. <sup>13</sup> Do you not know that those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in the sacrificial offerings? <sup>14</sup> In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.*

*<sup>15</sup> But I have made no use of any of these rights, nor am I writing these things to secure any such provision. For I would rather die than have anyone deprive me of my ground for boasting.*

*<sup>16</sup> For if I preach the gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! <sup>17</sup> For if I do this of my own will, I have a reward, but if not of my own will, I am still entrusted with a stewardship. <sup>18</sup> What then is my reward? That in my preaching I may present the gospel free of charge, so as not to make full use of my right in the gospel.*

*<sup>19</sup> For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them.*

*<sup>20</sup> To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. <sup>21</sup> To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. <sup>22</sup> To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. <sup>23</sup> I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.*

# STUDY #12: 1 CORINTHIANS 9 [CONT.]

*<sup>24</sup> Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. <sup>25</sup> Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. <sup>26</sup> So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. <sup>27</sup> But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.*

Let's take a look at the way that this passage flows together. The first section, stretching from verse 1 to verse 14, is dominated by Paul's use of rhetorical questions. Take a quick scan through those verses again and make a mental note every time you see a question mark. How many did you see? I count four in the first verse alone!

The entirety of this first section serves one purpose—to establish Paul's rights as the one who planted the church in Corinth. In verses 1–2, Paul establishes his personal relationship with the Corinthians: “You are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.” In verses 3–7, Paul appeals to common sense: “Would a soldier go to war and also tend a garden at the same time?” In verses 8–14, Paul appeals to the law of God in the Old Testament to rest his case.

To this point, the Apostle Paul has marshalled several powerful lines of argument, in the strongest possible language, to lead to his conclusion. We should expect, and surely the Corinthians would have expected, that Paul would conclude this argument with a simple statement: “Pay up, bums.” Instead, we get one of the greatest insights into the gospel in the whole New Testament.

In verse 12, Paul writes, “Nevertheless, we have not made use of this right [to compensation], but we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ.” He goes on in verse 15 to say, “But I have made no use of any of these rights, nor am I writing these things to secure any such provision.”

At its core, this is a passage about freedom and privileges, liberty and love. Paul has gone to great lengths to demonstrate that he has an abundance of freedom. It's the first rhetorical question he raises in verse 1—“Am I not free?” Our society conditions us to believe that the essence of freedom is being free from restraint. To be free means that no one can lay a claim against your time, your money, your identity, your behavior, and on and on. The great theologian Elsa might have said it best in the 2013 film *Frozen*: “It's time to see what I can do to test the limits and break through. No right, no wrong, no rules for me. I'm free.”

Paul has a very different understanding of freedom, and it comes through in verses 24–27. Revisit those verses now. Paul uses the image of an athlete to illustrate to the Corinthians the meaning of true freedom. An athlete, like you and me, has choices to make every day. Should I wake up at 4:30 AM for training, or sleep in? Should I eat a slice of cake for dessert, or stick to salad?

Athletes have every right to be lazy and indulgent. But choosing that path means giving up a greater vision. If they are going to succeed in their high calling, they must make a dozen decisions every day, denying themselves some pleasures in order to obtain a higher pleasure. They do so in hope that one day they will ascend the podium and win the prize. And in that moment, every one of the little momentary denials of pleasure will seem

# STUDY #12: 1 CORINTHIANS 9 [CONT.]

miniscule in comparison to their victory. Every slice of cake refused will be forgotten in the sweetness of that moment. Every moment of strain and sweat will seem like nothing. They would do it all over again if only to attain their goal. To hear their name above all others—what a glorious thought!

So too for the Christian. And so too we long for a moment of glory at the end of our race. But ours will not die on the lips of adoring fans. At the end of time for every follower of Jesus, there will come a moment when our Lord looks us squarely in the face, comprehending the deepest flaws in our history and character, and pronounces over our lives, “Well done.” And he’s not joking. That is the compelling vision that drives us to say “no” to good things—things that may rightfully be ours to take hold of—in favor of something greater.

How then must you live your life today? Giving full blow to the whims of your desires? Treading down others in the path of whatever today’s version of “freedom” offers you? Absolutely not. Instead, like an athlete looking for every opportunity for any advantage in their quest for glory, so also we must scour our lives prayerfully and discerningly, with the help of our brothers and sisters, to determine how we might faithfully heed this call to imperishable glory. It is costly. And it is worth it.

*Heavenly Father, open my eyes to the ways that I am prone to lay hold of my rights rather than stewarding them for the sake of Christ. Forgive me. Begin to show me the glorious ways that I can instead leverage my rights for the sake of the gospel. Show me how I might be wonderfully inconvenienced for the sake of my neighbors and friends and brothers and sisters. Give me partners in this venture. And make us a church known for laying aside our rights for the sake of others. Hear me, merciful Father, in the name of Jesus.*