

1 CORINTHIANS

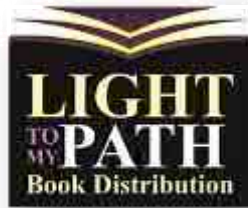
A photograph of the Temple of Apollo in Corinth, Greece. The temple is a well-preserved ancient Greek temple dedicated to the god Apollo. It features a prominent portico with six tall, fluted Doric columns supporting a fragment of the entablature. The temple is situated on a hillside, and the foreground shows the ruins of other ancient structures, including the Temple of Concordia, which is partially collapsed. The sky is clear and blue, and there are some green trees and shrubs scattered around the ruins.

A Devotional Look at Paul's First
Letter to the Corinthians

F. Wayne MacLeod

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PREFACE

The letter of 1 Corinthians was written to a church with many struggles. It was plagued by division. Believers sided with their favorite leaders, questioning the ministry of the apostle Paul. There were those who depended too much on their human wisdom and we're not seeking God's heart. Others were taking fellow believers to court. One man was caught in sexual immorality and the issue had never been addressed by the leadership. Believers were coming to the Lord's Table and getting drunk. Others questioned whether Christ had really risen from the dead. On top of this they had many questions about marriage, idols, spiritual gifts, the role of women in ministry, and the resurrection. They needed to be instructed in these matters of the faith.

Paul wrote 1 Corinthians to help the believers in Corinth answer questions they had about God and His purpose. He also offers his advice on how to deal with some significant behavioral issues in the church. He gave them guidelines for healthy worship and Christian living, answered their questions, and challenged them to love each other.

As with all the commentaries in this series, the goal is to walk systematically through the book of 1 Corinthians. I

have written it in such a way that it can be used in your personal quiet time with the Lord. I encourage you to take the time to go through 1 Corinthians using this book as a guide. The goal of this commentary is not to replace the Bible but to complement it and to make it easier to understand. Please read the Bible passage referenced with each chapter. Take the time to consider the questions at the end of each chapter.

The commentaries in this series are being sent to needy pastors and other Christian workers around the world. I have been encouraged by letters returning from these servants of God in Africa, Asia and Latin America telling me how God has used the commentaries in their ministries. Would you take a moment to pray that the Lord would use this particular book to encourage and bless a pastor or Christian worker who is receiving it through the ministry of Light To My Path Book Distribution?

May God be pleased to draw you closer to Himself through this study.

F. Wayne MacLeod

INTRODUCTION TO

1 CORINTHIANS

Author:

There is little doubt that the author of the Epistle of 1 Corinthians was the apostle Paul. This is evident from 1 Corinthians 1:1 where he introduces himself as the author.

Background:

The city of Corinth was a wealthy city in Paul's day. The church was a mixture Jewish and Gentile converts who had been influenced by the wealth and immorality of the Corinthian culture. As new believers, they struggled to overcome their sinful past and this was quite obvious in the life of the church.

A quick look at the book of 1 Corinthians reveals some of the real needs in the church of Corinth. It was a divided church with believers giving their allegiance to different leaders (1:10-17). Some of the believers in Corinth rejected Paul. Paul defended his ministry before these individuals in 1 Corinthians 4:1-5. Sinful behaviour in the church had been overlooked, lawsuits had sprung up

among believers and some were living in sexual immorality.

Paul is also forced to address various issues related to their worship services. It appears from 1 Corinthians 11:21 that the Lord's Supper was being abused with people over eating and getting drunk. Spiritual gifts were being abused in their worship services which seemed to have no order. Some in the church had also fallen into false teaching and claimed that there was no resurrection.

It appears, according to 1 Corinthians 16:8, that the apostle Paul wrote this letter from Ephesus. Having heard of problems in the church of Corinth, Paul felt obliged to write them to encourage them toward greater unity. The most famous passage in this letter is 1 Corinthians 13 which goes into great detail about what it means to love one another.

Importance of the Book for Today:

There can be no doubt that the book of 1 Corinthians has much to say to the church of our day about unity and sincerity of faith. The modern day church struggles with the immoral practices of our society, differences of opinion regarding spiritual doctrines, and relationships among believers in the body of Christ. Paul not only addressed these issues in the book of 1 Corinthians but also shares important and timeless principles for walking in harmony with our brothers and sisters in Christ.

1

INTRODUCTION

Read 1 Corinthians 1:1-9

This letter was written by the apostle Paul to the Corinthians. In Paul's day Corinth was a significant trade city and home of the pagan goddess Aphrodite, goddess of love. Paul spent almost a year and a half ministering in Corinth.

As he began his letter to the Corinthians, Paul reminded them that he was called to be an apostle by the will of God. He placed his credentials before them. He reminded them of his position because it was important that they know he was writing to them from a position of authority. He emphasized his divine authority here because of the nature of the issues that had come up in the church. He wrote as one who has been called and empowered of God. He had a word from the Lord for them. They were to take what he had to say with all seriousness.

The letter also came from Sosthenes. We are not sure about the identity of Sosthenes (verse 1). Many believe him to be a synagogue ruler in Corinth who was converted under Paul's ministry (see Acts 18:17). Sosthenes would

have been well known in Corinth and would not need any introduction.

The letter is addressed to “the church of God in Corinth” (verse 2). Notice first that this church belonged to God. The church did not belong to the Corinthians. It was not their invention. Those who belonged to this church belonged to God. Second, the church was comprised of those who had been sanctified in Christ Jesus. Sanctified means set apart both in character and in lifestyle for the Lord Jesus and His purposes. Those who belonged to this church of God had set themselves apart for Him, and He was shaping them into His character. Third, this church was called to be holy. This was their obligation. They were to live as God required. They were to turn from their old ways to serve and live entirely for the Lord Jesus. Notice that Paul told the Corinthians that this is what God expected of His people everywhere and not just in the city of Corinth. This brings us to the fourth characteristic of this church. It was not just one little assembly of people located on a certain street in Corinth. The church of God is much bigger than that. Everyone who has been set apart by God through the sacrificial death of Christ and called by Him to be holy is part of this church. These Corinthians belonged to a universal body of people that would span the globe and stretch throughout time.

In verse 3 Paul offered the Corinthians his blessing: “Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” Grace refers to the unmerited favor of the Lord Jesus offered to undeserving sinners. Peace is not an absence of problems but a right relationship with God and knowledge of His sovereign care and provision. This was Paul’s desire for the Corinthians. He wanted them to experience the unmerited favor of God and a deep assurance that they were in a right relationship with Him.

Paul had a very large heart of compassion. He had never met many of these Corinthians believers. Some of them had fallen into sin (some even into very deep sin). He still thanked God for them. In fact, his heart was filled to overflowing with thanksgiving (verse 4). Despite their sin, Paul knew them to be God's children, and he loved them as such. There is indication in this book that some people in Corinth did not care much for Paul. This did not matter. They belonged to God and because God loved them, Paul loved them too.

Do we have the same attitude as Paul? Let us be honest with ourselves. Some Christians are very hard to love. Paul had the ability, however, to see these individuals as God saw them. Are there believers that you cannot thank God for today? Paul could have held grudges or bitterness in his heart toward certain of these Corinthians, but he refused to fall into this trap. May God give us the grace to follow Paul's example.

Paul began this letter by looking at the positive characteristics of the Corinthian believers. Let's examine each of these characteristics individually.

In Him You Have Been Enriched (verse 5)

The Corinthian believers had been enriched by Christ in every way. This enrichment was in two particular areas. First, they were enriched in their words ("speaking"). In 2 Corinthians 8:7 Paul said that the Corinthians excelled in speech and knowledge. Very obviously, they were not keeping the message of the gospel to themselves. They were spreading this message of Christ to those around them. They spoke the Word of God with boldness. This was a sign of the blessing of God on their lives. God had gifted them with boldness to share his Word.

Second, the Corinthian believers were enriched in knowledge. They did not share Christ out of ignorance. They had received the Scriptures and understood the truth of God. They had answers for those who asked them the reason for the hope they had (1 Peter 3:15). God had blessed this church with evangelistic zeal and understanding of the Scriptures.

Our Testimony about Christ Was Confirmed in You (verse 6)

When Paul looked at the way the work of God was progressing in the region of Corinth, he took great comfort in it. What he shared with them about the person and work of Christ when he lived among them was being demonstrated in their lives. They were experiencing the power of the risen Lord in their daily life. While Paul understood that they still had certain problems, no one could deny that Jesus was doing a mighty work through them. They were a testimony to a living and all-powerful Christ.

You Do Not Lack Any Spiritual Gift (verse 7)

The power of the living Christ was also evident in the way the Corinthians experienced and used their spiritual gifts. Often we have to encourage people to use the gifts God has given them. This was not the case in Corinth. The Corinthians were known for their spiritual gifts. They used them and experienced the power of God in their midst.

You Eagerly Wait for the Lord Jesus to Be Revealed (verse 7)

Another important characteristic of the Corinthian church was their eager longing for the Lord's return. Paul spent

time in this letter answering questions the Corinthians had about the Lord's return. This was a preoccupation for them in their ministry. They longed for the day when the Lord would return to take them to be with Him forever.

Paul reminded the Corinthians in verse 8 that God would keep them strong to the end, even to the day of Christ's return. He was confident that God was able to perfect this church and make it everything He intended it to be. Although these believers were presently experiencing many trials and difficulties, Paul was confident that the Lord who called them would not abandon them (verse 9). God had called the Corinthians out of sin and to Himself. Now that they belonged to Him, He would never abandon them. Even when they fell into unfaithfulness and error, God would remain faithful to them.

For Consideration:

- Is there anyone you have trouble loving and for whom you have a hard time thanking God? Ask God for the grace necessary to thank Him for this person today.
- Look at the positive characteristics of the church in Corinth. How does your church measure up to this church? How do you personally measure up?
- Are you facing a trial in your life today? What encouragement do you receive from this passage?

For Prayer:

- Ask God to help you demonstrate the positive character traits of the church in Corinth.
- Thank the Lord that He has promised to complete the work He began in you. Ask Him to show you the areas of your life He is working on today.
- Take a moment to consider the people God has placed in your life. Thank the Lord for each of them.

2

PAUL, APOLLOS, CEPHAS AND CHRIST

Read 1 Corinthians 1:10-17

We saw in the last meditation that the church in Corinth had many positive characteristics. They were far from perfect, however. Here in this next section, we see that the church suffered from various divisions.

Paul began by appealing for unity. He urged the Corinthians to agree with one another so that there would be no division among them. Notice in verse 10 that he appealed to them as brothers. He did not place himself above them. By addressing them as brothers, he is showed tender affection toward them. Notice that he did so in the name of "our Lord Jesus." He spoke to them on the Lord's behalf and with His authority. He spoke as a brother but with the authority of an apostle.

Paul's desire for the believers in Corinth was that they agree with one another and be perfectly united in mind and thought (verse 10). This statement could cause us to

wonder if Paul really understood human nature. Is there such a thing as a church where everyone agrees with each other and all are united perfectly in mind and thought? Is Paul expecting something from these believers that was simply not possible? What did he mean by this statement?

In Romans 14 Paul spoke to the Romans about accepting those who were weak in the faith (verse 1). He reminded them that some people considered one day as being more important or sacred than another (verse 5). He encouraged each believer to accept the differences that existed between them by being sensitive to anything that would cause a brother or sister to stumble in their faith (verses 19-20). From this we gather that Paul understood that even in the healthiest churches, there would be differences of opinion and practice.

It is important that we see that Paul was addressing a very particular issue in 1 Corinthians 1. From verse 11 we understand that a piece of information had reached him concerning the church in Corinth. He had heard that there were quarrels among believers in the church. It appears from verse 12 that people were divided over personalities. The Corinthians were forming groups that identified with the ministry style and personality of certain leaders. Some looked to Paul, others to Apollos or Cephas (the apostle Peter), and still others to Christ.

Each of these human leaders had different gifts and ministries. Paul, for example, was a very strong missionary leader. Acts 18:24 tells us that Apollos was a very knowledgeable man in the Scriptures. Peter was an apostle to the Jews. While these various ministries were intended to give the body a fuller ministry, the believers in Corinth were quarreling over them. Satan was successful in using the strengths of these leaders to divide the church. We need

to see how subtle the enemy is in his attacks. He can use our strengths to accomplish his evil purposes.

Some believers feel the need for extensive effort in local evangelism. Others see the need to reach out in missions. Some prefer a strong emphasis on the teaching of the Word while prefer to focus on worship or fellowship. People begin to associate with those with whom we are most comfortable. These various ministry traditions can begin to divide us. We can come to a point where we believe that we have the right way and those who don't see things as we do are off track. The church in Corinth was not the only church to struggle with problems such as these. They are very real in our day as well.

Paul was addressing this situation when he told the church in Corinth that they needed to be of one mind and thought and agree with one another. They needed to stop allowing these issues to divide them. They needed to put aside their preferences and come together on the issues that really mattered. They needed to realize that every gift in the body was important. "Is Christ divided?" asked Paul (verse 13). Did Paul die on the cross for your sins? Were you baptized in the name of Paul? The Corinthians could not miss Paul's point. It would be blasphemous to think that Paul was crucified for them. Their worship and devotion was to the Lord Jesus alone. The enemy had been successful in diverting their attention from Christ to their leaders and the various leadership styles in the church of that day.

Paul reminded the Corinthians that he had not baptized any of them (except Crispus, Gaius, and Stephanas). The Corinthians were not to be followers of Paul but of the Lord Jesus. How easy it is as leaders to seek followers. We who are in leadership know the temptation to seek the adoration and praise of those we work among. Paul refused to

fall into this trap. He was not interested in the praise and adoration of people. His desire was that the Lord Jesus be lifted up. God had not sent him to baptize and gain a following of believers for himself. He did not come to preach his own wisdom and gain support for his own theological views. There was no power in this sort of faith (verse 17). He wanted Christ alone to be lifted up in His midst.

Paul issued a strong exhortation to unity by warning the Corinthians about becoming followers of human leaders and not of God. I have seen churches that have lost their vision of Christ because they placed too much emphasis on their denominational distinctions. They may have a very good doctrinal statement and preach the truth of the Word of God, but they have lost their first love. This essentially was the problem with the church in Corinth. They began to focus too much on their programs, leaders, and ministries and lost sight of their central focus—the Lord Jesus. Paul challenged them to place Christ on the throne of their church. They were in danger of emptying the cross of its power. Their focus on human leadership and human wisdom would only leave them empty and powerless in the end. Unless Christ was the focus of their worship and service, they would have nothing of any substance to share with a dying world around them. They would be powerless.

For Consideration:

- What things tend to divide believers in the church today?
- Will we always agree with each other in matters of faith and practice? Can we still be one with a brother or sister even if we don't agree with

everything they believe? What is it that makes us one?

- Can you think of an example of a church today that has lost its focus on Christ? What has been the result?
- What is true for a church is also true in our personal lives. What things can take our focus from the Lord?

For Prayer:

- Ask God to help you maintain your personal focus on the Lord Jesus.
- Take a moment to pray for a church that has, lost its focus on the centrality of Christ.
- Take a moment to thank God for your spiritual leaders. Ask God to keep them free from a desire to gain a following for themselves.

3

HUMAN WISDOM AND THE CROSS

Read 1 Corinthians 1:18-31

One of the problems in the church of Corinth was that they became followers of their human leaders and not of God. Some appreciated the ministry and doctrinal emphasis of Paul while others preferred those of Apollos or Cephas. Because of this the Corinthians were emptying the cross of its power. They were preaching the ways and methods of their leaders, and their focus was not on Christ and His inspired Word. Paul reminded them that the power they needed would not come from being followers of the wisdom of their leaders but in centering their attention on the cross of Christ.

The apostle begins this section by reminding the Corinthians that the preaching of the cross is “foolishness” to the people of this world (verse 18). For those who did not know the Lord Jesus, the cross represented death and defeat. The cross was a place of final humiliation. The cross, at this time in history, was not something about which

someone would boast. It was the place where criminals received a just reward for their hideous crimes against humanity. It is quite easy to understand, from the perspective of the world of Paul's day, that the preaching of the glories of the cross would not have been understood.

On the other hand, from the perspective of the believer, the cross was a very different thing indeed. The cross did not represent defeat and death. It represented life, victory, and hope. It was there on the cross that their sins were forgiven. The cross was not the final humiliation of Jesus but His ultimate victory. The cross represented power over death, sin, and Satan.

According to Paul, the wisdom of this world could not compare to the power of the cross. By our earthly wisdom, we can obtain everything this world has to offer. By means of worldly wisdom, we can amass wealth, prestige, and influence. No amount of worldly wisdom, however, can forgive our sins. No amount of worldly wisdom can keep a sinner from an eternity of hell. The cross alone can rescue us from the jaws of Satan and set us free.

Paul told the Corinthians that God would destroy the wisdom of the wise (verse 19). "Where is the wise man?" asked Paul in verse 20. Where has all this worldly wisdom led us? By worldly wisdom we have made our lives more convenient. We have managed to prolong life by our medical advances and have found cures for diseases once thought incurable. We have simplified communications and are now able to travel easily from one part of this earth to another. Have all these advances drawn us any closer to God? Have they prepared us to face God on the Day of Judgment? What do we really gain if we have all the comforts and luxuries of this life but spend an eternity separated from God?

The Jews of Paul's day were looking for a miraculous sign (verse 22). The Greeks were looking for great wisdom. What Paul had to offer was the simple message of Christ crucified (verse 23). The Jews rejected the cross. It was a stumbling block for them. To the Jewish mind, the cross could not offer hope. A crucified Messiah was the end of hope. The cross was an offense to them. The Gentiles did not accept the message of the cross because it was not rational. The cross did not make worldly sense to the Greek mind, and so it was rejected. To those who believed and accepted the cross, however, they found it to be the power and wisdom of God for salvation (verse 24).

Even in our day, people fall into one of these categories. We have met people who could not accept the message of the cross because they were waiting for a thunderbolt from heaven. Unless these people have a "Damascus Road" experience like Paul (see Acts 9), they cannot accept the message of the gospel. Like the Jews of Jesus' day, they are looking for a great sign from heaven before turning to God. They cannot accept the simple truth.

On the other hand, there are those who cannot accept the message of the cross because it is not rational enough for them. They cannot understand how the death of Christ could give eternal life. Until they understand this, they are not going to accept it. They dismiss the message of the cross as foolishness. They see it as being only for the superstitious or weak minded. What they fail to understand is that the foolishness of God is much wiser than the greatest human wisdom (verse 24). God's wisdom does not conform to our view of wisdom. When God calls Jews and Gentiles to salvation, however, they come to understand that Christ and His work on the cross are the ultimate power and wisdom.

Paul turned his attention to the Corinthians in verse 26. For the most part, they were a very simple people. There were not many in the church of Corinth who were considered by the world's standard to be wise and influential. In the eyes of the world, they were insignificant. God, however, took these simple people and did something tremendous in them. He made them his children and inheritors of His great kingdom through the simple message of the cross. There was nothing in them that would have drawn the attention of God but His power was revealed in them.

It was in their weakness that the Lord Jesus came to them. Because of the cross, these Corinthian believers put to shame the wisest people on the earth. The Spirit of God's Son lived in them. They were righteous before God (verse 30). They were a holy people, separated for God. They had been rescued from hell at the cost of Jesus' life on the cross. No human wisdom could have brought them to this point. The cross of Christ alone brought this victory.

Paul challenged the Corinthians to put aside their differences and unite under the central theme of the cross of Christ. It was here that they were powerful. It was here that they were united. Though they were insignificant in the eyes of the world, united under the cross they were powerful. When seen in this light, their boasting about being of Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas was foolish. No one could claim to be better than another simply for following a certain spiritual leader. Any boasting they did could not be in human wisdom or methods. They could only boast in the person and work of the Lord Jesus on the cross. The cross put each of them on the same level.

I suspect that this principle applies to us equally today. Can we consider ourselves better than our brother or sister in Christ because we belong to a certain church or have a

certain doctrine and practice? Are we not, like our brothers and sisters, fully dependent on the cross for everything? All boasting must be in the cross.

For Consideration:

- What is it that keeps your unbelieving friends from the Lord? What are people looking for according to this chapter?
- Do you think that there are times when believers are ashamed of the cross because it does not measure up to the wisdom of this world?
- What do we boast about as believers? Are any of these things truly legitimate? What should be our only boast?
- What is the source of our unity as believers, according to the apostle Paul?

For Prayer:

- Take a moment to pray that God would reach down to your unbelieving friends and show them the power of the cross.
- Have you been guilty of criticizing or looking down on other believers because they do not do things like you? Ask God to forgive you for this.
- Ask God to give you a deeper love for His people, regardless of their doctrinal or denominational flavor. Thank Him that at the cross we are all equal.

4

KNOWING CHRIST CRUCIFIED

Read 1 Corinthians 2:1-5

In chapter 1 Paul spoke to the Corinthians about the dangers of depending on human wisdom. He reminded them that it was not because of their wealth and intelligence that they had been saved from the wrath to come. They were a simple people with a simple message. Their power was not in their abilities but in the cross of Christ. Next, the apostle shows them how this principle worked itself out in his own personal ministry among them.

In verse 1 Paul reminded the Corinthians that when he came to minister among them, he did not come with great eloquence and human wisdom. It should be understood that, of all the apostles, the apostle Paul was probably the best educated and most eloquent. A quick look at the New Testament will show you that he wrote the vast majority of the books. Paul had a brilliant mind, but he realized that his great learning was not what was necessary for the ministry in Corinth. When he went to Corinth, he knew that if

the gospel message was going to be effective, it would not be because of his wisdom and ability to communicate. He knew that he would fail if his ministry was founded on human wisdom and eloquence. Instead, he resolved that, in his ministry in Corinth, he would know and preach only one thing—Christ crucified (verse 2). This statement merits careful consideration.

For Paul, knowing Christ crucified meant two things. First, it meant that the cross of Christ was the central focus of his preaching and teaching. If there was one thing he wanted the Corinthians to hear from him, it was the gospel message of Christ. He reminded the Corinthians in verse 4 that his preaching was not filled with human wisdom and persuasive words. His preaching focused on one thing and one thing only—the cross of Christ and its power to transform.

Second, knowing Christ crucified meant that Paul chose to depend on the power of the cross to minister to the Corinthians instead of depending on his own human wisdom and skill. This is what he told the Corinthians in verse 4. He reminded them that his message was not in human wisdom but in Spirit and power. The cross of Christ represented power for Paul. In chapter 1 we read that the message of the cross is the power of God for salvation (1:18).

How often have we been distracted from this vital truth? What is going to convince the world of its need of Christ? We take courses in how to evangelize and how to answer any question being asked by the unbeliever. We learn various techniques in evangelism. Are we depending on our techniques and training to win the world to Christ? Paul tells us here that the power to win the world to Christ is the cross. The simple presentation of the cross alone is sufficient to save. We do not have to be well educated. We do

not have to have an answer for every objection. We simply have to present the powerful message of Christ crucified. This is what God will use to win souls to Himself. Even the simplest believer can be a mighty witness for the Lord because the power is not in us and our ability but in the cross. The cross has the power to save.

Paul told the Corinthians that he purposefully chose to minister to them in this manner so that their faith would rest not on human wisdom but on God's power (verse 5). It would have been easy for Paul to gain followers for himself. It was more important for him, however, that people see the power of Christ than see his knowledge and eloquence. He wanted his life and message to be filled with Christ and His power so that people had no alternative but to recognize that the crucified Christ was living and working through him. The result would be that they would be attracted to Christ and not to Paul. What do people see in your life?

There is one more thing we need to mention from this passage. Notice in verse 3 that Paul told the Corinthians that he came to them in weakness, fear, and trembling. It is hard to imagine the great apostle Paul shaking in his boots as he went to Corinth to minister. We often picture the apostle as a man of tremendous confidence and spiritual ability. Paul's confidence, however, was not in himself but in the Lord.

When he was an unbeliever, Paul had great confidence in his natural ability. He showed no lack of confidence when he went to the chief priest for permission to lead in an assault against the church. Now that he was a believer, however, all confidence in his natural ability was gone. He knew that as he ministered in Corinth, the sure way to fail was to lean on this natural talent and ability. He trembled

because he knew his inability to reach the city of Corinth in his own strength and eloquence. He went to Corinth emptied of human pride but trusting in the power of the Lord. That can be a scary thing. It is relatively easy to live in our own strength and planning. It is not so easy to live not knowing where God is going to lead us or what we need to say. Paul knew his strength was insufficient for the task. He did not have confidence in himself. This is where each of us really should be in our ministry. God would prove to be faithful to Paul and use him mightily in Corinth. He can do the same for you if you trust in Him and the power of His cross.

For Consideration:

- Take a moment to consider the last time you spoke to someone about the Lord. Were you depending on the Lord or on your own ability to convince them?
- How much of Christ do people see in your service and life today?
- What encouragement do you take from this section? What kind of people does God use to minister in His name?
- What are your fears in ministry? What makes you hold back in service for the Lord? What encouragement do you receive from the fact that Paul trembled as he went to Corinth?

For Prayer:

- Have you found yourself depending on your own ability as you present Christ to those around you? Ask God to forgive you and help you to walk in His enabling.
- Ask the Lord to forgive us for believing that the message of the cross is no longer sufficient. Ask the Lord to show you afresh the power of this message.
- Pray that Christ's power and life would be seen in you.
- Ask God to enable you to be bold in ministry despite your fears and trembling.

5

THE WISDOM OF THE SPIRIT

Read 1 Corinthians 2:6-16

Paul reminded the Corinthians that the message he preached to them was not in words of human wisdom. That is not to say the apostle was preaching foolishness to them. On the contrary, he was preaching great wisdom. This wisdom, however, was not the wisdom of this world, which would eventually come to nothing.

Paul was not interested in preaching worldly wisdom. The wisdom Paul preached was a “secret” or mysterious wisdom. This wisdom existed before time began but had been hidden from the world (verse 7). The rulers of Paul’s age did not understand this wisdom. If they had understood it, they would not have crucified the Lord Jesus. This leads us to understand that the wisdom that Paul spoke about here was found in the person and work of the Lord Jesus.

The apostle John spoke of Jesus as the “Word” or wisdom of God (John 1:14). Jesus represented the plan of God for the salvation of humanity. In Him we find the reason for our existence. How many wise people have sought to

understand the purpose and meaning in life? Only in Christ can we know the answers. In Him and His work is found the great wisdom of God and His purpose for us as His creation.

There is a tremendous promise for those to whom this wisdom is revealed. Paul reminds us that no eye has ever seen the things that God has planned for those who love Him (verse 9). No ear has ever heard the glories that God has in store for those who accept this wisdom. Our minds are not big enough to comprehend the great purpose of God in the person of Christ. Men and women in their worldly wisdom have made life more comfortable and pleasant. Life expectancy has been lengthened. We have cured diseases thought to be fatal. These achievements, however, pale into insignificance when compared to what God has in store for those who love Him. There in His presence there will be no sickness, no death, and no sorrow.

Verse 10 tells us that it is the ministry of the Holy Spirit to reveal the profound wisdom of God to believers. Just as we need our own human spirit to understand worldly wisdom so we need God's Spirit to understand spiritual wisdom. Without God's Spirit in us, we would never be able to understand Christ's work of redemption (verse 13). Unbelievers who lack the supernatural life and wisdom of the Holy Spirit cannot receive the things of God because these truths are spiritual and make no sense to a worldly mind (verse 14).

Maybe you can identify with this personally. How many times did you sit under the preaching of the gospel? How many times did you hear that the Lord Jesus died for your sins and that if you accepted Him, you could become a child of God? You heard the words, but they did not make

sense to you. You were trying to understand without having the capacity to process spiritual thought.

This is what Paul was telling the Corinthians in verse 14. He made it clear that people without the Spirit do not accept the things that come from the Spirit; spiritual things are foolishness to them. Only those who have the Spirit of God can understand the wisdom of God. The message Paul spoke was a spiritual message. His wisdom could not be found in books written by worldly wise people of his day. His message was from the Spirit of God. He conveyed spiritual wisdom in words given to him by the Holy Spirit, and only those to whom the Spirit revealed this truth could understand it.

While a man or woman without the Spirit could not understand the things Paul spoke, a spiritual person (who has the Spirit of God) would be able to make judgments about these spiritual matters (verse 15). In other words, spiritual people are able to discuss and consider the things of God because the Holy Spirit, living in them, gives them understanding.

Paul went on to say that the spiritual person “is not subject to any man’s judgment” (verse 15). The ways of God are very different from human ways. How can someone who does not understand the ways of the Spirit judge the believer? Believers will be misunderstood by the world, but they do not need to fear the judgments of men, they are accountable to God alone and to the Spirit who reveals to them the thoughts, ways and purposes of the Lord (verse 16).

The truth unbelievers need to know is a spiritual truth that only the Spirit of God can enable them to understand. This ought to drive us to our knees to seek God on their behalf.

We are communicating to people who do not have the capacity to comprehend what we are presenting to them. How important it is that we work in partnership with the Spirit of God. While He uses us in the presentation of the gospel, ultimately He must give the understanding. What a privilege we have to be partners with the Spirit in reaching this world. What a privilege it is to have our minds opened by that Spirit to the deep truths of God. The Corinthians were among those whose minds had been opened by the Spirit of God to the truth of Christ and God's purpose in Him.

For Consideration:

- Can you recall the day that you came to understand the message of the gospel for the first time? Can you relate to what Paul is saying in this passage about being given the mind of God?
- What role do we play in the conversion of a soul to Christ? What role does the Spirit of God play? To what extent are we dependent on the work of God's Spirit as we share the truth?
- Do you have the mind of Christ? What is the difference between the mind of Christ and the wisdom of this world?

For Prayer:

- Take a moment to pray for an unbeliever in your neighborhood. Ask God to give this person an understanding of the gospel.

- Have you ever found yourself running ahead of God in the presentation of the gospel, believing that you could win the lost to Christ by your own persuasive words? Ask God to forgive you and help you to recognize the role of His Spirit in winning the lost and giving them life and understanding of the truth.
- Thank the Lord for how He has opened your mind to spiritual truths.

6

DIVISION IN THE CORINTHIAN CHURCH

Read 1 Corinthians 3

In the last meditation, Paul made a distinction between the spiritual person who has the Spirit of God and the worldly person who does not. Here in this chapter, he reminds the Corinthians that the distinction between the spiritual and the worldly person is not always as clear as it ought to be. Although spiritual people have the capacity to live according to God's wisdom, they do not always do so. Often they live and think like the worldly person.

Notice in verse 1 that Paul spoke to the Corinthians as "brothers." The term would indicate that he believed them to be God's children. They had accepted the Lord and were part of God's family. Notice, however, that though they were his brothers in the faith, Paul could not address them as "spiritual." While they belonged to the Lord Jesus, they had chosen to live according to the standards and wisdom of the world. What a tragedy this was. They were

mere babes in Christ. They had never matured in their faith.

Paul could not give them solid food—the deeper truths of God (verse 2). Like babies they were still in need of milk in their walk with the Lord. They had been Christians long enough to have demonstrated real changes in their lives, but this had not happened. Paul told the Corinthians that they were still worldly in their understanding and ways (verse 3).

It is important that we note that Paul was expecting progress in their walk with the Lord. Has there been progress in your spiritual life? Are you closer to the Lord this year than you were last year? This growth should be seen at every level of your Christian experience. Sometimes we see tremendous growth in the first few years of our relationship with the Lord, and then it seems to fade away. Even the believer who has known the Lord for fifty years needs to continue to mature in godly living. We will never exhaust our understanding of God and His grace. There will always be sins to overcome, new heights of empowerment in our service, and deeper intimacy with Christ. Growth ought to be the normal experience for us at every stage of our spiritual walk.

The Corinthians had never really progressed in their relationship with the Lord. One of the evidences of this could be seen in their jealousy and quarreling. As a church, they were caught up in minor differences. Some people followed Paul; others preferred Apollos. These differences were causing division in the church. The mere fact that they had this fragmentation proved that they were not growing in their faith. Instead, they were thinking and behaving as “mere men” (verse 3). That is to say, they were living like unbelievers.

Paul showed them in verses 5-6 that both he and Apollos were ministers together in the cause of Christ. God had given to Paul and Apollos different functions in the body of Christ. Paul planted the seed of truth, and Apollos watered it. Both of these men were dependent on God to cause the seed to grow and produce fruit in the lives of the Corinthians. Both Paul and Apollos had one goal: they wanted to see the fruit of Christ in the lives of the Corinthians. Paul was demonstrating that it was immature to think that one ministry was more important than another.

Paul recognized his role in the life of the Corinthian church. In verse 10 he used the illustration of a building. He had laid the foundation of the church in Corinth. God had used Paul to preach the gospel and establish a new church (see Romans 15:20) but it was the responsibility of someone else to construct the rest of the building on that foundation. Apollos had done this by teaching the Word of God among them.

Paul reminded the Corinthians that each of them had the responsibility to build on the foundation of Christ and His work (verse 11). Each believer had a role to play in building of the church of Christ. As children of God, they had a choice of materials to use. They could build wisely by using the best of materials—gold, silver, and costly stones—or they could build unwisely by using wood, hay, and straw (verse 12). Through faithful ministry and obedience they could build a solid church that would withstand the test of time (verse 13). On the other hand, they could be unfaithful and build with worldly techniques and impure motives (compared here to wood, hay, and straw). This poorer construction would not stand the test of flames. The Day of Judgment would bring all these things to light (see 2 Corinthians 5:10). On that day the quality of each person's

work would be revealed. God would reveal the motives or their heart.

Paul reminded the Corinthians in verse 15 that he was not speaking about their salvation when he spoke about building on the foundation. Their salvation was secure the moment they accepted the Lord as their Savior. Paul speaks here about what they did with the salvation they experienced in Christ. The person who built with wood, hay, and straw would suffer tremendous loss on the Day of Judgment but still be saved "as one escaping through the flames" (verse 15).

The way we live our lives will be brought to light in the Day of Judgment. The Bible speaks of rewards for earthly service (Matthew 5:12; 6:1). There are believers who serve the Lord with wood, hay and straw. These believers live and think like unbelievers. Their motivations and attitudes are not what God desires. Maybe they are proud and self-seeking. Maybe they have never learned to walk in the leading of God and according to the principles of His Word. Paul reminded the Corinthians that this type of believer would suffer the loss of rewards in heaven. God would still love them and accept them as His children, but they would not receive the commendation of their Heavenly Father for their efforts.

As believers, we are temples of God. God's Spirit lives in us (see verse 16). As God's holy temples, our lives are sacred. We need to be careful not to allow into these temples anything that would bring dishonor to the Lord God who lives in our hearts. It is a serious thing to defile the temple of God. Paul warned the Corinthians that if they defiled their temples, God would destroy them (verse 17). Blessing and intimacy with God could only flourish when they were walking in obedience and faithfulness. The

Corinthians had been guilty of allowing jealousy, quarrels, and division to enter their temples. Their church was being destroyed by this wood, hay and stubble.

Paul challenged the Corinthians not to deceive themselves (verse 18). They thought that they were wise. They believed that things were all right between themselves and God, but they were only misleading themselves. Things were not right. The Corinthian believers needed to be awakened to the reality of what was taking place in their lives. They were trying to function with worldly wisdom. They were being caught up in worldly ways. They were boasting in men (verse 21). They were lifting up ministry styles and personality traits when they had things of far greater significance to boast about.

Paul reminded them in verse 22 of the blessing that was theirs in Christ. They had wonderful servants who had shared God's love with them. The world itself was a gift of God to them. Their lives were being sustained by Him. Their present blessings and their future hope were all gifts from a gracious God to them. They belonged to Christ. He had chosen them and saved them from an eternity of hell and suffering. In light of the wonderful blessings of God, their petty divisions were irrelevant.

As believers, we can still live worldly lives. This is what was happening in the church of Corinth. The believers there were being caught up in petty divisions. The enemy had succeeded in getting their attention off Christ and onto themselves. The result was that they were no longer growing in their faith. Instead, they began to place blocks of jealousy and division on the solid foundation of Christ's church.

What a challenge this chapter is to us as believers today. As you look at your temple, what sort of blocks do you find? Perhaps scattered among the blocks of gold, silver, and precious stone can be seen blocks of wood, hay, and straw. These inferior blocks need to be pulled out and replaced with blocks that bring honor to the name of the Lord Jesus.

For Consideration:

- Has this meditation drawn your attention to some blocks in your life that need to be dealt with? What are those blocks?
- Are you being led of the Spirit in what you do or are you being influenced by the things of this world?
- What evidence of spiritual growth do you find in your life? How has the Lord Jesus been changing you?

For Prayer:

- Ask God to help you to deal with blocks in your life that do not bring honor to Him.
- Do you know fellow believers who have not been able to grow in their spiritual life because of certain barriers in their lives? Take a moment to pray for them now.
- Thank God for the sure foundation He has given us in Christ. Thank God that this foundation will never fail.

- Ask God to help you to build on this foundation of Christ with attitudes and works that truly bring glory to His name.

CALLED INTO QUESTION

Read 1 Corinthians 4:1-5

Have you ever had someone call your ministry into question? This is what was happening in the church of Corinth. There were people in Corinth who did not like the apostle or his ministry. Even the Lord Jesus was not always appreciated. People questioned His authority. If you are a servant of the Lord, sooner or later, you also will have to face these same issues.

How do we deal with opposition to our ministries? A look at how the apostle Paul dealt with this should help us in our own times of trial.

He Had a Clear Understanding of His Calling (verse 1)

Probably one of the single most important things we can do as we face opposition and questions about our ministry is to be sure of our calling. If I depended on what others thought of my ministry, there would have been many times when I would have given up. While there have been many difficulties, I have never been able to get beyond the fact

that the Lord Jesus one day made it clear that He wanted me in full-time ministry. There have been times in my life when I considered another type of work, but each time the Lord brought me back to His original call. That sense of calling has sustained me through many difficulties.

The apostle Paul had a clear understanding of his call. He understood himself to be a servant to whom Christ had entrusted the “secret things of God” (verse 1). The word entrust is important. God gave Paul a responsibility. He trusted him with a message for His people, and Paul understood that he was under obligation to share that message. The apostle was convinced that he needed to be faithful no matter what others said about him. Paul was able to face those who questioned him and his ministry because he had a clear understanding of God’s call on his life.

*He Committed Himself to Being Faithful to His Calling
(verse 2)*

Having confirmed in his mind what the call of God was for his life, Paul then committed himself to obey that call. The Lord God had given him a trust, and he knew he had to be faithful to that trust.

We can be sure that the enemy will do his best to keep us from being faithful to the trust God has given us. I have probably experienced more frustration in the area of my giftedness than any other area of ministry. Satan has used the reactions of people to discourage me. Sometimes I have questioned my gifting. I have at times gone back to the Lord to ask Him if I should continue.

When challenged in his ministry, the apostle Paul returned to his calling. He also realized that when God entrusts a

charge, He expected that we be faithful to that charge. This was Paul's commitment.

He Refused to Allow Himself to Be Judged by Anyone (verse 3)

Having clarified his calling and commitment to be faithful to that calling, Paul then told the Corinthians that he would not allow himself to be judged by any human court. "I care very little if I am judged by any human court," he told them. Paul's goal was not to please people but the God who called him. Paul did not care if he was judged by people. What individuals said about his ministry was not as important as what the Lord said. He chose to be faithful to God rather than humans.

I have found this to be a lot easier to say than to practice. How often I have become fixated on what others thought about my ministry? I want to be liked. I feel the need for appreciation and support, and I often look to people to give me this support and encouragement. The danger in this is becoming a people-pleaser.

Throughout the Scriptures we see God calling His servants to stand against the flow. Paul's commitment was to the Lord his God. He would not allow others to distract him from his calling. It was not important that people liked him and his message. What was important was that he do what God called him to do.

Joseph made an enemy of Potiphar's wife when he refused to sleep with her (Genesis 39). Though she pleaded with him day after day, he refused to defile himself. For this he was thrown into prison. Daniel too made many enemies when he refused to stop praying to his God (Daniel 6). This resulted in him being thrown into the lion's den.

Faithfulness to the call of God in our lives will sometimes lead us to the path of rejection and scorn. Paul had eyes and ears for no one else. His commitment was to please God. It did not matter what others said or thought. If we are going to be a true servant of God we must get past what other think of us.

He Refused Even to Judge Himself (verse 3)

Notice in verse 3 that Paul not only refused to allow others to judge him in the matter of God's calling, but he also refused to judge himself. Paul is telling us here that he refused to allow his own doubts and questions to distract him from God's call.

Sometimes we are our own worst enemy. How many times have we questioned our abilities and gifting? How many times have I gone to God with serious doubts, created in my own mind about whether I was the person for the task He had called me to do? How many times would I have left the ministry if I had been listening to my own feelings? Many people in Scripture struggled in the same way. Moses called his ministry into question when he told God that he was not an able speaker (Exodus 4:10-13). Jeremiah, in the face of much opposition, wondered if it would not have been better for him to simply be quiet and not speak anymore (Jeremiah 20:9). I wonder if Peter, after denying the Lord three times, called his own ministry as a disciple into question.

Paul realized that the call of God in his life transcended even his own feelings and doubts. He refused to allow himself the privilege of questioning what God had made clear to him.

He Maintained a Clear Conscience (verse 4)

Notice in verse 4 that Paul sought to maintain a clear conscience. Paul maintained a clear conscience by refusing to allow others to distract him from his God-given calling. He maintained a clear conscience by refusing to allow his own personal doubts to distract him. Paul reminded the Corinthians that this did not mean he was perfect. He knew that in his ministry he made mistakes. Despite these shortcomings, however, he knew he was where God wanted him to be. In this he had a clear conscience. He chose to live in obedience to God and be faithful to what God had clearly laid out for him. He was determined to live his life walking in obedience so that he could stand before his Lord unashamed when he gave an accounting of his life and ministry. This was a daily commitment. He would live each day with a clear conscience and knowledge that he had been faithful to the purpose of God for his life.

He Waited for the Lord to Bring to Light the Motives of the Heart (verse 5)

Notice finally that Paul committed all judgment to the Lord Jesus. He knew that the only judgment concerning his ministry that mattered was the judgment of the Lord. In his ministry his motivations and methods were often questioned. Paul felt no need to prove what his motives were to others. He committed these matters to the Lord. The day was coming when the Lord would judge the motives of his heart. Until that time, Paul persevered in what he knew was the call of God.

How often has the enemy succeeded in distracting us by causing us to focus on what others were saying about us or our ministry? How often have we been sidetracked in our calling by the cares and pleasures of this world? Paul

refused to be distracted by these things. He committed himself to the Lord and continued faithful in his ministry. May God give us the grace to do the same.

For Consideration:

- What has God entrusted to you? What are your gifts? What ministries has He given you?
- Have you been faithful to the ministry God has given you?
- Have you ever been distracted in ministry because of what others were saying about you? What challenge do you receive from this passage?
- Can you say that you have been faithful to God's calling on your life today? Will you have any reason to be ashamed on the day you give an account before your Lord?

For Prayer:

- Thank God for the gifts and calling He has given you.
- If you are not sure of what God's ministry is for you, take a moment to ask Him to give you a clear sense of His gifting and calling on your life.
- Ask God to open doors of opportunity for you to exercise His calling on your life. Ask Him to help you to be faithful to that calling.

- Ask the Lord to help you to be willing to walk faithfully even in the small things He gives you to do each day.

8

COMFORTABLE CHRISTIANITY

Read 1 Corinthians 4:6-21

Paul had been speaking to the Corinthians about the divisions in their church and their lack of maturity. The believers in Corinth had been taking sides with certain leaders, and criticizing others. This disunity was rooted in jealousy. Paul addresses this spirit of pride and envy in this passage.

Paul began in verse 6 by telling the Corinthians that they should not go beyond what was written. By taking pride in one person over another, they were going beyond the bounds of how God saw things. The clear teaching of the Word of God is that everything we have received everything from the hands of God (verse 7). We have nothing to boast of in ourselves. What have we ever done that we did not owe to God? As great as the apostle Paul was, he knew that everything he accomplished was a result of God's grace and power. Paul knew that he was no different from any other servant of God. All his efforts for the gospel

were the result of the work of an almighty God in his life. His life, his ministry, and everything he was or ever could be, he received as an unmerited gift from the hand of a sovereign God. If there was to be any boasting it would have to be in the Lord and what He could accomplish through the life of an undeserving sinner.

The Corinthians did not understand this concept. In their pride, many of them believed that they had achieved spiritual maturity. They saw themselves as being spiritually rich (verse 8). They felt that they were ruling like spiritual kings in their city. Paul saw things differently. "I wish you really had become kings," he said.

While the Corinthians lived comfortably in their church, arguing about which spiritual leader they should follow, the apostles were on display before the world like men condemned to die. The Corinthians saw themselves as kings, while Paul saw himself as a condemned man in the arena (verse 9). In contrast to the easy and comfortable lives of the Corinthians, the apostles were suffering the insults and jeers of the crowd looking for their death. In the eyes of the world, the apostles were considered fools.

The Corinthians had maintained an air of respectability in their community. The apostles, on the other hand, were seen by the world as weak and insignificant. Paul had often been insulted and mocked. Wherever he went he suffered dishonor. He knew what it was like to go hungry and thirsty. Unlike the Corinthians, the apostles dressed in rags and had nowhere to call home (verse 11). They had to work hard to find enough money to pay for their own ministries. When people cursed them, they blessed them in return. When they were slandered, they responded with words of kindness. People saw them as the "scum" and

“refuse” of the earth (verse 13). This was in direct contrast to the how the Corinthians saw themselves—as kings.

The Corinthians had become comfortable in their Christian lifestyle. They enjoyed a respectable reputation in the community. They lived like kings. They were happy with where they were in their spiritual pilgrimage. They felt they had achieved spiritual maturity.

Paul warned the Corinthians about this attitude in verse 14. He did so in a tender and gentle way. He reminded them that they were “dear children” to him. He reminded them that he was their spiritual father in the faith. They had come to Christ through his ministry, and as a father, he expressed his deep concern for them.

As teenagers in the faith, the Corinthians felt that they had all the answers. They did not need Paul’s parental guidance (see verse 8). Paul urged them to follow his example. He challenged them not to get caught into the trap of “comfortable faith.” As believers, they needed to expect that if they lived a godly life, they would be persecuted (see 2 Timothy 3:12). Paul did not hesitate to challenge the Corinthians to become imitators of him in his suffering (verse 16).

Paul believed that the Corinthians needed to break the shackles of comfortable Christianity. Despite his persecution, Paul was free. The Corinthians, on the other hand, though they considered themselves to be kings were in reality chained and imprisoned in arrogant attitudes and endless arguments. In order that they be set free from these chains, Paul decided to send Timothy to them (verse 17). Timothy would teach them how they needed to live as true children of God. Notice that Paul did not single out the

Corinthians for special teaching. What he told them was what he taught everywhere he went.

The challenge of Paul is for us as well. Paul desired to see people moving forward in the work of God. He challenges us in this passage to move beyond our petty arguments and comfort zones. Some of the Corinthians had become arrogant (verse 18). They had the right talk and knew the right doctrines. Paul was not interested in their talk. He wanted to see the power of God in their lives. He wanted to see them put their talk into action. "The kingdom of God," said Paul "is not a matter of talk, but of power" (verse 20).

This is a challenge to us today. How easy it is to stand on the sidelines and criticize those who are doing the work. This is what the Corinthians were doing. They stood at a distance and compared Paul to Apollos. They had all kinds of opinions. The fact of the matter, however, was that they were unwilling to risk everything for Christ. How often do we practice our Christianity by sitting in meetings and talking about how things should be? Where are those who will move from talking about their faith to demonstrating the power of their faith?

Paul believed that this was a very serious matter for the church in Corinth. He reminded them, as their spiritual father, that if they did not change their ways, he would be forced to come to them with his whip (verse 21). In other words, he would be forced to discipline them as a loving father to correct their ways. May God challenge us to leave our comfortable pew in order to demonstrate in real life the power of the faith we profess.

For Consideration:

- What would Paul have to say to the church of our day? Have we become comfortable? Do we live as "spiritual kings" in our churches today?
- What are the real spiritual needs in your community? What is your church doing to demonstrate the power of God in addressing those needs?
- How has the power of God been demonstrated in your life?

For Prayer:

- Ask God to forgive us for becoming comfortable and thinking more of ourselves than we ought to think.
- Ask God to show you the real needs around you. Ask Him to show you what He would have you to do about those needs.
- Ask Him to demonstrate through you the real power of the gospel to change lives.
- Ask God to move you beyond a Christianity of words alone to a Christianity of life and power.

9

OLD YEAST

Read 1 Corinthians 5:1-13

We have seen that the church of Corinth had problems with worldliness (3:1) and division (3:3) in their midst. Despite these sins, they had become quite comfortable with where they were in their spiritual development (4:8). In chapter 5, however, we discover that there were reports of immorality in the church of Corinth.

The immorality found in their assembly was of such a nature that even pagans would be horrified (verse 1). It was reported that there was a man among them who was having sexual relations with his father's wife. It should be understood here that the phrase "father's wife" does not necessarily imply that the person concerned was his mother. In addition, we do not have any indication from the passage of where the father was at this time. Could he have died? Had he divorced his wife? Were they still living together? We are simply not told. It is sufficient to note that such relations were strictly forbidden, not only by the culture of Corinth but also by the law of God in Leviticus 18:8.

What disturbed Paul about this situation was that the church of Corinth had not disciplined this brother. “And you are proud!” said Paul in verse 2. We saw in the last meditation that the believers in Corinth felt good about themselves. Paul had told them that they were very proud (4:18). Here again he reminded them of their pride. In reality, however, they had no reason to be proud. Instead of being ashamed of what was happening in their midst, they ignored it.

Before we condemn the church in Corinth for their sin, it would be good for us to look at our own churches. Have we, like them, been guilty of ignoring sin in our midst? There are many reasons why we do not confront sin in the church today. Sometimes it is because of a lack of clear teaching of the Word of God. There are shepherds who simply do not have enough understanding of Scripture to know what God requires. Other times we do not deal with the sin because we do not have the courage to face those who are living in sin. The fear of people’s reactions is more powerful than the fear of God.

Here in this chapter Paul instructs the Corinthians in how they should dealt with this situation. Let’s examine what Paul taught them here.

Grieve in Your Hearts for the Sin (verse 2)

Paul began by telling the Corinthians that when they saw a flagrant and rebellious sin, their first response should have been to grieve. How often have we become calloused to the sin that surrounds us? Even in the church, we have accepted defeat as being normal. Somehow, we do not live with the understanding that victory is not only possible but required. God does not delight in His people falling into sin. He has given us His Spirit to enable us to

live in victory. His strength and power are at our disposition. It should grieve us to see Christians not availing themselves of this power to overcome sin.

Does your heart break when you see believers living in sin? Do you have a holy hatred for all that is contrary to the will and purpose of God? I am not sure what grieves me more in this passage—the sin of the man committing immorality or the sin of the church in not grieving over it. Before we can exercise any discipline in the church, we need to be a people who grieve over sin.

Judge the Sin (verse 3)

We will come back to verse 2 in a moment. In verse 3 Paul told the Corinthians that though he was not physically present with them, he had already passed judgment on this man. Satan would have us believe that we are not to judge anyone. He reminds us of our own unworthiness. He has believers so afraid of making any kind of judgment that they would prefer to leave sin alone rather than deal with it. This works to Satan's advantage.

Paul was not afraid to call sin, *sin*. He could pass judgment on this man because this immorality was in direct contradiction to the clear teaching of the Word of God. When a brother or sister is violating the principles of the Word of God, it is our obligation to recognize this, declare it as sin and warn them. As believers, we need to judge everything according to the teaching of the Word. To refuse to do so is to play into the hands of the enemy.

Paul's standard was the Word of God. He encouraged the Corinthians to do likewise. When we refuse to judge sin, we choose to accept it and live with it. Soon the church is filled with sin and all standards are cast aside. There will be

times where we will be called to confront the enemy and make a judgment about sin in our midst.

Put the Sinner Out of Your Fellowship (verse 2)

Having made a judgment, according to the Word of God, Paul then told the Corinthians to separate themselves from the sin and the sinner. He challenged them, in this particular case, to put the guilty man out of their fellowship.

Satan will not hesitate to remind us of the love of God when it suits his purpose. How often has he been successful in having us believe that putting a person out of the church would not be the loving thing to do? He would have us believe that it would be more loving to let the person stay in sin than to confront him and put him out of the church. Deep in our hearts, we know that this is a lie, but we still struggle with it every time we need to exercise church discipline.

Separation must take place for three reasons. First, it reminds individuals of the seriousness of sin. This time of separation from the church should give them time to realize that they need to be serious about their Christian lives. They cannot live in sin and maintain fellowship with God and His people. If the individuals are serious about their faith, they will deal with their sin. Discipline shows them that sin is a serious matter that will not be tolerated in the church.

Second, discipline maintains the witness of the church. Probably one of the greatest accusations of unbelievers against the church of our day is the fact that there are too many hypocrites. This is due, in large measure, to the fact that as believers we do not exercise proper discipline in

our midst. If we want to maintain our witness in the world, we need to deal with the sin in our assemblies.

The third reason we need to separate the sinners from the body is that it prevents further contamination of the church. Sin, like a contagious disease, has a tendency to spread. When we allow sin to run unchecked in our churches, it will soon take over. Like bad weeds in the garden, sin needs to be pulled up by the roots, or it will soon begin to choke the life out of the good plants and remove the blessing of God from our midst.

In verses 6-8 Paul compared sin to yeast. When we put yeast in our bread, it quickly spreads through the whole loaf. This is what happens with sin. It is important that we deal with sin immediately. We cannot allow it to spread and influence others.

This principle of separating ourselves from the sinner is to be applied to those who practice rebellious and open sins in the church. Paul reminded the Corinthians that they could not apply this to the unbeliever. If believers tried to separate themselves from everyone who practiced sin, they would have to leave the world itself (verse 10). In the course of our daily activities we have to associate with the unbeliever.

There is a different standard for believers. The Corinthians were not to associate with those who claimed to be believers but did not live according to the moral standard of God's Word (verse 11). Paul listed particular sins here: sexual immorality, greed, idolatry, slander, drunkenness, and swindling.

Paul was not say here that if a brother does not agree with us over a minor doctrinal or practical issue that we are to

separate from him. Paul spoke here about clear violations of the moral standard of God's Word. Paul already condemned the church for being divided over these small and insignificant issues (see 3:1-4). Much damage to the witness of the church has come about because we have not been able to distinguish moral sin from differences of opinion over insignificant issues.

Hand the Sinner over to Satan (verse 4-5)

Paul told the Corinthians, finally, that they were to hand this man over to Satan for the destruction of the sinful nature. This merits some careful consideration. Notice in verse 4 that the handing over to Satan took place in the power and authority of the Lord Jesus. While the man was being handed over to Satan, he was yet in the hands of God. This passage reminds us of Job. Job was handed over to Satan. Satan was given the right to inflict and oppress Job for a time. God, however, did not take His hands off Job. Satan could only go as far as God allowed him to go.

God allowed Satan to physically inflict Job so that His greater purposes could be accomplished. God allowed an evil spirit to oppress His servant Saul in order to show the world that His hand was on David (1 Samuel 18:10-16). God permitted Satan to inspire the evil kings of Babylon and Assyria to attack His own people in order to judge them and convict them of their sin (Jeremiah 25:9-12). God allowed Satan to sift Peter like wheat, even giving him the freedom to deny Christ in order to break Peter of his pride (Luke 22:31-32; Matthew 16:23). God permitted a "messenger of Satan" to torment Paul so that he would trust only in the enabling power of Christ (2 Corinthians 12:7-9). Does it surprise you that God would use Satan to

accomplish His greater purposes? Be encouraged that even Satan is subject to the greater purposes of God.

Notice the purpose of handing this man over to Satan: his sinful nature would be destroyed but his spirit would be saved on the day of the Lord (verse 5). Satan could not take his salvation away. God would use whatever Satan did to purge and cleanse this man of his rebellion but He would not let him go.

How does this discipline work in the life of the church? First, the church recognizes sin and confronts the individual concerned according to the principles of Matthew 18:15-17. If he resists all the efforts of the church to bring him back to holiness, the individual is removed from the fellowship and blessing of the church. He is committed into the hands of Satan under God's ever watchful eye. The church is to pray that God would do whatever it takes to break the sinful nature that blocks this man from fellowship. The goal of all this is to see the man's rebellion broken so that in humility and with a broken and contrite heart, he returns to the fellowship of the body of Christ with a new awareness of his need. This whole process is exercised in love with the return of the sinner to fellowship as the central focus. The church of Corinth needed to exercise this discipline on this individual for the glory of God and the good of the church.

For Consideration:

- Why is it so difficult for us deal with sin in our midst? What keeps us from exercising discipline in the church today?

- What does this chapter teach about the importance of dealing with sin in our assemblies?
- Have you ever been handed over to Satan? What was the result in your spiritual life?
- What has been the result of sin in the life of the church today?

For Prayer:

- Do you know believers who are living in sin today? Take a moment to pray that God would do whatever it takes to bring them back to Himself.
- Ask God to forgive us as a church for not taking sin seriously.
- Ask God to raise up churches in our midst who take sin seriously.

LAWSUITS AMONG BELIEVERS

Read 1 Corinthians 6:1-11

The church in Corinth was far from perfect. We have seen that they struggled with immaturity, immorality and division. Here in 1 Corinthians 6:1-11, Paul unveiled yet another sinful practice. It appears that disagreements were so strong between certain believers that they were taking each other to civil court.

Paul had some strong words to say about this practice. "If any of you has a dispute with another, dare he take it before the ungodly for judgment instead of before the saints?" Paul asked (verse 1). In saying this, Paul recognized that there would be disputes between believers. Those disputes at times could be serious. He warned the Corinthians, however, about taking these cases to unbelievers to settle.

It should be mentioned that Paul was not telling the Corinthians that they should separate themselves completely

from the secular legal system. In Romans 13:3-5 the apostle challenged believers to submit to the secular government that God had placed over them:

“For rulers hold no terror for those who do right but for those who do wrong. . . . He is God’s servant, an angel of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. Therefore, it is necessary to submit to the authorities, not only because of possible punishment but also because of conscience.”

Paul taught that Christians were to respect the laws of their land and walk in submission to them. The secular court system is in our society for a reason. Christians are often required to use this system to make agreements legal. The problem in the church in Corinth was not that Christians were using the courts of the land to deal with legal matters. It was that they were not solving their personal disagreements among themselves. Paul condemned the practice of taking other believers to a secular court to deal with disagreements for two reasons.

Saints Will One Day Judge the World (verses 2-5)

The first reason why believers should not take each other to court, according to Paul, was that they would one day judge the world. Jesus told His twelve disciples in Matthew 19:28:

“I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”

Revelation 20 paints a picture of believers reigning with Christ. The apostle John saw the thrones of those who were given authority to judge (Revelation 20:4). The Lord told the church of Laodicea that if they overcame, he would give them the right to sit with him on his throne (Revelation 3:21). Paul reminded believers in 2 Timothy 2:12 that if they endured they would also reign with Christ. These verses and others remind us that the day is coming when those who belong to the Lord Jesus will one day rule with Him. Paul told the Corinthians that believers will even judge angels (verse 3). The angels referred to here are very likely the fallen angels (Satan and his demons).

One day we will reign with Christ and participate with Him in the judgment of the earth. If we are going to be part of this judgment, surely we should be able to deal with trivial cases among ourselves. Paul challenged the believer, when disputes arose among them, to appoint even the least esteemed among them to deal with these issues, instead of going to civil authorities (verses 4-5). As believers God had given them His authority to deal with any matter that stood between them. There was no need for them to go to the unbeliever for wisdom to settle disputes in the church when they had the authority and wisdom of God at their disposal.

Our Witness to the Unbelieving World (verses 6-8)

There is another reason why believers were not taking each other to secular courts to deal with their disagreements. Paul reprimanded the Corinthians for going to secular courts in front of unbelievers (verse 6). There is a tone of shame in Paul's words. How much damage is caused by believers who cannot deal with their disagreements! What kind of witness is it to the world when believers are unable to resolve their conflicts in a godly and peaceful

way? The world is not blind to these matters and forms its opinion of Christ based on our relationships with each other.

The fact that the Corinthians had lawsuits among themselves showed that they were already defeated (verse 7). They were defeated in their witness before the world. They were defeated in their relationships as believers. They were defeated in their testimony to their Lord.

Paul reminded the Corinthians that it would be better for them to be wronged and cheated than for them to return evil for evil. How easy it is for us to claim our rights. Paul encouraged the Corinthian believers to turn the other cheek. He told them that it was better to suffer wrong than to retaliate and add their own sin to the sin of those who had wronged them. The believer was to be willing to suffer insult and wrong rather than retaliate and risk bringing shame to the church and the cause of Christ. Christ suffered wrong for us. We ought to be willing to do the same for Him.

Paul concludes this section by reminding the Corinthians that the wicked would not inherit the kingdom of God. He reminded them of their past before they came to know the Lord (verses 9-10). Before they came to the Lord, they were guilty of sexual immorality (adultery, prostitution, and homosexuality). Others were idolaters. Still others had been rescued from being thieves, alcoholics, slanderers, and swindlers. Since coming to the Lord, however, they had been washed and sanctified. God had worked in their lives and set them free from their former practices. They no longer had to live in these sins. They could walk in victory over them.

In the church of Corinth, however, the reality of the matter was that they had never learned to live in the victory that was theirs in Christ. Paul had already told them that they were still worldly (3:1). The apostle did not question their salvation but certainly cast doubt on their maturity. In verse 11 he reminded them that they were washed (forgiven of their sins), sanctified (set apart for God), and justified (declared to be in a right relationship with God). As children of God, however, they had a long way to go if they were to mature into all that God intended for them.

How sad it is to see believers who are not experiencing victory over sin in their lives. We do not have to live with our sins. In Christ there is victory. Here before us we see a picture of believers who were living in defeat. The Corinthian believers, who were going to judge the world, could not even judge the trivial matters that came between them. They were not living in victory in their relationships with each other or in their relationship with God.

For Consideration:

- Can you remember the last time you were wronged or falsely accused? What was your response to this?
- Can you remember a time when you were wronged and took matters into your own hands? What was the outcome? Would it have been better for you to suffer wrong and forgive?
- Are there areas of your life where you are living in defeat? What are those areas?

- Is it possible to live in victory? What has God done to enable us to walk in fuller victory?

For Prayer:

- Take a moment to ask the Lord to help you live in victory. Thank Him that this is His heart for you.
- Do you know a believer who is not presently living for the Lord? Take a moment to ask the Lord to show them the victory that is theirs in Christ.
- Ask the Lord to heal relationships that are not what they should be in your life.
- Have you been wronged by another believer? Can you forgive that believer today? Ask God to give you grace to love them and forgive them for the wrong they have done.

11

SEXUAL IMMORALITY

Read 1 Corinthians 6:12-20

Paul has been challenging the Corinthians to deal with sin and hindrances in their spiritual lives. It appears from the opening chapters that there were many sins in the Corinthian church. We saw in the last meditation that many of the Corinthians had come to the Lord out of immorality (see 6:9-11). Could it be that these lifestyles had become the norm in Corinth? They needed guidelines to follow as they sought to live for the Lord and walk in His ways.

Paul began his exhortation by giving the Corinthians two basic principles to follow in their relationship with the Lord and others. Listen to what he says in verse 12: “Everything is permissible for me—but not everything is beneficial. Everything is permissible for me—but I will not be mastered by anything” (verse 12). Paul reminded the believers in Corinth that they were free in Christ. That is to say, they were no longer under the law. They did not need to be overly concerned about what they could or could not eat or what they could or could not do on certain days of the year. While they were free, this did not mean that they could do whatever they wanted. The two guidelines Paul

gives in verse 12 would help the Corinthians determine whether what they were doing was acceptable or not. Let's take a moment to consider these guidelines.

Is It Beneficial? (Verse 12)

While I may have freedom to practice something, not everything I practice is beneficial for me or those around me. Maybe you are involved in a legitimate activity that takes you away from your wife and family. In this case, your activity may not be beneficial to them. We should ask ourselves the question: Is what I want to do going to be beneficial to me and to those around me? Will it be beneficial to my walk with God or will it hinder that walk?

Paul reminded the Corinthian church that there would be times when they needed to stop doing something because it was not personally or spiritually beneficial and it did not benefit those around them. They were to consider the effect of what they did on others and their personal lives. It was better not to practice something that would cause a brother or sister to stumble. Paul encouraged the Corinthians to turn away from those things that were not beneficial.

Will I Be Mastered by What I Do? (Verse 12)

Secondly Paul challenged the Corinthians to ask themselves if they would be mastered by what they did. If we are honest with ourselves, sometimes we enjoy certain things too much. Even legitimate activities can become gods to us. The moment something begins to control our time, resources, and energy we need to take a break from it. This can be true of religious activities as well as secular. Paul challenged the Corinthians to beware of anything other than God that dominated and mastered their time, energy, and resources.

From this opening statement, Paul went on to speak more directly of sexual immorality (verse 13).

‘Food for the stomach and the stomach for food’—but God will destroy them both. The body is not meant for sexual immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body.

What was Paul telling the Corinthians? Notice how Paul said that food was for the stomach and the stomach for food. This is quite easy to understand. The stomach has a particular function in the body. Its purpose is to digest food. The stomach was made for food. In a similar way, the body has a purpose. Our bodies are given to us so that with them we can serve the Lord. Just as the stomach was made for food, so our bodies were made for the Lord and His glory. To use the body for sexual immorality would be to dishonor the body God gave us and to use it in a way it was never intended to be used. Paul then moved beyond this argument to show the Corinthians that sexual immorality was wrong for four other reasons.

We Will Be Raised (verse 14)

This physical body with its needs will one day be decayed by death. When the Lord Jesus came to this earth and died for our sins, he died so that we could have victory over sin and death. The power that raised the physical body of the Lord Jesus from the grave will one day raise our physical bodies as well. As believers, we have a wonderful hope. We will be raised to spend an eternity with Christ. What motivation this ought to give us to live in light of that hope. Those who live in light of eternity will keep themselves pure for the Lord. As a new bride before her husband, they do not want to be ashamed as they stand before him on that day.

Our Bodies Are Members of Christ (verses 15-18)

The second reason why the Corinthians needed to flee sexual immorality was that they were members of the body of Christ. The day they accepted the Lord Jesus as their Savior a radical transformation took place. The apostle Peter put it this way in 1 Peter 2:9:

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

As a chosen people, the Corinthians had been called from darkness into a deep and personal relationship with God. As unworthy as they were, they stood before a dying world as God's representatives and children. They would reign with Him throughout eternity. God was pleased to call them His own.

Would it be right, asked Paul, to take a member of the body of Christ and join that member to a prostitute? Would this not be blasphemous? All sexual immorality is sin, but for believers this sin is particularly dreadful because it profanes the Lord Jesus whom we represent.

Our Bodies Are the Temple of the Holy Spirit (verse 19)

The third reason why the Corinthians were to flee sexual immorality was that their bodies were the temple of the Holy Spirit. When they became children of God, the Lord sealed the transaction by placing His Holy Spirit in their hearts to empower and enable them to live as He required. As believers, their bodies were the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit of God. Should we defile the temple in which

God's Spirit dwells? On the contrary, we must honor God by the way we care for and use our bodies.

You Were Bought with a Price (verse 20)

Before coming to Christ, the Corinthians lived in immorality and sin. The Lord Jesus rescued them from the bondage of that sin. He set them free at the cost of His life on the cross. He died that they could be forgiven and live in a new way. Knowing the cost of their redemption, how could the Corinthians return to the life they once knew? They had an obligation to walk in purity of life.

What a privilege it is to be part of the family of God. Our bodies are the dwelling place of God's Holy Spirit. We stand before the world as His representatives and members of His family. As caretakers of the dwelling place of God's Spirit, we are called to live in such a way that the Lord Jesus is glorified in our bodies. For this reason, Paul said we must flee sexual immorality.

For Consideration:

- Take a moment to apply the principles in verse 12 to how you live your life today. Is Christ being honored in your body and in the decisions you make?
- How does knowing that you belong to Christ and that the Holy Spirit lives in you affect what you do with your life and body? Is there anything in particular that the Lord would have you change?

For Prayer:

- Ask God to reveal to you any areas in your life that need to be changed in light of the teaching of Paul in this chapter.
- Thank the Lord for the transaction that took place on the cross that made you His child.
- Thank God that His Holy Spirit dwells in you to empower and enable you to live for Him.
- Ask God to enable you to live a pure and holy life.

12

TO MARRY OR NOT TO MARRY

Read 1 Corinthians 7:1-9

In chapter 7 the apostle Paul spends time answering some questions that had been sent to him in a letter from Corinth (verse 1). In verses 1-9 he answers a question concerning whether a person should marry or not.

In answering this question, Paul began by stating his personal preference: "It is good for a man not to marry" (verse 1). In Genesis 2:18 God said: "It is not good for the man to be alone." What Paul said here seems to contradict the teaching of Genesis 2. How should we understand Paul's advice here?

The answer to this seems to lie in verse 7. While the sex drive is normal and natural and finds its ultimate satisfaction within the context of marriage, some individuals have received from God the gift of celibacy. Paul was one of those individuals.

According to Paul, marriage brings its obligations and concerns (see verses 32-35). A married person is concerned not only for the needs of the Lord but also for a partner and a family. The married person will not have the same time to spend on the things of God as an unmarried person. Paul told the Corinthians that it was good to be able to give themselves fully to the work of the Lord. As an unmarried person, Paul was unhindered by the constraints and obligations of family life. He was free to move as the Lord led him, with no concern about a wife and children. This was a good thing. Paul enjoyed the freedom to move as the Spirit of God led him.

Having said this, however, the apostle realized that not everyone had the gift of celibacy. There were those whose sexual and emotional needs were such that they needed to be married. Immorality abounded in the city of Corinth. While Paul believed that celibacy was preferable to marriage, he encouraged those who did not have the gift of celibacy to marry in order to avoid falling into sexual immorality. Only in the context of marriage could their sexual appetites be fulfilled in a God-honoring way. For this reason, he encouraged each man to have his own wife and each woman to have her own husband (verse 2).

Paul encouraged the husband and wife to fulfill their marital duties to each other (verse 3). The context indicates that this "duty" referred to sexual relations. Paul told the Corinthians that the wife's body did not belong to her alone but also to her husband and the husband's body belonged to his wife (verse 4). There is an important marriage principle we need to understand in these words.

When we were married as husband and wife we were joined together by God as one. I now belong to my wife and she belongs to me. Some see in this verse a license

for one partner to demand his or her due from the other but this is not the only principle Paul was teaching here. While writing to the Ephesians about marriage, Paul used a similar thought. Listen to what he had to say in Ephesians 5:28-29:

In the same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church.

It is true that our bodies belong to each other now that we have been joined together in marriage. We do have a right to each other's body.

What we need to understand here, however, is that we are also obliged to care for what belongs to us. I ought to be as concerned about the needs of my spouse as much as my own needs because her needs are also mine now that she belongs to me. Paul challenges the Corinthians to stop thinking selfishly. Because my wife belongs to me, my concern as a husband is to fulfill her physical, sexual, emotional and spiritual needs as if they were my own.

How many problems in marriage could be avoided if couples learned this principle of caring for each other in this way? When my wife is suffering, because she belongs to me, that suffering is also mine. When my body is in pain I do all I can to ease that pain. When it is in need I seek to fulfill that need. I must see my partner's needs as being my own.

In light of this teaching, Paul exhorted husbands and wives to stop depriving each other of sexual relations. Instead, they were to care for each other's needs. There were

exceptions to this rule. Paul realized that there were special occasions when a couple decided, by mutual consent, to cease having sexual relations. One example of this would be to spend time in prayer and seek God. Both partners, however, needed to agree to this. It was also understood that this agreement would only be for a certain time. They were to quickly return to their normal relations so that Satan would not tempt them and cause them to fall into immorality (verse 5). Notice here that Paul expected couples to be sexually active.

What we need to understand from this is that Satan is looking for every opportunity to cause us to fall. It is his particular delight to destroy Christian marriages. If the couples concerned are spiritual leaders in the church, the break-up of their marriage will have devastating consequences in the whole church. We cannot allow Satan access to our marriages.

While Paul felt in his heart that it was better for believers to give themselves completely to the work of the Lord, he realized that not everyone had the gift of celibacy. For those who did not have this gift it was better that they be married rather than to burn with passion and blaspheme the name of Christ by falling into sin (verse 9).

The believers in Corinth were living in a society filled with immorality. They needed to be godly lights in the midst of tremendous darkness. We have seen that immorality had been creeping into the church of Corinth. We too are seeing an alarming increase of sexual immorality among believers in our day. Even spiritual leaders are falling into this trap of Satan. More than ever before, we need to see healthy marriages in the body of Christ. We cannot invest too much into making our marriages better.

Paul taught that marriage, though not necessary for those like him, was necessary for others. He challenged married couples to be supportive of each other's needs and to take an active role in meeting those needs—for their partner's needs were in reality their needs as well. Paul knew that even those who were married could fall into sexual immorality and blaspheme the name of God and so he encouraged the Corinthians to build stronger marriages for the glory of God.

For Consideration:

- Do you have the gift of celibacy? How do you know? What freedom has this given you in service for the Lord?
- Are you tempted by immorality? Where are your particular weaknesses? How would God expect you to deal with this temptation?
- If you are married, take a moment to discuss what you have learned in this section with your partner.
- Do you care for your partner's needs as you care for your own? In which areas could you improve?

For Prayer:

- Ask God to help you to care for your partner's needs as you care for your own. Ask God to forgive you where you have failed in this.
- Take a moment to lift up the marriages of your spiritual leaders. Ask God to help your spiritual leaders

to build strong marriages that would be examples to others.

- Ask God to forgive you for the times you have not loved your partner as yourself. Ask God to help you to make things right.
- Has your partner been fulfilling your needs? Ask God to give you grace to love as He would have you to love anyway.

13

SANCTIFIED

Read 1 Corinthians 7:10-24

After having dealt with the question of whether it was good for a man or woman to marry, Paul turned his attention to the married couples in the Corinthian church. In particular, he had some words for believers married to unbelieving partners.

There were obviously a number of believers in the church of Corinth who did not have a believing partner. Remember that the church of Corinth was relatively young. People were coming to know the Lord whose partner was an unbeliever. The question was asked: What do we do with our unbelieving partners now that we have come to the Lord? Do we continue to live with them despite their rejection of the Lord? Paul gave the Corinthian church some basic principles to follow in regards to the marriage of a believer and an unbeliever.

*The Believer Must Not Separate from the Unbeliever
(verse 10)*

In verse 10 Paul told the believers that, as a general rule, they were not to separate from their unbelieving partners. The vows made prior to conversion to Christ were still applicable. They were to continue to love and remain true to their unbelieving partners (verse 10). This would not always be easy. As believers, they had a new allegiance to God and His holy ways. Their partners would not always understand or appreciate the changes in their lives. Sometimes their unbelieving partners would become hostile to their new found relationship with the Lord. Despite this difficulty, believers were to remain true and faithful to their unbelieving spouses. They were not to give them any reason to blaspheme the name of the Lord.

Notice in verse 10 that this teaching was not originally from Paul but from the Lord Jesus Himself (see Matthew 5:31-32; 19:5-8). It is the will of God that believers remain true to their unbelieving partners. He will give His children the strength necessary to be faithful in difficulties. The Lord knows our struggles. He will not call us to do something He does not give us the strength to accomplish.

If the Believer Separates, He or She Should Remain Unmarried (verses 11-12)

Having stated the general principle, Paul understood that there would be situations where it was not possible to remain with an unbelieving spouse. We live in a sin-cursed earth. It is possible, for example, that living with an unbelieving partner could compromise the safety or physical welfare of the family. There might be times when the unbelieving spouse would strike out against the believer with physical violence. Maybe the lifestyle of the unbelieving

spouse would have a negative effect on the children and draw them away from the Lord. What does the believer do in such a situation? While Paul did not encourage the believer to separate from the unbelieving spouse, he realized that there were cases where this was inevitable. When separation was necessary, Paul permitted the believer to separate, remain unmarried, and seek reconciliation with the unbelieving spouse.

If the Unbeliever Wishes to Remain, the Believer Should Not Seek Divorce (verses 13-14)

Paul made it clear that if the unbeliever was happy to remain with the believing partner, then the believer was not to seek a divorce. Paul went on to explain that the unbelieving partner was “sanctified” through the believing partner and their children were “holy” before the Lord. In order to understand what Paul was saying, we need to see it in the context of the question being asked by the Corinthians. Did God accept the marriage between a believer and an unbeliever or were they living in sin because they were married to unbelievers? What about the children of this union, were they legitimate?

Paul told the Corinthians that their unbelieving partners were sanctified or set apart by God. In other words, God recognized, under the circumstances, that these unbelievers were legitimate marriage partners, under God's blessing. Since God accepted the union of the parents, their children were also accepted as the legitimate fruit of their relationship. Paul encouraged believers, therefore, to remain with their unbelieving partners because God accepted and blessed their union.

If the Unbeliever Leaves, Let Him or Her Go (verses 15-16)

While faithfulness to marriage vows was encouraged, if the unbeliever chose to leave the marriage, the believer was to allow him or her to do so. In such a case, the believer was no longer bound. "God has called us to live in peace," Paul said in verse 15. The believer was not to try to hold on to the marriage against the will of the unbelieving spouse. "How do you know, wife, whether you will save your husband? Or, how do you know, husband, whether you will save your wife?" Paul asked in verse 16. While every effort should be made to bring the spouse to Jesus, there was no guarantee from God that this would ever happen. If the unbeliever was unwilling to live with a believing partner, it was better to divorce and be at peace. A believer, however, was not to initiate divorce (see verses 10-11).

Remain as You Were before You Came to Know the Lord (verses 17-24)

Paul concluded his challenge to married couples by stating a general principle that believers should remain in the status they were before they came to know the Lord. If they were uncircumcised when they came to know the Lord, said Paul, they should not be circumcised simply to be like their friends. If they were slaves before they came to know the Lord, they should not demand their freedom. Instead they were to serve the Lord as slaves with all their hearts. Slaves could take comfort in knowing that in Christ they were free. The Lord called them to service in whatever condition they were currently living. In His sovereign plan He had put them in this situation. They were to be everything God had called them to be in the situation they found themselves.

How many times have we lost opportunities to be lights in this world because we have assumed that becoming a Christian meant leaving everything we came from? We are to leave our sin and our sinful lifestyles but God sometimes leaves us in the circumstances we were before coming to the Lord, so we can minister to people in that setting. May the Lord give us grace to be all we can be for Him even in the difficult situations we find ourselves. Will you be a faithful witness where you are today?

For Consideration:

- Do you have an unbelieving spouse? What are some of the challenges of living with an unbeliever?
- How has your relationship with the Lord brought blessing to your unbelieving spouse and your children?
- How much contact do you have with the people of your unbelieving past? Is there any way you can be a light to them today?
- When should we remain in the situation we were in before coming to Christ and when do we need to leave that situation? When are we being a faithful witness and when are we placing ourselves in an ungodly and unhealthy situation?

For Prayer:

- Do you have an unbelieving spouse? Take a moment to pray that God would give you the grace to remain faithful to your wedding vows.
- Ask God to help you to be a positive witness to your unbelieving spouse. If your spouse is a believer pray for a friend or loved one with an unbelieving partner.
- Pray for someone in your unbelieving past. Ask God to show you if there is any way that you can be a light to them.
- Ask God to give you wisdom to know when you need to remain in your situation and when you need to get out.

14

HAPPY CELIBACY?

Read 1 Corinthians 7:25-40

Paul has been answering some questions the Corinthians had asked about marriage. Here in this next section of chapter 7, the apostle again addresses the question of whether it is good to marry. He has three things to say about this in this section.

Consider the Present Crisis (verses 25-31)

First Paul challenged the Corinthians to make their decision about whether to marry or not in light of the present crisis (verse 26). Notice in verse 25 that while Paul did not have a particular command from the Lord about this matter, his advice to remain single was sound counsel. Because his counsel, however, was not a direct command of Scripture, those who chose to marry anyway would not be sinning (verse 28). Let's consider Paul's advice to remain single based on the "present crisis."

What was the crisis Paul spoke about in this passage? The context gives us the answer. In verse 29 Paul reminded

his readers that the time was short. In verse 31 he told his readers that this present world was passing away. Paul had a very deep sense of urgency in the task of reaching the world for Christ. It is true that nearly two thousand years have passed since Paul wrote this, and the Lord has not yet returned. Paul lived his life, however, with the understanding that the Lord could come at any moment. This understanding created a sense of urgency in Paul. Two thousand years later, the coming of Jesus is even closer, and so the urgency is much greater.

Knowing that the Lord could come at any time demanded sacrifice. There was much to be done in light of the coming judgment. Unbelievers needed to be warned. Believers needed to be prepared to meet their God. This was not a time to be wrapped up in the luxuries of life. This was a time for intensifying efforts in preparation for the Lord's return. It was with this in mind that the apostle challenged the unmarried to remain unmarried (verse 25).

Paul felt that the believer needed to live in light of the shortness of time. "From now on those who have wives should live as if they had none," Paul said in verse 29. Paul was not encouraging believers to abandon their spouses. He was simply reminding them that while, in normal times, they might have time and resources to please each other, now the time was short. As couples, they needed to sacrifice some of those luxuries for the sake of reaching this world for Christ. People should not use marriage as an excuse for not being devoted to the Lord's work.

Because Paul knew he was living in a world that was passing away, he urged believers not to get caught up in the things of this life. Paul said that those who mourned should get over their sadness and press on in the work of reaching the world (verse 30). Those who were happy and joyous

needed to realize that this was not the time for celebration and partying. Those who delighted in buying the good things of this world needed to be willing to sacrifice their resources to reach this world in need of a Savior. This was not the time to be engrossed in the cares and possessions of this world.

We must admire the dedication of the apostle Paul to the cause of reaching the world for Christ. The understanding that this world was passing away radically affected him for the cause of Christ. How does your passion for the world compare to Paul's? How much have you become engrossed in the cares of this world? Paul challenged the Corinthians to seriously consider whether they should marry in light of the overwhelming need in this world.

We must mention again that Paul was not saying that those who marry are sinning or less spiritual than those who choose a life of celibacy. He made this clear in verse 28. He simply challenged them to consider the possibility that maybe they could better serve the Lord in these last days by remaining single.

Consider the Additional Responsibility (verses 32-35)

Paul secondly challenged the Corinthians to consider the additional responsibility and burden placed on a married person.

An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs—how he can please the Lord. But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world—how he can please his wife— and his interests are divided (verse 32).

Any married couple realizes that marriages do not just happen. They require a lot of work. Marriage requires sacrifice. Molding two personalities into one is not easy. Then there is the responsibility of bringing up children to know and love the Lord. There are many worries and concerns for the married couple. A married person is legitimately concerned about the welfare of his or her spouse and children. A married person's interests are divided. Unmarried people can devote themselves mind, soul, and body to the work of the Lord. Before deciding to marry, Paul challenged the unmarried to consider the added responsibility they would have in the care of their spouses and families. If they married, Paul told them, they would have to divide their attention between the work of the Lord and their families.

It is not always easy to maintain balance in ministry, even as a single person. The needs of people shout from all directions. The demand for our time is sometimes more than we can handle. The burden for people can absorb all our energy. Added to this, however, for married people, are the needs of their spouses and children. These needs in themselves can take almost all their time and energy. Paul wanted to spare the Corinthians the added burden of family.

Be assured here that Paul believed that it was absolutely necessary for a married person to care for the needs of his or her family and partner. Paul challenged the Corinthians to consider this added obligation before they chose to marry.

Consider Your Own Conscience (verses 36-40)

Finally, Paul told the Corinthians that before deciding to marry, they should consider their conscience. In verse 36 he said:

If anyone thinks he is acting improperly toward the virgin he is engaged to, and if she is getting along in years and he feels he ought to marry, he should do as he wants. He is not sinning. They should get married.

Paul was telling the Corinthians here that each person needed to consider his or her conscience before God in this matter of whether or not to marry. Paul told the Corinthians that it was not a sin to marry, and it was not a sin not to marry. Ultimately, this question needed to be decided between the individual and the Lord. If you feel in your heart that you are acting improperly by not marrying, then you ought to proceed with marriage. If, on the other hand, you have control over your body and mind, then you should consider giving yourself to the work of the Lord without the restrictions of marriage (verse 37).

Paul teaches us that not everyone is called to marriage. Before assuming that you have to be married, ask God if marriage is His purpose for your life. If it is, then you need to commit yourself to that marriage for life. Remember, Paul told the Corinthians that a man or woman is bound to a partner as long as that partner was alive (verse 39). When you marry, you make a life-long commitment. Only the death of a spouse should break that commitment. At the death of a partner, the remaining partner, according to Paul, was free to remarry. Paul believed, however, that the believer would be happier to remain single.

In conclusion, the apostle said that this question of whether a person should marry needed to be taken seriously. Before making a life-long commitment to a partner, Paul challenged his readers to consider whether this was actually the will of God for their lives. He challenged them to consider whether it would be more appropriate for them to devote themselves to the work of the Lord without the restrictions of family life.

For Consideration:

- Consider for a moment the devotion of the apostle Paul to the cause of reaching the world for Christ. What challenge does this bring you personally?
- Are there things that you would struggle to give up for the cause of Christ?
- Have you been called to marriage? How do you know?
- If you are married, what particular challenges do you face as a servant of the Lord and a married person?
- How are you ministering to the needs of your spouse? How can you minister more effectively to each other as a couple?

For Prayer:

- If you are married, ask the Lord to help you find the balance between serving the Lord and ministering to your partner and children.

- If you are not married, ask the Lord to show you if it is his purpose that you marry.
- Ask the Lord to give you a deeper sense of urgency in the work of reaching this world for Christ in these last days.

15

SACRIFICIAL MEAT

Read 1 Corinthians 8

In chapter 7 the apostle Paul answered a series of questions related to marriage. Here in chapter 8 he addressed the issue of meat sacrificed to idols. In the pagan culture of Corinth, believers frequently come into contact with meat that had been sacrificed to idols. Was it acceptable for believers to eat this meat? Did believers defile themselves by eating meat that had been offered to idols?

Before answering these questions, Paul makes an important point in verse 1: “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.” Let’s break this statement down to understand what Paul was saying and its connection with the question at hand.

Knowledge Puffs Up

Knowledge is a wonderful thing when it is used properly. There is something about knowledge, however, that can lead to pride. Even a little knowledge can cause us to think more highly of ourselves than we ought to think. Our

knowledge can cause us to lose patience with those who do not understand the things we understand. It can separate believers and cause us to look down on those who are not where we are in the understanding of truth.

Before sharing his knowledge on this matter of food sacrificed to idols, the apostle Paul wanted to remind the Corinthians of the danger of knowledge. Paul realized that the truth he was going to share could be divisive. Paul could imagine people grasping what he said and looking down on those who were not yet ready to receive this truth. To counter this Paul had two things to say.

First, if we think we know something, we probably still have a long way to go (verse 2). The greatest lesson that Bible College and seminary taught me was how much I did not know about the Bible. As years have passed and I have grown in my understanding of the Word of God, I now have more questions than I ever had. The more we know, the more we come to realize what we do not know.

As I mature I am coming to realize that not everything in life is clearly defined. I find myself saying, “I don’t know,” more frequently. Paul wanted his audience to exercise humility and not let the knowledge he was going to give them cause them to become proud or to look down on a weaker brother. Instead they were to remember that they still had much to learn.

Second, Paul reminded the Corinthians that God knows those who truly love Him (verse 3). What is important in life is that we love God and are known by God. The Christian life is not just about knowledge—it is also about love for God. The apostle John reminded his readers that if they loved God, they would also love others (see 1 John 2:9-11). Paul seems to be warning the Corinthians about the

knowledge he was going to share with them. He wanted to make sure that the Corinthian believers would not take this knowledge and use it in an unloving way.

Having warned them about the dangers of knowledge without love, Paul proceeded to explain his understanding about food sacrificed to idols. The truth of the matter was that idols are nothing (verse 4). An idol is simply a piece of wood or stone. In itself, it has no power. It was true that these idols had the names of certain gods associated with them, but the Corinthian believers knew that these were false gods (verse 4). There was only one true God (verse 6). This one true God was the source of all life. Why should a believer be afraid of an idol that had no power?

It is important that we examine what Paul was saying here. Should we draw the conclusion from this that believers do not have to get rid of objects in their homes associated with pagan worship? Is it okay for us to bring things into our homes that can become tools of Satan in our society?

When we served as missionaries on the island of Reunion in the Indian Ocean, we rented a home that belonged to a very superstitious property owner. She had placed religious medallions over all the doors and windows of the house to ward off evil spirits. Other religious objects were hung in various places in the house for protection and blessing. I have never lived in a house that had such an obvious sense of spiritual oppression. We felt as though we were living under a dark cloud. While these objects did not have any power in themselves, I believe that they provided an opportunity for Satan to oppress. The only way for us to break the oppression we felt was to remove these objects. When we did, the oppression ceased.

Throughout the Old Testament, the Lord challenged his people to rid their homes and their nation of all objects associated with the pagan religions around them. There is a difference, however, between participating in pagan and ungodly practices and buying meat in the marketplace. The people who bought meat in the marketplace had only one motive. They wanted to feed their families. For Paul, they did nothing wrong by eating meat with this motive.

There are times, when the believer must take a stand against ungodly practices. In the illustration I used earlier about the superstitious property owner, my wife and I believed that by removing these charms, we were stripping Satan of the right this property owner gave him in that house. We were making a statement by removing those religious objects. We were saying that our confidence would be in the Lord God alone. That freed us from oppression.

We must cleanse our lives and homes of anything directly related to evil and sin. Those who ate meat sacrificed to idols, however, were not doing anything ungodly. They were not participating in any religious rite. They were just buying food at the market. According to Paul, they were doing nothing wrong if they innocently ate this food.

When we served as missionaries on the island of Reunion one of the issues believers faced was whether they were to eat the meat their Hindu neighbours brought them during certain religious festivals. Were they free to take this meat and eat it or were they participating in the faith of their neighbours by eating that meat. The answer to this often depended on the individual and how they perceived what they were doing. Consider what Paul went on to say in verse 1.

Love Builds Up

Having shared his knowledge on this issue, Paul proceeded to remind his readers that true love builds up (verse 1). There were individuals who struggled with eating anything that was sacrificed to idols. Their consciences would not permit them to eat such food (see verse 7). While Paul believed that this food would not harm them, he exhorted his readers to show compassion and love towards those who did not have this opinion. While the Corinthians had freedom to eat this meat, they were to be careful not to place a stumbling block in front of a brother or sister who did not have this same freedom.

The knowledge that Paul shared with the Corinthians had the potential to destroy the faith of their brothers and sisters (verse 11). If this happened, the offending brother or sister would have to answer to Christ for his or her actions. Knowledge without love and compassion is very dangerous. It would be better never to eat meat sacrificed to idols than to eat it and cause a brother or sister to stumble and fall. Compassion must precede knowledge. Paul warned the Corinthians that by hurting a brother or sister, they were sinning against Christ (verse 12).

Paul assured the Corinthians that eating meat sacrificed to idols would not hurt them spiritually if they had a clear conscience before God. At the same time, however, love for other believers was to take priority over the liberty and freedom in Christ to eat this kind of meat. If eating such meat hurt a brother or sister and caused them to fall, than I would have to answer to God for my actions. While I may have freedom to do something in Christ, it is not always beneficial for the body of Christ that I speak about that freedom or practice it. The spiritual welfare of the body of Christ takes priority over my personal freedom.

For Consideration:

- What has been the result of knowledge without love and compassion in the church today?
- To what contemporary issues in church today does this teaching of Paul apply?
- What is the difference between eating meat sacrificed to idols and allowing sinful and evil practices into our homes and lives?
- When is it not helpful to exercise my freedom in Christ? When is it not helpful to speak about my personal freedom? When is not speaking about my freedom being hypocritical and when is it simply being sensitive to those who do not have the same freedom?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to help you to find a balance between knowledge and compassion.
- Ask God to give you a greater understanding and love for your brother or sister who sees things differently from you.
- Ask God to forgive you for the times you have allowed knowledge to puff you up so that you did not show compassion and understanding to your brother or sister.

- Ask God for grace to willingly sacrifice your freedom when it could be harmful to a brother or sister.

A PERSONAL EXAMPLE

Read 1 Corinthians 9:1-27

Paul has reminded the Corinthians that while they had freedom to eat meat sacrificed to idols, it was not always the proper thing to do. Their compassion for others would sometimes lead them to sacrifice their rights. Here in chapter 9 the apostle shared a personal example from his own life of this principle. He reminded the Corinthians of how, as an apostle, he had sacrificed certain rights and privileges for them.

Paul began by reminding the Corinthians of his position in the body of Christ. He was an apostle (verse 1). As an apostle, he was an authoritative witness to the person of the Lord Jesus. He had seen the Lord Jesus on the road to Damascus. Paul's call as an apostle gave him a particular status in the body of Christ. The Corinthians had seen evidence of the Lord's hand on the life of Paul. He had ministered among them for a year and a half (see Acts 18). Many of the believers reading this letter had come to the Lord because of Paul's ministry in Corinth. The Corinthians were the fruit of Paul's ministry and a confirmation to him of his calling to be an apostle (verse 2).

Not everyone accepted the apostle Paul. We are told in verse 3 that there were some who judged him. We are not told what it was in particular that these individuals had against the apostle. Paul's focus here, however, was not to defend his ministry but to share a personal example of how believers need to be willing to sacrifice personal freedom for the good of the body.

Paul reminded the Corinthians that, as an apostle, he had the right to take a wife with him on his journeys. Many of the other apostles brought their wives along with them (see verses 5-6). Paul, on the other hand, chose not to marry. We saw in chapter 7 that it was his desire instead to give himself entirely to the work of the Lord. The Corinthians had benefited directly from Paul's decision not to marry, as did many other churches. No other apostle seemed to have had the impact Paul had. His decision to not marry set him free to bring great blessing to many churches.

As an apostle, Paul also had the right to "food and drink" (verse 4). In other words, he had the right to receive wages for his labor of love. Even their own culture taught them that a laborer deserved his wages. In verse 7 Paul gave a series of examples from Corinthian culture. Does a soldier serve "at his own expense?" Doesn't his country pay his wages and provide him with the weapons necessary for their defense? Have you ever met a person who planted a vineyard who was forbidden the right to eat the grapes that grew in that vineyard? How about the shepherd who tended a flock? Does that shepherd not have the right to drink milk from that flock?

From these examples, the apostle moved to the teaching of the Old Testament law (verses 8-12). He reminded his listeners of what Moses taught about muzzling an ox while it was treading the grain. The law stated that the ox was to

be allowed to eat the grain he treaded (Deuteronomy 25:4). The farmer was not to muzzle the working animal, preventing it from eating. Paul told the Corinthians that this passage was not simply about cruelty to animals. It was given to teach that those who worked ought also to share in the harvest.

The practical application of this was that because the apostle had sown spiritual seed in their midst, he had the right to share in a material harvest. In other words, he had the right to be paid for his services. Even the priest of the day had a right to a portion of the sacrifices offered on the altar (verse 13). Paul reminded the Corinthians that the Lord Jesus taught that those who preached the gospel had the right to earn their living by this means (see Luke 10:5-7).

While he had this right, Paul chose not to use it (verse 12). Instead, he willingly suffered lack as he preached the gospel. He was not in this ministry for money. He served out of a passion for his Lord and for those lost in sin. Paul willingly sacrificed his privilege to receive a salary. He preached because he was called of God to preach, not because he was being paid to do so (verses 16-18).

Would you, as a servant of God minister in a church if you knew they could not pay you for your services? Is your sense of calling greater than your desire for material blessing? The apostle Paul had been set free from the love of money and possessions. He sacrificed his right to a wage and offered himself freely to the body of Christ. His sacrifice brought great blessing to the church and God blessed him with what he needed to accomplish that task.

Paul's ministry was one of sacrifice. This was one of the reasons for his success as a missionary. To the Jew, he

became like a Jew. To those under the Law of Moses, he lived like one under the law. To the weak, he became weak. He was willing to become all things for all people so that he might win them to the Lord (verses 19-23).

Paul was willing to live like someone under Law of Moses, putting aside his freedom in Christ, if by doing so he would honour the Lord and win them to Christ. He was willing to live with the poor and weak, sacrificing his earthly comforts, if he could minister to them in the name of Christ. Paul was not afraid to suffer and sacrifice whatever he had to for the cause of Christ.

The apostle concluded this section with an example from the world of sports (verses 24-27). There are many people who run a race. Only one of those people will get the prize. Those who are serious about the race will discipline their bodies and make many sacrifices in order to win the victor's crown. This was what Paul did. He disciplined his body and made it his slave so that he might win many to the Lord. He did not run the Christian race aimlessly. He had a goal of expanding God's kingdom and disciplined himself to attain that goal.

Paul refused to be entangled in the cares of this world. His sacrifices made a profound impact on the world for Christ. If eating meat is going to cause your brother to stumble, then don't eat meat. If standing up for your rights will hinder the communication of the message, then sacrifice your rights. This was Paul's lifestyle. This was his challenge to the Corinthians. It is also his challenge to us today.

For Consideration:

- Is there anything in your life that you would personally have difficulty sacrificing for the Lord? What is it?
- Has there ever been a time when you were not able to follow the leading of the Lord because you felt it would cost you too much? Give an example.
- Is there anything in particular that the Lord would have you to sacrifice for Him so that His work will move ahead in a greater way?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to free you from the love of possessions and worldly comfort.
- Ask God to reveal to you anything that would stand in the way of greater service for Him.
- Take a moment right now to offer your life and your possessions to God. Tell Him that you will allow Him to take away anything that would hinder you in your service of His kingdom. Ask Him to give you a heart like the heart of Paul.

A WARNING FROM HISTORY

Read 1 Corinthians 10:1-13

It is easy to read the pages of Scripture and see the sins of others but fail to see our own. We can often think more highly of ourselves than we ought. We believe we are strong in our faith but still fall into sin. Here in this section of Paul's letter, the apostle gives the Corinthian believers a lesson in history as a warning about falling for the attraction of sin.

Paul begins by reminding the Corinthians of how their spiritual ancestors were “baptized” in the cloud and in the sea (verses 1-2). This seems to refer to the time when the Israelites crossed the Red Sea after leaving the land of Egypt. Paul was drawing a parallel between the experience of the Corinthians and the experience of the Israelites in the wilderness.

The Corinthians had lived in sin and bondage of idolatry just as the Israelites had lived in the bondage and slavery of Egypt. One day the Lord sent Moses as a type of savior to rescue the Israelites from their bondage and take them

to the Promised Land. Moses led the children of Israel through the waters of the Red Sea, rescuing them from Egypt. Paul speaks of Israel's passing through the Red Sea as a type of baptism.

In a similar way, the Corinthians had been baptized into Christ as a symbol of their freedom from the bondage of sin. Now like their spiritual ancestors they too were on a path to the Promised Land.

As the children of Israel, under the leadership of Moses, wandered through the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land, they ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink (verses 3-4). The Lord provided for their physical needs each day by means of the manna He caused to grow on the desert floor. On at least two occasions, God provided water from a rock to quench their thirst. Through their wilderness wanderings, the children of Israel experienced the wonderful provision of the Lord.

The Corinthians were having a similar experience. We will see later in this book that, as a church, they experienced very powerful demonstrations of the Spirit's gifting. They shared at the Lord's Supper, eating spiritual food and drinking spiritual drink. These things pointed to Christ as their Provider and Guide (verse 4; see John 6:32-35). As it was for their ancestor of old, the Corinthians were seeing the provision and blessing of God in an exciting way.

Paul went on to say, however, that God was not pleased with the people of Israel in Moses' day. Despite their new-found freedom and the evidence of God's presence and power in their midst, all but two of them grumbled and turned from their Saviour, Provider and Guide. All who left Egypt, with the exception of Joshua and Caleb died in the wilderness. Paul warned the Corinthians that the same

thing could happen to them if they did not walk in reverence and obedience. The Israel of Moses' day served as an example for the Corinthians (verse 6).

Paul listed four sins that caused the Lord to judge the Israelites. He shares these sins as a warning to the Corinthian believers, lest they fall into the same sins.

They Set Their Hearts on Evil Things (verse 6)

Throughout their history, the children of Israel set their eyes on the nations around them. On one occasion, they asked the Lord for a king because they wanted to be like the rest of the nations (1 Samuel 8:4, 5). The sinful ways and practices of the nations held a certain attraction for the Israelites. They had lived in Egypt for hundreds of years amid great idolatry and immorality. Although the Lord had delivered them out of this pagan culture, the Israelites still lusted after the evil ways of Egypt.

Paul challenges the Corinthians in verse 6 telling them that Israel's example was given to "keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did." We will all struggle with temptation in the Christian life. The problem with the Israelites in the days of Moses was what they did with this temptation. Paul tells us that they "set their hearts" to follow the ways of the nations and to do evil.

The Corinthians were struggling with similar things. They had been delivered out of the pagan culture of Corinth, but they were still lusting after their old ways of idolatry. By eating meat offered to idols and attending pagan feasts (8:10), some were in danger of falling back into idolatry. In chapter 3, Paul spoke of the Corinthians as being worldly. The quarrels they experienced among themselves were because they had been setting their minds on evil things.

They became proud and arrogant. They had not really allowed the Lord to transform their minds and hearts. Instead they gave into these temptations and set their hearts to follow after them. Notice that evil begins in the heart. How important it is to guard our heart and keep it pure lest we too be tempted to set our affections on evil things.

They Practiced Idolatry (verse 7)

Having set their hearts to follow the ways of the nations, the children of Israel then acted on their desires by turned their backs on the Lord God to serve other gods. Soon after leaving the land of Egypt, they set up a golden calf idol. Later on, they would bow the knee to Baal. They would even offer their children as sacrifices to Baal. Once our heart is conquered by evil, the next step is to act out that evil in our lives.

Idols abounded in Corinth too. Paul spoke to the believers in chapter 8 about eating food sacrificed to the idols. The temptation was never far away to return to the worship of these idols. "Do not be idolaters," Paul told them. Notice that part of the idolatry of Israel in the days of Moses involved eating, drinking, and "indulging in pagan revelry." Satan made idolatry look very exciting. Paul challenged the Corinthians not to fall into his trap. The same temptations existed in Corinth that caused ancient Israel to fall.

They Were Guilty of Sexual Immorality (verse 8)

The people of Israel coming out of Egypt were also guilty of sexual immorality. One of the characteristics of the worship of Baal was its immoral sexual practices. Temple prostitutes were a vital part of the worship of Baal. The priests of Baal engaged in ritualistic sexual practices to guarantee the harvest for the coming year. The children of

Israel found this hard to resist. Numbers 25:1-9 speaks of a time when the men of Israel engaged in sexual immorality with Moabite women who invited them to the sacrifices to their gods. All these men were put to death.

Once the people of God allowed themselves to become involved in the idolatry of the nations around them as a group, this led to more personal sin. Their sin began in their heart. It moved from their heart to being involved with others of like mind in the sacrifices and pagan rituals. This in turn became more personal and they found themselves entrapped in sexual sin.

Paul spent much time in this letter exhorting the believers in Corinth to live according to the standards of the Word of God. They were not to conform to the standards of their pagan society. There was already evidence of sexual immorality in the church of Corinth (chapter 5). This was an area of deep struggle for the Corinthians, as it had been for Israel. The sins that had caused Israel's downfall could also cause the fall of the church in Corinth. They needed to be on guard at all times.

They Tested the Lord and Grumbled (verses 9-10)

Paul reminded the Corinthians of how the children of Israel tested the Lord by grumbling and complaining against Him. He reminded them of the story in Numbers 21 where the children of Israel complained to Moses about their wilderness hardships. They told Moses that they had been far better off in Egypt. This so angered the Lord that he sent venomous snakes to bite them. They tested the Lord by the way they refused to trust Him. They tested the Lord by the way they complained about what He was doing in their midst.

From an attitude of the heart their sin evolved into an open grumbling and complaining against God. They become angry with God. In fact, they question His ways and openly rebel against Him. They longed for the bondage and the worldly ways of Egypt. They reject God and His purpose.

In Corinth believers were also guilty of testing and grumbling against the Lord. They did this by the divisions in their assembly. Brothers and sisters were taking each other to court. They tested the Lord by their complaining about their spiritual leaders. "I am of Paul, I am of Apollos," they said. There were those in the church that did not like the way Paul did things. All this grumbling and complaining about what was happening in their church tried the patience of Almighty God. It did more than this however; it also showed the true nature of God's people in the church. They were questioning God and His ways. In some cases they were openly rebelling against His purposes for them as a church.

The church of Corinth had fallen into the same sins as ancient Israel. The Corinthians were guilty of lusting after evil things, idolatry, sexual immorality, and testing the Lord by their complaining and grumbling.

How easy it is for us to read the pages of Scripture and not see history being repeated in our own lives. We read about the sins of the children of Israel or the church of Corinth, and we are horrified at what we read. What we fail to see, however, is that our society and church are equally as guilty. If you think you stand, be careful lest you fall, Paul told the Corinthians in verse 12. Why would Corinth stand when Israel fell because of the same sins?

Paul concluded this section with an encouraging word for those who were struggling with temptations. There is no

temptation, he said, that God will not give you the strength to overcome. God will never let you be tempted beyond your ability to resist in His strength. He will always provide a way of escape (verse 13).

Ultimately, we, like ancient Israel and Corinth, are without excuse. God has left us with examples in Scripture that serve as stern and clear warnings. How easily we too could fall into the same cycle. Paul took the time to warn the Corinthians and remind them that the Lord God promised a means of escape. They could live victorious over these temptations and experience the blessing of intimacy with God. May the Lord give us grace in the church of our day to see how these warnings apply to us as well.

For Consideration:

- The apostle James compared the Word of God to a mirror. Why is it so hard for us to see ourselves in the pages of this inspired Word?
- What idols do we face in the church today? What sins are we being tempted by today?
- Have you ever found yourself grumbling and complaining about your spiritual leaders, the church, or your “lot in life?” What is the challenge of this passage to you?
- Do you see a progression of sin here in this section from the heart to action and ultimately to open rebellion? How do we stop this progression of sin in the church? Do you see evidence of this in your church or society today?

For Prayer:

- Ask God to forgive you for the grumbling and complaining you have done against His servants, His church, or His will for your life.
- If you are presently struggling with a temptation, ask the Lord to show you the means of escape.
- Thank God that He promises a way of escape from temptation.
- Take a moment to consider the temptations faced by the church in your society today. Ask the Lord to open the eyes of His people to these temptations and to give them a willingness to escape.

THE BOUNDS OF FREEDOM

Read 1 Corinthians 10:14-33

In this letter to the Corinthians the apostle Paul has challenged the believers regarding their rights and freedoms. In chapter 8 he showed them that they had freedom to eat meat sacrificed to idols. In chapter 9 he spoke to them about his personal freedom as an apostle. It would be easy for some to find here an excuse to practice whatever they wanted without restraint. In order to counter this, Paul reminded the believers in the opening section of chapter 10 that their spiritual ancestors abused their freedom. The result was that they perished in the wilderness. True freedom must have its boundaries. Paul provided two boundaries to spiritual freedom in this section.

You Cannot Drink the Cup of Demons and the Cup of the Lord (verses 14-22)

First, while Paul had no problem with the Corinthians eating food sacrificed to idols, he made it very clear that they were to flee idolatry. In order to illustrate his point, the apostle Paul used the illustration of the Lord's Table.

What did the table of the Lord represent for the Corinthians? Paul reminded them that as they drank the cup and ate the bread, they were symbolically participating in the blood and body of Christ. In other words, they were, by this practice, recognizing that it was for them that the Lord Jesus had died. In participating in the Lord's Supper, they were accepting the work of the Lord as their only hope of forgiveness and cleansing from sin. Paul also reminded them that because the bread they ate was part of one single loaf, they also represented the unity they had in the Lord (verse 17).

To illustrate this further, Paul challenged the Corinthians to "consider the people of Israel." When they ate the sacrifices that were offered on the altar, were they not identifying with what had happened on that altar? In the sacrificial system of the Old Testament, when an animal was sacrificed, part of the animal went to the priest, and, in certain sacrifices, the people offering the sacrifice ate part of the sacrifice. As they ate this animal, they rejoiced over the goodness of God and the forgiveness of their sins. They identified themselves with the death of the animal and ate as an act of thanksgiving and worship for the graciousness of God.

The sacrifices that the pagans were offering in Corinth were to demons (verse 20). The actual idol was merely wood or stone with no power in it. But behind that idol was a deceiving demon of hell that was holding the worshipers captive. By offering sacrifices to these idols, the worshipers were surrendering and submitting themselves to these demons.

If, as Paul said, behind these idols were the demons of hell itself, would it not make sense that believers reject the practice of idolatry. Paul told the believers that they had to

make a decision. They could not drink the cup of demons and also the cup of the Lord (verse 21). Would this not arouse the jealousy of a holy God (verse 22)? If His jealousy was aroused, would anyone be strong enough to stand against Him? Even common sense told the Corinthians that it would be both evil and dangerous to offend a holy God by the practice of idolatry.

In the exercise of our freedom, we must be sure that we do not arouse the anger of the Lord. We cannot serve God and drink the cup of demons at the same time. We must choose one or the other. If what I do glorifies the work of demons and dishonour the Lord God, I must have nothing to do with it. We need to live our lives and practice only those things that bring honor and glory to our God and His Word.

*Everything Is Permissible but Not Everything Is Beneficial
(verses 23-33)*

Second, Paul told the Corinthians that everything was permissible. He obviously did not mean that they could do anything they pleased. He had just told the Corinthians that they were to flee idolatry. We can assume from this that idolatry is not permissible for the believer. Paul makes a general statement here. As believers, the Corinthians were free to enjoy the good things the Lord had given unless, of course, those things dishonored their His name.

For Paul, the Christian life was not a life of rules and regulations. Rules and regulations change behaviour but do not necessarily draw us closer to God nor will they guarantee our salvation. God looks beyond the actions of the believer to the heart.

Sometime ago I heard about a man who was so convicted by God about a smoking habit that he placed the last package of cigarettes he had in the offering plate as it was passed on Sunday morning. There are those who might say that cigarettes have no place in the church offering plate. What was this man saying to God that day? He was saying, Lord, I hear what you are saying to me and I now surrender this habit to you. Somehow I believe that the offering pleased the Lord that day because of the attitude of heart in which it was given. God sees the heart in our actions. He doesn't judge by external appearances. The attitude of our heart is often more important than our actions.

While the Corinthians had been set free under Christ, not everything was beneficial. Not everything would build up the body of Christ. In the exercise of freedom, the Corinthians were to seek the good of others and the glory of God. Paul went on to explain what he meant by giving the Corinthians an example from everyday life.

"Eat anything sold in the market without raising questions of conscience," Paul told them in verse 25. The earth and everything in it belongs to the Lord. We should be free to enjoy the good things the Lord has provided. Even if you are invited to a meal at the home of an unbeliever, don't worry about where the meat came from (verse 27). Simply enjoy the hospitality of your host. If, however, another person is with you who tells you that the meat you are buying or eating has been sacrificed to idols, for the sake of that person, do not eat the meat (verse 28). We may have the freedom to do something in the privacy of our own homes that we would not do in the company of others. It is better to sacrifice our personal freedom than offend a brother or sister who does not have this freedom. By practicing our freedom in public we risk creating a problem for a brother or sister who will judge us for doing what they consider evil

(verse 29). If we thank God for a meal that offends a brother, they will denounce us (verse 30). This will only bring unnecessary separation between true believers. Be willing to sacrifice your freedom or keep your freedom to yourself, in order to preserve your relationship with a brother or sister.

Paul summed up his teaching on freedom here in verses 31-32. He told the Corinthians first that whatever they did they were to do for the glory of God (verse 31). Second, he told them that in everything they did they should be careful not to place a stumbling block in front of another person, whether that person was a believer or an unbeliever. Paul made it his goal in life to do nothing that would cause another person to fall. He did this so that others might be saved (verse 33).

Paul encouraged the Corinthians to live in the freedom of Christ and to enjoy the life the Lord had given them. While they were free in Christ, they were never to abuse that freedom. Like Paul, they were to be ready in an instant to sacrifice their rights and freedoms if, by so doing, they would bring greater glory to the Lord.

For Consideration:

- What are the idols we have to deal with in our day? Is there an idol that you need to deal with in your life?
- Would you be willing to sacrifice your personal freedoms for a brother or sister in Christ?

- Is what you have freedom to practice beneficial to those around you? If not, what should you do?
- Is it always helpful to share about our freedom with others? Is there a time to keep that freedom to ourselves?
- What is the difference between the freedoms Paul speaks about here and the practice of sin? Is it possible that what you perceive to be freedom is actually sin?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to help you to hold on to your personal freedom lightly so that you are ready to sacrifice it for the good of a brother or sister in Christ or for the greater glory of God.
- Have you ever been a stumbling block for another person? Ask the Lord to forgive you.
- Have you ever become negative or critical of another believer who had the freedom to practice something you did not have the freedom to practice? Ask God to forgive you and give you a better attitude toward that person.

WOMEN'S HEAD COVERINGS

Read 1 Corinthians 11:1-16

Paul speaks in 1 Corinthians 11 about the question of headship and submission. He begins in verse 1-2 by commending the Corinthians for observing the teaching he passed on to them in this regard (verse 2).

The apostle begins his discussion by making a general statement in verse 3:

The head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God

Paul tells us here that there is a God-given order in the church. Christ submits to the Father and His will. Man submits to Christ. Woman submits to man. Ultimately all submit to the Father but there is headship and submission in all that takes place.

It is important to note that headship does not imply superiority. Just as Christ is not inferior to His Father because He submits to His will, so a woman is not inferior to man.

Just as Christ and the Father are equal, so men and women are equal.

What we need to see, however, is that God has ordained that men and women exercise different roles in the body of Christ. Men have been given a role as “head” and are accountable to God for this role. Their model of headship is the person of the Lord Jesus.

As head, Jesus willingly died for His church. True headship is exercised in humble and sacrificial service. It is not found in those who demand others serve them, but in those who humbly sacrifice themselves for those under their authority. Headship brings responsibility and great obligation. As head, we are accountable to God for those for whom He has given us. We will answer to Him for their pain.

Paul continues his discussion by introducing the topic of women wearing head coverings in public worship. Obviously, women were questioning whether they should wear head coverings, as was the custom of the day. Some may have dispensed with the head covering and come to worship with their heads uncovered. This was causing a problem in the church of Corinth. In the last few chapters, Paul had reminded the Corinthians that they needed to be willing to sacrifice their rights and freedoms if those freedoms caused a stumbling block for another believer. Were there women in the church of Corinth who were unwilling to sacrifice their freedoms for the good of the body?

In verse 4 Paul told the Corinthians that a man who prayed or prophesied with his head uncovered dishonored his head. It is clear from the context that the covering of the head was a sign of respect and submission in their local culture. To uncover the head was to take authority. A

woman coming into the church with her head uncovered was making a public statement in that day. She was symbolically asserting her authority. For a man to cover his head was a symbol of his refusal to take authority. In so doing, he was disregarding his God-given leadership role. It would be a shame for a man who had received authority from the Lord to refuse to take that authority.

In many churches of our day, men have chosen to cover their heads. They have taken a back seat and left the work of the church to women. Paul's rebuke here is not just directed to women but also to men who refuse to take their God given responsibilities seriously.

In Israelite culture, a woman's hair was a source of great pride. To shave a woman's head was to disgrace her. In verse 6 Paul told the women of Corinth that if they did not wear a veil, they should have their heads shaved. In other words, they should be ashamed of themselves for their rebellion and unwillingness to submit to God's order. Paul exhorted the women of Corinth to wear their head coverings as a sign and reminder of submission to the God-ordained leadership in the church.

According to Paul in verse 7, a man did not need to wear a head covering as a symbol of submission because he was the image and glory of God. He says this on the basis of two principles stated in verse 8. First, that man was created first and second that woman was created by God as a helpmate for man. Let's consider this in greater detail.

Paul reminds the Corinthians that God created man first from the dust of the earth to be His representative on earth and to care for the earth. Woman was created next from man to be a helpmate for him in that task. This fact alone,

for Paul, was significant and had implications in the church of Jesus Christ.

Man was the glory of God in the sense that He had been chosen by God to represent Him in this world. Woman was the glory of man in that she was chosen by God to be a helpmate to man in that same undertaking. Paul believed that men and woman needed to be happy with the role God give them from creation.

Notice also in verse 10 that the Corinthian women were exhorted to wear a “sign of authority” because of the angels. Angels watch over the affairs of God’s servants in the church. As these women came to worship they came to a holy place. God’s presence was among them. His angels were present in worship. They protected and blessed God’s people as they served and lived for Him. In light of this fact, it would be inappropriate for a woman to question God’s purpose by refusing to wear the sign of her submission. To do this would offend the angels who had come to help, protect and bless them in the worship and service of God.

Having explained to the Corinthians the importance of respecting their God-given roles within the body of Christ, Paul wanted to make it clear that both men and women needed each other. Paul stated that Eve, the first woman came from man (verse 12). On the other hand, a male child is conceived in the womb of a woman and without her, he would not have life. Men and women are mutually dependent on each other from the beginning of life. This is how it ought to be in the church. God has created us in such a way that we owe our lives to each other. Having different roles does not mean that one sex is more important than the other. Each has a vital God-given role to play.

Paul concluded this section by encouraging the Corinthians to judge this matter for themselves (verse 13). He told them that nature teaches that there is a distinction between the sexes. One of these distinctions is the hair. While men have a tendency to go bald, women almost never lose their hair. Paul said that God has given a woman a natural covering for her head that is her pride and glory. That natural head covering, according to Paul, was a symbol of her role as a helpmate to man (verse 15; see Genesis 1:28).

Paul knew that his teaching on this subject would not be well accepted by everyone even in His day (and certainly also in our day). To those who resisted his teaching Paul simply said that this was the practice of the church (verse 16). In other words, this matter was not open for discussion. This was where the apostles stood. This is what they taught to be the purpose of God.

What do we take from this section of 1 Corinthians? Paul teaches that there are different roles in the body of Christ for men and women. God has determined that men should exercise the role of headship in the church. Women are helpmates in this great task. Each sex is to honor God by fulfilling their specific roles.

The issue of head covering has been a controversial matter in the church for centuries. Is it necessary for women to wear a head covering in worship today? Those who believe women should wear head coverings take these verses at face value. They see them as applying directly to the church of our day as well. They encourage women to wear a head covering as a symbol of their acceptance of God's role for them in the church. Those who do not feel that a head covering is necessary, generally base their

arguments on the fact that Paul told the Corinthians that a woman's long hair was a natural head covering (verse 15).

It is not my purpose to enter into this discussion. In the culture of Corinth, a woman refusing to wear a head covering would have caused quite a stir. In fact, it would have been distracting to the worship of God. It was an outright statement of rebellion against male headship and the teaching of the apostles. For this reason, Paul exhorted the women of Corinth to wear a head covering.

What is important in this chapter is to understand that God has a role for each of us to play. Submission and headship are vital elements in any church if it is to be healthy and accomplish all that God intended.

For Consideration:

- Do you feel that women should wear a head covering today? Why or why not?
- What does Paul teach in this passage about the different roles of men and women in the church? Does a different role imply the superiority of one sex over another?
- How has the principle of headship been abused in the church?
- How does what Paul teaches here in this passage challenge men to take their role more seriously.

- How did Jesus exercise His headship? What does this teach us about how Headship is to be exercised today?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to help you to take your role in the body of Christ seriously. Ask Him to give you great joy in the role He has given you.
- If you struggle with Paul's teaching here, ask God to give you grace to submit even though you do not fully understand.
- Thank the Lord for the role of His angels as we worship and serve Him.
- Thank the Lord Jesus for the wonderful example He has set for us to follow in this matter of leadership and headship.

THE LORD'S SUPPER

Read 1 Corinthians 11:17-34

We have seen that there were many problems in the church of Corinth. In chapter 1 Paul addressed the issue of division among believers. In chapter 3 he told them that the source of the jealousy and quarrelling among them was their worldliness. In chapter 5 he addressed the question of immorality. They were reprimanded in chapter 6 for the lawsuits that were springing up between believers. In chapter 10 the apostle challenged them on the issue of idolatry. We saw in chapter 11 that women in Corinth were struggling with the teaching of Scripture regarding their role in the church. Here in this next section, Paul addressed yet another important issue in the Corinthian church, the misuse of the table of the Lord.

Paul began by telling the Corinthians that in this matter, he had no praise for them (verse 17). What they were doing was causing great harm to the body of Christ. The problem Paul referred to was rooted in the disunity that existed among the believers. They were divided over their leaders. They were divided because of the lawsuits among them. They were divided over the practice of eating meat

sacrificed to idols. They were divided over the issue of the role of their women in the church. We will see later on in this book that they were also divided over the use of spiritual gifts.

These differences were being seen in the practice of the Lord's Supper. Notice in verse 21 that some people were eating without waiting for others. Paul went on to say that one person was getting drunk while another remained hungry. We need to understand that the practice of the Lord's Supper was different from our modern practice. This remembrance of the Lord would have been part of a larger common meal. It was in the context of such a meal (shared by the disciples in the upper room in Mark 14:12-26 that the very first celebration of the Lord's Table occurred. For the early church, it would have been quite normal to have the celebration of the Lord's Table in the context of a church supper. As the assembly gathered for this common meal and the remembrance of the Lord's death, some believers were getting there before others, eating, and drinking without concern for those who would come later. The result was that those who came later had nothing to eat.

Verse 22 indicates that their practice of the Lord's Supper was humiliating those who had nothing. This has led commentators to believe that what was happening was that the rich were coming early to these meals and not waiting for the poor people who had to work. The result was that the rich were feasting and getting drunk and there was nothing left to eat or drink when the hard-working poor arrived. We can only imagine the division this caused in the church of Corinth. This was obviously not the context for remembering the Lord's death. Some were drunk with too much wine while others were bitter because they had nothing to eat or drink at all.

Paul rebuked the Corinthians for what was happening. He challenged them to remember that they were to come together, as one body of Christ and equally share in the Lord's Supper. Their unloving behavior was blasphemous. By their practice they showed that they were not thinking about one another but only of themselves. This was contrary to everything the Lord Jesus represented. Paul told those who were practicing such gluttony to eat and drink at home before they came –indicating that they had a home with food to eat already.

Having reminded the believers of the problem, Paul then moved on to show them what the Lord's Supper represented. Paul told the Corinthians that he had was passing on to them something the Lord had given to him. What he told them about the Lord's Supper was not his own idea; it was from the Lord Himself (verse 23).

It is important that we realize that Paul was not with the disciples on the day the Lord instituted the Lord's Supper in the upper room. It would be easy for those who had their doubts about Paul to criticize what he said here because he was not one of those twelve disciples present with Jesus that day. Paul removed any doubt from their minds with this statement. While not present on the day of the Last Supper, the Lord God had nonetheless instructed Paul in what He expected.

Paul reminded the Corinthians on the night Jesus was betrayed, He took some bread and broke it, telling His disciples that the bread represented His body. He then commanded His disciples to eat it in remembrance of Him. After the supper was over, Jesus took a cup and told those present that the cup represented a new covenant in His blood. The old covenant of sacrificed animals was about to be fulfilled. A new covenant between God and His

people was about to be established by the blood of Jesus Christ. It was the clear teaching of the Lord that whoever ate this bread and drank this cup was remembering the death of the Lord Jesus and what it represented. This was to be practiced in remembrance of Him until He returned. The Lord's Supper was a celebration of the meaning and the benefits of the death of the Lord. The Corinthians, however, had turned it into an occasion for gluttony and drunkenness.

The apostle concludes by giving the Corinthians a stern warning about their practice of the Lord's Supper. He reminded them in verse 27 that whoever drank the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner would be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. This was a serious matter. By their selfish and blasphemous behavior at the Lord's Supper, they were degrading the work of Christ that saved them. Paul challenged them to examine themselves before they participated in the table of the Lord (verse 28). Those who ate and drank indifferently, without honoring the holy body and blood of Christ, were eating and drinking judgment on themselves (verse 29). Paul went on to say that this was the reason why some among them were sick. Some had even died as a judgment of God for their blasphemous actions at the table of the Lord (verse 30).

What a powerful reminder this would have been to the Corinthians. While we should not always assume that all sickness is the result of sin in our lives, the Bible does teach us that there are times when the Lord does discipline us in this way.

Paul challenged the believers in Corinth to realize the seriousness of what they were doing. The hand of the Lord was on them in judgment because of their evil. The Corinthians were guilty of sinning against the body and blood of

Christ and their fellow believers. The Lord took this very seriously. He was already judging them for their sin. What was intended to be a declaration of God's mercy had become a time for judgement.

For Consideration:

- What does the Lord's Supper mean to you?
- What does this section teach about sickness as a discipline of God? Can you ever recall a time when God used sickness to draw you back to Himself?
- What are some ways we can be guilty of participating in the table of the Lord in an unworthy manner?
- What does this passage teach us about the problem of selfishness and self-centeredness that existed in the church of Corinth? Do you see anything of this in your church?

For Prayer:

- Have you ever been guilty of participating in the table of the Lord in an unworthy manner? Take a moment to confess your sin to God.
- Take a moment to thank God for the death of His Son on your behalf.
- Ask the Lord to deal with any divisions between believers that exist in your church.

- Ask the Lord to show you any selfishness or self-centeredness in your life. Ask Him to help you to be more thoughtful of others.

21

SPIRITUAL GIFTS

Read 1 Corinthians 12:1-11

In chapter 12 Paul deals with the use of spiritual gifts in the body of Christ. Obviously, this had caused some division in the Corinthian church. The subject was an important one, and Paul devoted the next three chapters to teaching the Corinthians about the proper use of their spiritual gifts.

Paul begins by recognizing the background from which many of the Corinthian believers had come. They had been led astray by “mute idols” (verse 2). While these idols had no power nor could they speak the Corinthians had still been led astray by them. If they had been led astray by mute and powerless idols, how could the Corinthians discern what was from God and what was not? It is easy to be misled. There are demonstrations of power in every religion. Signs and wonders are performed even by those who do not know the Lord. In the exercise of spiritual gifts discernment is vital.

How can we discern if a spiritual gift or manifestation is from the Lord? Paul reminded the Corinthians in verse 3

that anyone who spoke by the Spirit of God would proclaim and recognize the lordship of Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit would never lead anyone to curse either the work or the character of the Lord Jesus Christ (verse 3). Those who depreciated or denied the person and work of the Lord Jesus were not speaking from God. This was the crucial test for all spiritual gifts. Does the exercise of that gift demonstrate a humble submission to the character and Lordship of Christ? Does the person exercising that gift do so demonstrating his or her devotion to the Lord Jesus and to His glory alone? There is much we could say about this but Paul does not go into further detail here.

In order that the name of Christ be exalted, God distributed to the church those gifts He deemed necessary (verse 11). Notice that Paul uses three words in verses 4 and 5 to describe these gifts.

First, he told the Corinthians that there were different *gifts* from the same Spirit. The Greek word for gifts in verse 4 is the word *charismata*, meaning “divine grace,” from which we get the English word *charismatic*. These are divine abilities that enable believers to glorify Christ and serve the church.

Second, in verses 4-5 Paul told the Corinthians that there were also different kinds of *services* from the same Lord (verse 5). The word Paul uses for service is the Greek word *diakonia* from which we get the word *deacon*. The word refers to an office in the church or a particular ministry focus. God calls people into a specific ministry.

There are, thirdly, different kinds of “working” from the same God (verse 6). The word used here is the word *energema* which has the sense of putting forth power or

might. The “working” Paul speaks about here may refer to special and mighty works of God in miraculous ways.

Notice also in verses 4-6 that these gifts come from all members of the Trinity. The Spirit gives gifts (verse 4); the Lord gives gifts (verse 5); and God the Father gives gifts (verse 6). This indicates that all three members of the Trinity are in harmony when it comes to the distribution of these gifts to the believer.

Notice also that God works out these gifts in “all men” (verse 6). This indicates that God has given to each of us a gift that He wants us to use for the furtherance of His kingdom. Paul reminded the Corinthians in verse 7 that everyone was given a manifestation of the Spirit for the common good of the body. God has not left us without power. He has equipped each of His servants with the necessary tools to build up the body of Christ. Each believer makes a unique and necessary contribution to the common good.

In verses 8-11 Paul gave some examples of the gifts God has distributed to the body. This list does not contain all the gifts.

Message or Word of Wisdom (verse 8)

Wisdom, as we know it, is the application of truth and knowledge to real-life situations. The person with this gift was empowered by God to share words that direct the body of Christ in the application of the revealed truth. This person was not necessarily a teacher or preacher but had a very keen sense of how to apply knowledge to everyday situations in a Biblical and God honoring way.

Message or Word of Knowledge (verse8)

The word of knowledge seems to be the ability to unveil truth for the body of Christ. This knowledge may be very specific in nature. Jesus, for example, knew that the Samaritan woman had five husbands (John 4:18). He also knew that personal sin had not caused the blindness of the man in John 9:1-3. This specific knowledge is revealed by God's Spirit for the advancing of the kingdom.

The word of knowledge may also be a more general knowledge of the truth of God as contained in the Scriptures. The person using the gift in this way reveals the purpose of God for the church as it is contained in the teaching of the Bible as the Word of God. The person with the gift of the word of knowledge is empowered by God to communicate truth (specific or general), in a way that advances the kingdom of God and reveals the purpose of God by unmasking lies and clarifying truth.

Faith (verse 9)

While each believer has a measure of trust in God, there were those who have been gifted to trust God in greater ways. These individuals are able to attempt the impossible for God and see His blessing. Their answers to prayer and strength under pressure inspire others to have confidence in God and His provision. This faith gives them confidence in God in times when many others would give up all hope.

We should not assume that people with this gift can get whatever they want from God. They have great faith because God has given them assurance of His purpose. People with this gift are given a special sense of God's desire and purpose and press on toward that purpose with assurance that God will do what He says.

Gifts of healing (verse 9)

Paul went on to say that God gives to some a particular burden to pray for individuals He desires to heal. Healing could be physical, emotional, or spiritual. The fact that Paul used the plural when he spoke about this gift (i.e., gifts of healing) has led some to say that there were various types of healing gifts. Did God call some to a ministry of inner, emotional healing and others to a ministry of physical healing, for example? Others believe that the plural was used here because this gift was given many times to these individuals, as they needed it. In other words, each time God wanted to use these individuals to heal, He gave them a fresh gifting to do so.

It is important that we note here is that Paul does not say here that this gift was only exercised through prayer. While praying for the sick is important, it may not be the only way for this gift to be exercised. There are people who are gifted counselors to whom the Lord has given a powerful ministry of healing deep emotional wounds. Others have God-given ability to minister to physical needs. Prayer for healing may be part of this gift but we should see it as being broader than this as well for there are many who are gifted practically of God to minister healing to the body.

Miraculous Powers (verse 10)

Miracles are distinguished from healing here in that they are not limited to the healing of the body, mind, or soul. Miracles imply the changing of the normal course of nature. Jesus, for example, stilled the storm. He also raised the dead. Individuals with this gift are empowered by God to alter the normal course of nature for a very specific purpose.

Prophecy (verse 10)

Prophecy, in the Scripture, is the ability to speak the word of God into a particular situation. While sometimes prophets predicted future events, the majority of prophecy in Scripture related to the present. Prophecy, according to Paul in 1 Corinthians 14:3, ought to strengthen, encourage, and comfort the body of Christ. Prophets in the Bible were given the ability to hear God's word and communicate that word either to specific individuals or to the larger body in a way that challenged them in the particular situations they found themselves. People with this gift are God's mouthpieces to reveal His heart for a given time and situation. Some of the most powerful prophetic ministry I have experienced has been from those who have taken and applied the teaching of Scripture in a way that strengthened, encouraged and comforted me in a situation I was facing at the time.

Distinguishing between Spirits (verse 10)

In a very general sense, this gift was a God-given ability to discern whether a specific person or movement was from the Lord or from the enemy. Peter, for example, discerned that Ananias was being motivated by Satan to give a gift to the church (see Acts 5). Jesus discerned the hypocrisy of the Pharisees as they spoke to Him on various occasions. Individuals with this gift seem to have had the ability from God to understand and identify the presence of evil or good in an individual or situation. They served as guards for the body of Christ to warn of danger.

Speaking in Different Tongues (verse 10)

There appears to be two types of tongues in the Bible. The tongues of Acts 2 were known languages. The tongues of

1 Corinthians 14, on the other hand, are unknown languages. In Acts 2 the Holy Spirit gave the disciples the ability to speak words that were unknown to them but clearly understood by those present from many different language groups. The purpose of this gift in Acts 2 was the proclamation of the gospel in other languages.

In 1 Corinthians 14 Paul speaks of a prayer language unknown not only to the speaker but also to those who heard it. The purpose of this type of tongue was not evangelism but worship, prayer, exhortation to the body (when interpreted), and personal edification. It may be that the reason Paul used the expression “different kinds of tongues” was to include the various types of tongues we have mentioned here. The person with this gift is given the ability to speak words unknown to him or her with the goal of furthering the kingdom of God in evangelism, exhortation, or personal edification.

Interpretation of Tongues (verse 10)

The interpretation of tongues was simply the ability to accurately translate the language spoken by someone speaking in tongues. This translation would serve for the edification of the larger body. This could take place in the context of a regular worship service, as recorded in 1 Corinthians 14, or possibly in a private situation. The person speaking in tongues may also have been given the gift to interpret his or her own words (1 Corinthians 14:13). The person with this particular gift had an ability to understand the things that were spoken in these unknown tongues.

God gives to the body the gifts He deems necessary for the expansion of His kingdom at a particular time. Ultimately, God Himself determines what gift we will receive.

We must be content to exercise that gift for the good of the body of Christ.

For Consideration:

- Why do you suppose there is a fear of the gifts of the Spirit in some circles of the body of Christ?
- Has God given you one or more of these gifts? What are they? How are you using these gifts for the good of the larger body of Christ?
- Why is it important to be able to recognize whether something comes from the Lord or not? What test did Paul give to help the Corinthians determine if a spiritual gift was from God or not?
- Is it possible to misuse the gifts God gives us? Explain.
- Why are the gifts of God important?

For Prayer:

- If you do not know what gifts the Lord has given to you, take a moment to ask the Lord to show you.
- Thank the Lord that He is willing to use you in such a special way to extend his kingdom.
- Ask God to give you eyes to see the opportunities He gives you to use your spiritual gifts and to exercise your calling.

- Ask God to give you grace to grow in your ability to use the spiritual gifts He has given you.

22

ONE BODY

Read 1 Corinthians 12:12-31

Having shown that the Lord has distributed a variety of gifts to the church, Paul moves on to remind the Corinthians how those gifts, though different, worked together for the common good of the body. To do this he uses the example of the human body with its various parts and functions.

The human body is made up of many different parts, each with its unique task. This is what the body of Christ is like (verse 12). The body of Christ is composed of people from many different cultural and social backgrounds (Jews and Greeks, slaves and free). Each of these individuals has been baptized by one Spirit and drinks from that Spirit (verse 13). Let us consider what the apostle is saying here more carefully.

When Paul said that we were all been baptized by one Spirit into one body, he referred to the baptism of the Spirit, not water baptism. Paul explained this baptism further in verse 13. The baptism of the Spirit, according to this verse,

occurs when the Holy Spirit comes to individuals, planting His life in them and making them children of God. At that time, the new believer is enabled and empowered to drink deeply from the well of salvation and experience all its benefits. What does this mean in practical terms?

At the point of conversion, the Holy Spirit comes to an individual planting the life of Christ in a person's heart. In the days of Mary and Joseph, the Holy Spirit came to Mary and planted the seed of Christ in her womb. In a similar way, the Holy Spirit comes to plant the life of Christ in us today. The indwelling Holy Spirit lives in us to transform our characters by empowering us to obey and live in God's ways.

The life of Christ in us is what makes us children of God. Paul reminded the Romans that if they did not have the Spirit of Christ in them, they did not belong to Christ (Romans 8:9). This Spirit baptized the Corinthian believers and brought them all into a common spiritual family.

What we need to understand here is that when the Holy Spirit comes to baptize each of us, filling us with Christ and His power, He does so in a way that is unique for each person. While filled with the same Spirit, we are unique. Though we are one body, there are many parts to that one body (verse 14). Each of those parts is essential for the proper functioning of the body. No part is inferior to another. For example, the foot cannot say: "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body" (verse 15). Nor could the ear say: "Because I am not like an eye, I do not belong to the body" (verse 16). This would be foolishness. Yet how often do we compare our gifts and ministries to others in the church and feel as though we do not an important member?

Paul challenged this way of thinking in verse 17. What if the whole body were an eye, he asked. If the whole body were an eye, how could it hear? What if the whole body were an ear? How could it smell? The fact of the matter is that God has determined that the body be comprised of many different members. Each member is necessary for the full functioning of the body. The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you." The head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you."

If we were to compare the head and the feet, would the head not receive more honor than the feet? Yet the feet are no less important to the full functioning of the body. While the head does the thinking, the hands and the feet do the work. In the same way, there should be no envying in the body of Christ. Every person in the body has an important role to play. One gift is no better than another. All are important and essential to the full functioning and fruitfulness of the church.

Have you ever stubbed your toe? While the toe is a seemingly unimportant member of the body, the whole body ceases to function for a moment when you stub the toe. The same is true when you hit your finger with a hammer. Your heart begins to beat faster. The pain shoots down your arm. Your feet begin to do a little dance. Your head feels the pain. Your mouth and tongue cry out in agony. The whole body responds. For a moment (until you recover from the pain), the work you are doing is put on hold. This, said Paul, is how it is when even the seemingly unimportant gifts are not functioning in the body of Christ.

Do you feel that your gifts are not important? Paul's words should remind you that without your gifts (however small you feel they are), the body will not function as it should. When your gifts are being used, it brings health and

wellness to the body of Christ. The whole body rejoices with you in health.

Paul went on to tell the Corinthians in verse 28 God appointed individuals to fulfill a variety of functions for the sake of His kingdom. The fact that God had designated these people to these certain functions should not go unnoticed. God reserves the right to determine what role He gives to each of us. This tells me that my function in the body is not something I decide for myself. God appoints me to my role. This removes any need for us to seek those gifts we perceived to be more important than others. It also challenges us to be content with what God has given.

Paul gives some examples of several of roles in the church. He mentions apostles, prophets, teachers, those working miracles and healing, and those exercising gifts of helps, administration, and tongues in this list (verse 28).

The apostles, as originally chosen by the Lord, were eyewitnesses to the Lord and His teaching. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the apostles founded the early church and taught with authority the word God had given them for the church. Our faith is solidly anchored on the apostles' doctrine and teaching. Their teaching was authenticated by signs and wonders. They spoke and taught authoritatively as Christ's founders of the church.

The prophet was empowered to communicate God's heart to His people in the times and situations they found themselves. This might be by means of an inspired application of the revealed word of God to a specific situation. It might also be a word of encouragement, exhortation, or comfort to the body from the Lord at a specific time of need. All prophecy was to be examined in light of the clear authoritative revelation of the apostles.

The teacher opened up the revealed truth of God. This role was established to explain the truths of the Word of God in a way that would be understandable to the people. The difference between the prophet and the teacher seems to have been in the function they fulfilled in the body. The teacher was concerned primarily for the general truth of the gospel and its correct interpretation and application in the church. The prophet's word was more pointed and specific. If you sat under a teacher, you would leave with a clearer understanding of what the Scripture was saying and a general application for today. You would have gained great insight. Sitting under a prophetic preacher, however, you would have a very definite sense that the Lord was pointing out a specific sin or speaking directly to a particular need you had been experiencing in your life.

God had also appointed "workers of miracles." God used these individuals to proclaim His sovereignty and lordship. Through the prayers of these individuals, the impossible happens. Through these individuals, God confirmed His power and authority. They confirmed by signs and wonders, the word spoken by the apostles, prophets, and teachers.

Beyond this there were those gifted in healing. The focus here seems to be physical, emotional, and spiritual healing. These individuals may be burdened to pray for these types of healings. We should not assume, however, that praying is the only way these individuals work. They may also be called as counsellor or medical professionals to minister practically to the physical and emotional needs of the body. Their burden is to see the body functioning in physical, emotional and spiritual health.

Those who had the gift of helping others (helps) were burdened to help those in need. These individuals are

somehow able to see practical needs and find opportunities to meet those needs others seem to overlook. They were burdened to do what they could to serve the practical needs of those around them.

Those gifted in administration are able to deal with the many details required to move the body of Christ forward. Whether these are political, financial, or practical in nature, these individuals excel in organizing and practical administration. They are able to communicate, delegate and help the body of Christ work together for its common good.

Tongues are also listed in this passage as a gift given to the body of Christ. As we mentioned in the last meditation, there are two types of tongues mentioned in the Scripture. The first was the ability to communicate in known languages. This appears to have been used by God for communicating His truth in an evangelistic way. The second was the ability to speak in an unknown spiritual language. This second use of tongues was for prayer, worship or exhortation of the body (when interpreted).

Paul concluded this section by asking a series of simple questions. Does everyone have the gifts to be an apostle? Is everyone appointed to be a prophet or teacher or a worker of miracles? Does everyone have the gift of healing, or does everyone speak in tongues or interpret tongues? The answer to these questions is obvious. Not everyone has these gifts.

God has a specific role for each person to play in the advancing of His kingdom. He gives the gifts He deems necessary. This is why we need each other in the body of Christ. If everyone had all the gifts, we would not need each other. God has created us in such a way that we depend on each other.

In conclusion, Paul challenged the Corinthians to desire spiritual gifts, especially the greater gifts (see 1 Corinthians 14:1 as an example). Notice how he challenged them to “eagerly desire” these gifts. It is easy for us to sit back and think that if God wants to give me a gift, He will give it to me. This attitude is contrary to what Paul was teaching here. Paul encouraged the Corinthians as a local church body to eagerly seek the full expression of the gifts in a way that brought honor to God and the expansion of His kingdom.

There are times when we need to pray as a church for people with certain gifts to fulfill the ministry God has us to do. As people of God we need to understand the role He has given us to play and seek to grow in our ability to use these gifts for the good of the body of Christ and the expansion of His kingdom in the world.

For Consideration:

- Have you ever felt as if your gifts were not important? What does this passage teach us about the need for every gift in the body of Christ?
- What gifts do you see in evidence in your church? Is there someone that you need to encourage in the use of his or her gifts?
- What gifts has God given you personally? What opportunities has He given you to use those gifts?

For Prayer:

- Thank God for the gifts He has placed in your church.
- Ask God to make it clear to you what gifts He has given you and the role He would have you to play in the body of Christ.
- If you do not know what gifts you have received from God, take a moment to pray that the Lord would clearly show you.
- Ask God to give you grace to be able to boldly use your gifts for the glory of His name alone.

23

LOVE IS PATIENT AND KIND

Read 1 Corinthians 13:1-4

In chapter 12 Paul instructed the Corinthians concerning the various gifts God had given to the body of Christ. Each person has a gift from God. All these gifts have one thing in common: they are to be exercised in love. Without love, Paul told the Corinthians, their gifts were like “a clanging symbol.” We can speak truth from our lips, but if that truth is without love, it is an annoying sound to the ears of the listener. Someone might have the gift of prophecy and be able to understand mysteries and knowledge, but if these gifts are exercised without love, they are of no value.

Paul told the Corinthians that they could give all they had to the poor and die for someone else, but without love their sacrifice meant nothing. For Paul, love is the essential ingredient in the use of all spiritual gifts. Paul devotes chapter 13 to teaching the Corinthians about love. Seeing that Paul emphasized the importance of love so much here, it would be wrong for us to move too quickly over this chapter. Let’s linger for a moment on Paul’s teaching about love.

We would all like to believe that we could find the perfect spouse and ride off into the sunset to a life of eternal bliss. Any couple will tell you that there are many struggles in marriage. The deepest wounds you and I will ever experience in life will come from those we love most. Since the fall of humanity into sin, there has never been a perfect relationship. Adam and Eve experienced a loss of intimacy in their marriage and the agony of the death of a beloved son at the hands of his brother. Jacob's wife Leah bore, throughout her life, the pain of her husband's spurned love. David and Jonathan knew the sorrow of separation from each other because of King Saul's jealousy. David wept over the rebellion of his son Absalom. The father of the prodigal son grieved because of a strong willed, undisciplined, and reckless child. The disciples felt the betrayal of Judas, a trusted companion of three years. Peter knew the shame of denying his Lord three times.

Because of sin there is hurt and sorrow involved in every relationship. How should we behave toward others when there is so much pain involved in relationship with them? The answer, according to Paul, is love. Let's examine what Paul teaches here about true biblical love.

Love Is Patient

What keeps relationships together when there is so much hurt and sorrow? The answer, according to Paul, is love. "Love," said the apostle, "suffers long" (verse 4, NKJV). The word he used here for "suffers long" or "patient" is the word *makrothumeo*. This word comes from two Greek words. The first of these words is *makros* meaning "long in time or distance." The second word is *thumos*, meaning "wrath or fierceness." Combined, these two words give us our first definition of love. Love is the ability to persevere a long time under the wrath and fierceness of another.

Makrothumeo can be translated in a variety of ways. It is the ability to endure the insults and pain inflicted by another. It is the patience of a wife who, day after day, puts up with her husband's cutting remarks and yet remains true and faithful to him. It is the perseverance of a parent who still reaches out in love to a rebellious son or daughter. It is the love of a friend who is there for you even when you have betrayed his or her trust. It is the love of a holy God who reached down when we were His enemies. It is the love of a Savior who bore our insults and remained on the cross for our salvation.

Love is the ability to endure the pain inflicted by a loved one and not have it change our devotion or commitment to them. True love accepts the pain, although it does not delight in the pain. There are times when it even seeks to protect itself from this pain but love remains faithful despite the pain. It will not run away when things get tough. It will not abandon its loved one. Love will willingly suffer for the sake of and even because of the one it loves.

All across our nations, relationships are breaking up because they are not founded on true love. The greatest example of this "long suffering" love is in the person of the Lord Jesus. How often have we let Him down or grieved Him? How many times have we been unfaithful to Him? Despite our rebellion, His love remains true. Nothing will change His love for us. Paul put it this way in Romans 8:38-39:

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

What a comfort this is! The love of Christ for us is such that nothing will ever separate us from Him. Despite our shortcomings and sin, His love remains true. He leaves us an example to follow. Love is not the absence of pain and suffering but the willingness to endure pain and suffering for one another.

Love Is Kind

There is nothing quite as powerful as kindness. Brute force will only serve to encourage retaliation. Angry words will give birth to strife. Shunning silence will foster bitterness and frustration. Kindness, on the other hand, will break down barriers.

Paul told the Corinthians that true love is kind. The word he used is the word *chresteuomai*. This word means to show oneself useful or to act in a compassionate and generous way. *Chresteuomai* comes from the root *chrestos* meaning, “to be employed or useful.” It is important to note here that kindness is an action word. The kindness Paul spoke about here is much more than an attitude of the heart. You cannot be kind if you are not showing yourself useful to those around you. Kindness by its very nature involves work. Kindness sees needs, is moved by those needs, and reaches out to do something about them. It involves sacrifice of time and effort for another.

It is one thing to be kind to those who are kind to you. It is quite another to be kind to those who have made your life difficult. Notice that Paul spoke of love being kind right after speaking about the long-suffering nature of love. The idea here is that love responds in kindness even when being mistreated. Love sacrifices and reaches out at its own expense, even to those who have been cruel and oppressive. Listen to what Jesus tells us in Luke 6:35-36:

But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

The apostle John put it this way in 1 John 3:16-18:

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.

True love expresses kindness by laying down its life. It will not count the cost. It willingly sacrifices its material possessions for another (even an enemy). Biblical love takes as its example the person and work of the Lord Jesus.

Do you remember when you first met your husband or wife? There was nothing you would not do for them? Do you remember how you would take out your last coin and give it to them (without complaint) as an act of love and devotion? Do you remember the late nights, the early mornings, the hours of listening? Nothing was too much. No sacrifice was too great. You were in love. You expressed kindness to each other in sacrificial deeds and loving consideration of each other's needs. You looked for ways to be kind. As time went by, however, your attention began to shift from your partner to yourself. You became blind to each other's needs. You wanted to be served. You gradually became frustrated when your partner required something from you. Sacrificing for your partner no longer

seemed to have the appeal it once had. Kindness was removed from your relationship.

Do you want to see your relationship with those around you refreshed and renewed? Put kindness back into love. Look for ways to reach out in active usefulness. You will be amazed at what it will do for your relationship. True love has eyes that are open to the needs of its loved one and reaches out to be of practical service. True love finds great delight in ministering kindness in small and large ways to the object of its affection.

For Consideration:

- Have you been responsible for causing pain in the life of someone you love? Take a moment to list some ways you have caused pain for a loved one. Confess these things to the Lord, and then go to the person you have offended and seek his or her forgiveness.
- How does this passage help us understand what our response should be toward our rebellious children or toward a friend or spouse who has offended us?
- Take a moment to consider if there is anyone in your life that you have trouble loving because of something they have done to you. What should be your response to them?
- How can you minister kindness to your husband or wife, friend or child? Commit yourself to putting at

least one of these things into practice over the next few days.

- Can you think of times this week when you failed to minister kindness to your loved ones? Confess this shortcoming to God. Claim the forgiveness offered you in Scripture.

For Prayer:

- Have you ever been hurt by someone you love? Confess any bitterness and ask God to help you love them with longsuffering love.
- Thank the Lord for His longsuffering love for us despite our sin and rebellion.
- Ask the Lord to reveal to you ways in which you can show kindness today. Be ready to hear Him when He prompts you.
- Ask the Lord to forgive you for the times when you failed to actively reach out to your partner in kindness. Ask God to help you to focus less on yourself and more on others.

LOVE DOES NOT ENVY OR BOAST

Read 1 Corinthians 13:4

Love Does Not Envy

Have you ever struggled with envy? Let's be honest with ourselves. There is not a week that goes by that we do not look at what someone else has and wish that we had something equally as good. Maybe it's a friend whose business seems to be much better than yours. Maybe it's a mother or father who seems to have a much easier time raising their children than we do. Maybe it's a student who never seems to have to work to get the grades you spent hours to get. Maybe it's a fellow believer who has a ministry that we could only dream of having.

The Bible often warns us about envy. Paul spoke of envy in Romans 1:28-29 as being the fruit of a depraved mind. In Galatians 5:18-21 Paul lists it among the acts of the sinful nature along with witchcraft, hatred, sexual immorality, and drunkenness, to name a few. Peter pleaded with his

readers in 1 Peter 2:1 to rid themselves of all envy. What is so wrong with envy that it is treated with such seriousness in the Scriptures? There are three reasons why we need to deal with envy in our lives.

First, we need to deal with envy because of where it can lead us. Genesis 37:11 tells us that Joseph's brothers envied him because of his close relationship to their father. This led his brothers to consider murdering him. When this failed, they sold him into slavery. Matthew 27:18 tells us that it was out of envy that the Jews had Jesus arrested and delivered over to Pilate to be killed. Envy is a tool in the hands of the enemy. If we allow it to remain unchecked, we give Satan a foothold in our lives. There is no telling where envy can lead?

Second, by its very nature envy is self-centered. Envy says, "I don't like other people having nicer things than I have." Envy is never happy to take second place. It cares nothing about the needs of others. It hates to see others prosper or succeed. This goes against everything Scripture teaches us about considering others as more important than ourselves (see Philippians 2:3-4).

Third, envy despises the will of God. It cannot accept the ways in which God blesses others. Envy says, "God, I don't like it when you bless someone else; why couldn't you just give all your blessings to me." It calls God's purposes into question. It takes a stand against God and His sovereign right to bless and give to His children as He sees fit.

Paul told the Corinthians in verse 4 that love does not envy. Earlier, Paul reprimanded the Corinthians for being jealous of each other: "You are still worldly. . . . since there is jealousy and quarreling among you" (3:3). While envy

cannot rejoice in the comfort and prosperity of another, biblical love is happy when others are blessed. If we love someone, we will rejoice in their blessing. We will not be asking ourselves, why didn't I get that? Or, why do things always work out for them? Love not only rejoices in the success, prosperity, and comfort of the loved one, it actively seeks it. Envy, on the other hand destroys love. It kills our ability to rejoice with others. Envy causes all of life to be viewed through the lens of competition. Proverbs 14:30 tells us: "Envy rots the bones."

One of the tests of Christian love is how we react to the blessing of others. Does their success or comfort cause us to become bitter? Do we inwardly desire their blessings for ourselves? Can we rejoice when others succeed in areas in where we have failed? Do we sincerely delight in their honor? There is no envy in true love.

Love Does Not Boast

There are some animal species who, during the mating ritual, the male will seek to impress the female by some great show of strength or dominance. Sometimes he parades himself around and tries to impress the female by his looks. Human beings are not very different. Good looks, intelligence, or skills seem to be very important in our society. We measure the value of an individual by appearance, worldly success or ability. We compare ourselves with others and measure our abilities and looks against theirs. If we come out on top or, at least, are equal with others, we feel good about ourselves.

Paul stated here in verse 4 that biblical love is not boastful. What did Paul mean by this and how does it relate to love? In true love, there is no need to boast. Why do we boast or parade ourselves? Is it not so that others will accept us

and think highly of us? Boasting is a sign of insecurity. If a product does not sell by itself, it has to be promoted so people will buy it. This is why we boast. We draw attention to our abilities so that others will see us, be impressed, and like us. In Christian love this is unnecessary. Paul encouraged the Corinthians to love others with the love with which they were loved—the perfect love of the Lord Jesus, who accepted them with all their warts and blemishes.

This is true for us as well. We may not be the most intelligent people. We may wish to get rid of a few extra pounds. In authentic love, however, none of these things matter. Love is unconditional. There is something very comforting about this. If we are loved with the love Paul spoke of here, we do not need to prove ourselves. We are accepted as we are. We will always be accepted by God no matter how things turn out (see Romans 8:31-39). The Lord loved us when we were at our worst. Like the father of the prodigal son, His arms are stretched out to receive us even when we have wandered from Him. His love for the ones who serve Him faithfully is no greater than His love for the wanderer. We could be laid up on beds of sickness and never able to serve or speak another word on His behalf and His love for us would not change. Our great achievements on His behalf will not make Him love us more. Our shortcomings will not make Him love us less. This is true love. This is true security.

There is another thing about boasting we need to understand. People who boast are self-centered. They do so with the attitude that they are better than others. Their focus is on themselves. This is foreign to what biblical love means. Real love does not seek to impress. Its focus is not on itself. Love centers on others. Its attention and efforts are concentrated on edifying and lifting up those it loves. Real love dies to self. It considers others as being more

important than itself. If there is any boasting, it is not in self but in the object of its love. True love will delight more in speaking of the qualities and strengths of the one it loves than it does about parading itself.

For Consideration:

- Consider for a moment when you last experienced envy in your relationship with another. What did this indicate about how you really felt about the person?
- Consider for a moment what it was that attracted you to your husband, wife, or friend. Have any of these things changed over time? How has this affected your relationship with the one you love?
- Have you ever been guilty of boasting? Why do you think you boasted? What does this tell you about yourself?

For Prayer:

- Take a moment to confess your envy to God. Tell Him honestly, what you feel and why you feel it. Ask Him to give you victory over this sin in your life. The next time you experience envy, reject it as sin and instead rejoice in God's blessing in the life of the individual concerned.
- Ask that Lord to help you take your eyes away from yourself. Ask Him to help you to be more secure and humble in your walk with Him.

- Thank God for the assurance you have in your relationship with Him. Thank Him that He alone is your only true reason for boasting.

25

LOVE IS NOT PROUD, RUDE OR SELF-SEEKING

Read 1 Corinthians 13:4-5

Love Is Not Proud

Proverbs 16:18 tells us that “pride goes before destruction.” This is true in relationships. One sure way to destroy a relationship is to allow yourself to become puffed up and arrogant. Pride is the number one enemy of biblical love.

Paul told the Corinthians that love is not proud. The word for proud in the Greek language is the word *phusioo*. Very simply this word means to inflate, to fill with air, or to make oneself higher than another. What is the relationship between pride and love?

In 1 Corinthians 4:6 Paul warned the Corinthians about letting pride set one person against another in the church:

Now, brothers, I have applied these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, so that you may

learn from us the meaning of the saying, 'Do not go beyond what is written.' Then you will not take pride in one man over against another.

This is the dangerous thing about pride. It has a tendency to elevate itself above others. Pride and arrogance foster competition in a relationship. When people puff themselves up in pride, the result is that they begin to expect others to bow to their wishes. The proud person resents the role of servant. An even more serious problem emerges when both people in a relationship puff themselves up in pride. Neither one will give in. Both fight to have their own way. Christian love, according to Paul, will not elevate itself above another. It will humble itself and consider the needs of another to be more important than its own.

There is another thing about pride: it often refuses to be corrected. Have you ever met people who cannot admit they were wrong? I have sometimes laughed to myself watching individuals try to make excuses for their mistakes. This inability to admit wrong is a very serious problem in a relationship. As parents, we sometimes puff ourselves up to believe that our judgments are always right. Let's admit it; there are times when we are wrong. Have you ever had to go to your child and apologize for what you said to them in anger? How about your husband or wife? Love accepts correction. It is not so puffed up that it could not admit its shortcomings. It will humbly listen to rebuke and willingly make the changes necessary.

A third thing about pride is that it is often incapable of admitting needs. Have you ever offered a hand to an individual who was too proud to accept it? Have you ever given counsel to someone who was too proud to admit they needed it? It is never easy to be vulnerable. We all want

people to think that we are better than we really are. There are times when we can even hide our weaknesses from ourselves. There are things that we are too ashamed to reveal even to those who are closest to us. We fear that they will think less of us. To open ourselves up to others and reveal our needs, struggles, and shortcomings is often very difficult. Only in the context of love are people free to reveal their true needs and be vulnerable.

Love is not proud. It does not enter into competition with others. Instead, it reaches out to serve. It does not fear correction. Instead, it accepts the gentle rebuke and makes the necessary changes. It is not too proud to admit its needs and weaknesses. Instead, it is willing to receive ministry. Only in this context can true love flourish.

Love Is Not Rude

Have you ever heard the expression that familiarity breeds contempt? What this expression means is that the more familiar we are with someone, the worse we tend to treat them. We have seen in the last couple of meditations that in a biblically loving relationship, there is security and no false pretences. Knowing that I am loved regardless of what happens can lead me to take the liberty to say or do things that I should never say or do. Very often we will go the extra mile for a stranger but will not cross the room for someone we love. We flatter and praise our acquaintances but cut down those with whom we are more familiar. When we find ourselves doing this we prove that we do not love with the love of Christ.

Paul told the Corinthians that love does not behave rudely. The word rude is translated in different ways in various translations of the Bible. It means to behave in an

unbecoming or improper manner. The English dictionary defines rude as a lack of grace or refinement.

When we go all out to show grace, refinement, and courtesy to our guests, what are we saying to them? Are we not telling them that we consider them worthy of our utmost esteem? Rudeness, on the other hand, shows contempt. It says, "You are not worth being treated with grace and refinement." By our courtesy or rudeness, we reveal to others what we think about them. If we are willing to show strangers how much we esteem them by our courtesy and refinement, how much more should we do this for those who are closest to us?

How many times do we forget to thank each other? How many times have we lacked grace and refinement in our speech with those who are closest to us? How often have we inflicted our unpleasant moods and attitudes on our family members or treated our partner like a garbage dump for all our frustrations and hostilities? Love is not rude. It shows grace and refinement in its dealing with others. It values others too much to inflict cruel words and improper behavior on them.

Rudeness is also characterized by forcefulness and abruptness. We say that people are rude if they seek their own way with no concern for others. Love shows respect. It would rather suffer loss than disregard the feelings and needs of others. Love is considerate. Rudeness says, "I know you are tired and weary, but my needs are more important." Love, on the other hand, chooses to minister to the tiredness and weariness at its own expense. It will willingly suffer loss because it values showing the love of the Lord Jesus. It seeks to minister grace and kindness.

Courtesy is one of those things we seem to lose with time in relationships. When things were new and fresh, we found ourselves always expressing our appreciation and thankfulness to our partners and friends, even for the small things they did for us. As time passes, however, we begin to take these things for granted. This can eventually turn into rudeness. What a beautiful thing it is to see an older couple who has relearned the art of courtesy in marriage. While this should be the norm in any relationship, it has become the exception.

Christian love, said Paul, is not rude. It demonstrates in word and deed how much it values others. One of the measures of love is courtesy. If we want to demonstrate love to someone, we will season our words and actions with the grace and refinement we feel they deserve.

Love Is Not Self-Seeking

In Leviticus 19:18 the Lord God commanded: "Love your neighbor as yourself." We understand from this commandment that love for self is both natural and good. This is the understanding of the apostle Paul when he wrote in Ephesians 5:29:

"After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church."

There is within us all a natural desire to care for ourselves. When we are hungry, we feed ourselves. When we are hurt, we will do everything in our power to relieve the pain. Not only is this true with regard to the very basic needs of life but with its pleasures and luxuries as well. The Lord has given us many good things to enjoy. We have all known the joy and satisfaction of basking in these good

things. It is the most natural thing in the world to care for ourselves and delight in the good things God has provided.

Paul told the Corinthians in verse 5, however, that love is not self-seeking. The love Paul spoke about here is stronger than self-love. It is a love that would willingly lay down its life for another. It is demonstrated best in the person of the Lord Jesus and how He lived His entire earthly life with more concern for others than for Himself.

Earlier Paul said: "Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others" (10:24). Paul was not saying that we should never care for our own needs. He meant that we ought to be even more concerned about the needs of others. Think about the decisions you make on an ongoing basis every day. How many of those decisions are based on providing for your own needs? Paul told the Corinthians that authentic love cares more for the needs of other than it does for its own needs. If you truly love others, you will find that your decisions have more to do with them than yourself.

Paul puts it this way in Philippians 2:3-5:

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.

Love gives priority to the interests of others. We are not speaking here about an inferiority complex or low self-esteem. Jesus knew that He was the Son of God. He knew in His heart that He was perfect and sinless. He knew that the destiny of humanity hinged on His work. While Jesus

knew His value as a man and as God, He gave up earthly comforts to achieve kingdom purposes. He did nothing out of conceit or personal glory. He looked always to the interests of His heavenly Father. To demonstrate the love of the Lord Jesus, we should willingly make sacrifices for the benefit of those around us.

Listen to what Paul said in Romans 14:14-15:

As one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean. If your brother is distressed because of what you eat, you are no longer acting in love. Do not by your eating destroy your brother for whom Christ died.

Love will willingly put aside legitimate desires and interests for the sake of another. It is willing to turn off the television or put down the newspaper. It is willing to spend less time at work or less time with friends for the sake of its partner. It will not claim its rights. If Christ was willing to die for those around us, we dare not treat them with less respect than He did, by refusing to sacrifice the petty matters of life for their good.

For Consideration:

- Consider the last time you had a disagreement with someone. What role did pride have in this disagreement? What would have happened if you had swallowed your pride?

- Take a moment to write down several ways in which your loved ones minister to you. Find some time this week to thank them and let them know what they mean to you.
- Very often the only way our families or friends have of telling how much we love them is by how we treat them in word and deed. What have you been saying to them recently? How can you show more courtesy to those close to you?
- Consider for a moment how you spend your personal time and money or how you make your decisions. How much of this is focused on your own personal needs and desires? How much is focused on others?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to help you this week to be willing to listen to the reproof of your loved ones. Commit yourself to making the necessary changes in your life.
- Ask the Lord to help you demonstrate His love through your words and actions.
- Ask God to forgive you for the times you placed your own needs above those of your loved ones.

ANGER AND RECORD KEEPING

Read 1 Corinthians 13:5

Not Easily Angered

Some years ago I was speaking to an individual who told me that his marriage was almost perfect. In over fifteen years of marriage he and his wife had never once had a disagreement. I immediately wondered where he had been those years. Every relationship I know has had its share of disagreements.

There are many things that can provoke us to anger. Paul told the Corinthians, however, that love is not easily angered. The word used here comes from two words in the original Greek. The first word is *para* meaning “near,” “in the vicinity of,” or “beside.” The second word is *oxus*, meaning “rapid,” or “quick.” When you put these two words together you get the word *paroxuno*. The idea in this word is to rapidly come near or possibly lash out at someone. It is what happens when someone touches a very sensitive

spot in your life. It causes you to respond in anger or bitterness and to quickly draw near to them in retaliation.

Paul was not saying that love never gets angry. There are times when it is right to get angry. We see examples of righteous anger in the Bible. Consider Paul when he went to Athens.

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed (*paroxuno*) to see that the city was full of idols" (Acts 17:16).

We also see the anger of Jesus when He overturned the tables of the money changers in the temple (Luke 19:45). These examples show us that there are times when anger is legitimate. In both of these examples, we see that Paul and Jesus became angry when principles of righteousness were being trampled on. The dishonoring of God and His word ought to make us angry.

There are times when we will be rightly provoked to anger. There is an anger, however, that is self-seeking and has very little to do with the glory of God. This is an anger that lashes out when we do not get our own way, when we feel threatened or insulted. In these times, the apostle Peter challenged his readers to look to the Lord Jesus as their example of how to respond:

To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. 'He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.' When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly (1 Peter 2:21-23).

Listen to the teaching of Jesus in this regard in Matthew 5:39-44:

But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles. Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you. "You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.

Love will not retaliate when insulted. It will absorb offenses and surrender its comforts when called to do so. When compelled to walk one mile, the love of Christ in us will offer to walk a second mile. It will love even those who persecute and make life miserable. Because biblical love does not seek its own, it will not be easily provoked to anger when called on to surrender its rights and conveniences. The supreme example is the person of Christ who surrendered all for us when we were His enemies.

Love Keeps No Record of Wrongs

In any relationship there will be friction and struggle. Few indeed are the relationships where an apology is not required. There are times when we do hurt those we love. These hurts are sometimes difficult to forget. We remind each other of them in very subtle ways. It can come out in subconscious bitterness and rejection or in angry outbursts. At other times, when we are accused, we throw past failures back at our accuser to get even.

One of the most wonderful things about being forgiven by the Lord Jesus is that He will never bring a forgiven sin against us again. Listen to some of the tremendous promises in Scripture:

For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more. (Jeremiah 31:34)

As far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. (Psalm 103:12)

You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea. (Micah 7:19)

When we forgive a person, we are in effect hurling their iniquities into the depth of the sea (Micah 7:19) never to bring them up against them again. We commit ourselves to never make them pay for what they have done to us. We will treat them as if they had never sinned against us.

Paul told the Corinthians that love does not keep a record of wrongs. The word used here is *logizomai*, which has the idea of taking inventory or counting. The love of God in us will not keep track of all the wrongs suffered.

It has been said that love is blind. Love, however, is not naive. It sees the shortcomings of others. It knows that people are less than perfect. It has felt the sting of cutting remarks and rejection. It has suffered through bad moods and anger outbursts. Love, however, covers each of these hurts with the balm of forgiveness. It buries hurts in the depths of the sea, never to bring them up again.

The love of God will do its utmost to seek reconciliation so that the enemy does not gain a foothold. Paul stated in Ephesians 4:26-27:

'In your anger do not sin': Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold.

The enemy delights in an unforgiving spirit. This is fertile soil for his efforts. When we have unresolved bitterness and anger in our lives, we are very susceptible to Satan's temptations. How many times have we allowed the offenses and insults of others to germinate in our hearts and grow up into a forest of resentment? These little roots of bitterness need to be dealt with immediately:

See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many (Hebrews 12:15).

The inability to forgive and forget is a major cause of disunity in the body of Christ and in our other relationships as well. For the sake of harmony in the Lord's church and the progress of the gospel in the world, let the Lord set you free of an unforgiving spirit today. The love of God which He has shed abroad in our hearts will not keep an account of wrongs suffered.

For Consideration:

- Can you recall the last time you were angry with someone? How much of that anger was self-

centered? What was the real reason you felt angry or bitter?

- What personal comforts or rights, when threatened, provoke you to anger? What does this meditation teach you about these matters? Are you willing to surrender these matters to the Lord for the progress of the gospel?
- Have you been hurt in the past by someone? What are your thoughts toward that person today? Are you thinking evil of him or her? Are you willing to forgive right now?

For Prayer:

- Are you easily angered? Ask God to take control of this anger in your life.
- Thank the Lord for His wonderful forgiveness toward you.
- Ask the Lord to give you grace to forgive and forget those things that have been done to you. Ask Him to replace the memories of past offenses with His deep love.

LOVE DOES NOT DELIGHT IN EVIL BUT REJOICES IN TRUTH

Read 1 Corinthians 13:6

Love Does Not Delight in Evil

Paul has been speaking to the Corinthians about love. In verse 6 he told them that love does not rejoice in evil. The word used here for evil is the word “*adikia*.” This word comes from two words. The first word is *a*, which when used in this context changes what follows to the negative. The second word is *dike*, which refers to justice or right. Putting these two words together, we get the idea of injustice or unrighteousness. What does all of this have to do with love?

We can understand the significance of Paul’s statement here in a variety of ways. First, love does not rejoice when the object of its affection is caught up in evil. I think particularly here of the story of the lost sheep in Matthew 18.

While there were ninety-nine safe in the fold, the shepherd went out in search of the one that was lost. His heart grieved for the one sheep that had wandered away. The love of God cannot sit idly by when its loved one is caught up in the snare of evil and sin. It will do its utmost to bring the lost sheep back to the fold where it will be safe and secure.

This is the love and concern of a mother whose child has gotten caught up in drugs. This is the concern of a wife whose husband is being snared by the pursuit of money and possessions. It is the concern of a Savior who was willing to leave the glories of heaven to take on the form of a human servant and die so that we could be set free from the bondage of sin and death. Love will not stand by with indifference and watch others perish at the hands of Satan. It will do everything in its power to rescue them from the jaws of this cruel enemy.

Second, love is grieved when others are treated with injustice. No matter how much someone has pained or tested the limits of love, it finds no secret delight in seeing another wrongfully treated. In the Old Testament, the people of God had often turned their backs on God. They had been unfair and unjust in their dealings with each other. They had cheated and reduced their brothers and sisters to slaves in order to increase their own personal wealth. Despite their crimes, God found no delight in seeing them mistreated and abused when foreigners invaded their land. He held these nations accountable for their crimes against His people.

Third, love does not take delight in being the source of evil and injustice toward another. This is a continuation of the theme of our last meditation. Love is not easily provoked.

It does not find delight in lashing out in vengeance and retaliation. Have you ever chuckled to yourself and said, "I sure put him in his place?" Have you ever patted yourself on the back and said, "Didn't I tell her so?" Have you ever laughed at those cutting remarks that put another person down? Have you ever joined others in their criticism of someone close to you? This is not the way of love.

Sometimes we can be very cruel to each other. Sometimes we jokingly criticize those we are supposed to love. Many times these remarks hurt. Biblical love, said Paul, does not rejoice in these evils. Love will pursue and practice only those things that build up and edify others. It will not be offensive and critical.

In summary, when Paul told the Corinthians that love did not delight in evil, he was telling them that if they loved someone, they would be grieved if that person wandered into evil (see 5:1-2). They would do everything in their power to bring that individual back to the safety of the fold. They would not delight when the object of their love was mistreated. Love would not find pleasure in seeking revenge or harming those it holds dear.

Love Rejoices in the Truth

Love seems to flourish in the context of truth and openness. Where there is truth in a relationship, there is security. Falsehood breeds suspicion and bitterness. Truth is the fertilizer in which biblical love grows. Falsehood, on the other hand, is fertile soil in which Satan can do his work.

Paul also told the Corinthians in verse 6 that love rejoices in the truth. The understanding here is that love soaks up truth like a parched land soaks up water. Truth brings joy, refreshment, and renewal to love. Love feeds hungrily on

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truth. It craves it as lungs crave air. The Greek word for truth is *aletheia*. This word comes from two words. The first part of the word is *a*, which refers to an absence of something. The second part of the word comes from the root *lanthano*, meaning to lie or to hide. The word *aletheia* is the freedom from lies and hypocrisy.

Paul stated in Romans 12:9 that love was to be “sincere.” Without sincerity we live a lie. It is to put on a mask in order to give the impression that we are one thing when, in reality, we are another.

The love of God in us is not put on like makeup. It penetrates to the very core of our being. It saturates everything we do and say. It is real. We all crave this reality. Relationships flourish in this context. The measure of our sincerity is seen in our actions:

“Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth” (1 John 3:18).

Biblical love, according to the apostle John, goes beyond saying, “I love you.” Authentic love backs up what it says by what it does. It affects how we live our lives and how we respond to each other. It is evident in how we handle our disagreements and difficulties. The love of Christ in us reaches out in practical ways. It is not the person who says, “I love you” who truly loves, but rather the one who demonstrates it in everyday life by word and deed.

Truth implies sincerity. Love thrives in an environment of honesty and sincerity. In this sort of relationship, we know where we stand with each other. We are not left guessing. We know that we can count on each other through the good times as well as the bad times. The hard times will

still be there. We may still have our disagreements, but we know that, despite our differences, our love for each other will carry us through these times. This sort of love is something we can depend on.

Truth not only implies sincerity of character, but it also has something to do with communication. If we are truthful in a relationship, we do not find it necessary to hide matters from each other. There are many relationships that are characterized by deceit. This was true in the marriage of Isaac and Rebecca when she encouraged Jacob to deceive Isaac in his old age (see Genesis 27).

Often there is a communication breakdown in relationships. People seek to hide from each other how they are spending money or what they are doing. How many times have you heard statements like, “Don’t tell your father” or “My husband would kill me if he found out?” What do these statements reveal about honesty and truth in relationships? In biblical love there is no need to hide. If we are acting in love, we will be able to speak honestly to others. We will not feel embarrassed or insecure. We will allow others to communicate their desires and failures without being critical. The love of God in us invites others to be transparent and honest. It is in this soil that true biblical love can grow.

For Consideration:

- Can you ever remember a time when you delighted in mocking someone? What does this tell you about how much you loved them at that time?

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- Have you been guilty of being dishonest or hiding things in a relationship? Why have you felt it necessary to do so? What does this reveal to you about your relationship? Ask the Lord to help you deal with these matters.
- How sincere is your love? Does it go beyond words?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to reveal to you any way in which you have hurt those close to you. Seek God's forgiveness and commit yourself to make the necessary changes in your life.
- Ask the Lord to help you be honest in your relationships with others.
- Ask God to give you grace to love not only in word but also in action and truth.

LOVE PROTECTS, TRUSTS, AND HOPES

Read 1 Corinthians 13:7

Looking over the city of Jerusalem, Jesus compared His relationship with its citizens to a hen and her chicks:

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate. (Matthew 23:37-38)

The picture of the mother hen is beautiful. While the mother is exposed to all the elements, under her wings, the chicks are sheltered. They are kept warm and dry despite the rain and cold outside.

Paul told the Corinthians that love protects. The word he used is the word *stego*, which literally means “to be a roof over” or “to cover.” It also has the idea of enduring or

suffering hardship to protect another. Let's go back for a moment to the picture of the mother hen. In order to protect her chicks, the mother hen has to suffer herself. While her chicks are warm and dry, she is exposed to the full force of the wind and rain. She suffers the cold and wet in order to protect her chicks. She becomes a roof over them.

A roof protects us from the elements. Without a roof, we would be terribly exposed. If you love someone, you will be a roof over them. You will be willing to face the foe for the sake of the one you love. Love naturally protects the object of its affection.

There are many things from which we need protection. First, there is need of physical protection. This is true in the case of parents' love for their small children. Mothers and fathers will show their love for their children by protecting them from physical harm. They will child-proof their homes to keep their little ones from dangerous objects. Authentic love wants to protect others from physical harm.

Second, love will protect from spiritual harm. In the book of 2 John, the apostle warned his readers not to allow into their homes anyone who did not preach the gospel (2 John 10). While there are many possible interpretations of this verse, one of these interpretations has to do with protecting the family (whether church family or domestic family) from the evil influences in the world. We will be careful to shelter those we love from the evil influences of the world. We will do our part to help them in their walk with the Lord. Love will do its utmost to fend off evil influences that would cause spiritual harm.

Third, love will protect from emotional harm, which can come in various forms. We can say things to others that will leave them scarred for life. Biblical love will protect

others from this sort of abuse. Love understands the impact of its words and will use them accordingly. When someone is hurt, love comes to the rescue. It bandages the wounds. It reaches out to heal and to build up again. It is encouraging and uplifting.

Love will protect and care for others. It will minister healing when someone is hurt. It never tires of protecting. It will willingly face the foe for the welfare of others.

Love Always Trusts

When we read what Paul said to the Corinthians about love always trusting, we have to wonder what he meant. Not everybody we love has proven worthy of our confidence and trust.

What did Paul mean when he said that love always trusts? Was he saying that love is blind and naïve? Is he telling us that if we love someone, we will overlook their faults and believe everything they tell us? Is he telling us that if we cannot trust our children in certain areas of their lives, then we really don't love them? Very obviously Paul was not saying any of these things. What then does Paul mean when he says that love always trusts?

First, love inspires confidence by being trustworthy. Where love reigns in a marriage, neither partner will stoop to sexual unfaithfulness or emotional disloyalty. True love is reliable. Love will persevere through difficulty and pain. It will never abandon its loved one. We can trust the one who truly loves us no matter the circumstance.

Second, love believes in these it loves. It encourages them to reach their potential in what God has gifted them to do.

In times of discouragement love cheers on the object of its love and trusts God for their victory. It will not give up on the one it loves.

Love flourishes in trust. Love is not negative or suspicious. It seeks to believe the best about others. Where there is deception and dishonesty love cannot grow. Trust is a necessary ingredient in love.

Where there is biblical love, there is confidence and trust. When I say that I love someone, I am, in reality, saying that I promise to be faithful to them, to be there for them, to believe in them, and to communicate the truth to them. I am saying that I am someone they can trust no matter what they are going through.

Love Always Hopes

One of the things about language is that it is constantly changing. The word hope is often used in our society to express uncertainty. When I say that I hope to do something, it usually means that I would like to do it but am not quite sure if it is going to be possible. This is not the way Paul is using the word hope in this passage.

The word *elpizo*, which Paul used, means to confidently expect. It comes from the word *elpis*, meaning to anticipate with pleasure or to wait with joy. There is great confidence and certainty in this word. Look at the way it is used in a number of other Biblical passages:

In his name the nations will put their hope. (Mat 12:21)

If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are to be pitied more than all men. (1 Corinthians 15:19)

(And for this we labor and strive), that we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all men, and especially of those who believe. (1 Tim 4:10)

Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. (Hebrews 11:1)

And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us. (Romans 5:5)

The hope spoken of here is a hope that will never disappoint. It will never let us down. It will always be true. If we want to understand what hope in love means, we need to see it in the context of the person of the Lord Jesus. What is our hope in Him? How does knowing Him give us hope? What hope does He have in and for us?

First, we have every hope and expectation that the Lord Jesus will be faithful to His promises. No matter what life may bring, the Lord Jesus will prove true to His word. When things all around us are dark and we cannot see our way, we can simply close our eyes and leap into the darkness with full confidence that the Lord's arms will be open wide to catch us and direct us through that darkness. We may not understand, but we have every reason to hope with full assurance that He will always come through for us.

Second, the Lord Jesus has great expectations about what He can do in us. He knows the plans He has for us. He

knows the way He can use us for His glory and honor. He has chosen, in His sovereign purposes, to use us in the unfolding of His plans for the universe. He has great expectations for us. He knows us better than we know ourselves. He knows the sin in our lives and hearts, and yet He places His hope in us. He is still willing to use us, despite our failures and shortcomings.

What does all this have to do with our love for each other? There is great confidence and hope in biblical love. If I am truly loved, I am assured that those who love me will be there for me. If I love others, I will be there for them. God's love for us and in us will never disappoint us. Our hope is in God and His unshakeable love for us. When we fail and repent, we can always be fully restored to Him. Because we have this hope and confidence in God, we are able to offer this unshakable love to others for the furtherance of the gospel and the spread of the kingdom of God on earth.

For Consideration:

- Have you ever found yourself saying things to others that hurt or wounded them? Can you think of times where instead of being the protector, you have been the attacker? Confess this to God and those you have wounded.
- Each of us has things we need protection from. What are some of these things? How can you help protect others from negative influences in their lives?

- Have there been times when you have not come through for those you love? What can you do to make this right?

For Prayer:

- Take a moment to think about the ways the Lord has protected you. Thank Him for this protection in your life.
- Take a moment to ask the Lord to help you be someone that others can believe in and trust. Ask Him to show you the areas of your life that you need to deal with in this regard.
- Take a moment to confess your shortcomings to God and to the ones you have disappointed in love.
- Thank the Lord for the hope we have in Him. Thank Him that He places His Holy Spirit in us to make us trustworthy to do the work He gifts us to do.
- Ask God to make you one in whom people can have absolute hope and confidence.

29

LOVE ALWAYS PERSEVERES AND NEVER FAILS

Read 1 Corinthians 13:7-13

There are times when we get the idea that love makes everything all right. The fairy tales we heard when we were children told us that everyone lived happily ever after. We are surprised when a relationship turns sour. The fact of the matter, however, is that in this sin-cursed earth, relationships can at times become very bitter.

My mind goes back to the Old Testament to a young wife by the name of Leah. She was married to a great man of God by the name of Jacob. The problem, however, was that Jacob also had another wife whom he loved more than Leah. As you read the story of Leah and Jacob in the book of Genesis, you see a woman who desperately tried to get her husband to love her, but to no avail. Throughout her life Leah would struggle with being the unloved wife (see Genesis 29). There are similar cases like this in our day.

Paul told the Corinthians that love persevered. The word for persevere is the word *hupomeno*, which literally means “to stay under” or “endure.” The idea here is that the person who loves is willing to remain under pain or not flee away from the person who is causing pain. I want you to realize here that this is not an easy thing for love. Consider for example the life of our Lord. Listen to what the writer of the book of Hebrews tells us about him in Hebrews 12:2:

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

We know for a fact that the cross was not a pleasant experience for the Lord Jesus. Physically, emotionally, and spiritually He wrestled with this deepest struggle of His earthly life. What was it that caused Him to endure the shame and awful agony? Was it not His love for us? Listen to what Jesus tells us in Matthew 10:22:

All men will hate you because of me, but he who stands firm to the end will be saved.

Jesus told us that we too can expect to have struggles in this life. Because we belong to Him, we will be rejected and mocked. People will hate us because of the Lord Jesus. Out of love for Him, however, He asks us to stand firm and endure these insults. Perseverance is a real measure of love.

Even King Solomon knew that there would be many struggles in relationships. He also knew however, that authentic love would not bail out when things got difficult. It is very difficult to extinguish biblical love:

Many waters cannot quench love; rivers cannot wash it away. If one were to give all the wealth of his house for love, it would be utterly scorned (Song of Solomon 8:7).

There will be times when love cries out in pain. Love will grieve. There may even be times when we wonder if we will not be crushed as we remain under the load we bear. Moses felt this pain. Listen to what he told God in Numbers 11:14: "I cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me." Here was a man under a heavy load. Moses served out of love not only for his people but also for his God. Despite his love for God and his nation, he cried out in pain as the load weighed heavily on him.

Yes, love may experience deep pain. The test of love, however, is not found in ease but in trial. It is not the young teen couple who has never experienced difficulty in their relationship who really knows what love is. It is the couple who has persevered through marital strife, rebellious children, conflict of personalities, and a whole host of other difficulties and problems who truly understand love. True love shines in all its brilliance against the black backdrop of pain and difficulty.

I am reminded of a family with a mentally handicapped child that attended a church I attended. I have never ceased to be amazed at the dedication of those parents to care for and minister to their son. Even after they were retired, their son continued to live with them requiring tremendous care and attention. When the husband died the mother looked after and cared for her son by herself. Even as an old woman, the mother didn't complain about the extra work or the things she had never been able to do in life. Her love for her son was a persevering love that suffered much but never gave up.

Love Never Fails

Who among us has never once failed to love others? If we are honest with ourselves, there are countless times when we have acted out of pride or selfishness in our relationships. What did Paul mean when he wrote that love never fails?

The word used here for never, in the original language, means “not at any time” or “never at all.” The word fail is the Greek word *ekpipto*. This word means “to drop,” “to fall away,” or “to be driven from one’s course. Paul was saying that true love will never at any time fall away or be driven from its course.

Does this mean, then, that if I fail someone, I have just proven that I do not love them? We know that this is not true. Every day we fail those we love in small and sometimes big ways. We know deep in our hearts, however, that we still love them. It would be more true to say that we fail our loved ones not because we don’t love them but because we are not acting in love.

It is one thing to love someone in our hearts but quite another thing to act on that love. All too often we do not put into practice the admonition of the apostle John: “Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth” (1 John 3:18).

In 1 Corinthians 13:8 Paul told the Corinthians that prophecy, tongues, and knowledge would cease to exist, but love would never fail. In the larger context of this letter Paul had been speaking of spiritual gifts. He wanted to remind the Corinthians that while these gifts would one day cease, love would never fail or come to an end. While there would be no more use for spiritual gifts in the presence of our

Lord, our love for him would grow throughout all eternity. This was Paul's way of reminding the Corinthians of the importance of love to the body of Christ.

Paul is telling the Corinthians here that love will not be here today and gone tomorrow. True love will not end. It will continue through the storms, disappointment and shortcomings of the ones it loves.

As we have been examining the various aspects of love, I am sure you have asked yourself the question: How could I ever love like that? The day is coming, if you know the Lord Jesus as your Savior, when you will love like this. Paul used the illustration of a child. When he was a child, he did childish things; but when he became a man, he put away those childish things. Here below we know only in part; but when the perfect comes, we will know even as we are known. What was Paul telling the Corinthians here? Was he not telling them that here below we will indeed struggle to love as God has challenged us to love. Here below we will wrestle with our childish, sinful nature. Here below we will only know in part what it means to truly love one another; but the day is coming when all this will change. Because love will never fail (never pass away), it will be with us throughout eternity. There in heaven we will know the fullness of love. There we will be set free from the petty things that keep us from loving. There in heaven we will be delivered from ourselves and set free to love each other even as Jesus loves us today.

What does this tell us? It tells us that if there is one thing worth investing in this life, it is love. It is one of the few things we will be able to take with us to heaven.

Be assured that it is the will of the Lord to teach us to love. Love is the fragrance of heaven itself. Love was the

motivation behind the Lord's life and death for us on earth. It is the will of the Lord that I know His love and show it to those around me. Are you struggling with the teaching of this passage about love? Do you feel that this type of love is beyond you? Let the Lord Jesus fill you with this love. To love like this is not natural to us. We can only love as Paul teaches us by letting the Lord Jesus live and love through us. Shall He whose desire it is that we experience and show His love to one another not reveal it to us? May the Lord give us grace to love as He loves.

For Consideration:

- Do you have to persevere under a heavy burden in a relationship today? Would you still love others if you knew that they would never provide you with what you are looking for in your relationships? What does this tell you about your love?
- Examine your relationships. Is there any way in which you are not acting out of love towards those around you?
- Have you ever found yourself questioning the love of God for you? What does this meditation tell you about God's desire for you to experience and know His love in your life? What keeps you from experiencing the fullness of God's love?

For Prayer:

- Take a moment to ask the Lord to help you love others even as He loves you.

- Thank the Lord that He is willing to teach us to love.
- Ask God to give you strength to persevere in love.

TONGUES AND PROPHECY

Read 1 Corinthians 14:1-25

Having reminded the Corinthians to pursue love, Paul then challenged them to “eagerly desire” spiritual gifts (verse 1). This was the second time Paul had made this challenge (see 12:31). This underlines the importance of spiritual gifts in the body.

God has chosen to expand his kingdom through people like you and me. He has given us the spiritual gifts necessary for that to take place. How far would we get with our own natural strength and talents? Without God’s gifts we would surely fail. It is for this reason that the apostle Paul encouraged the Corinthians to eagerly desire these gifts.

While all of the gifts of the Spirit are important (chapter 12), Paul focused his attention on the gifts of prophecy and tongues in this section. It would appear that there was a misunderstanding about these particular gifts in the church of Corinth. Paul wanted the Corinthians to know how to use these gifts more effectively.

Paul begins by comparing the gift of tongues with the gift of prophecy. In verse 2 Paul told the Corinthians that the one who speaks in tongues does not speak to humans but to God. The Holy Spirit uses the tongue of the person with this gift to offer up prayers to God. He or she becomes an instrument through which the Spirit of God prays on behalf of the kingdom.

Tongues are not, in this case, used to communicate with other people. In fact, the words spoken are not even understood by those who speak them (verse 2). Although the person speaking in tongues speaks divine mysteries, the words are not understood without the gift of interpretation.

Those who prophesy, on the other hand, speak clearly to people for their strengthening, encouragement, and comfort (verses 3-4). While tongues need interpretation, prophecy is clear and edifying. If tongues are not understood, what is the purpose of the gift? Paul gave two reasons why God gave the gift of tongues to the body.

Personal Edification

Those who speak in tongues edify themselves (verse 4). There is great blessing for the individual who has received the gift of tongues. The Spirit of God is pleased to use his or her tongue to proclaim or intercede on behalf of the kingdom of God. God enables these believers to communicate with Him in times when they do not know how to pray. Though these believers often do not understand what they are praying, they know that they are communicating with God. While Paul personally saw prophecy as a better gift because it edified the church, he coveted the gift of tongues for every believer (verse 5).

Public Edification

According to Paul, there is another use for the gift of tongues. If tongues are interpreted, they can edify the whole body (verse 5). Left without interpretation, tongues remain mysteries. There was a place for the public speaking of tongues in the presence of an interpreter. In this way the gift was being used in a prophetic way to strengthen, encourage and comfort the church. To explain more fully the difference between tongues and prophecy, Paul gave the Corinthians some practical examples from real life in verses 6-12.

If visitors came to your church when everyone was speaking in tongues, what benefit would they receive? They would not understand anything that was being said. If, on the other hand, someone had a revelation from God—a prophecy, a word of wisdom, or a word of instruction—they would be built up and strengthened by what they heard.

Paul gave a second example in verses 7-8. Unless the sounds of a musical instrument made distinctive notes, the listeners would not understand what was being played. If a military trumpet sounded but its notes were not clear, how would the army know that it was time to get ready for battle?

In the same way, said Paul, unless a person produced sounds that made sense to the listeners, there was no profit to those who heard those sounds (verses 9-11). The purpose of language is to communicate. In light of these facts, Paul encouraged the believers in Corinth to excel in the gifts that built up the body such as the gift of prophecy.

Because of the nature of the gift of tongues, the person who spoke in tongues was encouraged to pray for the gift

of interpretation (verse 13). In this way, the gift could be used not only for personal edification but also for the greater good of the whole body.

In verse 14 Paul told the Corinthians that when people prayed in tongues their minds were unfruitful. In other words, people do not understand what they are saying while speaking in tongues. The Holy Spirit speaks through them in words not understood by the speaker. This did not mean that the gift was useless, however, for God was still using the individual and his prayers in this unknown language for His glory. While using this gift the mind may be "unfruitful", Paul encouraged the Corinthians to engage their minds, especially in the context of public worship. He encouraged them to strive to give deep thought to their worship as they reflected on their God.

Paul went on in verse 18 to thank the Lord that he spoke in tongues more than any of the Corinthians. It is clear from this that Paul not only had the gift but also was often edified in its use. While Paul praised the Lord for this gift, he also believed it was better, in public, to speak five words that were understood by the body than ten thousand in tongues. While an individual may be praising God thorough the use of the gift of tongues, no one else is edified (verse 17). For this reason, we should not be sidetracked by the public use of tongues. Our concern, when we gather as believers, is not just to worship God personally but to edify the body with our spiritual gifts. In our public gatherings, we are to emphasize those gifts that bring the greatest edification to the body of Christ.

Regarding the spiritual gift of tongues, the church of Corinth had been thinking like children (verse 20). They had discovered this new and wonderful gift and were fascinated by it. The gift of tongues was being abused. The

believers in Corinth needed to find balance in its use. Speaking in tongues was not a sign of spiritual maturity nor was it the most important gift. The body of Christ needed all the gifts to be operational if it was to advance the gospel message.

In verse 22 Paul quotes a passage from Isaiah 28. Here the prophet told the people that the day was coming when the Lord would speak to His people through the lips of foreigners, and yet they still would not listen. The unbelieving Israelites of the Old Testament heard foreign tongues spoken to them as a sign of judgment, when the Assyrians and Babylonians entered their land. The sound of these foreign tongues revealed to these rebellious and unbelieving Jews that God was true to His word and that He would demand an accounting for their sin and rebellion.

Paul told the Corinthians in verse 22 that in a similar way, tongues were a sign for unbelievers. The gift of tongues demonstrated the power of the Holy Spirit at work. Even though unbelievers did not understand what was being said, they would be aware of the power of the Holy Spirit in operation through this gift.

Prophecy also had a similar effect on the unbeliever. He reminded the Corinthians that if unbelievers came into the worship service and heard a clear word of prophecy, they would be spoken to directly by God. This prophecy would judge unbelievers in their sinful ways. The prophecy would also reveal the secrets of their hearts. When this happened, they would know that God was not only present but also personally speaking to them. The result would be that the unbeliever would fall down and worship the Lord God, confessing that God was in truly among them (verse 24-25).

These verses tell us something about the gift of prophecy. Prophecy is the voice of God speaking out against sin. Through the prophet, God reminds people of their sinful ways and challenges them to return to Him. Notice also that prophecy laid bare the secrets of the heart. Throughout the Bible, the Lord revealed to His prophets the secrets of the heart. Nathan knew, for example, that David had committed adultery with Bathsheba (2 Samuel 12:7-10). The prophet was given the ability to see things as God saw them. There is a clear supernatural element to prophecy. It is more than teaching the word—it is revealing the heart of God for a specific need in the body of Christ.

In summary, Paul reminded the Corinthians that while both prophecy and tongues were spiritual gifts given to the body of Christ, prophecy occupied a more important role in public worship. Unless tongues were interpreted, they brought no specific edification in public worship. Through the gift of prophecy, however, God spoke specifically and powerfully to the whole body. While both gifts were necessary for the full functioning of the body, the church was challenged to excel in the use of those gifts that brought greater edification to the church as a whole.

For Consideration:

- What is the difference between tongues and prophecy?
- What purpose does the gift of tongues have?
- What role does prophecy have in the church?

- Is there evidence of balance in the use of spiritual gifts in your church?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord for the gifts He has given to the body. Ask the Lord to help you to use them faithfully as He leads.
- Thank God for those who have used their spiritual gifts to encourage and strengthen you.
- Ask God to give your church all the gifts necessary for the growth and building up of the body as a whole.

ORDERED WORSHIP

Read 1 Corinthians 14:26-40

Having described the difference between the gift of tongues and the gift of prophecy, Paul moved on to speak to the Corinthians about their worship services. It appears that worship services were getting out of hand in Corinth. Discipline and order needed to be re-established. This section of 1 Corinthians gives us a better example of how the worship service of the early church was structured.

Paul began in verse 26 by giving the Corinthians a general principle to follow in their worship. When you come together, he said, everything should be done for the strengthening of the church. One very important goal in gathering together as believers is to strengthening each other in faith. Does your church service serve to strengthen the body of Christ? If it does not, you should give some serious thought to improving this.

When the New Testament believers gathered, they came prepared to participate in worship and the strengthening of the body. Notice in verse 26 how Paul said “everyone” had

a hymn, a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. The word “everyone” is important. The implication here is that everyone had a role to play.

I remember some years ago attending a church. The pastor led the service, sang the special music, prayed all the prayers, played his guitar to lead the singing, and preached the message. As I left, I felt as though I had spent the last hour simply watching this pastor worship God but had not been given the opportunity to express my own heart. Paul expected the Corinthians to each have something to contribute to the worship of their Lord and Savior. It was in the context of the worship service that many of the gifts of the Spirit would be used. Is your worship service structured in such a way that the gifts of the Spirit can be used to their fullest measure?

Because people were coming to worship prepared to share their own hearts, the possibility of disorder were great. In order to remedy this, Paul encouraged the leaders to provide a structure that would allow the orderly use of gifts while at the same time, eliminate confusion and chaos. Paul spends the rest of the chapter giving leaders some guidelines for ordered worship.

Paul encouraged the use of tongues in the worship service (verse 27). At the same time, however, he realized the need for guidelines in their use. First, tongues needed to be limited to two or three individuals. It would be easy for the whole service to be dominated by those who spoke in tongues. Paul wanted to see all the gifts functioning in the worship service and not only those who spoke in tongues. For this reason, Paul encouraged the leadership to limit those speaking publicly in tongues to two or three in a given worship service.

Second, also concerning the use of tongues, Paul encouraged the leadership to see that those who did speak in tongues spoke one at a time. The temptation was obviously for everyone with a tongue to speak at the same time. This only led to confusion.

Seeing that public tongues were given for the edification of the larger body, it was necessary that they be interpreted. If there was no interpreter present, then the tongue speaker was to refrain from making this tongue public and instead speak it privately to themselves and to God. Paul did not restrict private speaking in tongues without interpretation. The limitation here was in making that tongue public without an interpretation, thus only creating confusion for the body.

Similar restrictions were placed on the use of prophecy (verses 29-33). Only two or three prophets were to speak in a given worship service. As the prophecies were being spoken, others who had the gift of prophecy were to listen and weigh carefully what was being said (verse 29). None of these prophets was infallible. "The spirit of the prophets are subject to the control of prophets," said Paul (verse 32). In other words, what a prophet spoke needed to be confirmed by other prophets. A lone prophet could be dangerous.

Notice next that Paul wanted the prophets to prophecy one at a time, so that everyone would be instructed and encouraged. If a prophet was speaking and another prophet received a word from the Lord, then the first was to be quiet and allow the second prophet to speak. All of this was simply maintain order within the body of Christ.

Notice that these prophetic words were not prepared in advance. They seemed to have been spontaneous in nature.

Notice as well that these prophetic words were for the instruction and encouragement of the body (verse 31). The prophetic word had a teaching element to it.

Paul moved from tongues and prophecy to the place of women in Corinthian worship services. It should be noted here that what Paul said about women was not limited to the church of Corinth. He clearly stated that his instructions were for all the churches of the saints (verse 33).

Women, according to Paul, were to remain silent in church. They were not to speak but to remain in submission, as the Law required (verse 34). Notice that the reason Paul gave for why women should not speak was the law of God.

Paul was not likely referring to any one law here but to the general teaching regarding the role of men and women. God created woman to be a helpmate for man. This is the teaching of Genesis 2:18. This principle was repeated in the New Testament by Paul when he told the Corinthians that “the head of every woman is man” (11:3). He taught this same principle in Ephesians 5:23 when he said: “the husband is the head of the wife.” God gave the role of headship to men. It may be for this reason that Paul challenged the women to be silent.

It is important that we understand what Paul meant about women being silent in the church. Did Paul mean that a woman was to maintain absolute silence in the presence of men during worship? This cannot be what Paul meant because he had already given instructions concerning how women were to cover their heads when they prayed or prophesied in worship (11:5). Scripture contains various references to women praying in the temple or in the presence of men (Acts 1:14; 2:18; Luke 2:36-37).

The context indicates that the speaking Paul referred to here had something to do with a woman refusing to be in submission: "They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission" (verse 34). This same connection was made by Paul in 1 Timothy 2:12:

"I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent."

What Paul seems to be saying is that the woman was not to take authority in the church by preaching or teaching, a role that was seen as authoritative.

It should be noted that the women of the day were, for the most part, uneducated. Paul encouraged women, if they needed explanation of what was being said, to ask their husbands to explain it to them at home to avoid confusion in worship. According to Paul, it was a disgrace for a woman to speak in the church (verse 35). She needed to accept her role as helpmate and be content to exercise that role without taking authority over men.

Paul concluded this section on orderly worship by stating his authority. He reminded the Corinthians that what he had told them came from the Lord. To disregard the principles Paul spoke of here was to incur judgment. God would turn His back on the church that ignored this teaching (verse 38). This shows us the importance Paul gave to the principles He taught in this passage.

In conclusion, Paul told the church of Corinth to be eager to prophecy and not to forbid the speaking in tongues. In all this, however, the church was to be careful to do everything in an orderly and fitting manner.

For Consideration:

- Does your church provide an opportunity for the use of the various gifts of the body? What gifts are not being used in your church?
- What guidelines does Paul give for the use of tongues and prophecy in this passage? Are these principles respected in the church of our day?
- What outlets for ministry does your church provide for women to use their gifts? Are these gifts being used in submission to God's overall purpose for the church?
- Is your worship service designed to strengthen the body of Christ? How have you been strengthened as you have attended your church's worship time?

For Prayer:

- Ask God to show you the role you need to play in your church.
- Ask God to open opportunities in your church for all the gifts He has given to be exercised.

32

HE IS RISEN

Read 1 Corinthians 15:1-34

There was a false teaching circulating in the area of Corinth. Some people were saying that there was no resurrection (verse 12). Paul wanted to set the record straight. He did not want any confusion on this important doctrine.

He began by reminding the Corinthians that it was through the gospel he had preached to them that they had been saved from their sins (verses 1-2). He was assured that these Corinthians had stood firmly on the truths of this gospel.

Paul went on in verse 2 to remind the Corinthians that they would be saved by this gospel he preached to them “if they held firmly” to the end, otherwise they had believed in vain. Paul seems to be telling the Corinthians that salvation is not simply a commitment to doctrine. Correct doctrine is important, but it will not save anyone. You may understand the message of the gospel perfectly in your mind, but if you are not experiencing the reality of it in your life, it means nothing. There are people who believe that Jesus died for

their sins and rose again from the dead but they will not be in heaven because they have never truly been saved. Paul told the Corinthians that they must not only believe these words but “hold firmly to them.”

If you hold firmly to something, you will never let it go. You will not be distracted from it. Paul is telling the Corinthians that this was the test of a true believer. True believers not only believe in the doctrine of Christ and His work but also hold firmly to it as their only hope of salvation. Authentic believers will not be tempted by modern philosophies. Their eyes will be fixed firmly on their Lord and Savior alone. They will place all their confidence on Him. They will live and die for the truth of the gospel.

Having made this distinction, Paul moved on to discuss with the Corinthians what the message of the gospel really was. The gospel, according to Paul, consisted of three principle points. First, Jesus Christ came as a sacrifice to die for our sins according to the Scriptures (verse 3).

Second, Jesus was buried (verse 4). His death was real. There were those who tried to say that Jesus did not really die. Paul wanted to make it clear that Jesus went all the way for our sins. If Jesus did not die, the penalty for our sins would not have been paid. The law of God stated that the penalty for sin was death (Romans 6:23; Ezekiel 18:4). Jesus truly did die for our sins. His burial was proof of His death.

Third, Jesus rose from the dead (verse 4). Death could not keep Him in the grave. He was victorious over sin, death, and hell. Because of this He is our assurance of victory.

Paul went on to tell the Corinthians that Christ’s resurrection was witnessed by a number of people (verses 5-8). He

appeared to Peter and the twelve disciples. Later on, He appeared to over five hundred. We are not told when the five hundred saw Jesus, but at the time of Paul's writing, many of these individuals were still alive. Later on, Jesus appeared again to James and the apostles and finally to Paul himself (probably on the road to Damascus).

Paul was saying that there were plenty of people who witnessed the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. The fact of the resurrection was certain. There could be no doubt that Jesus was alive and had conquered death and hell.

Paul himself was an eyewitness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, although he felt unworthy of this honor. In verse 9 he reminded his readers that he was the least of all the apostles because he had persecuted the church. He knew that, after all he had done against Christians, he did not deserve to be forgiven and given the ministry of apostle. By the grace of God, however, Paul had become a believer and a servant of the Lord. That grace of God worked in him, giving him a passion for the lost. In fact, God became so real to Paul that he worked and served Him more than all the other apostles (verse 10).

Paul reminded the Corinthians how important it was to believe in the resurrection of Christ. Some believed that there was no resurrection (verse 12). To Paul, this was foolishness. How could anyone say that there was no resurrection when His resurrection was clearly witnessed by hundreds of people?

In verses 14-19 Paul reminded the Corinthians of just how futile things would be if Jesus had not risen from the dead. First, if Christ was not raised, then Paul's preaching and faith were in vain (verse 14). The gospel of salvation he preached was solidly anchored in the resurrection. If Christ

was not raised from the dead, then what Paul preached was useless, and he risked his life for nothing.

Second, if Christ was not raised, the witnesses to that resurrection had lied (verse 15). If the resurrection was not true, then Paul and all the apostles who preached the gospel were liars and deceivers. They were offering a false hope to a dying world.

Third, according to Paul, if Christ was not raised the Christian faith was futile and those who believed it before us are lost eternally (verse 15). What purpose would it serve to be a Christian if our God was not victorious over sin and death? Could we serve a God who could not overcome sin and death? What hope would there be for eternity if the Lord Jesus could not overcome the grave? If Christ did not conquer the grave, then there can be no hope of anything beyond this world.

Paul went on to say that if there is no resurrection, Christians are to be pitied above all people (verse 19). They risk their lives for a false hope. They serve a God who could never save. For Paul, the truth about the resurrection was essential. It was the central hope of the believer.

In verses 30-32 Paul reminded the Corinthians of how futile his own ministry would be if there were no resurrection. Why would he endanger his life preaching a gospel if it were not true? Every day he had to die to himself to serve the Lord Jesus. In Ephesus, he fought wild beasts because of his stand in the gospel. Why would he do these things if Jesus were not raised from the dead? All his efforts would be fruitless and vain. We are not told what sort of "wild beasts" Paul had to face in Ephesus. Some believe that Paul had been thrown to the wild beasts in an arena and survived. Others see him speaking symbolically about the

people who had made his time in Ephesus very unpleasant.

Having reminded the Corinthians of the futility of their faith if there were no resurrection, Paul proceeded to reassure his readers that the Lord had indeed risen and their hope was not in vain. Christ is the first fruits from the dead, Paul told his readers in verse 20. The first fruits from the garden were presented to the Lord as a thanksgiving offering (Exodus 23:16; Deuteronomy 25:17). This first fruit from the land was a promise of more to come. As Jesus was the first to be raised from the dead, He is the promise of more resurrections to come. Adam brought death to the world by his sin, but Jesus brought resurrection from death to those who believe in Him (verses 21-23).

According to Paul, the Lord Jesus will destroy all other dominion, authority, and power (verse 24). Christ will return to earth to conquer and destroy all the enemies of God. The last enemy to be destroyed will be death itself (verse 26). God the Father has given to Christ this authority. After He has conquered death and all of our enemies, the Lord Jesus will victoriously turn everything over to His Father (verse 28). Paul speaks with absolute assurance here. Christ has overcome death and he will destroy its power once and for all.

In Corinth there were those who were baptized on behalf of their departed loved ones, with the hope that this baptism would impart some favor in the afterlife. Nowhere in Scripture is this commanded for believers. Paul was not encouraging this type of baptism. He was merely using this as an illustration to prove a point about the resurrection. When Paul was in Athens, he used an idol dedicated to an unknown God to share the message of the gospel with the people of Athens (Acts 17). In using this idol as a

witnessing tool, Paul was not condoning the practice of idolatry. He was merely using a cultural practice to illustrate the gospel. Here Paul seems to have been doing the same thing. He reminded the people of this pagan practice and asked why anyone would practice a baptism for the dead, if there were no resurrection? Even the pagans of Corinth believed in a resurrection.

In this section of Scripture, Paul emphasized just how important it is to hold tightly to the doctrine of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Without this doctrine there is no hope. Our preaching would be futile and living and suffering for the gospel would be in vain (verses 30-33). If Christ did not rise from the dead, we all live only for the present and perish in our sins.

Paul pleaded with the Corinthians to live respectfully in the truth about the resurrection and salvation in Christ. They were to share that truth with others who were ignorant of God (verse 34). The truth about a resurrection and salvation from sin was too good to keep to themselves.

For Consideration:

- What does this chapter teach us about the importance of the doctrine of the resurrection of Jesus?
- What does Paul teach us about being a true believer? What is difference between a true believer and one who simply understands the message of the gospel?

- Do we live our lives in light of the fact that the Lord Jesus is alive and returning one day to this earth?
- What impact will our understanding of the resurrection from the dead have on how we live our lives?
- Where would we be without a hope of the resurrection from the dead?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that He has conquered death.
- Ask God to help you to live your life with the understanding that He has risen to offer you new life and hope. Ask Him to set you free from the futility of living only for this life.
- Ask the Lord to give you the assurance that you are a true believer and not merely one who understands the message of the gospel intellectually. Ask God to help you to live in the reality of the salvation He has offered you in Christ.

WHAT HAPPENS TO THE DEAD

Read 1 Corinthians 15:35-58

Paul's discussion about the resurrection brought up some practical questions. If there was a resurrection, as Paul claimed, how would the dead be raised? What would the resurrected body be like? Paul addresses these particular questions in this next section.

To answer these questions, Paul began by sharing with the Corinthians an example from the world of plants. When you sow a seed, he told the Corinthians, it is necessary that the seed die in order that a plant might grow in its place. When small seeds are planted in the garden, the expectation is that those small seeds will produce plants that, in turn, will produce fruit. The seed does not at all resemble the fully matured plant. In a very similar way, when this earthly body dies and is planted in the grave, we can expect that when it is raised to life again, it will be very different from the body we presently have.

Not all flesh is the same (verse 39). In the animal kingdom, birds have one type of body and fish have another. Their bodies are suited to the environment in which they live.

In the same way, there is a difference between an earthly body and a heavenly body (verse 40-41). Just as the sun and the moon differ in splendor, so will our earthly body differ from our heavenly body. We should not expect that we will go to heaven with these present bodies. God will give us a new body suitable for resurrection life. In what way will our new heavenly body differ from this earthly body? Paul described some of the differences.

First, our new body will be imperishable (verse 42). We know how fragile life is here on this earth. At best, we might live 80 or 90 years and then we die. Many things can shorten those years of our life. Sickness, tragedy, or violence can snuff out our lives in an instant. This will not be the case with our new bodies. They will never die. Sickness will not harm them. Old age will never weaken them.

Second, the new body will be glorious (verse 43). The present body we now have is a marvel of creation. The abilities we have to see, hear, and speak are wonderful. This body reflects something of the glory and majesty of the Creator. On the other hand, however, this body deteriorates and is capable of the worst forms of crimes imaginable. My heart can be deceitful and corrupt beyond measure. My mouth can utter profane and hurtful words. The effects of sin have corrupted this marvel of creation.

All this corruption will be reversed in the age to come. The new body will be glorious. It will reflect the glory of the One who created it in a way that it cannot now. It will be unaffected by sin and the consequences of sin. In the heavenly body, I will no longer wrestle with my sinful ways and

temptations. My lusts and evil desires will be no more. No longer will evil and corrupt words be heard from my lips. This new body will be glorious. It will be a clear reflection of Christ.

Third, the new body will be powerful (verse 43). In this present body, I am limited. In reality, as wonderful as this human earthly body is, it is weak and helpless. Tiny insects are able to carry objects many times their weight. This is not true of the human body. I have never ceased to be amazed at how tiny animals are able to find a hole in a tree or in the ground somewhere and survive through even the coldest of winters. The human body is incapable of doing this. As we have already said, this human body is prone to becoming tired, weak, and sick. While my heavenly body will not be all-powerful (God alone is all-powerful), it will be a strong and healthy body unlike anything I have experienced here below.

Fourth, the new body will be spiritual (verse 44). We should not understand from this that we will not have physical bodies. Even the Lord Jesus, when He rose from the dead, had a physical body that the disciples could both touch and recognize (Luke 24:39). This body, however, will also be a spiritual body. While the new body will be physical in form, it is a body that is in tune with God and His eternal plans.

We received our earthly bodies through Adam, the first man, as we are all his descendants. Our new bodies, however, come through Christ. Paul reminded the Corinthians in verse 48 that “as is the man from heaven, so also are those who are of heaven”. Even as we are presently like Adam, we will one day be like Christ (verse 49).

Paul went on to remind his readers in verse 50 that “flesh and blood” cannot inherit the kingdom of God. When Paul spoke here about flesh and blood, he was referring to the earthly human body. He was simply saying that this present body of flesh and blood will not go with us to heaven. This body we will shed with all its sin and imperfections. We will take an imperishable and sinless body with us to heaven. Even those who do not die before the Lord returns will need to shed this present body of flesh and blood before entering heaven (verse 51).

When will all this happen, and how will it happen? Paul reminded the Corinthians that this whole process was a mystery. No human can understand the mind of God. This process of raising the dead and giving them a new body is beyond our ability to understand.

Paul did know, however, that this process would be an instantaneous process. In other words, we will be changed in the twinkling of an eye (verse 52). In the time it takes for you to blink, you will receive a new body.

When will this process take place? Paul reminded the Corinthians that this change would take place at the last trumpet (verse 52). That trumpet will sound when God raises the dead on the last day. On that day we will all be given our imperishable bodies. This implies that believers, whose physical bodies are in the grave, have not yet received their resurrection bodies, although their souls have gone to be with the Lord. On the day when the Lord God transforms our dead bodies into resurrection bodies and swallows up death in victory, heavenly souls will be clothed in their resurrection bodies (verse 54).

What happens to the old body? The earthly body decomposes in the grave. We will never see that body again. The

body we will see is a completely new body. If our old earthly bodies are not taken with us to heaven, how are we to understand the resurrection of the dead? God will raise up from the grave a new body that will be joined together with our soul. Even as He raised up Adam from the dust of the ground on the day of creation, so again He will raise up a new body for each believer in the grave. That new body will be clothed with the imperishable. It will never die. Death will have no victory over this body. Sin caused the old body to die. This was the result of the curse on Adam (see Genesis 3:19). That curse only had an effect on the earthly body. It cannot touch this new, heavenly body (verse 56). All this is possible through the work of the Lord Jesus. He gives us the victory (verse 57). Because He has dealt with sin, death's sting has been destroyed.

In light of these truths, we ought to stand firm (verse 58). Nothing should move us from our commitment to Christ and His kingdom. Nothing should distract us from our labors. We know that our efforts will not be in vain. Our hope is secure. The worst this world can do to us is take our perishable body from us. God, however will replace that body with a new heavenly one.

What is clear from Paul's teaching here is that there will be a resurrection in the end times. Our old bodies will perish in the grave but God will rise up a new body that will join our soul in heaven. In this we have great hope.

For Consideration:

- What limitations do we have in our present bodies? What promises does Paul give us here concerning our new bodies?
- What kind of bodies will we be given at the resurrection? What does Paul teach us about those bodies?
- How should the understanding of the resurrection influence how we live for and serve the Lord today?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord for the precious promises He gives us in this section of Scripture.
- Ask God to help you to place your priorities on things above and not on the temporary things of this earth.
- Thank the Lord for this earthly body in which we can serve Him. Thank Him that He promises a new and glorious body to all who will love and accept Him.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Read 1 Corinthians 16:1-24

Paul concludes his letter to the Corinthians with a series of comments on various subjects. We will examine these individually.

Collection for Jerusalem (verses 1-4)

Paul began with some comments about an offering that the Corinthians were collecting for the church in Jerusalem. Both the Corinthian and Galatian believers were collecting money to ease the burden of poverty among believers in Jerusalem. Paul encouraged the Corinthians to put money aside each Sunday when they met. Some people could give more than others, but each person was to contribute what they could. Paul planned to visit the Corinthians, and he wanted the collection to be completed prior to his arrival. Paul would write letters of introduction for certain men to take this money to the church in Jerusalem. According to verse 4, he was also willing to accompany them on this journey.

What is important for us to note here is that the apostle encouraged the Corinthian believers to consider the needs of the larger body of Christ. They were not to be so concerned about their own financial needs that they forgot the needs of suffering believers in other cities.

Paul's Desire to Visit Corinth (verses 5-9)

It was Paul's desire to visit the Corinthians. He planned to visit them when he went through the region of Macedonia. He knew that the Corinthians needed to be grounded more fully in the Word. He wanted to spend time with them, teaching and encouraging them in the faith.

Paul also wanted to visit Ephesus. There was a door of opportunity for the gospel in this area. We are not told what this opportunity was. It is clear, however, that the Lord had a work that He wanted to do in Ephesus, and Satan was also moving to counter that work. Paul was not afraid to face Satan. He knew that although the enemy is real, God is greater. His confidence was in the Lord God Almighty.

Timothy's Visit (verses 10-11)

Paul informed the Corinthians that Timothy wanted to visit them as well. Paul reassured the Corinthians of Timothy's sincere character and work for the Lord. They were to treat him with the dignity he deserved as a servant of God and send him on his way so that he could join Paul.

Apollos' Visit (verse 12)

Paul had strongly urged Apollos to visit the Corinthians, but his schedule was such that he was not able to go immediately. Apollos would visit Corinth when he had the opportunity. We are not told why Paul felt so strongly about this matter. Could it be because of the respect that certain individuals had for Apollos in Corinth? Clearly, Paul's ultimate concern was that the Corinthians be trained and encouraged in their faith. Paul believed that Apollos had much to contribute to this process.

What is important for us to understand is that Paul had a deep concern for the discipleship of those who came to know the Lord. In this chapter alone, we see the efforts Paul went through to ensure that the Corinthians matured in their faith. He spent a great amount of time writing this letter to them. He wanted to visit them personally to encourage and instruct them. He wanted Timothy and Apollos to visit them as well. Follow-up discipleship was important to the ministry of the apostle Paul.

Call to Stand Firm (verse 13)

While Paul did his utmost to send teachers and encourages to the Corinthians, he realized that the Corinthians needed to take a stand themselves. He challenged them therefore to stand firm in the faith. In light of the obstacles on their path, they were to be strong and courageous. In all that they did, they were to act in love as he had taught them (chapter 13).

A Word about Stephanas (verses 15-18)

Paul spoke to the Corinthians about the family of Stephanas. Paul had baptized this family (1:16). They were among the first believers in Achaia and had devoted themselves to the service of the saints. While they did not receive the praise they deserved, their work was very important.

It appears that Stephanas and his friends Fortunatus and Achaius had come to visit Paul. Their visit was a real encouragement to him in a time when he particularly needed it. Stephanas excelled in this ministry of encouragement. Paul challenged the church to respect and to submit to these men and others who labored for the kingdom of God. As we have seen, the Corinthians had a problem with submission and respect for the servants of God in ministry. Here Paul told them to respect these servants whose ministry was behind the scenes and not always noticed.

Greetings from other Churches (verses 19-20)

Before closing his letter, Paul sent greetings from churches in the Roman province of Asia, in which Ephesus was the capital city. Aquila, Priscilla, and the church that met in their home greeted them. Paul had met this couple originally in Corinth (Acts 18:1). They had now become very involved in ministry.

Paul encouraged the believers to greet each other with a holy kiss. This appears to have been the standard way for Christians to greet at this time.

Final Word (verses 21-24)

Paul concluded by telling the believers that he wrote this part of the letter in his own handwriting. Paul's letters were likely dictated to a scribe. Some commentators believe that this was because he had poor eyesight. Sometimes Paul would write a greeting in his own handwriting to authenticate the letter and also to make it more personal.

Paul called a curse on anyone who did not love the Lord. We should not see this as being a curse on all unbelievers. Paul may have brought this curse on those who called themselves believers but did not live in the love of Christ. These individuals were blemishes on the church and blasphemed the name of the Lord by their lives.

In verse 22 Paul used the Aramaic expression *Maranatha*, meaning "Our Lord, come." This may have been a common greeting in the early church. This reminded the Corinthians that the Lord was coming again. They needed to live their lives in light of His return. Paul concluded by reassuring them of his deep love for them and wishing God's grace for them, as he had done so in the beginning of this letter (1:3).

The church in Corinth was far from perfect. There were a series of issues in the church that needed to be addressed. It is fitting that Paul concludes this letter with a blessing of God's grace. After all the things we have seen happening in the church of Corinth, they truly did need to be reassured of God's unmerited favor.

For Consideration:

- Is your church involved in missionary projects as were the churches of Corinth and Galatia?
- What does this chapter teach us about the need of discipleship in the body of Christ?
- Examine Paul's attitude in this chapter toward the Corinthians. What does this tell us about the attitude we need to have toward those who are still immature in the faith?
- What do we learn here about the need to respect and honour those who serve the Lord in quiet faithfulness? Are there people like this in your church who do not receive the respect they deserve?

For Prayer:

- Take a moment to consider the needs of other churches in your area. Ask God to meet these particular needs.
- Take a moment to pray for a Christian who is weak in the faith. Ask God if there is anything He would have you do to help this person mature spiritually.
- Take a moment to thank the Lord for the spiritual leaders He has given you. Thank Him also for brothers and sisters who have had an impact on your life for good.

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