

1 Corinthians - Introduction

This morning we are going to begin a study through 1 Corinthians and I have to tell you I'm pretty excited to go through this book. This book is an amazing book for many reasons. It's profound, it's practical, it's convicting, it's loaded with grace and hope. It touches on a wide variety of topics that are crucial for us to understand as believers in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Maybe something you've noticed over the years as I've preached is just how often I refer to 1 Corinthians. I refer to it so often because it covers so many different issues. It's like the Swiss Army knife of Bible books.

You want to know what the Bible says about predestination? 1 Corinthians.

How do you deal with factions and divisions in the church? 1 Corinthians.

Ever wonder what final judgment is going to be like for believers as well as unbelievers? 1 Corinthians.

What do you do if someone is in open unrepentant sin and everyone in the church knows about it? 1 Corinthians.

What if that guy over there, who says he's a believer, owes you a lot of money and doesn't think he does? Do you take him to court and sue him? 1 Corinthians.

What about people who think they can go sleep with prostitutes because they have Christian liberty? 1 Corinthians.

What about the wife who refuses to have sex with her husband or the husband who refuses to have sex with his wife? Should you even get married and if you do what if it doesn't work out? 1 Corinthians.

What about a builder who buys all his lumber from a big box store that openly promotes the LGBT agenda? 1 Corinthians doesn't talk about that, but it does talk about what to do when buying meat from a pagan who sacrificed that cow you're eating to idols. Same kind of problem.

What about paying pastors and missionaries? What about wearing hats when you pray or head coverings? What about speaking in tongues and prophesy? What about our resurrection bodies?

What about evangelism - telling someone the gospel message - what information do they really need to know to be saved? What information do they really need to understand, believe and embrace to be saved?

All of that is in 1 Corinthians. And there's a reason a lot of that is in here. Many times after I finish preaching through a book I'll do a Q&A sermon or two to answer questions you guys might have. 1 Corinthians, to some extent, is just a Q&A letter about a whole bunch of different topics that believers in the Lord Jesus wrestled with 2,000 years ago and we still wrestle with now.

And I think one of the things that makes this letter so helpful is that this church is so messed up. It's almost like you read this thing and go, "Well, we've got our problems but at least we're not that bad!"

Actually, as we study through this letter we should be encouraged that for all their problems, Paul doesn't give up on them. And neither does Jesus who saved them. What we see here is the grace of God in keeping this church together.

I've heard people tell me "the problem with today's church is that we need to get back to the NT church. We need to be like the churches in the NT?" To which I ask, which ones? Like the churches all over Galatia that thought salvation was by grace plus circumcision? Like the churches that the apostle John wrote to who were kicking out genuine believers and propping up false teachers? The churches on the island of Crete where Titus was that gloried in the fact that they were all liars, gluttons and lazy beasts?

Every church has its issues. Every church has its shortcomings and weaknesses and contradictions and struggles. Ours included. And what will sanctify us is humbly submitting to the risen Christ who has saved us and shown us mercy.

This church does seem a like it has more issues than average. So what I want to do is give you some background to this letter because some of their issues stem from just their history and situation as a church. So there's going to be a lot of information which I really hope is helpful for you - but then we'll work our way through these first few verses.

It's amazing how crazy things seemed in Corinth. Why was it crazy?

1) Corinth was a crossroads to everything.

Slide 1: This is where we're at in the world. Corinth was about 800 miles from Jerusalem as the crow flies.

Slide 2: This is now modern-day Greece and Corinth is at the center of travel. It is literally a cross roads. If you're going from northern Greece to southern Greece by land, you go through Corinth. But it's also a crossroads from east to west if you're traveling by ship.

Slide 3: What you see here is a 4 mile long canal that was completed in the 1890's - so about 130 years ago. The first plan for this canal was in 600 years before Jesus in the 7th century. The reason for wanting to build this canal is because it's only 4 miles from one side of the sea to the other. If you go around not only is it considerably longer, but it's crazy dangerous for wooden sailing ships.

Slide 4: This is what the canal looks like today. You can see it high and narrow and rocky.

Slide 5: All this coast is littered with rocks and islands that easily bust up wooden sailing ships. So 600 years before Jesus they thought about making a canal. That didn't work out because it's pure rock through here and they didn't have the equipment or technology to mine something like that. Even today, the canal is only 70 feet wide and has to be closed because of rockslides.

So what the Corinthians did was to build an overland portage system that would transport boats over the 4 mile crossing. You'd park your ship on one side, they'd take the boat out of the water, pull it on logs across 4 miles and put it back in the water on the other side. As you can imagine, that wasn't a fast process. But it was safer and cheaper than going around.

This meshing of people coming and going from all parts of the world contributed to its pagan roots. Ideologies from around the world were blended and celebrated. Interestingly, it's also how the gospel spread as well. Christians didn't just hide from other people. They lived their lives and preached the gospel as they travelled as well.

2) Corinth was famous for its immorality. Well, what's a sailor to do for a couple weeks while waiting for his boat to cross? Corinth had all kinds of immorality.

And the pagan religions that existed at the time were very much connected to sexual immorality. Usually worship at a pagan temple included visiting cult prostitutes as part of the worship. It's hard to overstate just how disgusting this town was. It was so bad that the name of the city even became slang term for immorality. "Let's go Corinthianize" meant to be sexually immoral.

So the sailors, the pagan religions added to the immorality. There were also Olympic Games that were held in Corinth. We know of Athens being famous for athletic competitions but Corinth was second in line in importance. They hosted the Isthmian games which were the second most prestigious games in Rome. And like many sports today, the body was glorified. The biggest, strongest, fastest were worshipped. Many of the games were done naked or mostly naked, adding to the debauchery.

Side: Let me just open up a can of worms here: I want to encourage all of us that there are many sports today that we should not be watching or participating in because as Christians we are called to uphold modesty and

peace. I'll let you work out what you think that is because I think there is room for liberty on this issue. But I think we should always ask ourselves whether or not what we are doing or watching is aiding the gospel or distracting from it.

I used to watch UFC fighting many years ago until I realized that I just don't think the ground and pound gives glory to God. "Well how is that different than wrestling or football?" Well, 1) I like football and wrestling and 2) I think there are some finer distinctions we can make if we were to do a theology of sports. But if our first reaction is to go "Well, what about this or that" or "everyone else is doing it" I think that's a bad sign.

More I encourage you to simply ask if whether the sports you participate in and watch give glory and honor to Jesus regardless of anything else. And I'm not secretly trying to call anyone out on anything here. The athletic scene in Corinth was very ungodly - and the people loved it. The same can be true for modern sports.

So Corinth was crazy because it was a crossroads, it was known for its immorality.

3) Even within the church there was a wide variety of people. **Turn to Acts 18.** This is in the middle of Paul's second missionary journey when he comes to the town of Corinth. Look what happens. **Read 1-4**

So Paul was called by Jesus to be an apostle to the gentiles. But what he would do when he arrived in a city was to begin by preaching the gospel to Jews in the local synagogue. His goal was to show them that the Messiah they had been waiting for had arrived. It was Jesus who - against most every Jewish expectation - had come, died for the sins of his people, risen again, and ascended into heaven. That was quite the pill to swallow for most Jews because they thought Messiah would come and reign on the earth right away. Paul showed them that the Messiah - the Christ - does reign, he just does so from heaven.

And so as a rabbi he was able to basically walk into any synagogue and the local people would invite him to speak. So he'd preach as long as they would let him. Sometimes it was 1 week, sometimes a few weeks. He'd preach until he got kicked out and then he'd take those who believed and start a church and start preaching to the gentiles as well.

Here he meets up with Priscilla and Aquila who were basically refugees from Rome. The emperor had banned all Jews from Rome and at that time Christians were viewed as a sect of Judaism so they were expelled too. They meet up with Paul and they are all tent-makers - leather workers. Paul was a bi-vocational missionary when he needed to be. So he meets up with these fellow Christians in Corinth and at the same time he's preaching the gospel to the Jewish community. **Read 5-11**

So this is one of my favorite accounts in the book of Acts. The Jews at the synagogue get so upset with Paul that they kick him out. But not before some of the Jews have believed the gospel message. So Paul leaves, takes the synagogue leader who also believed the gospel with him and some others. And they literally start a church next door to the synagogue. That'd be like someone starting a church across the street at the community center.

"Well, is that appropriate? That seems kind of spiteful to do." Of course it is appropriate. Jesus himself literally tells Paul to keep going and promises him protection.

But watch what happens. The Jews hate Paul so much they try to get the government to stop him from preaching the gospel. In Roman times only certain religions were legal. Judaism was legal and they were trying to say Paul was practicing an illegal religion. It doesn't go well for the Jews. **Read 12-17**

So they try to outlaw Christianity and it totally comes back on them. And the Jews basically blame the new synagogue leader, Sosthenes, for not stopping Paul. So they beat the tar out of him while the Roman tribune turns a blind eye to the situation.

Welcome to church planting in Corinth, baby! It's like trying to start a church in Sodom or Gomorrah or Las Vegas with a Jewish twist.

Hopefully this gives you a little taste of why the city was so crazy. Had we been in Corinth we might have thought this city wasn't worthwhile. It wasn't worth the time and effort and hardship for the gospel. But look how Jesus encourages Paul to keep going. **Read 10**

You know what he encourages him with? Predestination. "I've got people in this city, Paul. They're not saved yet, but they're mine. I bought them with my own blood and they are worth every ounce of effort you will give for them."

Despite the violence and the attacks and the lawsuits. These Jews want so much blood they attack their own synagogue leader, Sosthenes, because he's not persecuting hard enough.

Listen carefully - this is important. God has placed you right here, right now, in this city and this state to proclaim his glory because he has people here who will believe, they just need to hear the gospel. I think at some point or another all of us have joked about how much better Idaho is sounding these days or Montana or whoever. God has not called you to Idaho or Montana - at least not right now. He's called you to be here to proclaim his glory. If Corinth wasn't beyond the gospel, Deer Park certainly isn't. And let me tell you, I've been to Idaho a lot recently and every person I've met over there that claims to be a Christian is bonkers. I miss my atheists and heathens here in WA. Idaho is going to be New California in 5 years anyway - there's no running from this craziness as though we're in retreat. How you transform a people is one by one they come to faith in Jesus through the preaching of the gospel. .

God is committed to Corinth. He's committed to Deer Park, to Washington. He's committed that every square inch of his creation will proclaim the name of Jesus - every tribe, tongue, language, and nation. Which is why we're committed to starting churches and spreading the gospel because that's what Jesus is committed to. There is no city on God's earth that is irredeemable.

You know how you change people from persecuting the church to proclaiming Jesus? The gospel. Watch what happens here. The Jews are so radically against Jesus they beat their own synagogue leader for not squashing Paul's preaching. **Turn** back to **1 Cor. 1**. Paul's letter to the Corinthian church was written some years after he first started the church. Paul is probably writing from Ephesus. But look who's with him. **Read 1**

Our brother, Sosthenes. We can't know for 100% certain that this is the exact same man that was mentioned in Acts - but most scholars believe it's the same guy. He would have been well known among the church, there's no other designation for who he is except for "brother."

Paul stays in Corinth for a year and a half, builds the church and the witness of the gospel is such that 2 synagogue leaders come to faith in Jesus. So much so that Sosthenes is actually not even in Corinth, he's in Ephesus with Paul preaching the gospel there.

No one person is beyond the gospel and no city is beyond the gospel. The gospel message that we preach - the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus to forgive the sins of worthless sinners who are saved by grace alone through faith alone - has power. Sosthenes was the model of defiance to the Lord. And yet, by God's grace and work, he came to faith in Jesus.

And actually this is the testimony of Paul himself, isn't it? **Read 1-3**

What we have here is a standard greeting for Roman letters. We have the writer, the writer's position, who the letter is addressed to, and some kind of greeting. This is a standard Roman introduction.

Our letters usually begin with the recipient, then we write our information, then we give a greeting, and then we write our name. In the first century that was all taken care of up front.

And in this first section we see who Paul is - and really we see that he is who he is because of God. **Read 1**

So this is the apostle Paul who came to faith in Jesus on the road to Damascus. Remember he was headed from Jerusalem to Damascus - northeast of the Israel - to persecute Christians. He had a letter from the Jewish

leaders to take those who were part of the Way - what they called Christians at the time - and throw them into prison. And it was there that Jesus appeared to him and utterly changed the direction of his life.

He went from a persecutor and blasphemer and murderer of Christians, to a believer in the risen Christ and the preeminent apostle over the church. How did that happen? Was it his own ingenuity? His own reasoning? His own effort?

Of course not. It was God's will. It was God who had determined before time began to use this man as an apostle to preach his glory to the nations. And Paul never forgot that. And he never let anyone else forget that either. His place in the Kingdom was not his doing, it was God's doing - God called him.

And when we see the word called here he doesn't mean in the generic sense of God asking Paul to be an apostle. That's not how it went down. No, Jesus appeared to Paul in blinding light and basically said "You're coming with me and I'm going to use you to proclaim my glory and at the end of your life I'm going to reward you for it." He was an undeserving sinner just like Sosthenes was an undeserving sinner, just like we are under serving sinners who have been blessed by God's grace.

Paul was an apostle. In the NT there are basically 2 meanings of the word apostle. The word apostle just means someone who is sent out. The generic meaning is just someone who is sent out on a mission. But there's also the more technical sense that we're used to. In the NT it's a person who is specifically set apart to proclaim the gospel of Jesus with authority. These are people who have personally witnessed the resurrected Christ and people who have specifically been commissioned by Jesus to proclaim the gospel. The NT records at least 16 apostles - the original 12, Matthias in Acts 1, Paul, Barnabas, and James, the half-brother of Jesus. There were likely others - but as that generation of apostles died off, the authority in the church transferred to qualified elders. There are no more apostles today.

But this is who Paul is, he is an apostle by God's will and he's writing this letter along with Sosthenes - both who have experienced the amazing grace of God in salvation.

Notice who he's writing to. **Read 2**

This little sentence is absolutely packed. And it's packed with Scriptural truths about who were as in Christ. There are 4 truths here that Paul crams into one simple sentence.

1) He is writing to the church of God in Corinth. What does he mean when he says church? When we hear church we usually think of the building or of the gathering on Sunday mornings. "We're going to church. We don't want to be late for church."

But for Paul the church is not a building or a time that people meet. We can use the word to mean those things, that's okay.

But biblically, it's the group of people who have been saved by Jesus. Church literally is ekklesia - it means those who have been called out. It's a gathering of people, called from darkness and death and sin, called into God's grace. In fact, in the Greek version of the OT the word Ekklesia - church - was often used of Israel. This was the gathering of the covenant people of God.

That's why it's the church **of God** - it's the group of people who have been saved by God, bought by God and belong to God. This is their identity, this is all of who they are.

2) To those who are sanctified. **Read 2**

Those these descriptions overlap. He's using a bunch of synonyms for Christians. They are the church of God, they are also sanctified in Christ Jesus. What does that mean? Something that is sanctified is something that is holy, it's set apart for a special use.

It's grandma's fine china that she only brings out at thanksgiving, It's the special bottle of wine you open to celebrate an anniversary or promotion. It's set apart and holy.

Paul is saying that everyone who is in Christ - every last believer - is sanctified. We are set apart for a holy purpose, a righteous cause.

And you say, "Well, I don't feel very holy or righteous. I don't feel very set apart." Well, we're not holy in and of ourselves. How does Paul say we are sanctified? In Christ Jesus.

It's Jesus who, through his atoning death and glorious resurrection, have made us holy. He has clothed us in righteousness and set us apart for service to him. This is who we are.

Not only are we the gather people of God, but we are the people made holy and righteous by Jesus for a the purpose of proclaiming his excellencies.

3) Called to be saints. **Read 2**

How is this different than being sanctified? Well, in truth, they overlap. Who we are defines what we do. This is very important. When the Bible calls us to do something, it does so by reminding us who we are first.

Let me give you 2 examples. If you've been signed to the Seahawks, then you know how you should act? Like a Seahawk. What you do and how you act and perform - for better or worse - is defined by who you actually are.

The same thing is true in my family. My kids are Upchurchs and there's just some things we do because we're Upchurchs. What we do, our actions, flow from who we are.

That's how the Christian life works as well. We are called to be saints because God has sanctified us. We live holy lives because we have been made holy. This is our family. This is our calling. Sin and depravity is beneath us. And so we lived sanctified lives.

4) Called to be united as the worldwide church. Notice that our calling as saints isn't isolated - it's part of the greater work that God is doing. **Read 2**

Our Christianity is not lived in isolation. To follow Jesus is to be part of all the saints of all the ages. The church, the family of God that we've been brought into by faith in Jesus includes everyone who has ever called on the Lord Jesus in every age.

Your faith in Jesus - though it needs to be yours and it is personal - is also very corporate. Our Christianity is very American - and that's okay because God has called us to faith here in America. But we join with our Asian brothers and African brothers and European brothers - all 5 of them - and our Pacific Islander brothers and Latin American brothers. And we all have a common faith in Jesus and we all have a common history in Abraham and we are all part of the great work that God is doing to bring the nations to himself.

When you were saved you were brought into this incredible family of God with the richest history ever known who we will spend all of eternity with calling on the Lord Jesus Christ who saved us.

That's who Paul is writing to. And that includes us as well.

And here's the amazing blessing. **Read 3**

Paul pours out a personal blessing of grace and peace. Grace - the NT emphasis. And peace - the OT emphasis. We have both grace and peace from whom? God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

We, like Corinth have been abundantly blessed - and personally blessed - by God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I don't know about you but I'm excited to study this book and be encouraged by the grace and peace God will pour out on us as we look to his Word.

Pray