1 Corinthians
Bible Commentary
With Study Guide



J. Mark Ayres

1 Corinthians - Bible Commentary

Copyright © 2026 by J. Mark Ayres
All Rights Reserved

No part of this book may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Author: J. Mark Ayres, Master of Divinity,
Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, CA

Published by Voice of Gladness Ministries
Laguna Niguel, CA

All scripture quotations and subtitles are taken from
The New King James Version © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc.

For
My deepest thanks to my wife, Debbie, for her love, encouragement, and prayers, especially for faithfully reading through each chapter and offering thoughtful feedback.

Table of Contents

Preface	8
How to Use the Reflective Questions	10
Introduction to 1 Corinthians	11
A Church with Problems	11
1 Corinthians 1	20
Greeting	20
Spiritual Gifts at Corinth	25
Reflection Questions for 1 Corinthians 1:1-9	32
Sectarianism Is Sin	33
Christ the Power and Wisdom of God	41
Glory Only in the Lord	46
Reflection questions for 1 Corinthians 1:10-31	54
1 Corinthians 2	56
Christ Crucified	56
Spiritual Wisdom	60
Reflection Questions for 1 Corinthians 2:1-8	63
Reflective Questions for 1 Corinthians 2:9-16	72
1 Corinthians 3	74
Sectarianism Is Carnal	74
Watering, Working, Warning	77
Reflective Questions for 1 Corinthians 3:1-15	85
Avoid Worldly Wisdom	88
Reflective Questions for 1 Corinthians 3:16-23	91
1 Corinthians 4	93
Stewards of the Mysteries of God	93
Fools for Christ's Sake	94
Reflective Questions for 1 Corinthians 4:1-13	100

Paul's Paternal Care 102
Reflective Questions for 1 Corinthians 4:14-21 104
1 Corinthians 5 106
Immorality Defiles the Church 106
Immorality Must Be Judged 111
Reflective Questions for 1 Corinthians 5:1-13 113
1 Corinthians 6 115
Do Not Sue the Brethren 115
Reflective Questions for 1 Corinthians 6:1-11 123
Glorify God in Body and Spirit 124
Reflective Questions for 1 Corinthians 6:12-20 130
1 Corinthians 7 132
Principles of Marriage 132
Keep Your Marriage Vows 135
Reflective Questions for 1 Corinthians 7:1-16 139
Live as You Are Called 140
To the Unmarried and Widows 143
Reflective Questions for 1 Corinthians 7:17-40 148
1 Corinthians 8 150
Be Sensitive to Conscience 150
Reflective Questions for 1 Corinthians 8:1-13 156
1 Corinthians 9 158
A Pattern of Self-Denial 158
Reflective Questions for 1 Corinthians 9:1-14 163
Serving All Men 165
Striving for a Crown 167
Reflective Questions for 1 Corinthians 9:15-27 169
1 Corinthians 10 171
Old Testament Examples 171

Reflective Questions for 1 Corinthians 10:1-13 176
Flee from Idolatry 177
All to the Glory of God 180
Reflective Questions for 1 Corinthians 10:14-33 183
1 Corinthians 11 185
Head Coverings 187
Reflective Questions for 1 Corinthians 11:1-16 192
Conduct at the Lord's Supper 193
Institution of the Lord's Supper 196
Examine Yourself 198
Reflective Questions for 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 201
1 Corinthians 12 203
Spiritual Gifts: Unity in Diversity 203
Reflective Questions for 1 Corinthians 12:1-11 208
Unity and Diversity in One Body 209
Reflective Questions for 1 Corinthians 12:12-31 216
1 Corinthians 13 218
The Greatest Gift 218
Reflective Questions for 1 Corinthians 13:1-13 225
1 Corinthians 14 227
Prophecy and Tongues 227
Tongues Must Be Interpreted 230
Reflective Questions for 1 Corinthians 14:1-19 234
Tongues a Sign to Unbelievers 236
Order in Church Meetings 239
Reflective Questions for 1 Corinthians 14:20-40 245
1 Corinthians 15 247
The Risen Christ, Faith's Reality 247
The Risen Christ, Our Hope 252

Reflective Questions for 1 Corinthians 15:1-19 255
The Last Enemy Destroyed 256
Effects of Denying the Resurrection 260
Reflective Questions for 1 Corinthians 15:19-34 262
A Glorious Body 263
Our Final Victory 269
Reflective Questions for 1 Corinthians 15:35-58 274
1 Corinthians 16 276
Collection for the Saints 276
Personal Plans 277
Reflective Questions for 1 Corinthians 16:1-12 282
Final Exhortations 283
Greetings and a Solemn Farewell 285
Reflective Questions for 1 Corinthians 16:13-24 288
Bibliography 290
APPENDIX A: Paul's Ministry in Corinth (Acts 18:1-17) 291
About the Author 306

Preface

In the book of Acts (8:26-40), the Holy Spirit nudged Philip to run alongside the chariot of an Ethiopian official. Philip approached and asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" The Ethiopian replied, "How can I unless someone guides me?" That moment reminds us that sometimes we are the guides, and sometimes we are the ones needing guidance. As teachers and preachers of God's Word, we step into Philip's sandals, coming alongside others to help them navigate the Scriptures. Yet, in our quieter moments, we're often the Ethiopian — grateful for someone to help us read, reflect, and apply what we don't yet understand.

When we open the Bible to teach, we aim for accuracy. No Bible teacher has perfectly captured every verse in a way that everyone agrees with. Passages can carry more than one valid interpretation; sincere believers may differ. My views on various topics have changed over the years, and yours likely have too. The point is to teach with humility. What we believe is right may need refining, and what we dismiss may need rethinking.

So why this commentary? And who is it for?

In my life as a missionary for over 27 years in Southeast Asia, I've seen pastors and leaders wrestle with the New Testament. They want to know what the writer really means? How can we apply this passage to our lives today without altering its original intent?

This work is for pastors, teachers, and students of the Bible who want to step into the context of the New Testament with both reverence and curiosity. It's for those who want to honor the Scriptures, including their ancient languages, culture, and setting, and yet bring them into today's world with integrity and meaning.

This is my attempt to bring the New Testament to life in its original world so that it can live powerfully in ours. We'll walk through each book, paying attention not only to "what it says" but to "why it was said," "to whom," and "in what context." We'll try to answer questions like what did the first-century reader understand? How did their language, history, geography, and cultural mindset shape the message? And then how does that message work in our congregation, our language, and our culture? The Christ of the New Testament remains the same yesterday, today, and forever; but our churches and cultures are continually evolving.

Let us come to the Scriptures with expectant hearts and open minds. May the Holy Spirit do His guiding work in both our teaching and our learning. May you, dear reader, not only understand what you read, but live what you discover. This commentary is not simply about gaining knowledge. It's about entering the story of a God whose kingdom breaks in, reshapes lives, and calls each of us to new frontiers.

— Mark,
Kota Kinabalu, Malaysia
October 2025

How to Use the Reflective Questions

In each chapter, you will find two sets of reflective questions designed to help you not only understand the passage but also respond to it in a meaningful and personal way. These questions may be used for personal study, group discussion, or teaching. The first five reflective questions should guide you into a careful reading of the text. They help you slow down, observe what is being said, and consider how the main ideas of the passage apply to your own life. The two challenge questions invite you to go deeper, encouraging thoughtful reflection, spiritual application, and conversation that moves beyond surface-level understanding. As you work through the questions, take time to pray, think, and respond honestly before the Lord. Allow the Scriptures to speak for themselves, and seek to apply what you learn with humility and faith. In a group setting, these questions can spark rich dialogue and strengthen each other's faith in God's Word. 11

Introduction to 1 Corinthians

A Church with Problems

Building a Healthy Church

When we think of the New Testament church, we often picture revival with miracles, healings, and rapid growth. And yes, the early church experienced all of these. But the early church also faced serious problems. There were pressures from outside through persecution, and problems from inside through division and sin.

Churches aren't normally destroyed by pressure from outside. Persecution actually makes the church stronger. But problems from inside could destroy a church. When we look at 1 Corinthians, we are looking at a church with big problems. Perhaps it is the most troubled church in the entire New Testament.

Paul wrote this letter around AD 56 from Ephesus (see 16:8). Most scholars agree Paul is the author based on internal evidence (1:1; 16:21) and strong early church testimony. Paul wrote 1 Corinthians for two reasons. First, he received a disturbing report from Chloe's household about divisions in the church (1:11). Second, he received a letter from the Corinthians asking questions about marriage, divorce, food offered to idols, spiritual gifts, and the collection for Jerusalem (7:1; 16:1).

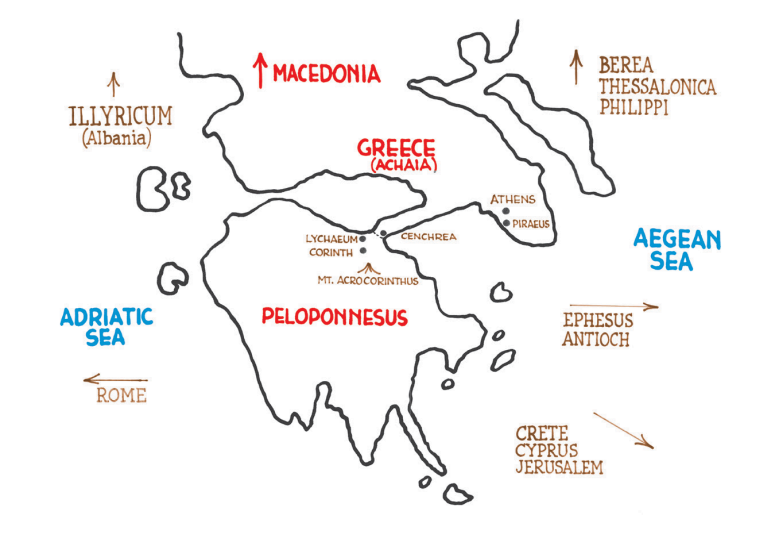
This letter addresses both what Paul heard (chapters 1–6) and what they asked (chapters 7–16). It's a case study in how to handle church problems with truth, grace, and pastoral wisdom.

The City of Corinth

To understand 1 Corinthians, we must understand Corinth. Corinth was a major city in Greece, located on a narrow strip of land (an isthmus) connecting northern and

southern Greece. This strategic location made Corinth one of the wealthiest and most influential cities in the Roman Empire.

Ships traveling between the Adriatic Sea and the Aegean Sea would unload cargo at Corinth and transport it overland rather than sail around the dangerous southern coast. Even smaller boats were pulled across on rollers. This made Corinth a crucial trade center with a steady stream of merchants, sailors, and travelers bringing wealth into the city. Today a canal cuts through the isthmus, but in Paul's day, Corinth controlled all east-west trade.



Map of first century Greece

The City's Reputation

Corinth was known for three things: wealth, wisdom, and wickedness. The city attracted self-made traders who became wealthy through commerce. Many were former slaves who had bought their freedom and worked their way up from nothing. This is why Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1:26, "Not many of you were noble." They were ordinary, hardworking people, ambitious and proud of what they had achieved.

Corinth was also a center for Greek philosophy and wisdom. People came to debate ideas and hear the latest teachings. Everyone claimed to have answers to life's problems. This love of human wisdom would create problems in the church when believers began comparing Paul with Apollos and other teachers.

But Corinth was most infamous for its immorality. On a mountain overlooking the city stood the temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love, with 1,000 temple prostitutes.



Lay out of city of Corinth - First Century

Worship at this temple involved sexual immorality. To call a woman "a Corinthian" was an insult. It meant she was a prostitute. Some historians consider Corinth the most immoral city in the Roman Empire.

Just as Corinth was known for specific vices, some cities today are known for sex tourism, gambling, drug trafficking, or corruption. When a city becomes identified with immorality, it affects everyone who lives there—including the church. The values of the city seep into the church like water soaking through a wall. This was Corinth's greatest challenge, and it remains ours today.

Most of Corinth's population consisted of three groups: Romans (including descendants of soldiers who rebuilt the city in 44 BC), Greeks (the original inhabitants), and Jews (who had established a synagogue there). Although it was a Greek city, Roman culture and law dominated. This mix of cultures created both opportunity and conflict.

Will the church of God become more like Corinth? Or will the city of Corinth become more like the church of God? This is the battle every church faces. We are in the world, but we must not be of the world. The church must look different and be different from the surrounding culture.

Paul's Ministry in Corinth

The story of how the Corinthian church began is found in Acts 18:1-17. Paul arrived in Corinth around AD 51-52 on his second missionary journey. He had just left Athens, where his sermon at the Areopagus had produced limited results. In Corinth, Paul met Aquila and Priscilla, Jewish believers and tentmakers who had recently been forced to leave Rome when Emperor Claudius expelled all Jews from the city.

Paul stayed with Aquila and Priscilla, working as a tentmaker while preaching in the synagogue every Sabbath. When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia with financial support, Paul devoted himself more fully to preaching, testifying to the Jews that Jesus is the Christ.

When Jewish opposition intensified, Paul declared, "Your blood be upon your own heads; I am innocent. From now on I will go to the Gentiles" (Acts 18:6). He moved his ministry next door to the house of Justus, a Gentile worshiper of God whose house became the first church meeting place in Corinth.

Then something remarkable happened. Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed in the Lord along with his entire household. This was costly. Crispus lost his position and was no longer welcome in the synagogue. But his conversion may have influenced many others. Acts 18:8 says, "Many of the Corinthians, hearing, believed and were baptized."

God's Encouragement

When opposition grew more intense, the Lord appeared to Paul in a vision: "Do not be afraid, but speak, and do not keep silent; for I am with you, and no one will attack you to hurt you; for I have many people in this city" (Acts 18:9-10).

Notice what God promised: not that enemies wouldn't oppose Paul, but that they wouldn't succeed in harming him. God could see people Paul couldn't yet see, those who would come to faith. God was already working in Corinth before Paul arrived.

There are people in your city right now whom God is preparing to bring into His Kingdom. You may not see them yet, but God does. He is working in their lives even

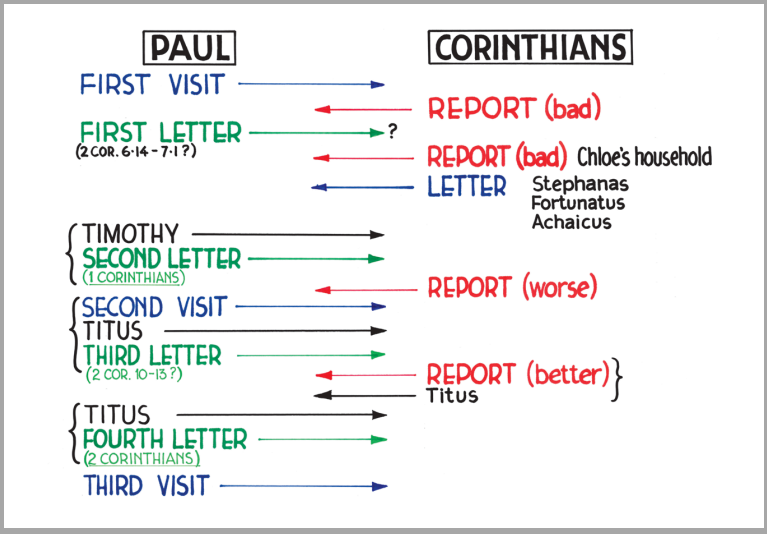
now, and at the right time He will bring them to you. Your job is to be faithful in speaking God's Word. The results are in His hands.

Encouraged by this vision, Paul stayed in Corinth for eighteen months, teaching the Word of God (Acts 18:11). It was longer than he had stayed in any city up to that point.

When the Jews brought Paul before Gallio, the Roman proconsul, he refused to judge the matter. He recognized it as a religious dispute, not a criminal case. This ruling was significant. It effectively made Christianity a legal religion, separate from Judaism. Paul left Corinth with Priscilla and Aquila, but the church he planted would soon face serious internal problems.

Paul's Ongoing Relationship with Corinth

Paul wrote four letters to the Corinthian church, but we only have two of them (1 and 2 Corinthians). He also made three visits to Corinth over a period of six to seven years. Understanding this timeline helps us appreciate how much Paul cared for this troubled church.



Timeline of Paul's correspondence with the Corinthians

The Timeline:

First Visit (AD 51-52): Paul founded the church and stayed eighteen months (Acts 18:1-17).

First Letter (lost): After Paul left for Ephesus, he received a bad report about the church. He wrote a short, urgent letter telling them to address certain problems (mentioned in 1 Corinthians 5:9). This letter no longer exists.

Report from Chloe's Household: Paul learned his first letter had been ignored. Chloe's people brought news of divisions in the church (1 Corinthians 1:11).

Letter from Corinth: Three leaders—Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus—brought a letter asking Paul questions about marriage, food offered to idols, spiritual gifts, and the collection for Jerusalem (1 Corinthians 7:1; 16:17). But they didn't mention the real problems—immorality, lawsuits among believers, and disorder in worship.

Second Letter (AD 56): This is our 1 Corinthians. Paul addresses both the problems reported by Chloe and the questions in their letter. He sends Timothy to deliver it and help the church (1 Corinthians 4:17; 16:10).

Second Visit (painful visit): Timothy's visit didn't resolve the issues, and the situation worsened. So Paul went himself — a second, painful visit that ended badly (2 Corinthians 2:1).

Third Letter (severe letter): Paul wrote a strongly worded letter (now lost) addressing the problems directly (2 Corinthians 2:3-4; 7:8). He sent it with Titus.

Third Visit: Titus brought good news. The church had repented and things were improving. Paul wrote 2 Corinthians and made a third, joyful visit.

Paul made ten contacts with Corinth over six to seven years—four letters and three visits, plus sending Titus twice and Timothy once. He never gave up on them, even when they ignored his counsel or opposed him. This shows us the heart of pastoral ministry: persistent love, patient teaching, and refusing to abandon difficult churches.

As a pastor or leader, you will face discouragement. People will ignore your counsel. They will disagree with your decisions. But like Paul, your responsibility is to speak God's Word faithfully. Changing hearts is God's work, not yours. Your job is to plant and water; God gives the growth (1 Corinthians 3:6-7).

Key Problems: How the Church Became Like the City

The worldliness of Corinth had invaded the church like a disease. Every wrong thing Paul addresses in this letter was common in the city of Corinth. The church was being shaped by the culture rather than transforming it. Three areas reveal how the church had become too much like the city:

1. The Glorification of Human Wisdom

Corinth loved philosophy, debate, and human wisdom. People discussed and debated every opinion and teaching. This attitude infected the church. Believers began following different teachers: "I follow Paul," "I follow Apollos," "I follow Cephas (Peter)," "I follow Christ" (1 Corinthians 1:12). They were treating Christian leaders like competing philosophers, debating their teachings instead of submitting to God's Word.

2. Tolerance of Immorality

In Corinth, idol worship was joined with prostitution. The city's motto could have been: "If it feels good, do it." Some in the church adopted the same attitude. A man was living in sexual immorality with his father's wife, and the church was proud rather than grieved (1 Corinthians 5:1-2). They had failed to understand that following Jesus requires moral purity, not cultural conformity.

In some cultures, certain behaviors are tolerated because "everyone does it"—small bribes to speed up paperwork, dishonest business practices, or compromises to avoid conflict. When the church adopts the world's standards of what's acceptable, we lose our witness and grieve the Holy Spirit. The church must be different, even when being different is costly.

3. Rampant Selfishness

In Corinth, everyone did what was right in their own eyes with little concern for others. This attitude showed up in the church during fellowship meals and worship gatherings. The wealthy ate their own food and even got drunk while the poor went hungry (1 Corinthians 11:20-22). Believers interrupted speakers, creating confusion and disorder (1 Corinthians 14:26-33). They cared more about showing off their spiritual gifts than building up the body.

The Deepest Problem

These were symptoms of a deeper issue. The church had failed to recognize that it should be different from the culture around it. There will always be tension between the church and the surrounding culture. If there's no tension, the church isn't having its proper influence.

Think about your own city or village. On a scale of one to ten, with ten meaning the church has maximum influence and one meaning no influence, where would you place your church? What would need to change for your church to move higher on that scale?

Understanding Paul's Approach

Paul was a trained rabbi who had memorized much of the Old Testament. He uses metaphors, Old Testament references, and rabbinic teaching methods throughout this letter. Sometimes he expects his Gentile readers to ask Jewish believers for help understanding Old Testament allusions. This was common in the mixed Jewish-Gentile communities Paul wrote to.

In 2 Corinthians 1:13-14, Paul addresses those who complained that 1 Corinthians was hard to understand. He gently says, "We write nothing to you that you cannot read and understand... you have understood us in part... keep trying and you will understand completely." The same is true for us. Some passages require effort, but God will give understanding to those who seek it (James 1:5).

Practical Theology

First Corinthians is about practical theology—how Christians should live in a pagan world. Paul describes what it means to be spiritual, how to handle conflict, how to make decisions when Scripture doesn't give explicit commands, and how the church should function as the body of Christ. These are issues every church faces.

Note to Readers: For those who want more detail on how the Corinthian church was founded, see **Appendix A: Paul's Ministry in Corinth (Acts 18:1-17)** at the end of this commentary which provides background on Paul's eighteen-month ministry in Corinth.

1 Corinthians 1

Greeting

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

The letter opens with Paul identifying himself as the author. He was known by two names throughout his life. "Saul" was his Hebrew name, linking him to his Jewish heritage and the tribe of Benjamin, the same tribe as Israel's first King Saul. "Paul" was his Roman name, meaning "small" or “little."

There's beautiful irony in this. King Saul was known for his impressive physical stature but his life ended tragically because of pride and disobedience. The Apostle Paul chose to emphasize his name meaning "small," reflecting his humility and his view of himself as "the least of the apostles" (1 Corinthians 15:9). He went from persecutor to preacher, from pride in his Jewish credentials to counting everything as loss for Christ (Philippians 3:4-8).

Like Paul, many Christians in Southeast Asia have two names. A birth name from their culture is given and an adopted English name. This dual identity can feel like living in two worlds. But Paul shows us that our identity isn't ultimately found in our name or cultural background. It’s found in Christ. Whether you use a traditional name or a Christian name, what matters is that you're called by God and a servant of Jesus Christ.

Paul emphasizes he is "called to be an apostle... through the will of God." He's not claiming this title on his own authority or boasting about his position. He's establishing his credentials because some in Corinth questioned his apostleship. After all, he wasn't one of the original twelve disciples.

Paul insists his calling came directly from God, not from human appointment. When facing opposition or criticism, Paul's authority doesn't rest on human recognition but on divine calling. The same principle applies to all Christian ministry. God calls us, and the church recognizes and affirms that calling.

If you're in ministry (and every Christian is), remember that your calling comes from God, not from people's approval. When people criticize you or question your authority, stand firm in the confidence that God has called you. At the same time, be humble like Paul. We serve "through the will of God," not our own ambition.

Paul includes "Sosthenes our brother" in the greeting. This likely refers to the same Sosthenes mentioned in Acts 18:12-17, who was the ruler of the synagogue in Corinth. He led the attack against Paul before the Roman governor Gallio. When the Jews' legal case failed, the Greeks beat Sosthenes—possibly in Paul's presence.

If this is the same person, his transformation is remarkable. From opponent to "our brother," and from persecutor to coworker. How did this happen? We can't be certain, but perhaps when Paul witnessed Sosthenes being beaten, he showed him kindness and compassion. That act of love toward an enemy may have opened Sosthenes's heart to the gospel.

By including Sosthenes's name, Paul shows unity with a well-known believer in Corinth. He shows his own forgiveness and reconciliation, giving credibility to the letter. Sosthenes agrees with what Paul writes and models courage. He is publicly associating himself with Paul, knowing some in Corinth oppose him.

In some communities, when there's conflict, people show whose side they're on by standing physically next to someone at public gatherings. By putting his name on this letter, Sosthenes is publicly standing with Paul, even though he knows some Corinthians are critical of Paul. This takes courage. He's risking criticism by association.

Are you willing to stand publicly with truth and with godly leaders, even when it's unpopular? Are you willing to risk criticism to support what's right? Every leader needs loyal supporters like Sosthenes. And if you're a leader, remember Paul's example. He welcomed a former opponent as a brother and ministry partner.

> 1:2-3 To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all who in every place call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours: 3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul addresses his letter to "the church of God which is at Corinth." He doesn't say "my church" or "the church in Corinth", he says "the church of God." The church belongs to God, not to any human leader. This is an important reminder for a church struggling with division and factions (as we'll see in verses 10-12).

Paul calls them "sanctified in Christ Jesus." To be sanctified means to be set apart for God's special purpose. It's like clothing reserved for special occasions. It is not your everyday wear, but you keep it clean and ready for important events.

Here's what's remarkable. Paul calls them sanctified even though this church has serious problems. There is sexual immorality, divisions, lawsuits among believers, disorder in worship, and theological confusion. How can he call them sanctified when they're living in such worldliness?

It's because sanctification is about their position in Christ, not their current behavior. God sees them as holy because they're "in Christ Jesus." This is both an encouragement and a challenge. Our identity is secure in Christ. Regardless of our struggles, we are to live up to who we are in God's sight.

When a couple gets married, they become husband and wife legally and officially, even if they don't always act married. A husband who forgets his anniversary is still a husband.

A wife who argues with her husband is still a wife. Their status doesn't change based on behavior. But their status should influence their behavior. They should act like the married people they are.

In a similar way, the Corinthians are sanctified in Christ. Their calling should influence their conduct. They should live like the holy people God has declared them to be.

The word "saint" comes from the same root as “sanctified”. Both relate to holiness. Paul reminds them they are "called to be saints." This doesn't mean they've achieved a higher level of spirituality or earned special status. It means God has set them apart as His special people.

For Paul, every believer is a saint. Not because of superior holiness, but because of God's calling. You don't become a saint after death if you were especially holy. You're a saint right now if you belong to Christ.

Don't think of yourself as "just a sinner" or "unworthy." Yes, we're saved by grace and don't deserve God's favor. But in Christ, you are sanctified, you are a saint, and you are set apart for God's purposes. Your calling is to live like who you already are.

Paul reminds the Corinthians they're not alone. They're part of a global movement. Everywhere—"in every place"—people are calling on the name of Jesus Christ. They're connected to believers throughout the world who face similar struggles.

This is important because the Corinthians might feel isolated or think their problems are unique. Paul says, “No, you're part of something bigger. Other churches are learning from your experience.” The lessons here apply to everyone.

In the Old Testament, "calling on the name of the LORD" meant calling on Yahweh, the God of Israel. When Paul says believers "call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord," he's

making a stunning claim: Jesus is God. To call on Jesus' name is to recognize His divinity and lordship.

This would have been revolutionary for both Jewish and Gentile readers. Jews believed in one God. Gentiles worshiped many gods. Paul declares that Jesus Christ is Lord and He is God incarnate, worthy of worship, and holding supreme authority over all creation.

Paul says grace and peace to you. "Grace" echoes the standard Greek greeting of Paul's day, and "peace" echoes the Hebrew shalom. So in his very first line, Paul greets a church splitting along Jewish and Greek lines with both a Greek blessing and a Jewish blessing, modeling the unity he's about to call them to before he's even named the problem.

This was Paul's standard greeting, but it's not empty religious language. For a church facing division, immorality, and opposition, grace and peace are exactly what they need. Grace refers to God's kindness toward us that we don't deserve. The Corinthians needed to remember they're saved by grace, not by their own wisdom or goodness which they valued.

Peace refers to wholeness, well-being, and reconciliation with God. It's not just the absence of conflict but the presence of God's shalom, His perfect order and blessing. These blessings come "from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." Notice Paul places God the Father and the Lord Jesus on equal footing as the source of grace and peace. This reinforces Jesus' divinity.

Paul uses the title "Lord" for Jesus six times in the first ten verses (verses 2, 3, 7, 8, 9, 10). In the Old Testament, "Lord" was God's title, indicating His sovereignty and authority. By repeatedly calling Jesus "Lord," Paul establishes Jesus' divine authority and His rightful place as the true King.

Most Corinthian believers were Gentiles with no Jewish background. Paul wants to establish a firm foundation. Jesus is Lord—not Caesar, not the Greek gods, not human wisdom or philosophy. Jesus is the center of all history, the purpose of all creation, and the ultimate authority over all things.

For Paul, history isn't random. It's purposeful and moving toward a specific destination. The full revelation of Jesus Christ as Lord of all. God has a grand plan, and Jesus occupies the central position in that plan.

In cultures where ancestors, spirits, or political authorities demand allegiance, Paul's emphasis on Jesus as Lord is crucial. When you face pressure to compromise—whether from culture, family, authorities, or tradition—remember who is Lord. Jesus' authority is greater than all other claims on your life. Stand firm in confessing "Jesus is Lord," even when it costs you.

Spiritual Gifts at Corinth

> 1:4-5 I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given to you by Christ Jesus, 5 that you were enriched in everything by Him in all utterance and all knowledge,

Paul begins this letter by thanking God for the Corinthians. This might surprise us given what's coming in the next verses. He will confront division and later immorality, lawsuits, and other problems. But Paul doesn't start with criticism. He starts with gratitude.

This is pastoral wisdom. When people feel valued and appreciated, they're more open to correction. If Paul had opened with "You people are a disaster," they would have closed their hearts. Instead, he says, "I thank God for you," and then addresses the problems with genuine love.

In many cultures, even when a child brings shame to the family through bad behavior, parents still speak well of the child in public and affirm what is good in them before addressing what is wrong. A wise father doesn't begin a correction by saying, "You worthless child." He says, "You are my son, and I'm proud of you. But there is something we need to address." Paul follows this same pattern. He affirms the Corinthians as God's children before correcting them as their spiritual father.

When you need to correct someone such as a church member, a family member, or friend, begin by affirming what is good and true about them. Acknowledge God's work in their life. This doesn't mean ignoring sin, but it means approaching correction with genuine love and appreciation.

Paul thanks God "for the grace of God which was given to you by Christ Jesus." This is foundational. Everything good in the Corinthian church, and there is good, flows from God's grace, not their own merit.

Grace is God's unmerited favor. It's not something we earn or deserve based on our behavior. The Corinthians didn't deserve God's gifts any more than we do. Grace is freely given, even when we fall short as the Corinthians often did.

This should humble us. When God blesses us with spiritual gifts, talents, or opportunities for ministry, we can't take credit. It's all grace. And when we see sin and failure in our lives, we can't despair. Grace covers that, too.

Paul says the Corinthians were "enriched in everything by Him." The word "enriched" means to be made wealthy or abundant. This is not talking about material wealth. God had poured out spiritual riches on this church. They weren't spiritually poor; they were spiritually rich.

But notice Paul specifies two areas in particular: "all utterance and all knowledge."

Utterance (speaking) refers to spiritual gifts involving speech: prophecy, teaching, tongues, and interpretation of tongues. Knowledge refers to spiritual insight and understanding of God's truth.

These were the "spectacular" gifts the Corinthians prized most highly. They loved eloquent speakers, impressive knowledge, and supernatural manifestations. Later in this letter (chapters 12-14), we'll see how they misused these gifts and created divisions over them.

God gave them these gifts graciously, but they turned them into sources of pride and competition. What was meant to build up the church became tools for tearing it down. This raises an important truth we must understand. Spiritual gifts are not indicators of spiritual maturity.

The Corinthians were "enriched" with spiritual gifts. They didn't lack any gift (verse 7). But as we'll see throughout this letter, they were immature, worldly, and divisive. They had spectacular gifts but lived in spectacular sin.

Many Christians believe that people with strong spiritual gifts must also be spiritually mature. They see powerful preaching, prophecy, healing, or tongues and assume the person is holy. But the church in Corinth shows that this is not always true. Their example reminds us that gifted people are not always godly people.

God gives spiritual gifts not based on our maturity or holiness, but based on what He wants to do through us for others. Ministry and spiritual gifts are about God's purposes, not our spiritual achievements. A gifted teacher may struggle with pride. A powerful evangelist may battle lust. Gifts don't equal godliness.

Think of a student who earns a scholarship for academic ability but still struggles with dishonesty, selfishness, and disrespect. A scholarship proves academic gifting, not moral

maturity. It's the same with spiritual gifts. God gives gifts for His purposes. Maturity comes through obedience and faithfulness.

Don't judge spiritual maturity by spiritual gifts. Don't assume someone is close to God just because they can preach well or pray powerfully. And don't assume you're immature just because you don't have spectacular gifts. Maturity is measured by love, obedience, humility, and faithfulness. Not by how impressive your gifts appear to others.

> 1:6-7 even as the testimony of Christ was confirmed in you, 7 so that you come short in no gift, eagerly waiting for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

The word "confirmed" means to make firm, establish, and verify as genuine. Paul's preaching was validated and proven true in their lives through the work of the Holy Spirit. When Paul preached the gospel in Corinth, how did people know it was true and not just another philosophy? Because God confirmed it through spiritual gifts and changed lives. The Spirit's presence and power proved the message was from God. The Corinthians' spiritual gifts weren't just for their benefit. They were evidence that God's message was true. The gifts authenticated the gospel.

The Corinthian church had the full range of spiritual gifts operating among them. But remember, having all the gifts doesn't mean they were using them correctly. A church can be "charismatic" (full of spiritual gifts) and "carnal" (immature and divisive) at the same time. The Corinthians prove this.

Verse 7 says they were looking forward to Jesus' return. This is commendable. Every believer should live in anticipation of Christ's coming. But Paul's mention of this raises a question: Are they ready for His return?

Jesus is coming for a pure and spotless bride (Ephesians 5:27). The Corinthians were waiting for the wedding, but were they preparing themselves as the bride? They had spiritual gifts, but did they have holy lives?

This challenges us too. We say we're waiting for Jesus' return, but what does our daily life reveal? Are we preparing ourselves, or are we content to wait without changing?

In many cultures, wedding preparation is elaborate and time-consuming. The bride's family spends months preparing. They clean the house, buy new clothes, cook food, and make arrangements. Everyone knows the wedding is coming, so they prepare carefully because guests will see everything. When Jesus returns, He's coming for His bride (the church). Are we preparing ourselves, or just waiting passively? Eagerly waiting should lead to active preparation by pursuing holiness, fighting sin, loving others, and serving faithfully.

> 1:8-9 who will also confirm you to the end, that you may be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. 9 God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Verse 6 said the testimony was confirmed in them (past). Verse 8 says God will confirm you to the end (future). The same God who validated the gospel in their lives will also establish and keep them until Jesus returns. God will keep you firm, strengthen you, and preserve you until "the day of our Lord Jesus Christ". That's the day when Jesus returns and we stand before Him.

This is a promise of preservation, not passivity. God doesn't just save us and then abandon us to struggle on our own. He actively works in us, sustaining our faith and completing what He started (Philippians 1:6).

The goal is "that you may be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ". That means there will be no valid charge against you. Nothing will disqualify you from standing in God's presence.

Now here's what's crucial to understand. The Corinthians were not blameless at that moment when Paul was writing to them. They were divisive, immoral, proud, and confused. There was plenty wrong in this church.

So how can Paul say they will be blameless?

The Corinthians were justified (saved), but not yet glorified (perfected). They were in the messy middle where sanctification takes place. God was working in them to transform them, and one day He would finish the job. Note the three stages of salvation:

- Justification (past): We were declared righteous when we believed - positionally blameless in Christ.
- Sanctification (present): We are being made holy as God works in us - progressively becoming blameless.
- Glorification (future): We will be perfected when Jesus returns - completely blameless.

The same is true for us. We're not blameless yet in our daily conduct, but we are blameless in our standing before God through Christ, and we will be blameless when Jesus returns and completes His work in us.

This should encourage every believer. No matter how much you're struggling with sin, with doubts, with failures now, God is not finished with you. He's working in you. Your present struggles don't define your final destiny. God will complete what He started.

Everything Paul just promised rests on one foundation: "God is faithful."

- God gave you grace (v. 4) - because He is faithful
- God enriched you with gifts (v. 5) - because He is faithful
- God confirmed the testimony in you (v. 6) - because He is faithful
- God will confirm you to the end (v. 8) - because He is faithful
- God will present you blameless (v. 8) - because He is faithful

Our salvation doesn't depend on our faithfulness. Thank God! It depends on His faithfulness. We waver, we fail, we doubt, we sin. But God remains faithful (2 Timothy 2:13). He keeps His promises. He finishes what He starts.

In verse 9 Paul reminds them of their calling. This isn't just a calling to salvation (though it includes that). It's a calling to fellowship with Jesus Christ. And this calling isn't limited to pastors, missionaries, or super-spiritual people. Every believer has been called into fellowship with Jesus. God personally invited you into a relationship with His Son. That's your identity, your purpose, and your destiny.

When you feel like you're failing, and you're discouraged by your own weakness, remember that God called you. He won't abandon what He started. Your job isn't to save yourself or perfect yourself. That’s God's work. Your job is to stay in fellowship with Jesus, trusting God's faithfulness to complete what He began.

Before Paul addresses the Corinthians' problems, he establishes what they need most: a right view of Jesus. Notice that every single verse in this section (1-9) mentions Jesus Christ. Nine verses, at least ten references to Jesus. This is deliberate. The Corinthians were divided over human leaders (as we'll see in verse 12). They were focused on impressive gifts, eloquent speakers, and worldly wisdom. Paul wants to reorient them. It's all about Jesus.

Division? Jesus is Lord over all factions. Immorality? Jesus calls us to holiness. Confusion? Jesus is our wisdom. Pride? Look at Jesus' humility. Weakness? Trust in Jesus' strength.

Regardless of the problems we face in our churches, our families, and our own hearts, the answer is always the same. Keep Jesus at the center.



Reflection Questions for 1 Corinthians 1:1-9

1. Paul says he was called to be an apostle "through the will of God." Where did his authority come from, and why did that matter to the Corinthian church?

2. Paul calls the Corinthians "sanctified" and "saints" even though they had serious problems. What does sanctified mean, and how could Paul use that word to describe this struggling church?

3. The Corinthian church had every spiritual gift but was still immature. What does this tell us about the relationship between spiritual gifts and spiritual maturity?

4. God called the Corinthians into fellowship with His Son. What does that mean, and who does this calling apply to?

5. Paul begins with thanksgiving before addressing serious problems. Think of a difficult conversation you need to have with someone. How could Paul's example of starting with gratitude change your approach?

Challenge Questions

6. Paul points to three stages of salvation: justification, sanctification, and glorification. Can you find verses in 1:1-9 that point to each stage? What difference does understanding all three make when a believer is struggling with sin?

7. Paul uses the title "Lord" for Jesus at least six times in the first ten verses. Why was calling Jesus "Lord" a bold claim in Corinth for both Jews and Gentiles? What "lords" in your culture make that same confession bold today?

Sectarianism Is Sin

> 1:10-13 Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment. 11 For it has been declared to me concerning you, my brethren, by those of Chloe's household, that there are contentions among you. 12 Now I say this, that each of you says, "I am of Paul," or "I am of Apollos," or "I am of Cephas," or "I am of Christ." 13 Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?

After thanking God for the Corinthians, Paul immediately addresses the most urgent problem in the church: divisions. Notice how he begins: "Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." It's an urgent appeal based on the authority of Jesus Himself.

Paul uses the word "plead" which means to beg, urge, or exhort with intensity. He's not issuing a command from a distance. He's pleading with them as a loving father begs his children to stop fighting.

When Paul says he wants them "all to speak the same thing", this doesn't mean robotic conformity where everyone uses identical words or suppresses their individuality. It means unity in the gospel message. It's agreeing on the core truths about Jesus Christ, His death, His resurrection, and what it means to follow Him.

The Corinthians were experiencing divisions among different house churches, each holding conflicting views and following different leaders. Paul's desire is for them to be unified in their beliefs and teachings about Christ.

The Greek word for "divisions" means a tear or split, like fabric ripping apart. The church had torn into factions, and Paul wants them healed and whole again.

The phrase "perfectly joined together" means to mend, restore, or put in proper order. It's the same word used for mending fishing nets (Mark 1:19). Imagine a fishing net with tears. It can't function properly until it's mended. The Corinthian church was like a torn net. It was still a church, but not functioning as God intended.

They are encouraged to be of the same mind and same judgment. This refers to having a common understanding and shared perspective. It is seeing things from God's point of view rather than human wisdom. It means allowing God's truth to shape their thinking and decisions.

Paul is urging the Corinthians to set aside their divisions, personal preferences, and individual agendas, and instead pursue unity based on Christ and His gospel.

In many villages, when there's conflict between families, the village elders call everyone together and say, "We are one village. We share the same well. We plant in the same fields. We celebrate the same festivals. We must not be divided." The elders remind people of their shared identity to restore unity. Paul does the same thing spiritually. He says, "You all share the same Lord Jesus Christ. You all received the same grace. You all call on the same name. Don't let human preferences divide what God has united."

Chloe is concerned about the conflict she sees in Corinth. While some might ignore it or even leave the church, Chloe does neither. Instead, she appeals to Paul for help. It is very possible that some in the Corinthian church were upset with Chloe’s household for reporting the problems. Although the text does not state this directly, the situation strongly suggests it. In today’s language, we might describe her as a whistleblower. When someone reports an issue, some will appreciate it, while others may feel exposed or criticized. In Corinth, some may have wondered, “Why did you tell Paul about us?” So some level of resentment would not be surprising.

Some may also wonder why Paul names Chloe publicly. Chloe was likely a known and respected figure, and the text indicates the report came from Chloe's household, not merely from Chloe herself. Her household acted together and spoke with a unified voice. Paul does not criticize them but instead treats their report as trustworthy. By naming Chloe's household, he establishes the credibility of his source and affirms the reliability of the report he has received.

Chloe was likely a wealthy businesswoman, possibly involved in trade, whose household members traveled between Corinth and Ephesus for business. Members of her household had witnessed the divisions in Corinth and reported them to Paul honestly and openly. They were not attempting to hide the problem but were concerned enough to bring it to his attention.

This demonstrates an important principle. Healthy churches acknowledge their problems rather than cover them up. Chloe's household didn't spread the issue as gossip. They brought it to someone in spiritual authority who could address it for the good of the whole body. The goal was never to expose or shame, but to bring clarity so the church could be strengthened. This is the biblical pattern for handling conflict.

The word "contentions" means quarrels, strife, or disputes. It appears in Galatians 5:20 as one of the "works of the flesh", behaviors that flow from our sinful nature rather than from the Spirit. The contentions weren't private disagreements quietly handled. They were public and disruptive, tearing apart the unity and harmony of the church.

Paul identifies four groups that had formed in the Corinthian church, each claiming allegiance to a different leader:
"I am of Paul" - Paul founded the church and stayed 18 months teaching them. He was an educated Roman citizen. Some Corinthians (especially Romans or those attracted to Paul's apostolic authority) aligned with him.

"I am of Apollos" - Apollos was an eloquent, well-educated Jewish teacher from Alexandria (Acts 18:24-28), "mighty in the Scriptures" and gifted in public speaking. Greeks, who valued rhetoric and philosophy, were attracted to his education and eloquence.

"I am of Cephas" - Cephas is Peter, the leader of the twelve apostles. He was Jewish, had walked with Jesus, and represented the Jerusalem church. Jewish believers (especially those with Hebrew backgrounds) identified with him.

"I am of Christ" - This group claimed to follow Christ directly, not any human teacher. While this sounds spiritual, they may have been using "Christ" as their faction slogan, possibly exhibiting spiritual pride.

Here's the tragedy. Paul, Apollos, and Cephas weren't causing these divisions. They weren't competing with each other or building their own followings. The Corinthians were misusing these leaders' names to create parties and factions. Later in this letter (3:5-9), Paul makes clear that he and Apollos are fellow workers serving the same Lord.

Think about how political loyalty usually works. People rally around a strong personality rather than a set of ideas. People say, "I follow this leader" or "I support that leader," often based on ethnicity, region, or family loyalty rather than policy positions. The leaders themselves may not be creating divisions, but their followers used their leaders' names to form competing groups. This was happening in Corinth. The church members were creating factions around leaders who never asked for such loyalty.

Paul responds to these factions with three powerful rhetorical questions that expose the foolishness of their divisions:
"Is Christ divided?" The obvious answer is no! Christ is not split into pieces or divided into factions. He is one. Jesus prayed in John 17:21 that His followers would be one, just as He and the Father are one. By creating divisions, the Corinthians were acting as if Christ Himself was divided. Jesus said, "A house divided against itself cannot stand"

(Matthew 12:25). If Satan's kingdom can't survive division, how much more must Christ's kingdom remain united?

"Was Paul crucified for you?" Again, no! Only Jesus died for the Corinthians' sins. The crucifixion of Jesus is the ultimate act of sacrifice and redemption. No human leader, no matter how gifted, eloquent, or apostolic, can reproduce that. Paul is saying, "I may have led you to the Lord. I may have taught you. I may have started the church. But was I crucified for you? If not, why are you pledging allegiance to me instead of to Christ who died for you?"

"Were you baptized in the name of Paul?" No! They were baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Baptism is a symbol of identification with Christ and entry into the body of believers. It declares, "I belong to Jesus. I've died with Him and been raised to new life with Him." When you were baptized, you weren't baptized in the name of Paul, Apollos, or Peter. You were baptized into Christ. Therefore your identity is in Christ, not in human teachers.

When divisions arise in the church today over worship styles, theological preferences, or leadership personalities, we must ask the same questions. Is Christ divided? No. Then why are we? Did our preferred teacher die for us? No. Then why do we follow them more passionately than we follow Christ? Were we baptized into a denomination, a pastor, or a movement? No. We were baptized into Christ.

These questions cut through all our excuses and bring us back to the foundation. Christ alone is Lord. Christ alone died for us. Christ alone is the center of our unity. Paul's plea for unity is timeless. As followers of Christ, we're called to pursue unity, to speak in agreement with His teachings, and to be joined together in the same mind and judgment. All of this is for God's glory and the advancement of His kingdom. Are we building unity around Christ, or are we creating divisions around preferences, personalities, or traditions? The answer determines whether we're functioning as the body of Christ or tearing apart like a damaged net.

> 1:14-17 I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, 15 lest anyone should say that I had baptized in my own name. 16 Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas. Besides, I do not know whether I baptized any other. 17 For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of no effect.

After asking rhetorically "Were you baptized in the name of Paul?" (verse 13), Paul makes a amazing statement. He's thankful that he personally baptized very few people in Corinth. This might seem strange. Why would an apostle be grateful for baptizing only a handful of converts? Because Paul understood that baptism could become another source of division if people claimed special status because "Paul himself baptized me."

Paul specifically remembers baptizing three individuals or households. Crispus, the synagogue ruler mentioned in Acts 18:8, who believed along with his entire household early in Paul's ministry. As a prominent Jewish leader, his conversion was significant, and Paul likely baptized him personally.

Gaius is probably the same Gaius mentioned in Romans 16:23 as Paul's host and host to "the whole church." He was apparently a wealthy believer with a house large enough to accommodate church gatherings.

The household of Stephanas is called the "firstfruits of Achaia" (1 Corinthians 16:15), because they were among the very first converts in the region. They "devoted themselves to the ministry of the saints."

Paul adds almost casually, "I don't know whether I baptized any other." This isn't a memory problem. Paul is making a point that baptism was secondary to his mission so he didn't keep track of who he baptized. By baptizing so few, he ensured that no one

could claim special allegiance to him based on who performed their baptism. The person who baptizes you doesn't matter. What matters is that you're baptized into Christ.

In some places, being baptized by a famous pastor or church leader is considered special. It's like having a photograph with a celebrity. People might say, "I was baptized by Pastor So-and-so when he visited our city," as if that makes their faith more valid. But Paul's example shows this thinking is wrong. It doesn't matter if a famous apostle or a new believer baptizes you. What matters is that you're identifying with Christ in baptism, not with the person who performed the ceremony.

Paul states his primary mission clearly: "For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel." This doesn't mean baptism is unimportant. Jesus commanded it (Matthew 28:19), and the early church practiced it consistently. But Paul is making a distinction between his primary calling (preaching the gospel) and secondary ministries (baptizing converts, which others could do).

Paul's statement reveals an important principle. Not every minister does every ministry task. Paul focused on what God specifically called him to do. He was an apostle to the Gentiles, pioneering new churches and preaching Christ. Baptism was left to others who served alongside him. This prevents both burnout in leaders and unhealthy dependency in congregations.

Now Paul explains how he preached: "not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of no effect." This phrase is crucial for understanding the entire letter.

In Paul's day, Corinth was obsessed with Greek rhetoric and philosophy. Sophists (professional teachers of rhetoric) traveled from city to city charging high fees to teach public speaking. Eloquent speakers were celebrities. They filled auditoriums, won debates, attracted followers, and commanded respect. The Greeks valued how you said something as much or more than what you said.

When Paul arrived in Corinth, he faced enormous pressure to compete with these eloquent speakers. The Corinthians expected impressive oratory, philosophical arguments, and rhetorical flourishes.

Paul refused. He says in 1 Corinthians 2:1-4 that he did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom. He goes on to say his speech was not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power.

Why? Not because he couldn't do it, but because eloquence would obscure the gospel. Paul was highly educated, trained by Gamaliel, and fluent in Greek rhetoric. If Paul preached with dazzling rhetoric, people might believe because of his persuasive skill rather than the truth of the message. Their faith would rest on human wisdom, not God's power.

Here's Paul's concern: the message of the cross is foolishness to human wisdom (as we'll see in verses 18-25). You can't make the cross "smart" or "sophisticated." A crucified Messiah scandalizes Jewish expectations and ridicules Greek philosophy. If Paul tried to "sell" the cross with clever arguments and eloquent rhetoric, he would fundamentally alter the message. The cross doesn't need to be dressed up in human wisdom. It needs to be proclaimed plainly.

When people believe the simple message of Christ crucified, their faith demonstrates God's power, not the preacher's skill. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 2:5 "that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God."

In some cultures, traditional medicine men or healers gain followers through elaborate ceremonies, mysterious incantations, and impressive rituals. People are drawn by the spectacle and believe in the healer's power. But when simple medicine came, "take this pill twice a day", some people initially rejected it because it wasn't impressive or mysterious enough.

The gospel is like simple medicine. "Believe in Jesus Christ who died for your sins and rose again." It's not impressive to human wisdom. There's no elaborate ceremony, no secret knowledge, no philosophical complexity. It's plain and simple. But it works. And when people believe this simple message, you know it's God's power at work, not human persuasion.

This challenges anyone who teaches God's Word. Don't try to impress people with your eloquence or education. Your job is to clearly explain the gospel and let God's Word do its work. Don't be ashamed of the simplicity of the gospel. You don't need to make it "intellectual" for educated people or "sophisticated" for skeptics. The gospel is the power of God to everyone who believes (Romans 1:16). Trust the message, not your delivery. The gospel doesn't need your help to be powerful. It needs your faithfulness to proclaim it clearly.

The gospel doesn't need human wisdom to package it or make it acceptable. The cross is God's power and God's wisdom, and it stands on its own. As believers, don't create factions around human leaders. As ministers, focus on your specific calling. As preachers, proclaim the gospel plainly and let God do the rest.

Christ the Power and Wisdom of God

> 1:18-20 For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. 19 For it is written: “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, And bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent.” 20 Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?

The message of the cross divides humanity into two groups based on how they respond to it. Notice the present continuous tenses: "those who are perishing" and "those who are being saved." These are not finished states but ongoing processes. People are on the

road to destruction or on the road to salvation, and their response to the cross reveals which road they are on.

The Greek word for foolishness is where we get the English word moron. It means stupidity or nonsense. To those who are perishing, the message of the cross is nonsense. And you can understand why. Think about what the gospel claims. God became a man, the Messiah was crucified, death brings life, weakness is strength, and shame is glory. From a human perspective none of this makes sense. It violates every assumption about power, wisdom, success, and divinity.

But to “those who are being saved”, the cross is the power of God. The Greek word for power is where the English word dynamite comes from. Through the cross, sin is defeated, death is conquered, Satan is disarmed, humanity is reconciled to God, and eternal life is opened. What looks like weakness to the world is actually the greatest display of divine power in history. Your response to the cross reveals your spiritual condition. If the gospel sounds foolish to you, you are on the road to destruction. But if the cross has gripped your heart as the most beautiful and powerful truth in the universe, you are being saved. The same message produces opposite reactions depending on whether the Spirit is opening your eyes or whether you are still blinded by worldly thinking.

Paul quotes Isaiah 29:14 to show that God's destruction of human wisdom is not new. It is his consistent pattern throughout history. In Isaiah 29, God confronted Israel for trusting in human schemes instead of divine power. When the Assyrian army threatened Jerusalem, Israel's leaders made a secret alliance with Egypt for military protection. They thought they were being wise and strategic. But God said through Isaiah, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise”. Israel should have trusted in God's power, not Egypt's chariots. Their clever plan failed.

Paul applies this directly to Corinth. Just as Israel trusted in Egyptian alliances instead of God, the Corinthians were trusting in Greek philosophy and eloquent rhetoric instead

of the cross. They wanted the gospel packaged in sophisticated arguments. But God says, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise”. Notice God does not just ignore human wisdom or set it aside. He actively destroys it and exposes it as useless. How? By accomplishing through the cross what all human wisdom combined could never do. Greek philosophy could not forgive sin. Roman power could not conquer death. Jewish law could not make people righteous. Human religion could not reconcile us to God. The cross did all of it.

Paul then issues a rhetorical challenge that exposes the emptiness of worldly wisdom. “Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?”

He has three representatives of human wisdom in mind. The “wise” refers to Greek philosophers. Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, and the Epicureans spent their lives pursuing wisdom through reason and debate. The “scribe” refers to Jewish scholars, Torah experts who studied every detail of Scripture and were highly respected for their knowledge. The “disputer of this age” refers to skilled rhetoricians who made a career out of intellectual combat, winning arguments and defending positions. Together, these three groups represent the best that human wisdom has to offer.

Paul's question, “Where are they?” is sarcastic and prophetic. In many villages, there is a respected elder known for wisdom and sound advice. But occasionally a crisis comes that their wisdom cannot solve. Everyone suddenly realizes that even the wisest among us have limits. The Greek philosophers, Jewish scholars, and skilled debaters all possessed impressive wisdom, but they could not solve humanity's deepest problems.

God exposed the limits of their wisdom by accomplishing through the cross what they could never achieve. When you stand before God, your degrees will not save you. Your intelligence will not justify you. The only question will be: did you trust in the foolishness of the cross, or did you trust in your own wisdom?

> 1:21-25 For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. 22 For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; 23 but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, 24 but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25 Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

God wisely designed the world so that human wisdom would fail to find him. It was his deliberate plan that human philosophy and reasoning could not discover the way of salvation. Why? Because if people could figure out God through human wisdom, they would take credit for it. Salvation would become a human achievement rather than a divine gift. Pride would replace humility. So God chose a different method: the foolish message of the cross. A crucified Savior? God dying for sinners? Salvation as a free gift? This contradicts everything human wisdom expects. God was pleased to save people through a message that looks ridiculous to human thinking, because it means no one can boast.

Jews demanded miraculous signs as proof before they would believe. They expected the Messiah to overthrow Rome with divine power. Instead, God gave them a crucified Messiah. The word for stumbling block means a trap or snare that causes you to trip and fall. For Jews, a crucified Messiah was scandalous and offensive because Deuteronomy 21:23 says, “Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree”. Crucifixion proved you were cursed by God. So when Christians claimed Jesus was the Messiah but admitted he was crucified, Jews responded, impossible. God's chosen one cannot be cursed. The cross was not just unexpected. It prevented them from believing.

Greeks pursued truth through reason and logic and wanted the gospel packaged in philosophical language with sophisticated arguments that appealed to human intellect. Instead God gave them a message that sounded absurd. God became a man, died on a

cross, and rose from the dead to save sinners. How could the divine become flesh? How could God die? How could crucifixion be the center of a religious message?

Many people today still respond the same way. Some want dramatic signs before they will believe. Others want the gospel to align with modern philosophy or intellectual respectability. But Paul says, “we preach Christ crucified”. Not Christ the miracle worker, not Christ the philosopher, but Christ crucified, because the cross is where salvation actually happened. We do not change the message to meet expectations.

To those who are called by God, both Jews and Greeks, that same message that appeared as a stumbling block and foolishness is revealed as the power and wisdom of God. When God calls someone, their eyes are opened. What once looked foolish now appears as profound wisdom. What once seemed weak now displays the greatest power. Jews who are called no longer demand signs. They see Christ as the ultimate display of God's power. Greeks who are called no longer seek human wisdom. They see Christ as the ultimate revelation of God's wisdom, revealing God's character and the path to eternal life.

Think of a town facing a devastating flood. Some say we need powerful machinery. Others say we need wise engineers. But what if the answer is neither impressive machines nor complex engineering, but something simple like moving to higher ground. To those who reject it, this seems too simple, not impressive enough. But to those who accept it and move, it saves their lives. The cross is like that. It does not meet worldly expectations of power or wisdom, but it actually saves.

Paul ends with a paradox. Even if we assumed for argument's sake that God could be foolish or weak, his foolishness would still be wiser than human wisdom and his weakness would still be stronger than human strength. God is never actually foolish, but take the thing that looks most foolish, the cross. Even that is infinitely wiser than the smartest human philosophy because it solved the problem of sin and death that no human wisdom could solve. God is never actually weak, but take the thing that looks

most weak, a crucified Savior. Even that is infinitely stronger than the greatest human power because it defeated enemies that no human strength could overcome.

This should both humble us and encourage us. It humble us because even God's worst from a human perspective is better than our best. It encourages us because we do not need to make the gospel impressive or acceptable to human thinking. The cross is already more powerful and wise than anything humans can achieve. When you are tempted to trust your own understanding remember that God's foolishness is greater than your wisdom. When you are tempted to rely on your own strength remember that God's weakness is greater than your power. Trust the cross. It is enough.

Glory Only in the Lord

> 1:26-29 For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. 27 But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; 28 and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, 29 that no flesh should glory in His presence.

Paul has just explained God's method. Now he gives proof from their own experience: "Look at yourselves, Corinthians. You're living examples of this principle." Notice Paul doesn't say "not any" but "not many." There were some educated, influential, and wealthy people in the Corinthian church. Crispus the synagogue ruler, Gaius who hosted the whole church, and Erastus the city treasurer. But these were exceptions, not the rule.



Inscription in Corinth mentioning Erastus (Acts 19:22, Romans 16:23 and 2 Timothy 4:2)

The vast majority were:

- Not wise - Not educated or intellectually accomplished by worldly standards.
- Not mighty - Not powerful, influential, or politically connected.
- Not noble - Not from aristocratic families or the upper class.

Most of Corinth's population consisted of freedmen. These were former slaves who had bought their freedom and worked their way up through trade. They were self-made, but not noble by birth. Paul wants them to remember where they came from. When they were creating factions around eloquent teachers, they forgot God didn't choose them because they were impressive.

In many societies, there are the educated elite, the powerful officials and business owners, and the noble families with generational wealth. If you're from a poor village with only a basic education, you're at the bottom of the social hierarchy. But when God builds His church, He often passes over the impressive people at the top and calls the ordinary people at the bottom. This was true in Corinth, and it's often true today.

The phrase “God has chosen” appears three times in verses 27-28. God deliberately selected people the world considered foolish, weak, and worthless.

The Foolish Things - The Corinthian Christians believed a crucified criminal was God. They claimed a dead man rose from the dead. They lived by different values. Sophisticated Greeks thought they were idiots. But when uneducated believers showed more genuine wisdom about God than the philosophers, it exposed the philosophers' wisdom as bankrupt.

The Weak Things - The believers had no political power, no military might, no social influence. They were persecuted and marginalized. But when powerless Christians outlasted their powerful persecutors, when the church survived Rome's attempts to destroy it, it exposed worldly power as temporary.

The Base Things - "Base" means lowborn, ignoble. These were people at the bottom of the social ladder with no prestigious family name, no inherited wealth, and no social connections.

The Despised Things - Many Corinthian believers were slaves or former slaves. People society viewed as property, not persons. They were people the world literally despised.

Paul describes believers as "the things which are not", the nobodies. From society's perspective, they didn't count, didn't matter, and were invisible. God chose nobodies to cancel out the somebodies. The philosophers whose names filled Corinth's lecture halls are forgotten. The powerful Roman officials are dust. The wealthy aristocrats are gone. But the faith of the "nobodies" who believed in Jesus has endured for 2,000 years. The somebodies became nobodies. And the nobodies became eternal.

Don't despise yourself or others because of a lack of education, wealth, or status. God doesn't choose people based on worldly credentials. If you feel like a "nobody," you're exactly the kind of person God loves to use.

In verse 29 Paul reveals why God chose foolish, weak, lowly people: so no one could boast before God. "Flesh" refers to human nature apart from God. "Glory" means to boast or take credit. God arranged things so that no human being could stand before Him and take credit for their salvation or usefulness.

Imagine if God only chose the highly educated. They would say, "Of course God chose me. I'm brilliant." If He only chose the powerful. They would say, "Naturally, God chose me." But when God chooses the foolish, weak, and despised, no one can claim they deserved it. Everyone stands on level ground, saved by grace alone.

When we stand before God, whether in worship now or at judgment later, there will be no room for human pride. No one will say, "God was lucky to have me." Everyone will say, "I'm amazed He chose me."

In some cultures, when important guests visit, families prepare elaborate displays to impress the visitors and bring honor to themselves. But imagine if the most honored guest came to visit the poorest family in the village, those with nothing impressive to offer. Everyone would know the guest came out of pure grace, not because the family earned it. This is how God builds His church.

Remember why Paul is writing this. The Corinthians were creating divisions based on which teacher they followed. They were boasting about wisdom, eloquence, and spiritual gifts.

Paul says, "look in the mirror". Who were you when God called you? Not many wise, mighty, or noble. God chose you when you were foolish, weak, and despised. He didn't choose you because you were impressive.

So why are you now boasting about human teachers? Why are you dividing over intellectual preferences? You're contradicting the very method God used to save you. If God saved you by choosing the foolish to shame the wise, then stay humble. Don't become proud and boastful. That is the very thing God bypassed when He built His church.

In God's presence, there is no room for human glory. You have nothing that wasn't given to you (4:7). The only appropriate response is gratitude and worship.

> 1:30-31 But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God —and righteousness and sanctification and redemption—31 that, as it is written, "He who glories, let him glory in the Lord."

After twenty-nine verses addressing the Corinthians' divisions and boasting, Paul now gives his climactic conclusion. Everything has been building to this moment. The Corinthians were boasting about human wisdom, eloquent teachers, and their own spiritual status. Paul has systematically dismantled every reason for human pride. Now he tells them who they should boast in and why.

The word "but" in verse 30 signals a contrast with verse 29: "that no flesh should glory in His presence." You can't boast in yourself (v. 29), but you can boast in what God has done (v. 30).

"Of Him" means "from Him" or "because of Him" and refers to God the Father. Everything that follows is God's doing, not yours. Your salvation, your position, your blessings all originate with God.

Paul says we are in Christ Jesus. This describes our union with Christ, and our identity before God. Everything Christ accomplished applies to you. His death becomes your death to sin. His resurrection becomes your new life. His righteousness becomes your righteousness. You're not just connected to Christ - you're in Him, united so completely that what's true of Him becomes true of you. You didn't achieve this through wisdom, works, or worthiness. God did it by grace through faith.

Now Paul identifies what Christ became for us. When Jesus came He became four specific things for believers:

Christ became our wisdom from God

Remember the Corinthians' problem? They were obsessed with human wisdom - Greek philosophy, eloquent speakers, and intellectual arguments. Paul has shown that human wisdom is foolishness and that God's wisdom is found in the cross.

Now Paul makes it personal. Christ Himself is your wisdom. You don't need the philosophers' systems or sophisticated arguments. In Christ, you discover the true

nature of God, the solution to sin and death, the meaning of life, and the path to eternal joy. All the wisdom you were seeking through human teachers is found in a Person - Jesus Christ.

This directly answers their divisions. They were saying "I follow Paul" or "I follow Apollos" because of wisdom. Paul says: You all have the same wisdom - Christ.

Christ became our righteousness

Righteousness means being right with God, having the status of "not guilty," standing justified and accepted before Him.

The problem is that we're all unrighteous (Romans 3:10). We can't make ourselves righteous through good behavior or religious rituals.

The solution is that Christ became our righteousness. His perfect righteousness is credited to us. When you believe in Christ, God counts Christ's obedience as yours. Christ lived the perfect life you couldn't live, and God credits it to your account. Christ didn't just give us His righteousness; He took our sin. On the cross, He bore our punishment. Our sin was given to Him; His righteousness was given to us.

This answers their boasting. The Corinthians were acting spiritually superior, creating hierarchies. Paul says none of you are righteous on your own. You all stand righteous only because of Christ. You have nothing to boast about.

In some legal systems, if someone can't pay a debt or fine, a family member can pay it for them. The guilty person goes free not because they're innocent but because someone else paid their penalty. In the same way, Christ became our righteousness by paying our sin-debt and giving us His perfect record. We stand before God not because we're good but because Christ was good for us.

Christ became our sanctification

Sanctification means being set apart for God, made holy, and transformed into Christ's likeness. While righteousness deals with our legal standing (justified, declared not guilty), sanctification deals with our actual condition (being made holy in practice). Righteousness is instant. You're declared righteous when you believe. Sanctification is progressive. You're being made holy over time as the Spirit works in you.

Christ became our sanctification and set us apart as God's holy people and sent the Spirit to transform us. This answers their carnality. The Corinthians were living like the world - divisions, pride, and immorality. Paul is saying "You've been set apart for holiness. Live like who you are".

Christ became our redemption

Redemption means to be bought back, freed from slavery through payment of a ransom. In the ancient world, slaves could be "redeemed" if someone paid their purchase price and set them free.

Christ paid the price to free us from slavery to sin's power, death's penalty, Satan's dominion, and the law's condemnation. Christ's blood was the ransom price (Mark 10:45). He purchased us from the slave market of sin and set us free.

This reminds the Corinthians (many of whom were former slaves) where they came from. "You were slaves. Christ redeemed you. You owe everything to Him".

Paul ends chapter 1 by quoting Jeremiah 9:23-24 in verse 31. This is the conclusion to his entire argument about boasting and wisdom. In Jeremiah 9:23-24, God says: "Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, let not the mighty man glory in his might, nor let the rich man glory in his riches; but let him who glories glory in this, that he understands and knows Me."

This was spoken to Israel when they were trusting in their own wisdom, military strength, and wealth instead of trusting in God. Sound familiar? That's exactly what the

Corinthians were doing. God's command was clear. Don't boast in human wisdom, human strength, or human wealth. Boast only in knowing the Lord.

Paul applies this directly to Christ. The "Lord" they should glory in is the Lord Jesus Christ. So Paul's final word to the Corinthians is to stop boasting in Paul, Apollos, or Cephas. Stop boasting in your wisdom or spiritual gifts. If you must boast, boast only in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul says “let him glory in the Lord”. To “glory in the Lord” means that you recognize that everything you have comes from Him. We give Him credit for our salvation and blessings. We talk about what He's done, not what we’ve done. We find our identity in Him, not in our achievements.

When someone graduates, lands a good job, or wins an award, the first thing they often do is thank the people who made it possible. They say, "I couldn't have done this without my parents' sacrifice." They give the glory back. Christians should also say about every spiritual blessing: "I couldn't have this without Christ. I glory in what He's done, not what I've done."

This verse is the perfect conclusion. Paul has been addressing divisions over leaders (vv. 10-17), boasting in wisdom (vv. 18-25), and pride in status (vv. 26-29). Every problem in Corinth stemmed from glorying in the wrong things. The solution is glory in the Lord alone.

What do you boast about? Your education? Your ministry success? Your spiritual gifts? Your theological knowledge? Paul's word to you is the same as to the Corinthians: Stop. You have nothing that wasn't given to you (4:7). Everything good in your life comes from God through Christ. If you must boast, boast only in Him. When people compliment you, redirect the glory to Jesus. When you're tempted to compare yourself favorably to others, remember, you’re only righteous, sanctified, and redeemed because of Christ.

Step back and look at this whole chapter, and you'll notice one word going through it from beginning to end: called. Paul opens by describing himself as "called to be an apostle" (v. 1). He describes the Corinthians as "called to be saints" (v. 2) and "called into the fellowship of His Son" (v. 9). Later he describes believers simply as "those who are called" (v. 24), and near the chapter's close he tells them to look at "your calling" (v. 26). From Paul's own apostleship to the Corinthians' salvation, nothing in this chapter starts with human effort or achievement. Everything starts with God's call. That's why boasting makes no sense (v. 29), and why glory belongs to the Lord alone (v. 31). You didn't call yourself into ministry, into salvation, or into fellowship with Christ, God did. That's worth remembering whenever you feel unqualified, or whenever you're tempted to take credit for what God alone started.

This is the way to unity. When everyone in the church is glorying in the same Lord, divisions disappear. When no one is boasting in themselves, there's no room for pride or competition. When Christ is everything to everyone, the church functions as it should - united, humble, and focused on the only One worthy of glory.



Reflection questions for 1 Corinthians 1:10-31

1. Four groups had formed in Corinth, each loyal to a different leader. What were the groups, and what drew people to each one?

2. Paul asked three sharp questions in verse 13 — Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized in Paul's name? What point was he making with each one?

3. Paul was grateful he had baptized very few people in Corinth. What does this tell us about his priorities, and what does it say about the person who performs a baptism?

4. Who did God mostly choose when He built the Corinthian church, and why did He choose that way? What does verse 29 say was His reason?

5. Christ became wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption for us. Which of these four means the most to you right now, and why?

Challenge Questions

6. Paul quotes Isaiah 29:14 — "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise" — and then asks where the wise, the scribe, and the disputer have gone. What did each of these three figures represent, and how did the cross expose the limits of each one? Where do those same types of wisdom compete with the gospel in your context today?

7. Paul preached the same message, Christ crucified, to both Jews and Greeks, even though it was a stumbling block to one and foolishness to the other. What does this tell us about changing the gospel to reach different audiences? Where is the line between adapting how we communicate and compromising what we communicate?

1 Corinthians 2

Christ Crucified

> 2:1-5 And I, brethren, when I came to you, did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God. 2 I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. 3 I was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling. 4 And my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, 5 that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

Paul has just concluded chapter 1 by saying "let him who glories, glory in the Lord" (1:31). Now he illustrates this from his own ministry. When Paul first came to Corinth, he deliberately avoided eloquent wisdom and impressive credentials. Instead, he came in weakness, preaching a simple message, relying entirely on God's power. This wasn't just humility. It was strategic, so their faith would rest on the right foundation.

Paul says "When I came to you”. He is referring to his first visit to Corinth (Acts 18). He arrived after being run out of several cities by persecution. In Athens, his sermon produced minimal results. When he mentioned the resurrection, some mocked and only a few believed (Acts 17:32-34). He came to Corinth discouraged, physically worn out, and unsure how the gospel would be received in this sophisticated city.

So, Paul says when I came to you I ”did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom.” "Excellence of speech" refers to rhetorical skill. This is the eloquent oratory that Greek sophists used to dazzle audiences. "Wisdom" refers to philosophical sophistication. This is complex arguments and intellectual systems.

Paul could have used both. He was highly educated and capable of sophisticated argumentation. But he deliberately chose not to. Why? Because if people believed because of his eloquence, their faith would rest on human persuasion rather than divine power.

Paul says "I determined not to know anything… except Jesus Christ and Him crucified." Paul was in Corinth - a city obsessed with philosophy, politics, and culture. There were endless topics he could have discussed. But he says: I determined to know nothing except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. This was a deliberate decision.

Notice he doesn't just say "Jesus Christ" but "Jesus Christ and Him crucified." The cross is central. Paul didn't preach Jesus the moral teacher or miracle worker. He preached Christ crucified. This is the foolishness and stumbling block from chapter 1.

Why this focus?

Because the cross is where salvation happened. Everything essential to the gospel is found there - God's holiness, God's love, human depravity, Christ's substitution, and victory over sin and death. Paul refused to dilute this message or dress it up in philosophical language.

Are you tempted to make the gospel more "sophisticated" to appeal to educated people? Paul's example challenges this. The gospel doesn't need our help to be powerful. Preach Christ crucified. Everything people need is found there.

In verse 3, Paul describes his state of mind when he first came to Corinth. Most people hide their weaknesses; Paul reveals his. He had been beaten, imprisoned, and run out of cities repeatedly. Paul was afraid. This was not sinful fear, but honest human fear. Athens had just rejected him. Would Corinth do the same? He was physically worn out, working as a tentmaker to support himself. But Paul tells them this deliberately. When

they believed the gospel, it wasn't because Paul was impressive. It was despite his weakness which proves their faith rested on God's power, not Paul's ability.

Paul is also modeling humility for a proud church. The Corinthians were boasting about their wisdom and gifts. Paul says, “Look at me. I came weak, afraid, and trembling, but God used me anyway.”

Shortly after Paul arrived in Corinth, God gave him a vision: "Do not be afraid, but speak, and do not keep silent; for I am with you, and no one will attack you to hurt you; for I have many people in this city” (Acts 18:9-10). God didn't rebuke Paul for being afraid. He encouraged him to keep speaking despite the fear.

In most nations, missionaries and pastors are expected to be strong, confident leaders who never show weakness. Admitting struggle is losing face or lacking faith. But Paul's example challenges this. He openly shared his weakness and fear - not to discourage people but to show that God's power works through weak vessels. When people see a weak, fearful preacher and the gospel transforms lives anyway, they know it's God's power at work.

Don't be ashamed of your weaknesses in ministry. Share them honestly. Ask for prayer. Trust God to work through your weakness. When people see God using you despite your limitations, they'll know it's His power, not yours.

In verses 4-5 Paul repeats that he didn't use rhetorical tricks or philosophical arguments that Greek speakers employed. He didn't try to win them through clever wordplay or intellectual sophistication.

He says his speech was "in demonstration of the Spirit and of power”. The Greek word means proof or evidence. Paul's preaching provided demonstrable proof of God's power. But how?

- Miraculous signs - Paul later writes: "Truly the signs of an apostle were accomplished among you... in signs and wonders and mighty deeds" (2 Corinthians 12:12). There were supernatural confirmations.
- Changed lives - The Spirit's power was demonstrated through conviction and transformation. Crispus the synagogue ruler believed. Gaius believed. Former idolaters, drunkards, and immoral people were converted and changed (1 Corinthians 6:9-11). This couldn't be explained by Paul's eloquence. It was the Spirit's work.

Paul's purpose for preaching in weakness was so their faith would rest on the right foundation. If the Corinthians had believed because Paul was brilliant and persuasive, what would happen when a more brilliant speaker came along teaching something different? Their faith would be shaken. But because they believed despite Paul's weakness, because the Spirit convicted and transformed them, their faith rested on God's power which cannot fail.

This is why Paul deliberately preached in weakness. It wasn't just humility. It was strategic. He wanted their faith built on rock (God's power), not sand (human persuasion).

In construction, some builders cut corners by using poor-quality concrete for foundations. The building looks fine at first, but when storms come, weak foundations fail and buildings collapse. Other builders invest in strong foundations even though it costs more. When storms come, those buildings stand. Paul was concerned about the foundation of the Corinthians' faith. If their faith rested on human wisdom (weak foundation), it would collapse under testing. But if it rested on God's power (strong foundation), it would endure any storm.

How did you come to faith? Was it because someone gave you compelling arguments? Because a preacher was charismatic? While these aren't bad, Paul wants your faith to rest on the Spirit's work in your heart and God's power to save. When doubts come and

questions arise, your faith will stand firm because it's built on God's power, not human wisdom.

Spiritual Wisdom

> 2:6-8 However, we speak wisdom among those who are mature, yet not the wisdom of this age, nor of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. 7 But we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the ages for our glory, 8 which none of the rulers of this age knew; for had they known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.

Paul preached without eloquent wisdom so the Corinthians' faith would rest on God's power (vv. 1-5). Now he clarifies that this doesn't mean there's no wisdom in Christianity. There is wisdom, but it's God's wisdom, not the world's. And it's only understood by those whom the Spirit has made mature.

Paul uses the word “however” which signals a qualification. He’s saying: "Don't misunderstand me. I didn't use human wisdom, but that doesn't mean I have no wisdom at all. We do speak wisdom. It’s just not the world's kind.” This is important because the Corinthians valued wisdom highly. Paul isn't rejecting wisdom itself, but redefining it.

Who are "the mature” in verse 6? The word means complete and fully developed. It is spiritual maturity. The Corinthians thought they were mature because they had knowledge and spiritual gifts. But Paul will shortly tell them they're actually immature. They are still spiritual babies (3:1-3).

The truly mature are those taught by the Spirit to understand God's wisdom. Maturity isn't measured by knowledge or eloquence, but by Spirit-given understanding of the cross. The mature see the cross as wisdom, not foolishness. They glory in Christ, not in human teachers.

"This age" refers to the present world system - its values and ways of thinking. The wisdom of this age is brilliant by worldly standards but foolish by God's. Paul has already shown (chapter 1) that the wisdom of this age is being destroyed.

Paul says the “rulers of this age are coming to nothing”. 'Rulers of this age' has a dual meaning — human rulers like Pilate, Caiaphas, and Herod, and the spiritual powers behind them (Ephesians 6:12). Both are 'coming to nothing.' The cross was their defeat, and Christ's return will complete it.

Some people seek wisdom and power from spirits, ancestors, or mediums. Village leaders might consult spirit mediums before making decisions. These practices seem powerful, but from God's perspective, these “rulers”, both the human leaders and the spiritual powers they consult, are "coming to nothing." They have no ultimate power. Christ defeated them through the cross.

A "mystery" in Paul's writings means something that was hidden but is now revealed. It's a divine secret God kept concealed but has now disclosed through the gospel. What is this mystery? God's plan to save both Jews and Gentiles through Christ's death, creating one new humanity. The Old Testament hinted at this, but the full reality wasn't clear until Christ came. No Greek philosopher deduced it. No Jewish rabbi fully understood it from the Law. It required God to reveal it.

God's plan wasn't an afterthought when humanity sinned. It was ordained before the ages - before creation, before time, before the fall. God predetermined from eternity that He would save sinners through Christ's death. Before Genesis 1:1, God had already planned the cross.

God ordained His wisdom for our glory. God's plan of salvation is designed to glorify us, transform us into Christ's image, and share His glory with us. Romans 8:30 says, "whom He justified, these He also glorified.” If God planned this before creation, nothing can thwart His purpose — our glorification is certain.

Both human rulers (Pilate, Caiaphas, Herod) and spiritual rulers (Satan and demons) were ignorant of God's wisdom. They didn't understand what they were doing when they crucified Jesus. They thought they were eliminating a troublemaker, defeating God's Messiah, and proving their power. But they were wrong. By crucifying Jesus, they actually fulfilled God's eternal plan, accomplished salvation for humanity, and sealed their own defeat.

The cross looked like Satan's victory but was actually his defeat. He thought he was destroying Christ, but Christ was destroying him (Hebrews 2:14). Colossians 2:15 paints the same reversal even more vividly. On the cross, Christ "disarmed principalities and powers" and "made a public spectacle of them". He was like a conquering king parading defeated enemies through the streets. The very rulers who thought they were winning were actually being marched through the streets in defeat.

If the rulers had understood God's wisdom, that the cross would accomplish redemption and defeat Satan, they never would have crucified Jesus. They would have tried to prevent it. This is divine irony. By acting according to their "wisdom," the rulers accomplished exactly what God had planned. Their wisdom proved to be foolishness.

"The Lord of Glory" is a divine title. Glory belongs essentially to God alone. By calling Jesus "the Lord of glory," Paul affirms His deity. They crucified the Lord of glory - the One who possesses all glory. The Creator hung on a cross. The King of glory was crowned with thorns. But through this humiliation, He accomplished our glorification. His shame became our honor. His death became our life.

The world still doesn't understand God's wisdom. People look at the cross and see weakness, foolishness, and defeat. But those with spiritual eyes see it as the wisdom and power of God - the means by which God saved the world and defeated evil. Don't be ashamed of the gospel. What looks like foolishness to the world is actually the highest wisdom.



Reflection Questions for 1 Corinthians 2:1-8

1. Paul said he "determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified." What does it mean that he determined this, and why did he emphasize the crucifixion specifically?

2. Paul admitted he came to Corinth afraid and trembling. What was causing his fear, and why did he share this openly rather than hide it?

3. Paul said his preaching came "in demonstration of the Spirit and of power." What were the two ways God's power showed up in Corinth even though Paul himself came in weakness?

4. Paul calls God's wisdom a "mystery." What does he mean by that word, and what was the mystery that had now been revealed through the gospel?

5. Paul came without impressive credentials, yet God worked powerfully through him. In your own ministry or witness, where are you most tempted to rely on your own ability rather than the Holy Spirit?

Challenge Questions

6. The rulers of this age, both human and spiritual, crucified Jesus without understanding what they were doing. If they had understood, they would have stopped it. What does this tell us about God's sovereignty over human opposition? How does this

change the way you think about situations where people seem to be working against God's purposes?

7. God planned His wisdom before the ages and Paul preached in deliberate weakness. How do these two ideas connect? What does this tell us about how God works through human weakness, and what does it mean for how we measure success in ministry?

> 2:9-10 But as it is written: “Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, Nor have entered into the heart of man The things which God has prepared for those who love Him.” 10 But God has revealed them to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God.

The rulers crucified Christ because they didn't understand God's wisdom (v. 8). But why couldn't they understand? Paul now shows that God's wisdom is beyond human discovery. It can only be known through divine revelation by the Spirit.

Paul quotes from Isaiah 64:4, where Isaiah praises God for His unprecedented acts on behalf of those who wait for Him. He applies this to the gospel. Just as Israel couldn't fully comprehend God's past works, humanity cannot comprehend God's ultimate work in Christ without divine revelation.

There are three ways human ability falls short:
"Eye has not seen" - We cannot observe God's wisdom with our physical eyes. The cross looked like defeat and shame, not wisdom and power.

"Nor ear heard" - We cannot hear God's wisdom through human teaching or philosophy. The greatest Greek philosophers and Jewish rabbis couldn't figure it out.

"Nor have entered into the heart of man" - We cannot conceive God's wisdom with our natural minds. Even our best thoughts can't reach God's wisdom.

"The things God has prepared" are all the blessings of salvation that God planned before creation. It includes Christ's death and resurrection, forgiveness, justification, adoption as God's children, sanctification, glorification, eternal inheritance, and union with Christ. These exceed anything the eye could see, the ear could hear, or the heart could imagine.

This verse is often quoted about the wonders awaiting us in heaven that are too glorious to imagine until we get there. But that's not what Paul means. His very next sentence says God "has revealed" these things to us now, in the past tense. Paul isn't describing a future mystery. He's describing a present one, already disclosed through the Spirit.

These blessings aren't for the wise or powerful (1:26). They're for those who love God and who have responded to His love revealed in Christ. Love, not intellectual achievement, is the prerequisite.

Imagine a village child who has never left his remote mountain village. He has never seen a city, never heard about airplanes or skyscrapers, and never imagined technology like smartphones. No matter how smart he is, he cannot conceive of these things. He needs someone from the city to come and tell him. No matter how brilliant humans are, we cannot discover God's plan of salvation on our own. We need God to reveal it.

This humbles human pride. The Corinthians were boasting about wisdom and knowledge. The most important truths - how to be saved, how to know God, how to have eternal life - are beyond your ability to discover. You need revelation, not education.

Verse 9 emphasis what we cannot know through human ability. Verse 10 says what God does reveal through His Spirit. "Revealed" means to uncover, unveil, and disclose what was hidden. God pulled back the curtain on His eternal plan through His Spirit.

The Spirit is God's agent of revelation. The Spirit takes what is hidden in God and makes it known to believers. This is why you can read the Bible and understand it - not because you're clever, but because the Spirit illuminates truth to your heart.

The Spirit searches all things which means to investigate thoroughly and to know completely. This is not about the Spirit searching within believers. It's about the Spirit's comprehensive knowledge of God.

The Spirit knows God completely - every attribute, every purpose, every thought, and every plan. Nothing about God is hidden from the Spirit. Why? Because the Spirit is God (as Paul explains in verse 11).

Because the Spirit knows God completely, the Spirit can reveal God to us. We couldn't discover God's depths on our own, but the Spirit who knows those depths perfectly reveals them to us.

The "deep things" means the profound, hidden, mysterious aspects of God that are beyond human reach. What are these deep things?
- God's wisdom (arranging salvation through the cross)
- God's love (giving His Son for rebels)
- God's justice (punishing sin at the cross)
- God's eternal plan (predestining us before creation)
- The mystery of the gospel (Christ crucified as wisdom)

These are "deep" not because they're intellectually complex but because they're divinely hidden. Human wisdom cannot measure these depths. Only the Spirit who dwells in those depths can reveal them.

In some places, there are deep underground cave systems that remain unexplored. Only experienced guides with proper equipment can enter the deepest caverns and discover what's inside. In the same way, the "deep things of God" are inaccessible to human

exploration. But the Holy Spirit is the perfect guide who has been in every cavern, knows every passage, and can lead us to discover what we could never find on our own.

How well do you know God's "deep things"? This isn't about how much Bible knowledge you have or how many theology books you've read. It's about whether the Spirit is actively revealing God to you.

This should drive us to humility. We can't discover these things on our own. It should make us more dependent on the Spirit to teach us. And it should make us ask the Spirit to reveal God's depths to you. When you read Scripture, pray: “Holy Spirit, reveal the deep things of God to me. What I cannot see, show me. What I cannot understand, teach me."

> 2:11-12 For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God. 12 Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God.

The Spirit reveals God's deep things. But how can the Spirit do this? Paul now explains with a powerful analogy and a crucial distinction.

He uses a simple comparison from human experience. Your own thoughts, feelings, and intentions are known to you and to your spirit (your inner self or consciousness). No one else can fully know what's in your mind unless you reveal it. I can't read your thoughts. You can't read mine. We might guess or infer based on words and actions, but we cannot know another person's inner thoughts completely. Only the person's own spirit knows what they're truly thinking.

Just as only your spirit knows your thoughts, only God's Spirit knows God's thoughts. No human wisdom or philosophical system can fully comprehend what is in God's mind. God's thoughts and purposes are known to Him alone - specifically to His Spirit.

This is a profound statement about the deity of the Holy Spirit. If only God can know God's thoughts, and the Spirit knows God's thoughts, then the Spirit must be God. The Spirit isn't a created being or a force. He is God Himself, possessing divine knowledge that only God can have.

This answers the question from verse 10. How can the Spirit reveal God's deep things? Because the Spirit knows those deep things perfectly. The Spirit can reveal God's thoughts because He knows them. He is God knowing Himself. Jesus had already promised this the night before He died. The Spirit will "guide you into all truth" and will "take what is Mine and declare it to you" (John 16:13–15). What Paul describes here isn't a new idea. It's that promise now being fulfilled in the Corinthian church. This is why the Spirit's revelation is reliable. He's not guessing about God. He knows God completely, exhaustively, and perfectly.

In some families, secrets or knowledge are passed down within the family but hidden from outsiders. Only those within the family truly know the family's history, struggles, and plans. Likewise, God's "family secrets" - His eternal plans and His hidden wisdom - are known only within the Godhead. The Spirit, being God, knows these divine secrets and reveals them to those God adopts into His family through faith.

When the Spirit illuminates Scripture to you, you're not receiving human interpretation or philosophical speculation. You're receiving God's own understanding of Himself. Trust the Spirit's revelation; don't trust your own reasoning.

Paul says "We have received... the Spirit who is from God". When you believed in Christ, you received the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:9, Ephesians 1:13-14). This isn't something you earned. It's a gift given at conversion. The Spirit proceeds from God, sent by the Father and the Son. He is divine in nature and authority.

Some people live by "the spirit of the world”. This has multiple dimensions. It's the world's way of thinking with the values and wisdom of fallen humanity. In Corinth, this was Greek philosophy that rejected the cross as foolishness. It's also the world's spiritual atmosphere. Ephesians 2:2 speaks of "the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience." Satan, as "the god of this age" (2 Corinthians 4:4), blinds minds and promotes a spirit contrary to God's Spirit.

Before conversion, the Corinthians operated by the world's spirit. They pursued wisdom, boasted in eloquence, and competed for status. But when they believed, they received a different spirit, God’s own Spirit and everything changed.

The purpose for receiving the Spirit is that we might know “the things freely given” to us by God. The “things freely given to us by God” are not a single gift but the whole reality of salvation in Christ. This includes the gift of the Holy Spirit, the blessings of forgiveness and new life, the wisdom of God revealed in the gospel, and even the ability to understand these truths. These are not discovered through human effort or intelligence but are graciously given and spiritually revealed. Without the Spirit, they remain hidden; with the Spirit, they become known and experienced.

Imagine a poor farmer who inherits a vast estate from a distant relative but doesn't know it. The inheritance is legally his, the documents are filed, the wealth is waiting, but he continues living in poverty because he's unaware of what he's been given. Someone must come and inform him so he can claim it. The Holy Spirit does this for believers. God has freely given us incredible spiritual riches in Christ, but without the Spirit's revelation, we wouldn't know what we have. The Spirit opens our eyes to see our inheritance.

Have you grasped what God has freely given you? Many Christians live spiritually poor because they don't know their riches. Ask the Spirit to reveal what God has given you. Read Scripture asking, "What has God freely given me in this passage?" Don't live like a spiritual pauper when you're a royal heir.

> 2:13-16 These things we also speak, not in words which man's wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual. 14 But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. 15 But he who is spiritual judges all things, yet he himself is rightly judged by no one. 16 For "who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct Him?" But we have the mind of Christ.

Now Paul shows the practical implications of what the Spirit reveals to us. These things refer to everything he has been discussing in this chapter. He did not use persuasive words of human wisdom because the message comes from the Spirit. The Spirit not only reveals what to say but also how to say it. The Spirit guides Paul's choice of words, ideas, and expressions to accurately convey divine truth.

When Paul says the Holy Spirit teaches by comparing spiritual things with spiritual, he means the entire process — revelation, communication, and reception — is spiritual, not natural. We use Spirit given words to communicate Spirit revealed truths to Spirit taught people. We do not mix divine content with human vocabulary or worldly methods. This challenges how we teach and preach. Are we trying to make the gospel acceptable by packaging it in human wisdom? Are we using worldly methods to make it more attractive? Paul says let the Spirit guide both what you say and how you say it.

Paul then describes three kinds of people and how they respond to God's truth: the natural man, the spiritual man, and the carnal man, which he will address in chapter 3. The natural man is the unsaved person who operates entirely on human wisdom and ability without the Spirit. He does not receive spiritual truth. Not because he lacks intelligence, but because he lacks the Spirit. Spiritual truths require spiritual capacity. This connects back to chapter 1 where Paul said the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing. The natural man looks at the gospel and thinks it is foolish. A crucified Savior? Salvation as a free gift? It sounds senseless to natural wisdom.

Notice Paul does not just say the natural man does not receive spiritual things. He says he cannot. It is impossible, not just unlikely. Imagine explaining the beauty of a sunset to someone born blind, or a symphony to someone born deaf. No matter how eloquently you describe it, they cannot grasp it because they lack the capacity. The natural man is in exactly that position with spiritual truth. This explains why some hear the gospel and it makes no sense to them. They are not stupid. They are spiritually dead (Ephesians 2:1).

The spiritual man is the believer who has the Spirit and follows his leading. The spiritual person is able to judge all spiritual matters. They can discern truth from error and apply spiritual truth to life. This does not mean that the spiritual person knows everything. It means they have spiritual capacity through the Spirit to evaluate spiritual matters correctly.

Paul then says that the spiritual person cannot be correctly judged by the natural man. Why? Because the natural man does not have the spiritual capacity to understand spiritual things. How can someone without the Spirit accurately evaluate someone who lives by the Spirit? The natural man thinks Christians are foolish for believing the gospel, naive for trusting God, and wasting their lives serving Christ. But that judgment is wrong because he is evaluating spiritual reality with natural understanding. Do not be surprised when unbelievers think you are foolish for following Christ. They judge you wrongly because they cannot see what you see.

Paul closes by quoting Isaiah 40:13, "Who has known the mind of the Lord? The answer is no one. God's thoughts are infinitely higher than human thoughts. No one can know God's mind well enough to instruct him. But because we have the Spirit, we have the mind of Christ. This does not mean we know everything Christ knows. It means the Spirit has opened our minds to Christ's thoughts. We understand God's wisdom in the gospel. We can think God's thoughts after him. We have access to divine truth, the natural man cannot know.

The mind of Christ is Paul's final answer to the Corinthians' pride in human wisdom. They were boasting, “I follow Paul; I follow Apollos.” Paul says stop boasting in human teachers. You have something far greater. The mind of Christ through the Spirit. All believers have this. Every single one. It should unite them, not divide them. Paul uses this same phrase again in Philippians 2:5, urging believers to let the mind of Christ shape not just what they know, but how they live — humbly, emptying themselves rather than grasping at status. For a church competing over teachers and boasting in wisdom, having the mind of Christ means more than superior understanding. It means Christ's posture of humility.

They needed to stop boasting in human wisdom and eloquent teachers and treasure what they actually had. In chapter 3 Paul will confront a painful irony. Their church has the mind of Christ but is still behaving like spiritual infants.



Reflective Questions for 1 Corinthians 2:9-16

1. Paul says no eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no heart has imagined what God has prepared. What are the three limits of human ability he is describing, and what do they tell us about our natural capacity to know God?

2. Paul compares the Spirit's knowledge of God to a person's knowledge of their own thoughts. How does this comparison explain the Spirit's ability to reveal God's truth, and what does it tell us about who the Holy Spirit is?

3. Paul says the natural man "cannot" receive spiritual truth — not just that he will not. Why is that distinction important for understanding how people respond to the gospel?

4. Paul says believers have the mind of Christ. What does this mean practically, and how should it have addressed the divisions in Corinth?

5. God has freely given believers incredible spiritual riches, but without the Spirit we may not even know what we have. In what area of your life are you not living in light of what God has already given you?

Challenge Questions

6. Paul distinguishes between the natural man and the spiritual man. The natural man cannot receive spiritual truth because he lacks the Spirit. The spiritual man has the Spirit and can discern spiritual things. But having the Spirit does not automatically mean you are living as a spiritual person. What is the difference between having the Spirit and being led by the Spirit in your daily life?

7. The Spirit reveals God's deep things to believers, yet Paul will tell the Corinthians in chapter 3 that they are not ready for solid food. If all believers have the Spirit, why do some understand God so much more deeply than others? What is the believer's own responsibility in growing in that understanding?

1 Corinthians 3

Sectarianism Is Carnal

> 3:1-4 And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ. 2 I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able; 3 for you are still carnal. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men? 4 For when one says, “I am of Paul,” and another, “I am of Apollos,” are you not carnal?

In 2:15-16, Paul described believers in general as "spiritual." But now he says to the Corinthians specifically: I could not speak to you as spiritual. How can both be true? There's a difference between positional and practical spirituality. Positionally, all believers are spiritual because they have the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:9). But practically, some believers are carnal. They have the Spirit but aren't following Him.

Paul distinguishes three kinds of people. The natural man (2:14) has no Spirit and is unsaved. The spiritual man (2:15) has the Spirit and follows Him into maturity. The carnal man (3:1) has the Spirit but doesn't follow Him. He’s saved, but living like he isn't.

"Carnal" means "fleshly" - controlled by the flesh rather than the Spirit. A carnal Christian is someone who is genuinely saved (has the Spirit) but lives like an unsaved person (follows the flesh). They have spiritual capacity but don't use it.

A "babe" is an infant. Babies are immature, self-centered, easily upset, unable to handle solid food. The Corinthians were spiritual babies. But here's the problem. They should have grown up by now. Paul first came to Corinth years earlier (Acts 18). They had time to mature, but they hadn't.

The Corinthians prided themselves on being sophisticated and spiritually superior. They divided into factions based on which teacher was wisest. They thought this showed maturity. But Paul calls them babies. Divisions don't prove maturity. They prove immaturity. Babies fight over toys. They are fighting over teachers.

In many cultures, there's great emphasis on "saving face" and appearing respectable. Imagine a wealthy businessman who dresses in expensive suits and speaks eloquently, but at home acts like a spoiled child, throwing tantrums when he doesn't get his way. The Corinthians were like this. They looked spiritual (gifts, knowledge, eloquent teachers) but acted carnal (envy, divisions, pride).

When Paul first came to Corinth, he fed them "milk" - the basic truths of the gospel: Jesus Christ crucified, salvation by grace, and basic doctrines about sin and repentance. This wasn't wrong. Babies need milk. New believers need basic teaching.

But mature Christians need "solid food", a deeper theological understanding. This includes the mysteries Paul mentioned in chapter 2, a deeper understanding of God's wisdom, application of truth to complex situations, and advanced doctrines.

Here's the problem. Years later, they still can't handle it. They should have grown by now, but they're stuck at the baby stage. Hebrews 5:12 says the same: "By this time you ought to be teachers, but you need someone to teach you again the first principles!"

Why can't they handle solid food? Not because they lack intelligence, but because they're carnal. Spiritual maturity isn't about intellectual capacity. It's about the spiritual condition. As long as they're living carnally (jealous, divisive, proud), they can't grasp deeper spiritual truth.

How long have you been a Christian? Can you handle solid food, or are you still on milk? If you've been saved for years but still struggle with the same basic issues and still need the same elementary teaching, you're a spiritual baby. It's time to grow up.

Paul says "You are still carnal" in verse 3. He is repeating himself for emphasis. They haven't changed or haven't grown. Time has passed, but transformation didn't happen. How does Paul know they're carnal? He uses three words to describe their behavior. First, he says there is envy among them. The Corinthians were jealous of each other's gifts, teachers, and status. Then he says there is strife. Their church gatherings were marked by tension and fighting. Lastly, he says they were divided into competing groups (1:12) around human leaders instead of united in Christ. These three go together. Envy leads to strife, which creates divisions.

This is how "mere men" behave. "Mere men" means ordinary humans, people without the Spirit. They are acting no differently than unsaved people. Unsaved people are envious, quarrelsome, and divisive. But they have the Spirit. They should be different. Yet they are behaving exactly like the world.

In many countries, counterfeit products flood the markets - fake designer bags that look real but don't function properly. The Corinthians were like spiritual counterfeits. They looked Christian on the outside (going to church, having spiritual gifts) but functioned like worldly people (envy, strife, divisions). Real Christians should function differently.

Paul now gives a specific example. Their carnality is most visible in their factions: "I am of Paul," "I am of Apollos." Despite Paul's rebuke in chapters 1-2, they're still doing it.

Why is this carnal?
- It's pride in human wisdom (which Paul already condemned)
- It's competition, not cooperation (treating God's servants as rivals)
- It's division, not unity (fragmenting the body over preferences)
- It's worldly thinking (how Greek philosophical schools operated)
- It misses the point (Paul and Apollos both pointed to Christ)

This carnality takes different forms today.

- Denominational pride - "I'm Baptist," "I'm Pentecostal," as if your denomination makes you superior.
- Church competition - "Our church is better than theirs." Churches comparing attendance or programs like businesses.
- Ethnic divisions - Identifying primarily by ethnicity instead of "We're all one in Christ."

Whenever we define ourselves primarily by anything other than Christ and use those definitions to divide from other believers, we're being worldly, carnal, and immature.

What divides you from other believers? Is it theology, culture, age, preference, style? Ask yourself if this division is necessary (a matter of gospel truth), or is it worldly (a matter of preference and pride)? Are you behaving like a spiritual person who sees believers as family, or like a carnal person who sees them as competitors? Spiritual maturity unites around Christ. Carnality divides around lesser things.

Watering, Working, Warning

> 3:5-9 Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers through whom you believed, as the Lord gave to each one? 6 I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. 7 So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase. 8 Now he who plants and he who waters are one, and each one will receive his own reward according to his own labor. 9 For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, you are God's building.

Paul goes on to explain why those divisions are foolish. Paul and Apollos are merely servants. God does everything that matters. That is why he says who are Paul and Apollos? The Corinthians treated Paul and Apollos like celebrities. Paul says: Let me tell you who we really are.

Paul calls himself and Apollos ministers. The word means servant and is the same word used in Acts 6 for serving tables. Paul is saying: We're waiters serving food someone else prepared.

When you go to a restaurant, do you fight about which waiter is best? That would be ridiculous. The waiter doesn't create the food or deserve the credit. Paul and Apollos are spiritual waiters. God is the chef. You're fighting over waiters while ignoring the one who made the meal.

Then Paul says "as the Lord gave to each one". Even their different roles came from God. If their abilities came from God, why boast in the men? Glory in the Giver, not the gifts. Paul says "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase." In farming, different workers perform different tasks, but only God makes seeds grow.

Later, Apollos arrived (Acts 18:24–28), and his role was different but just as important. He built on what had already been started, teaching more deeply and strengthening the believers, like watering what had been planted. These were two different men with different gifts, yet they were serving the same mission. There was no rivalry in God's plan—only cooperation. In the end, both planting and watering are necessary parts of how God grows His work among His people.

Here's the crucial point. Who made the church grow? Who saved souls? Who transformed lives? God. Neither planting nor watering produces growth - only God does. No amount of human effort can create spiritual life.

This humbles ministers and their followers. Pastors cannot save anyone. No matter how eloquent or experienced, human ministers cannot produce spiritual life. Only God can. If God does all the saving and growing, why boast in Paul or Apollos? They're just tools in God's hands. Glory in God, not in men.

Paul says he and Apollos are nothing. They are nobodies and of no account. He has to use this kind of extreme language to destroy the Corinthians' pride in human teachers. If Paul and Apollos are nothing, then boasting in them is foolish. Yes, God uses human instruments. But the power and results all come from God.

This should free ministers from pride and pressure. You're nothing - so don't think too highly of yourself when ministry "succeeds." But also don't despair when it "fails." Your job is to plant and water faithfully. God's job is to produce results.

Despite their different roles, Paul and Apollos are one. They are unified in purpose (advancing God's kingdom), Master (serving the same Lord), and message (preaching the same gospel). This directly answers the Corinthians' divisions. The Corinthians saw Paul and Apollos as rivals. Paul says: We're one. So your factions are completely unjustified.

Though united, each minister has individual accountability. God will reward each according to his own labor - not based on results, but on faithful work. You're not judged by how many people you converted but by how faithfully you worked.

In some cultures, extended families work together in family businesses. One person handles sales, another accounting, a third production. Different roles but one goal: family prosperity. It would be foolish for customers to say, "I only support the sales brother, not the accounting sister." They're one family business. Similarly, ministers have different roles but serve one Master. Don't divide over them.

Verse 9 says "For we are God's fellow workers.” "Fellow workers" means co-laborers working together. But we're not just fellow workers with each other - we're God's fellow workers. We labor with God. This is both humbling (we're junior partners, not equals) and honoring (God invites us into His work).

Paul then shifts his attention from the workers to the work itself—the Corinthians. He uses two simple but powerful metaphors to make his point. First, they are “God’s field,” the place where planting and watering have taken place through different servants. Second, they are “God’s building,” a structure that is being carefully constructed, a theme Paul will develop further in verses 10–15.

In both pictures, the emphasis is clear: the Corinthians belong to God, not to any human leader. Paul and Apollos are merely servants used in the process, but ownership and identity belong to the Lord alone. That’s why the divisions among them make no sense—saying “I am of Paul” or “I am of Apollos” forgets the most important truth: you are not attached to a human name, but to God Himself.

If you're God's field and God's building, then you can't divide into Paul's church and Apollos' church - there's only God's church. You can't boast in human leaders - you belong to God, not them. You should unite around your true Owner rather than fragment around human workers. Stop asking "Whose are you?" and start remembering who you are - God's people, God's possession, and God's project. If the Corinthians are God's building, then the only question that matters is what it's being built with, and on what foundation.

> 3:10-13 According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation, and another builds on it. But let each one take heed how he builds on it. 11 For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. 12 Now if anyone builds on this foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, 13 each one’s work will become clear; for the Day will declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one’s work, of what sort it is.

Paul explains how ministry must be built upon the only true foundation, Jesus Christ. His role as a “wise master builder” was not due to personal ability or training, but by the grace of God. As the first missionary to Corinth (Acts 18), Paul laid this foundation by

preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ, specifically “Jesus Christ and Him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2).

After his departure, others such as Apollos continued the work of teaching and discipling believers, building upon what had already been established. This pattern reflects normal ministry: one plants, another waters, but all depend on the same foundation (cf. 3:6).

Paul emphasizes that while the foundation doesn’t change, the manner of building upon it must be done with care. Leaders can build on the right foundation but still use inferior materials—such as bad teaching or worldly methods—that will not endure. The warning, “Let each one take heed how he builds,” is directed toward those in ministry, highlighting responsibility in how the church is taught and developed.

The imagery of a master builder underscores that once the foundation is laid, others continue the construction, but the stability of the entire structure depends on that foundation. There is no alternative foundation available; attempts to replace it with human philosophy, cultural trends, works-based righteousness, or personality-driven leadership are rejected. The foundation is not merely doctrines about Christ, but Christ Himself. Everything in the church must be grounded in Him.

Paul then contrasts two types of building materials: gold, silver, and precious stones versus wood, hay, and straw. These represent the quality of ministry.

Gold and silver correspond to sound doctrine, Christ-centered teaching, and truth that endures testing. Wood, hay, and straw represent shallow, superficial, or man-centered approaches that may appear effective but will not survive God’s testing. The “Day” refers to a future time of divine evaluation, when the quality of each person’s work will be revealed by fire. Paul isn't introducing a strange new idea here. He teaches the same truth elsewhere. Everyone will appear before Christ's judgment seat to receive what's

due for what they did in the body, whether good or bad (2 Corinthians 5:10). This is Paul's regular theology of accountability, not a one-time warning for a troubled church.

This testing does not determine salvation, which is secured through Christ, but evaluates the quality and durability of one's ministry. Some works will endure and be rewarded; others will be consumed, resulting in loss of reward while the person himself remains saved.

Paul's emphasis is both reassuring and sobering. Salvation rests on Christ alone, but ministry will be examined for its faithfulness, integrity, and alignment with the truth of the gospel. This should lead ministers to build carefully, not for immediate success or human approval, but with materials that will endure God's evaluation. The question remains: are we building with what will last, or with what will burn?

> 3:14-15 If anyone's work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. 15 If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.

Now Paul explains what happens when the fire tests our work. There are two outcomes, but notice this carefully—both people are saved. The difference is not salvation, but what remains after the fire.

If the work "endures," it means it survives the fire. It passes through and comes out the other side refined, proven, and still standing.

So what kind of work survives?

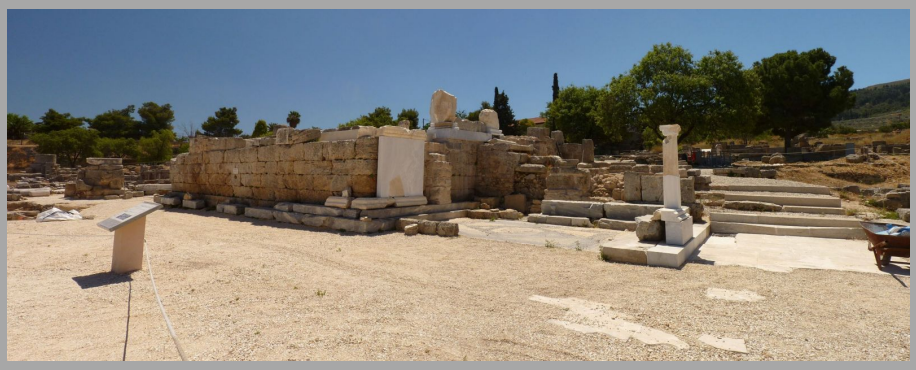
Work built with the right materials. Paul describes these as gold, silver, and precious stones. In other words: sound doctrine, Christ-centered teaching, and faithful investment in people. This kind of work lasts—not because the person was gifted or popular, but because it was built on God's wisdom, not human wisdom.

And Paul says something encouraging. If your work endures, you will receive a reward. This isn't about earning salvation. Salvation is a gift that's completely based on what Christ has already done. But the rewards are different. They are God's gracious response to faithful service.

Scripture gives us a few glimpses of what those rewards might look like—crowns, Christ's "well done," greater responsibility, and treasures in heaven. Think of them as God saying, "What you did mattered. It lasted."

Here's a simple way to keep it clear. Salvation is based on Christ's work for you. Rewards are based on your work for Christ. Everyone who trusts Christ shares the same foundation. But not everyone builds in the same way.

Now Paul turns to the other possibility. Some work doesn't survive. It burns up. This happens when someone builds with wood, hay, and straw—things like worldly thinking, shallow teaching, or methods that look impressive but aren't rooted in truth. On the surface, it might look successful. It may even draw a crowd. But when God tests it, nothing remains.



The judgement seat in Corinth (Acts 18:12).

Paul says that person will "suffer loss." Not loss of salvation—but loss of reward. Imagine spending years building something, only to watch it disappear in a moment. That's the idea. It's not punishment. It's the painful realization that what could have lasted… didn't.

And yet, the person is still saved.

Why? Because the foundation was built on Jesus Christ.

Paul is very clear. Salvation is not based on how well you built, but on what you built on. Even if everything else is gone, if Christ is your foundation, you are secure. But he adds one sobering image. It's like escaping a fire.

You make it out—but just barely. No rewards. No lasting work. Nothing to show for it. Just… saved.

That should make us pause.

The issue here is not sin being punished, but work being evaluated. Paul's message to Corinth, and to us, is simple: build carefully. Because not everything that looks strong will last.

Think of a student who gets into a university. That's like salvation—he's in. But how he studies matters. One student works hard, grows, and graduates with honors. Another barely gets through by cutting corners and doing the minimum. Both graduate. But only one has something to show for it.

This should create a kind of holy caution for those who lead or teach. Not fear of losing salvation but fear of wasting your life on things that don't last.

Be careful what you value. Don't be impressed by what looks big, loud, or successful. Look for what is faithful. Support those who teach God's Word clearly. Pray for your leaders. They carry the weight of knowing their work will be tested.

Here’s the sobering reality. Some who seemed incredibly successful may see their work disappear. And some who quietly taught truth and made disciples will see their work shine like gold. In the end, the fire tells the truth. So build wisely.



Reflective Questions for 1 Corinthians 3:1-15

1.Paul describes three kinds of people — the natural man, the spiritual man, and the carnal man. What is the key difference between the natural man and the carnal man, and why does it matter that a carnal Christian is still genuinely saved?

2. Years after founding the church, Paul finds the Corinthians still on milk instead of solid food. What evidence did he point to that showed they were still immature, and what does this tell us about the connection between how we behave and how we grow?

3. Both Paul and Apollos are called servants and described as nothing. What does the farming image of planting and watering teach us about the role of human leaders, and where does the real credit for spiritual growth belong?

4. Two kinds of building materials appear in verse 12. Gold, silver, and precious stones on one side, and wood, hay, and straw on the other. What do these represent, and what is the difference between work that survives the fire and work that doesn't?

5. A minister's life work could be burned up on the Day of Judgment, not because they weren't saved, but because they built poorly. What are you currently building with in your ministry or service to God? Are there areas where you are doing what looks impressive rather than what is faithful?

Challenge Questions

6. Envy, strife, and divisions were Paul's evidence that the Corinthians were carnal — behaving no differently from unsaved people. If a church has spiritual gifts, large attendance, and active programs but also has rivalry and division among its leaders, what does Paul say that actually reveals about the church? How should this change the way we measure church health?

7. Salvation rests on the foundation of Jesus Christ and cannot be lost. But rewards depend on how faithfully a person built. Some will be saved "yet so as through fire" with nothing to show for their ministry. How does this tension between the security of salvation and the accountability of rewards shape the way a minister should approach their calling?

> 3:16-17 Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? 17 If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are.

Paul now brings his argument to a climax with a powerful image: the church is God's temple.

He's already used two pictures—the church as a field and as a building. Now he adds a third. A field can grow. A building can be tested. But a temple? That's sacred. That's where God lives.

Then Paul says something that should make us think. "Do you not know…?" In other words, "You should already understand this." But their behavior showed they had forgotten.

Notice that "you" here is plural. Paul is describing the whole church together as one temple, not each believer individually. Later, in 6:19, he'll use this same image about an

individual believer's body. Keep those two applications separate. Here the issue is division and false teaching corrupting the church as a whole. There it will be personal sexual purity.

The church is not just a group of people meeting in the same place. It is the dwelling place of God. God doesn't live in a building made with stone. He lives in His people. His Spirit dwells among them.

So the church is not ordinary. It is holy.

And that's why verse 17 hits so hard. "If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him." That's strong language, and it's meant to be.

To "defile" or "destroy" here doesn't mean knocking down a building. It means corrupting the church through division, false teaching, or sinful influence. That's exactly what was happening in Corinth. People were dividing over leaders, promoting human wisdom, and creating factions. From their perspective, it might have seemed like normal disagreements. From God's perspective, it was damage to something sacred.

And God takes that personally because the church belongs to Him.

Put all three images together, and you get the full picture. The church is God's field. He is the one who gives growth. The church is God's building. Everything must be built on Christ. And the church is God's temple. He Himself dwells in it.

So this isn't just about ministry strategy or personal preference. This is about how we treat what belongs to God. The presence of God defines the identity of the church. And because His presence is there, the church must be treated as holy.

That means division isn't a small issue. False teaching isn't a minor mistake, and worldly thinking isn't harmless. These things don't just create problems. They damage what God is building and inhabiting.

Paul's point to the Corinthians is simple, but serious. You don't belong to Paul or Apollos. You belong to God. And since that's true, you must live in unity and build carefully on Christ. Guard the purity of the church because God Himself lives there.

Don't treat the church like it's yours. It's God's house.

Avoid Worldly Wisdom

> 3:18-20 Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you seems to be wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. 19 For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, "He catches the wise in their own craftiness"; 20 and again, "The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile."

Paul warns the Corinthians not to deceive themselves by trusting in the wisdom of this age. This isn't a new idea. Paul already showed in chapter 1 that God's wisdom looks like foolishness to the world, and that the cross confounds the wise (1:18–25). Here he simply applies that same truth directly to the Corinthians. If you want real wisdom, you must be willing to look foolish by the world's standards.

In the context of the church, this self-deception happens when believers begin to evaluate themselves and others according to human standards of wisdom, status, or skill rather than God's truth revealed in Christ.

To "become a fool" does not mean embracing ignorance, but surrendering confidence in human wisdom and accepting God's way of salvation through the cross, even when it appears foolish to the world. This idea connects directly to Paul's earlier teaching: the

message of the cross is the true wisdom of God, though it is rejected by those who rely on human reasoning.

The Corinthians had fallen into this trap by aligning themselves with particular teachers and valuing eloquence or philosophical insight over faithfulness to the gospel. In doing so, they were measuring wisdom by the wrong standard.

Paul reminds them that the wisdom of this world is ultimately empty when compared to God's wisdom. To support this, he quotes Job 5:13 to show that God "catches the wise in their craftiness" and that the thoughts of the wise are futile. These statements emphasize that human wisdom cannot stand against God's knowledge or purposes. What may appear impressive by human standards is exposed as limited when placed before God.

This warning ties directly back to the broader discussion of building the church. If the foundation is Christ, then the only wisdom that truly matters is the wisdom that comes from Him. Human wisdom, when used as the guiding principle for ministry or church life, leads to division, pride, and instability. But when the cross is embraced as the true wisdom of God, it produces humility, unity, and faithful building. Paul's point is simple: do not evaluate ministry, teachers, or even yourself by worldly standards. Instead, submit every thought and practice to the wisdom revealed in Christ, who alone is the true foundation and the true measure of what is wise.

> 3:21-23 Therefore let no one boast in men. For all things are yours: 22 whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas, or the world or life or death, or things present or things to come—all are yours. 23 And you are Christ's, and Christ is God's.

When Paul says, "do not boast in men," he is referring specifically to himself, Apollos, and Peter. No individual servant of God is to be elevated as the source of loyalty or identity, no matter how influential or gifted they may be. We can learn from faithful

teachers, past and present. We are not called to belong to them or to divide ourselves around them.

Paul's point is that these leaders belong to the entire church, not to separate groups within it. Instead of the Corinthians saying, "I belong to Paul," "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Peter," Paul corrects them by showing that the relationship is the opposite. These servants are given by God for the benefit of the whole church. Since they belong to the church, there is no basis for division over them.

In fact, Paul expands the idea further by saying, "all things are yours." This means that everything God has provided—including faithful leaders, ministry gifts, and spiritual resources—is given for the good of the whole body. Believers can receive from a variety of teachers, appreciate their differences, and benefit from their distinct contributions without needing to agree with everything they say. All of these are gifts intended to serve the church, not to divide it.

This claim echoes what Paul writes in Romans 8:32, "if God did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us, how will He not also, along with Him, freely give us all things?" "All things are yours" isn't just a clever way to end an argument about factions. It's Paul's settled conviction about what belonging to Christ actually secures.

Ultimately, this reality is rooted in our union with Christ. If we belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God, then we share in all that belongs to Him. Therefore, rather than competing for allegiance to human leaders, believers are called to recognize their shared inheritance in Christ. This understanding removes the need for division and instead encourages unity, gratitude, and a proper focus on our identity in Christ.

In the opening of 1 Corinthians, Paul confronts the divisions in the church by reminding the believers that Christ is not divided. The Corinthians were aligning themselves with different leaders and boasting in human wisdom, but Paul shows that true unity comes

from centering on the gospel of Jesus Christ rather than on people or worldly knowledge.



Reflective Questions for 1 Corinthians 3:16-23

1. Three images describe the church in chapter 3 — a field, a building, and a temple. What does each image emphasize, and why does the temple image carry the most weight when it comes to division and false teaching?

2. The warning in verse 17 is one of the strongest in the letter — "If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him." What specific behaviors in Corinth counted as defiling the temple, and why does God respond so seriously?

3. Verse 18 says "let no one deceive himself." What kind of self-deception was happening in Corinth, and what does it mean to become a fool in order to become wise?

4. Instead of saying "I belong to Paul" or "I belong to Apollos," Paul flips the relationship in verses 21-23. What does he mean when he says the teachers belong to the church rather than the church to the teachers, and how does this remove the reason for division?

5. Paul says "all things are yours" including Paul, Apollos, Peter, life, death, and things to come. Do you live with this sense of spiritual richness, or do you find yourself attaching to one teacher or tradition and missing the full inheritance God has given you?

Challenge Questions

6. God’s response to those who defile His temple is the same word used for the defiling itself, destruction. This is unusually strong language for a pastoral letter. Knowing that Paul is addressing division and worldly thinking rather than outright immorality, what does this tell us about how seriously God views disunity in the church? Do we treat it with the same seriousness?

7. The words at the end of verse 23, ”you are Christ's, and Christ is God’s”, roots everything Paul has said about unity and humility in one theological reality: our union with Christ. How does this chain of belonging answer every problem Paul has addressed in chapters 1-3? What does it tell us about the connection between sound theology and practical church health?

1 Corinthians 4

Stewards of the Mysteries of God

> 4:1-5 Let a man so consider us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. 2 Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful. 3 But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by a human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. 4 For I know of nothing against myself, yet I am not justified by this; but He who judges me is the Lord. 5 Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts. Then each one's praise will come from God.

Paul now shifts the focus from what ministers build to how they should be viewed. The Corinthians had been comparing leaders—Paul, Apollos, Peter—and forming opinions about who was better. Paul steps in and says, "This is how you should think about us." Not as celebrities or competitors, but as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. A servant simply carries out the will of his master, and a steward manages what belongs to someone else. That's the key. Nothing belongs to them. They have been entrusted with the message of the gospel, the revealed plan of salvation.

This is the same "mystery" Paul described in chapter 2 — God's once-hidden, now-revealed plan of salvation through Christ crucified. Ministers aren't stewards of their own ideas or reputations. They're entrusted with managing that specific treasure faithfully.

Because of that, the main requirement is simple: faithfulness. Not success, not popularity, not how impressive someone looks or sounds but faithfulness. That would have been a correction for the Corinthians, who were focused on style and personality. Paul brings them back to what really matters. A steward doesn't own the treasure; he is responsible for handling it well. In the same way, anyone entrusted with teaching or

leading in the church is called to be faithful with what God has given, not to build a reputation for themselves.

Then Paul says something that feels almost shocking. He doesn't really care how they judge him. It's not that he's dismissive or proud; he just knows who his real Master is. He serves the church, yes, but he answers to Christ. So human opinions—whether praise or criticism—don't carry ultimate weight. In fact, Paul goes even further and says he doesn't even trust his own judgment of himself. He may have a clear conscience, but that doesn't mean he is right. Only the Lord sees everything perfectly, including motives and intentions. This is the same judgment Paul describes more fully in 3:13–15. It's not a judgment that threatens salvation, but one that evaluates faithfulness.

That leads to his main instruction: "Do not judge anything before the time." The Corinthians were evaluating and ranking leaders, but Paul says they are jumping ahead of God. Human judgment is limited. We can see actions, but not the heart behind them. One day, when the Lord returns, everything hidden will be brought into the light, even the motives of the heart. And in that moment, what will matter most is not what people said about us, but what God says.

So Paul's point is both grounding and freeing. Ministry is not about gaining approval from people, and it's not about constantly second-guessing yourself either. It's about being faithful to Christ and leaving the final evaluation to Him. There will always be people who misunderstand, criticize, or disagree. There will also be moments when you question yourself. But neither of those is the final voice; God is. And when He judges, He judges rightly and graciously. Each one's praise will come from God.

Fools for Christ's Sake

> 4:6-8 Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively transferred to myself and Apollos for your sakes, that you may learn in us not to think beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up on behalf of one against the other. 7

> For who makes you differ from another? And what do you have that you did not receive? Now if you did indeed receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it? 8 You are already full! You are already rich! You have reigned as kings without us—and indeed I could wish you did reign, that we also might reign with you!

Paul now takes everything he has been saying and makes it very personal. He tells the Corinthians that he has been using himself and Apollos as examples for their sake. This is intentional. Instead of calling out others directly, Paul uses himself as a model so they can learn without the situation becoming more divisive. He is not just correcting them—he is doing it in a way that protects the church.

His goal is simple: "that you may learn in us not to think beyond what is written." This means they must let Scripture set the boundaries for how they think—especially about leaders. If they had been guided by what God has already said, they would not have elevated one leader over another or formed factions. Scripture corrects pride and keeps believers grounded. When people move beyond it, they rely on human thinking, and that is where division starts.

At the heart of the problem is pride. Paul says they are "puffed up," taking sides and boasting in certain leaders. So he confronts that pride directly in verse 7 with three simple but powerful questions: Who makes you different? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if you didn't?

Step by step, he removes any basis for boasting. Everything they have—abilities, knowledge, spiritual gifts, even their opportunities—has been given to them. Nothing is self-made. That means there is no room for pride and no reason to compare themselves with others.

This single question may be the closest thing to a thesis statement for the whole letter. Every problem Paul addresses—pride in wisdom, pride in spiritual gifts, pride in

knowledge, even competing over whose suffering is more impressive—traces back to forgetting that nothing you have is self-made. Keep this verse in mind as you read the rest of the letter. It resurfaces every time the Corinthians boast in something God gave them.

Then Paul shifts tone and uses sharp sarcasm to expose how far off they are. “You are already full! You are already rich! You have reigned as kings…” He is not praising them —he is confronting their self-perception. In their own minds, they had already “arrived.” They thought they had all the wisdom they needed, all the status they wanted, and no longer needed correction—even from Paul. But in reality, they were full of themselves, not full of God.

This is deeper than just arrogance—it is spiritual self-sufficiency. They were living as if the Christian life was already complete, as if there was no more growth needed, no more dependence on God, and no place for humility. Paul even says, “You have reigned as kings without us,” meaning they were acting as if they had reached a level of spiritual maturity on their own, without the very apostles who had taught them.

Then comes a subtle but important line: “I wish you did reign.” Paul is pointing forward. One day, believers really will reign with Christ, but that day has not come yet. The Christian life right now is not about comfort, status, or self-satisfaction. It involves humility, dependence, and often suffering. This prepares the way for what Paul will say next, where he contrasts their comfortable view of Christianity with the difficult, sacrificial life of the apostles.

So Paul’s point becomes obvious. Their divisions, their pride, and their boasting all come from the same root problem. They have forgotten that everything they have is a gift from God and have started to think of themselves as self-made. When that happens, people begin to compare, compete, and divide. But when they remember everything is received, pride disappears and unity becomes possible.

In simple terms, if everything is a gift, there is nothing to boast about. And if there is nothing to boast about, there is no reason to divide.

> 4:9-11 For I think that God has displayed us, the apostles, last, as men condemned to death; for we have been made a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men. 10 We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are distinguished, but we are dishonored! 11 To the present hour we both hunger and thirst, and we are poorly clothed, and beaten, and homeless.

Paul now pushes the contrast even further. The Corinthians saw themselves as strong, wise, and reigning like kings. But Paul shows them what real ministry actually looks like, and it is the complete opposite.

He says, "I think that God has displayed us, the apostles, last, as men condemned to death." This does not mean that God is the direct cause of their suffering, but that He has allowed their circumstances and is using them as a visible example. The apostles are being put on display—not in honor, but in humiliation. Their lives are like a public demonstration of what it truly means to follow Christ.

Paul uses an image that the Corinthians would immediately understand. In the Roman world, the worst criminals were brought out last into the arena, condemned to die in front of a crowd. That is how Paul describes the apostles—last, lowest, and facing death. While the Corinthians saw themselves as first, important, and reigning, Paul says, "We are the ones at the end of the line."

He adds that they have become a "spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men." Their lives are like a public theater—not of success, but of suffering. They are being watched not only by people, but even by angels. This is not quiet or hidden. Their hardship, rejection, and endurance are on display before the entire world.

Paul then continues with sharp irony. “We are fools for Christ’s sake, but you are wise… we are weak, but you are strong… you are honored, but we are dishonored.” This is the same wise/foolish contrast from chapter 1, now turned personally on Paul himself.

The Corinthians believed they were wise and strong, but they were using human standards. Paul calls himself a fool, yet he is living according to God’s wisdom. The contrast exposes how completely upside down their thinking has become.

This is not just about Paul defending himself. It is about redefining what true Christian leadership looks like. The Corinthians thought following Christ meant status, recognition, and strength. Paul shows that real apostleship often looks like weakness, rejection, and suffering.

Then he brings it down to his present reality: “To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly clothed, beaten, and homeless.” This is not something from the past—it is his daily life. He has no comfort, no security, no stable home. Instead of being treated like a king, he lives with constant hardship.

Paul is not seeking sympathy. He is exposing the gap between their comfortable self-image and what true discipleship actually looks like. Following Christ is not about arriving at a place of comfort and honor. It is about faithfulness, even when it leads to suffering.

This raises a question for us. What kind of Christianity are we expecting? The Corinthians wanted a life of ease, recognition, and status. But Paul shows that the path of Christ often looks very different.

Wealth and comfort are not wrong in themselves, but they can easily become a trap. They can lead to self-sufficiency and make us forget our dependence on God. The issue is not what we have, but whether those things shape our priorities and control our hearts.

In the end, Paul's message is clear. The Corinthians were living as if they had already arrived. The apostles were living as those who were still being poured out. And Paul is saying you have misunderstood what it means to follow Christ.

> 4:12-13 And we labor, working with our own hands. Being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we endure; 13 being defamed, we entreat. We have been made as the filth of the world, the offscouring of all things until now.

Paul says that the apostles "labor, working with our own hands." This shows that he supported himself through manual work. Paul was known as a tentmaker, and he did not rely on financial support from the Corinthian church. Earlier in the chapter, he has already described being hungry and poorly clothed, which reflects the lack of material support he experienced.

He then describes how the apostles respond to mistreatment. When they are reviled (insulted or slandered), they bless. When they are persecuted, they endure with patience. When they are defamed (spoken against with harmful or abusive words), they respond with gentleness and kindness. In each case, Paul shows that their response is not retaliation but grace.

This reveals a pattern of self-denial. Paul is not living to defend his reputation or secure comfort, but to faithfully follow Christ. His responses reflect the teaching of Jesus to love enemies, endure suffering, and respond to evil with good.

In many communities, when someone is publicly dishonored, falsely accused, or spoken against, the expected response is to defend yourself or retaliate. But Paul does the opposite. He blesses, endures, and responds with gentleness. This isn't weakness. It's the hardest kind of strength.

This contrasts with how the Corinthians viewed themselves. They were concerned with image, honor, and appearing wise and successful. Some even looked down on Paul because he did not fit their expectations of status and outward strength. Paul, however, embraces a position that the world despises.

Paul is showing that faithful ministry in Christ does not always align with worldly success, comfort, or recognition. Instead, it may involve hardship, rejection, and being misunderstood or dishonored.

The phrase “offscouring” also carries the idea of something removed during cleansing. In this sense, the apostles bear the rejection and hostility of others as they continue their work in the gospel. They absorb the opposition directed toward them without returning it in kind.

By presenting himself this way, Paul is not expressing failure, but showing the nature of true apostolic ministry—marked by humility, endurance, and willingness to suffer for the sake of Christ.

Paul’s response shows that Christian maturity is not measured by outward success, but by Christlike humility and endurance. Following Jesus often means accepting a low position in the eyes of the world while remaining faithful to Him in all circumstances.



Reflective Questions for 1 Corinthians 4:1-13

1. Two words describe how ministers should be viewed — servants and stewards. What does each word tell us about the proper role of a Christian leader, and why is faithfulness the key requirement rather than success or popularity?

2. Paul says he doesn't even trust his own judgment of himself. What does this tell us about the limits of self-evaluation, and why does he say God's judgment is the only one that ultimately matters?

3. Three questions cut to the heart of pride in verse 7 — Who makes you differ? What do you have that you didn't receive? If you received it, why do you boast? How do these three questions remove every reason for pride?

4. While the Corinthians saw themselves as wise, strong, and honored, how did Paul describe the actual daily reality of apostolic life, and what does this tell us about what genuine ministry looks like?

5. When insulted Paul blessed. When persecuted he endured. When spoken against he responded with gentleness. Think of a situation where you have faced criticism or mistreatment. How does Paul's example challenge you, and what would responding with that same grace look like this week?

Challenge Questions

6. Paul uses sarcasm in verse 8 — "You are already full! Already rich! You have reigned as kings!" — but then says "I wish you did reign." What is the difference between the false reigning the Corinthians were already doing and the genuine reigning Paul points to in the future? What does this tell us about a Christianity that prioritizes comfort and status now?

7. Paul refuses two temptations most leaders face — seeking human approval and constantly evaluating himself. He replaces both with one focus: faithfulness to Christ. How does this protect a minister from both pride and insecurity? What practical difference would it make if you genuinely believed God's evaluation is the only one that counts?

Paul's Paternal Care

> 4:14-16 I do not write these things to shame you, but as my beloved children I warn you. 15 For though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet you do not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel. 16 Therefore I urge you, imitate me.

Paul is not writing to shame them but to warn them, like a loving father guiding his children away from danger. He has been saying things that were hard to hear, but his words are full of care. He calls them his beloved children, showing that his goal is not punishment but guidance. Because he loves them, he feels responsible for their growth.

Paul is their spiritual father. He started the church and nurtured their faith. Many may teach them, but few will care for them like a parent does. Think of a parent teaching a child to ride a bicycle: the parent runs alongside, steadying the child, correcting mistakes, cheering them on. The child learns not just by hearing instructions, but by watching and imitating the parent.

In the same way, Paul wants them to imitate him—not in a show of pride, but in the way he lives and serves Christ. Paul shares these warnings so they will lead to changed behavior. Are we humble enough to learn from those who correct us? Do we pay attention to those who have invested in our lives, even when their advice is hard to hear?

He is showing them how to follow Jesus through example, as much as through words. This is the guidance we all need: someone who has invested in us, who corrects with love, and whose life is a model for us to follow.

> 4:17-21 For this reason I have sent Timothy to you, who is my beloved and faithful son in the Lord, who will remind you of my ways in Christ, as I teach everywhere in every church. 18 Now some are puffed up, as though I were not

> coming to you. 19 But I will come to you shortly, if the Lord wills, and I will know, not the word of those who are puffed up, but the power. 20 For the kingdom of God is not in word but in power. 21 What do you want? Shall I come to you with a rod, or in love and a spirit of gentleness?

Paul backs up his words with action. He has sent Timothy — his beloved and faithful son in the Lord — to the Corinthians to remind them of his ways in Christ. He imitates Paul so he can teach them well. Timothy reminds them of the ways of their spiritual father, Paul, so they can follow him more faithfully. Timothy is like an older brother. He guides them through example as well as words.

Paul says he teaches the same way everywhere he goes. He models correct belief and behavior, not just in words but in action. This is what we should do in our churches. People are watching us. For some, we may be the only Christian example they ever see. Some of the Corinthians were proud, thinking Paul was not coming again. They assumed they could do what they wanted. But God willing, Paul would return to see for himself what was truly from man—pride—and what was from God—power. He was not interested in their excuses or clever words. Being a big talker is one thing; living by God's power is another. The Kingdom of God is not just words—it is lived in love, patience, and faithfulness.

Paul gives the church a choice. He could come with a rod, like a disciplining father, or in love and gentleness. Their behavior would determine his approach. This letter arrived before Paul, giving them time to reflect. Would they humble themselves and prepare for gentle correction, or provoke stricter discipline?

Sometimes a pastor—or any spiritual leader—must confront sin or pride. But it should always be done in a spirit of gentleness. Only the work of the Spirit can change hearts. Paul's example shows that correction without God's power is useless; real transformation comes from God, not just human authority.



Reflective Questions for 1 Corinthians 4:14-21

1. Two roles appear in verse 15 — instructors and fathers. What is the difference, and why does Paul say the Corinthians could have ten thousand instructors but not many fathers?

2. Rather than commanding the Corinthians to obey him, Paul urges them to imitate him. What is the difference between those two approaches, and what does it tell us about how genuine spiritual change happens?

3. Timothy is sent as Paul's representative to remind them of Paul's ways in Christ. What does it tell us about Timothy that Paul trusted him with this, and what does "as I teach everywhere in every church" reveal about the consistency Paul expected from Christian leaders?

4. Some in Corinth assumed Paul would never return and acted however they pleased. What does Paul mean when he says he wants to see not the "word" of the proud but the "power," and what is the difference between the two?

5. Paul gives the Corinthians a choice the rod or gentleness, and their own response would determine which he brought. Is there an area where someone has been trying to correct or guide you and you have been resistant? What would it look like to humble yourself and respond with openness rather than pride?

Challenge Questions

6. Spiritual fatherhood is one of the most important ideas in this chapter. Paul distinguishes between those who merely instruct and those who truly invest in someone's growth. What are the marks of a spiritual father or mother, and what is lost when leaders see themselves only as teachers rather than spiritual parents? Who has played that role in your life, and are you playing it for anyone else?

7. The kingdom of God is not in word but in power, yet Paul has spent four chapters using words to address the Corinthians' problems. How do these two ideas fit together? What does genuine spiritual authority look like, and how should it shape the way leaders measure their own effectiveness?

1 Corinthians 5

Immorality Defiles the Church

> 5:1-3 It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and such sexual immorality as is not even named among the Gentiles—that a man has his father’s wife! 2 And you are puffed up, and have not rather mourned, that he who has done this deed might be taken away from among you. 3 For I indeed, as absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged (as though I were present) him who has so done this deed.

Paul shifts from addressing divisions (chapters 1-4) to confronting a shocking moral failure. The Corinthians' carnality didn't just produce factions. It led to tolerating serious sexual sin. Worse, they were proud of their tolerance instead of mourning.

The phrase “it is actually reported” emphasizes widespread knowledge. This wasn't a private matter or a rumor. It was public knowledge both inside and outside the church. The Corinthians hadn't written to Paul about this problem (unlike the issues in chapter 7 where they asked questions). They hoped Paul wouldn't find out and wanted to hide it. But Paul heard anyway, probably from the same sources who reported the divisions: Chloe's household, Stephanas, or others. God didn't let this stay hidden. What they tried to conceal, God exposed. This is His pattern. Hidden sin eventually comes to light (Numbers 32:23).

The word for sexual immorality is a broad term covering all sexual sin outside marriage: fornication, adultery, prostitution, and incest. Corinth was a sexually permissive city famous for temple prostitution. Immorality was common, but this case was extreme even by Corinthian standards. Paul says this kind of immorality is "not even named among the Gentiles." This is exaggerated for emphasis. He's not saying incest never occurred among pagans; it did. He's saying it was rare and scandalous even to them.

Both Jewish and Roman law condemned this relationship. Leviticus 18:8 prescribed death, and Roman law demanded exile. Even pagan writers like Cicero found it disgraceful. The point is devastating. If those who worship idols find this shocking, how can the church tolerate it?

The situation involved a man living with his stepmother, not his biological mother. The father was either dead or divorced, otherwise it would be adultery as well. This violated God's law and even pagan morality. The relationship was ongoing, not a onetime failure. And it was public; everyone knew.

In many cultures, family honor and sexual morality are deeply important. A stepmother/stepson relationship would bring shame not just to the family but to the entire community. Neighbors would gossip, the family would be disgraced, and such a relationship would be universally condemned. Yet the Corinthian church was tolerating what even their pagan neighbors found shocking.

In verse 2, Paul identifies the core problem. "Puffed up" means inflated with pride, arrogant. Paul used this word earlier about their divisions (4:6, 18, 19). Now he applies it to their response to sexual sin. They were proud of tolerating this relationship.

Why would they be proud of tolerating incest? Two reasons. First, they had misunderstood Christian freedom, twisting Paul's teaching about grace into a license for immorality. Second, they were influenced by Greek dualism, believing that what you do with your body is irrelevant to your soul. Whatever the reason, they were celebrating what should have horrified them.

Paul says they should have "mourned" with deep grief and sorrow. This is the opposite of "puffed up." They should have been broken-hearted over the man's sin and spiritual danger, their failure to address it, the damage to God's name, the harm to the church's witness, and the shame brought on the gospel. Biblical mourning leads to repentance

and action (2 Corinthians 7:10). They should have grieved so deeply that they took steps to address the sin.

The purpose of mourning was to lead to church discipline and excommunication. Paul will develop this in verses 4-13, but he introduces it here. Their mourning should have motivated them to remove the man from fellowship for his own good and the church's purity.

Biblical church discipline has three purposes, all of which the Corinthians had ignored: restoring the sinner through repentance, protecting the church from spreading sin, and preserving the church's witness before a watching world. Notice Paul doesn't mention the stepmother. She’s probably not a believer. Church discipline applies only to professing Christians.

Paul says he is absent in body but present in spirit. He is in Ephesus, hundreds of miles away. But physical distance doesn't limit his apostolic authority or spiritual concern. He's united with them in spirit. His heart, prayers, and authority are with them even though his body isn't. Paul hasn't waited for the Corinthians to act. He's made his decision. The verb tense emphasizes completed action with ongoing results: "I have judged, and my judgment stands." This isn't arrogance, but apostolic authority. Paul, guided by the Holy Spirit, has evaluated the situation and rendered his verdict. This isn't up for debate. The decision has been made.

The judgment mentioned in verses 4-5 was removal from the church and spiritual protection, and delivering the man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh. If Paul were physically present, he would have acted immediately. His absence doesn't change his judgment. He's declaring his verdict now so they can execute it.

The church failed to address this, so their inaction forced Paul's hand. As an apostle responsible for the churches he founded, Paul had to intervene. The health of the church was at stake. This connects to 3:16-17 - the church is God's temple, and those who defile

it face God's judgment. By tolerating sexual immorality, the Corinthians were defiling God's temple. Paul, as a wise master builder (3:10), had to protect the building.

The Corinthians were proud of their tolerance, but Paul shows us that love doesn't mean accepting everything. True love confronts sin for the sinner's good and the church's purity. When serious, unrepentant sin goes unaddressed, the whole church is affected as Paul is about to show. Having rendered his judgment, Paul now tells them exactly what must be done and why.

> 5:4-8 In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, 5 deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. 6 Your glorying is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? 7 Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us. 8 Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ means that the authority of Jesus is behind this action. This is not done by human strength or opinion, but under His authority and guidance. Paul is asking the church to gather publicly to deal with this situation. Since the issue was already known in the church, it needed to be addressed openly.

Church discipline usually begins as a private matter. It involves the whole church only when necessary—when a person refuses to repent and the sin is serious and known by many. The goal is always restoration, never punishment.

In verse 5, Paul says to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh. To 'deliver' someone to Satan means removing them from the protective fellowship of the church and allowing them to face the full consequences of their sin.

This does not mean God has stopped loving that person. Paul uses this same severe language again in 1 Timothy 1:20, where he delivers Hymenaeus and Alexander "to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme." This wasn't an extreme, one-time reaction. It's a recognized form of apostolic discipline Paul applied more than once.

The person feels the weight of life outside of God's protection, where sin has greater influence. The phrase "destruction of the flesh" most likely refers to the sinful nature—the old way of life—not physical death. There are real consequences for sin, and sometimes those consequences are what God uses to bring a person to repentance. You reap what you sow.

Even though this sounds severe, the goal is always hope. Paul desires that the person's spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. The purpose is not to destroy, but to restore. Paul hopes this discipline will lead the person to repentance. In fact, in 2 Corinthians, we learn that this man repented, and Paul later instructed the church to welcome him back.

Paul warns them that their boasting is not good. They were proud of their tolerance, as if allowing sin showed maturity. But sin is never something to celebrate or ignore. Even a little sin can spread and damage the whole church.

In verse 6, Paul uses leaven as an example. Leaven (yeast) is added to dough and causes it to rise. It works quietly, but it spreads completely through the dough. Think of a small piece of mold on bread. At first, it may not seem like a big problem, but if it is not removed, it spreads and eventually ruins the entire loaf. Sin works in a similar way. If it is not addressed, it can influence and harm the whole church.

Paul repeats this same proverb almost word for word in Galatians 5:9. But there he applies it to false teaching spreading through a church, not sexual sin. The principle is

broader than this one case. Any untreated corruption, whether moral or doctrinal, spreads through a community if it's left alone.

Paul connects this to the Passover. In the Old Testament, before the Passover lamb was sacrificed, all leaven had to be removed from the house. This symbolized the removal of sin before God's deliverance. Now Christ is our Passover Lamb. His sacrifice has made a way for us to be forgiven and made new.

This is Paul's first use of Passover and sacrifice imagery in this letter. Keep it in mind. He'll return to it when he addresses the Lord's Supper in chapter 11.

Because of this, Paul says we should keep the feast—not with old leaven, but with unleavened bread. We should live in sincerity and truth, not in sin and wickedness. The Christian life can be seen as a continual "Passover life." We have been rescued by Christ, and now we are called to live in a way that reflects that rescue. The old way of life, filled with sin, does not belong anymore. Instead, we live with sincerity and truth.

Immorality Must Be Judged

> 5:9-13 I wrote to you in my epistle not to keep company with sexually immoral people. 10 Yet I certainly did not mean with the sexually immoral people of this world, or with the covetous, or extortioners, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. 11 But now I have written to you not to keep company with anyone named a brother, who is sexually immoral, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or an extortioner—not even to eat with such a person. 12 For what have I to do with judging those also who are outside? Do you not judge those who are inside? 13 But those who are outside God judges. Therefore "put away from yourselves the evil person."

Before writing this letter, Paul had already written to the Corinthians once, warning them not to keep company with sexually immoral people. But they misunderstood him, and that misunderstanding made a serious problem worse.

Paul corrects that misunderstanding. He explained he was referring to people inside the church, not those outside. The world is full of sinful people—that is expected. Believers are called to be in the world as witnesses. Our mission is to reach those outside with the gospel.

But those who are inside the church are held to a different standard. If someone claims to be a believer but continues to live in sin without repentance, the church has a responsibility to address it. This includes rebuking, correcting, and, when necessary, removing the person from fellowship until repentance takes place. Paul doesn't spell out the steps here, but this command assumes the process Jesus laid out in Matthew 18:15–17. First private confrontation, then two or three witnesses, and only then bringing the matter before the church. Public discipline is the last step of a process, not the first. Love for the church means we care enough to confront sin, not ignore it.

Paul gives a list of sins: sexual immorality, greed, idolatry, reviling, drunkenness, and extortion. These are not just “small mistakes,” but patterns of life that show a heart turned away from God. Paul says not even to eat with such a person.

In that culture, sharing a meal was more than just eating together. It showed fellowship and approval. Sharing a meal symbolized a connection and a welcoming gesture. Paul doesn’t want the church to give the impression that sin is acceptable.

Meals represented shared values. Paul makes an important distinction. The church judges (disciplines) those who are inside the church. Those outside are judged by God alone. The church is not called to police the world, but to care for its own spiritual health.

If the church ignores sin within its own body, it spreads, like leaven working through dough. A little tolerated sin can influence others and weaken the whole church, and the Corinthians had already seen this with their divisions. Now the same tolerance was showing up in their response to sexual immorality.

There is a strong tendency today for Christians to focus on changing the surrounding culture while neglecting their own spiritual condition. We speak loudly about the world's sins while remaining quiet about sin within our own churches and lives. But the Corinthian church shows us where that leads. When a church allows what even the surrounding culture would not tolerate, its message loses credibility and its witness disappears. Real spiritual impact begins when God's people take sin seriously at home first.



Reflective Questions for 1 Corinthians 5:1-13

1. The Corinthians were proud of tolerating serious sexual sin rather than grieving over it. What were the two main reasons they had developed this attitude?

2. Church discipline has three purposes — restoring the sinner, protecting the church, and preserving the church's witness. Why is it wrong to see it as simply punishment?

3. Paul draws a clear line between judging those inside the church and those outside. What goes wrong when a church gets this backwards?

4. Paul uses leaven to show how sin spreads. How was the tolerated sin in Corinth already working like leaven, and what does the Passover image tell us about why it had to be removed?

5. Is there sin in your own life or church that is being tolerated rather than honestly confronted? What is the cost of continued silence to the person, the church, and the gospel's witness?

Challenge Questions

6. The Corinthians heard Paul's teaching on grace and used it to justify tolerating serious sin. How do we guard against that same mistake? What is the difference between grace that covers sin and a false grace that ignores it?

7. Paul acts decisively from a distance before the church has even gathered. When a church fails to address serious known sin, what responsibility does outside leadership have to step in, and what does Paul's willingness to act tell us about church accountability?

1 Corinthians 6

Do Not Sue the Brethren

> 6:1-5 Dare any of you, having a matter against another, go to law before the unrighteous, and not before the saints? 2 Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world will be judged by you, are you unworthy to judge the smallest matters? 3 Do you not know that we shall judge angels? How much more, things that pertain to this life? 4 If then you have judgments concerning things pertaining to this life, do you appoint those who are least esteemed by the church to judge? 5 I say this to your shame. Is it so, that there is not a wise man among you, not even one, who will be able to judge between his brethren?

Paul has addressed divisions (chapters 1-4) and sexual immorality (chapter 5). Now he confronts a third problem. Christians are taking each other to secular courts (the unrighteous) over disputes that should be resolved within the church.

Paul opens with shock and indignation. "Dare" expresses disbelief - "How dare you?" He's appalled that Christians would sue each other before pagan judges. The "matter against another" refers to civil disputes - financial conflicts, property disagreements, business issues - not criminal cases. These were disputes between believers that should have been handled within the church.

"Before the unrighteous" means pagan judges who don't know God or follow His standards. In Corinth, judges often favored the wealthy and powerful. Justice was corrupt, influenced by bribes and social status. Paul asks, why would you submit your disputes to people who don't know God's wisdom when you have fellow believers who should be able to judge righteously? When Christians sue each other in secular courts, they're telling the world: "Our church family is so dysfunctional we can't resolve our own problems."

Paul introduces a stunning truth. Believers will one day judge the world. This refers to Daniel 7:22 and Revelation 20:4. Revelation makes this promise, "thrones were given to them, and judgment was committed to them" (Revelation 20:4). Daniel envisioned the same reality — that "judgment was made in favor of the saints" (Daniel 7:22). This is a promise the Corinthians could trace back through Scripture themselves.

When Christ returns, believers will reign with Him and take part in judging the nations. Paul asks, “If you're going to judge the entire world in the future, can't you handle minor disputes among yourselves now? If you have authority over nations, shouldn't you be able to resolve a property disagreement between brothers?”

The logic is devastating. They're training for universal responsibility but failing at basic conflict resolution. Paul calls these earthly disputes "the smallest matters" - not because they're unimportant to those involved, but compared to judging the world, they're minor.

This goes further. Believers will judge not only the world but also fallen angels (Jude 6, 2 Peter 2:4) who currently influence nations. If you will judge powerful spiritual beings, surely you can judge earthly matters like property and money.

The destiny believers have in eternity should shape how they live now. Those called to global authority should be able to handle mundane disputes. The Corinthians were acting like people with no future, no calling, and no spiritual capacity when God has given them staggering responsibility.

In some countries, village disputes are brought before local elders respected for their wisdom. No one would ask children to judge these matters because they lack maturity. But when Christians go to secular courts, believers who will one day judge angels are acting like spiritual children who need unbelievers to solve their problems. It's backwards.

In verse four Paul says, ”If then you have judgments concerning things pertaining to this life, do you appoint those who are least esteemed by the church to judge?”

Paul could mean one of two things. First, he might be using sarcasm: “So, you’re actually letting pagan judges, people with no place in the church, decide your problems?” Or he could be saying, “Wouldn’t it be better to let even the least mature Christian handle this than to go to outsiders?” Either way, his message is clear. It’s shameful for believers to take their disputes outside the church. Whatever their social standing, pagan judges are spiritually 'least esteemed’. They don't know God and cannot judge by His wisdom.

What they are doing is not just wrong; it is shameful. “I say this to your shame” is a stinging rebuke. In chapters 1-4, they boasted about wisdom and having the best teachers. Now Paul exposes their hypocrisy. “You pride yourselves on wisdom, yet you can't find even one wise person to settle a dispute? You have to go to unbelievers?”

The irony is brutal. They divided over which teacher was wisest, but when they actually needed wisdom to resolve conflicts, they went to pagans. This proves their so-called wisdom was worthless. If after all Paul's teaching they still couldn't find one person wise enough to judge between brothers, what good was that teaching?

This also damaged their witness. Christians suing each other publicly showed the world that Christians are no different from anyone else. Paul has been arguing that Christians are different. If they're not, why bother calling themselves Christians?

It’s important to clarify that Paul isn't saying Christians can never use courts. In Acts 16:37 and 22:25-29, Paul appealed to Roman law to protect himself from illegal punishment. The difference is that Paul was defending himself against criminal injustice, not suing a fellow believer over money or property. Christians can use courts for legitimate legal needs, such as criminal defense and protection from persecution. But Christians should not sue each other over civil disputes.

Disputes should be handled within the church through godly mediation. If you can't resolve it, let it go and suffer the loss rather than destroy your testimony by dragging your brother to court. Forgiveness, reconciliation, and prioritizing relationships over money should mark believers. When Christians sue Christians, everyone loses: the individuals, the church, and their witness to Christ.

> 6:6-8 But brother goes to law against brother, and that before unbelievers! 7 Now therefore, it is already an utter failure for you that you go to law against one another. Why do you not rather accept wrong? Why do you not rather let yourselves be cheated? 8 No, you yourselves do wrong and cheat, and you do these things to your brethren!

Paul repeats his shock for emphasis. The word "brother" appears twice in this verse. They're not strangers or business associates; they're brothers in Christ, family members in God's household. Yet they're suing each other before "unbelievers". The tragedy isn't just that Christians have disputes - that's inevitable among sinful people. The tragedy is they're airing these disputes publicly before a watching world that doesn't know God.

This is what the Corinthians were doing with God's family.

Paul calls it “an utter failure,” which means a complete loss. Even before the lawsuit is decided, they've already lost. Win or lose in court, they've suffered spiritual defeat. How?

First, they've failed to resolve conflict as Christians should through forgiveness, reconciliation, and godly mediation. Second, they've damaged their witness before unbelievers who see them as hypocrites. Third, they've harmed their brother and the church's unity. Fourth, they've demonstrated that worldly wisdom matters more to them than kingdom values. The lawsuit itself, regardless of who wins, is evidence of spiritual defeat.

When two family members have a serious disagreement, most families don't bring in outsiders to settle it. They sit down together, or ask a trusted relative to mediate. Taking the conflict to strangers who don't know or love either side feels like a betrayal of the family itself, no matter who's right. Paul is saying something similar about the church. Even if one Christian technically 'wins' a lawsuit against another, the church as a family has already lost, because outsiders are now measuring its dysfunction instead of its testimony.

Paul has a radical alternative. ”Why do you not rather accept wrong? Why do you not rather let yourselves be cheated?” Instead of suing, accept the wrong done to you. Instead of fighting for your rights, let yourself be cheated. This sounds crazy to our natural thinking, but Paul is applying Jesus' teaching from the Sermon on the Mount: "If anyone wants to sue you and take away your tunic, let him have your cloak also" (Matthew 5:40). Turn the other cheek. Go the extra mile. Don't resist the one who wrongs you.

Why would Paul say this? Because eternal things matter more than temporal things. Your testimony for Christ is worth more than money or property. And because God sees, God knows, and God will make all things right. Trusting His justice is better than demanding your own.

This doesn't mean Christians should never stand up for themselves or that all suffering is noble. Paul defended himself when falsely accused of crimes (Acts 22:25-29). But when it comes to civil disputes with fellow believers over money or property, Paul says: Let it go. Suffer the loss. Trust God.

Paul says “you are the ones doing wrong and cheating, even against your own brothers!” He now exposes the real issue. Some were not innocent victims at all—they were guilty of cheating others, and the lawsuits were simply the result of their own wrongdoing.

This makes it worse. Not only were Christians suing Christians, but some Christians were deliberately wronging and cheating other believers, then having the audacity to take them to court. They were using the legal system to legitimize their own dishonest behavior. The very people who should be accepting wrong were instead doing wrong. The very people who should suffer loss were inflicting loss on others.

And notice the emphasis: "you do these things to your brethren!" Not to strangers, not to enemies, but to brothers and sisters. They're cheating family, defrauding those who should be closest to them, betraying those who share their faith.

In some business cultures, there's an expectation of special treatment and trust within the community. If a Chinese businessman cheats another Chinese businessman, or if a Vietnamese entrepreneur defrauds a fellow Vietnamese, it's seen as a particularly shameful betrayal. You're supposed to look out for your own community, not prey on them. When someone cheats their own people, they're expelled from the community network and lose all trust. Christians cheating and defrauding other Christians is a betrayal. You're supposed to be brothers, not predators.

Paul's principle can work in practice. The Akha Outreach Foundation (AOF) in Chiang Rai, Thailand exists because two Christian business people in the USA had a dispute and initially sued each other. But they realized this was wrong. Instead, they used a Christian mediator to help them resolve the conflict. Both parties agreed beforehand that whoever the mediator ruled in favor of would not accept money from the other. Instead, any money awarded would go to missions. This led to the founding of AOF, which has helped countless people in Thailand. What could have been a destructive lawsuit became a blessing because Christians followed Paul's principle.

Do we ever behave in ways that shame the gospel in the eyes of the world? When unbelievers see Christians acting exactly like worldly people - greedy, contentious, unforgiving, litigious - they conclude Christianity makes no real difference. But when

they see Christians forgiving debts, absorbing losses, and prioritizing relationships over rights, they see something radically different. They see Christ.

Having exposed both the lawsuits and the cheating behind them, Paul now raises the stakes entirely. This isn't just about reputation or witness. It's about the kingdom of God.

> 6:9-11 Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, 10 nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. 11 And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God.

Paul asks, “Do you not know?” for the eighth time in this letter. This question isn’t a rebuke just for the Corinthians. It’s a reminder that what he’s teaching should be basic Christian understanding. They ought to know this because it’s central to who they are in Christ.

The list of sins Paul names isn’t random. These were patterns of behavior common in Corinth and in the lives some believers had lived before Christ. Paul isn’t talking about the occasional mistake. He’s talking about lifestyles that define a person’s life.

But right after the warning, Paul gives the gospel: “And such were some of you… but you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified…” In other words, many in Corinth had once lived in these patterns, but Christ had changed them.

The sins Paul lists — sexual immorality, idolatry, theft, drunkenness, and verbal abuse — were not random. These were the defining patterns of Corinthian life that some believers had come from. Paul isn't ranking them. He's showing that unrepentant persistence in any of them shows someone not truly converted.

Paul says, ”And such were some of you.” That is a hopeful phrase. It’s past tense. You were fornicators, idolaters, thieves, and drunkards but not anymore. Some Corinthian believers had come from these very backgrounds. They weren't sinless, but they were no longer characterized by these patterns.

This is where grace changes everything. Transformation didn't come from the Corinthians cleaning themselves up before God would accept them. It came from God reaching into their lives and changing them from the inside out. The same people who once lived in sexual immorality and worshiped idols were now part of God's family, not because they earned their way in, but because grace met them exactly where they were.

Paul uses three past-tense verbs to describe their transformation.

You were washed - Cleansing from sin and symbolized in baptism. God washed away the filth of their former lives. They received forgiveness and a clean start.

You were sanctified - Set apart as holy and belonging to God. They were no longer identified with their old life but with Christ.

You were justified - Declared righteous and acquitted of guilt. God declared them not guilty because Christ paid their penalty.

So what about someone who calls themselves a Christian but still struggles with drunkenness, same-sex behavior, or addiction? The Bible doesn’t pretend Christians never struggle. What matters is the direction of the heart. A believer depends on Christ for strength and grows in holiness. Struggles and setbacks don’t prove someone is outside God’s kingdom, but a life defined by unrepentant sin with no desire to turn from it shows a heart not secure in Christ’s grace.

This isn't about perfection. Christians still sin and struggle. The difference is repentance - you hate your sin, you fight it, you confess it, you seek help. You're not characterized by unrepentant practice.

This is the gospel's power. You were washed. You were sanctified. You were justified. Not because you cleaned yourself up first, but because God changed you. That is what grace does.



Reflective Questions for 1 Corinthians 6:1-11

1. Paul points to two stunning facts about believers in verses 2-3. What are they, and how does he use them to show how absurd it is for Christians to sue each other?

2. Before a verdict is reached, Paul says going to court against a brother is already a defeat. Why is the church the loser the moment believers sue each other?

3. Rather than fighting for their rights, Paul says accept the wrong and let yourself be cheated. What reasons does he give for this?

4. Verse 11 contains three past-tense words — washed, sanctified, justified. What does each one mean?

5. The AOF story shows two men who turned a potential lawsuit into a blessing. Is there a conflict in your own life where you have focused more on your rights than on your witness or your relationship with a brother?

Challenge Questions

6. Paul draws a line between someone who struggles with sin and someone whose life is defined by unrepentant sin. How do you counsel someone who is either too confident in their salvation regardless of how they live, or too fearful because of their ongoing struggles?

7. Bad behavior in the church is often rooted in a failure of identity, not just willpower. How does this change the way we approach conflict resolution and pastoral care?

Glorify God in Body and Spirit

> 6:12-14 All things are lawful for me, but all things are not helpful. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any. 13 Foods for the stomach and the stomach for foods, but God will destroy both it and them. Now the body is not for sexual immorality but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. 14 And God both raised up the Lord and will also raise us up by His power.

Paul quotes a popular Corinthian slogan: "All things are lawful for me." This phrase appears four times in 1 Corinthians (here twice, and twice in 10:23), showing it was a common saying they used to justify questionable behavior. Watch for this same move from Paul again in chapter 10, where he'll quote this identical slogan two more times. This isn't just a repeated phrase. It's Paul's consistent method throughout this section of the letter. He takes the Corinthians' own words, agrees with the true part, and then exposes where they've stretched it too far.

Where did this slogan come from? Possibly from misunderstanding Paul's own teaching about Christian freedom. Paul taught that believers aren't under the Law; they're free in Christ. Some Corinthians twisted this to mean "anything goes." They thought freedom meant no moral boundaries.

Paul doesn't completely reject the slogan. In one sense, it's true. Christians aren't bound by Jewish dietary laws, ritual regulations, or ceremonial requirements. We have

freedom in Christ. But the Corinthians were applying this freedom in ways never intended, using it to excuse sin, particularly immorality. They reasoned that Christ freed us from the law, so we can do whatever we want.

Paul adds two important qualifications. First, "all things are not helpful." Just because something isn't forbidden doesn't mean it's good for you. Many actions, while not technically sinful in themselves, aren't beneficial. They don't build up, edify, or help you grow spiritually. Christian freedom should be used for what's beneficial, not just for whatever feels good.

Second, "I will not be brought under the power of any." Paul refuses to be enslaved or dominated by anything. They claimed freedom ("all things are lawful"), but Paul warns that misusing freedom leads to slavery. When you give yourself to sin - even things that seem minor - you become controlled by it. You think you're free, but you're actually enslaved to habits, appetites, and desires.

Anything that controls you - food, entertainment, money, work, even ministry - has become your master. Paul says, “Only God should have power over me. I won't let anything else enslave me.”

Paul quotes another Corinthian slogan: "Foods for the stomach and the stomach for foods." This was a philosophical argument commonly used to justify immorality. The reasoning went like this. God made the stomach for food and food for the stomach. It’s a natural, morally neutral function. When you're hungry, you eat. The physical act of digestion has no spiritual significance. Therefore, they concluded, sex works the same way. God made the body with sexual desires, so satisfying those desires is morally neutral, like eating when you're hungry.

Paul rejects this completely. He agrees the stomach was made for food and vice versa - that part is true. But he adds a crucial point. "God will destroy both it and them." The

stomach and food are temporary. In the resurrection, we won't need physical digestion. These things will pass away.

But then Paul draws a sharp distinction. He says, "Now the body is not for sexual immorality but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body."

Here's why food and sex aren't comparable. Food is temporary fuel for a temporary stomach. But sex isn't just satisfying a temporary appetite. It involves the whole person (as Paul will explain in v. 16 - sexual union makes "one flesh"). Your body isn't designed for immorality; it's designed for the Lord. Your body belongs to God, and is meant to glorify Him. It is destined for eternal resurrection.

"The Lord for the body" means Christ values your body. He cares about it and has purposes for it. Your body isn't worthless flesh to be discarded. It's precious to God. He created it, redeemed it, and will resurrect it. Therefore, what you do with your body matters.

In many cultures, if someone loans you a valuable item - a motorcycle, a family heirloom, an expensive tool - you're expected to treat it carefully because it belongs to someone else. You don't abuse it or use it for purposes the owner didn't intend. If you damage it through misuse, you bring shame upon yourself and dishonor the owner. Your body belongs to God (as v. 19 will make explicit - "you are not your own"). He loaned it to you for His purposes. Using it for immoral purposes is like taking what belongs to God and defiling it. You dishonor yourself and the owner.

Then Paul brings up the resurrection, "And God both raised up the Lord and will also raise us up by His power." Here's Paul's argument. The resurrection of the body proves that what you do with your body matters. God didn't just raise Jesus' spirit or soul - He raised His body. Jesus has a physical, resurrection body. And God will do the same for believers.

This destroys the Corinthians' philosophy that physical actions don't affect spiritual reality. If bodies didn't matter, why would God resurrect them? Why not just save our spirits and discard our bodies? The fact that God will raise and transform our bodies shows that our bodies have eternal significance.

This is why sexual sin is uniquely serious. Paul will say in verse 18 that a person "sins against his own body"). Other sins are external or don't directly involve the body in the same way. But immorality involves your body in a way that defiles what God has declared holy and destined for glory.

This teaching continues through verse 20, where Paul will say explicitly: "You are not your own… you were bought at a price. Therefore glorify God in your body." The body is sacred because it belongs to God, it's a dwelling place for the Holy Spirit, and it will one day be glorified. What you do with it now matters eternally.

> 6:15-17 Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a harlot? Certainly not! 16 Or do you not know that he who is joined to a harlot is one body with her? For "the two," He says, "shall become one flesh." 17 But he who is joined to the Lord is one spirit with Him.

Now Paul applies that truth to sexual immorality, showing why it is incompatible with being united to Christ. When he asks, "Do you not know?" he expects the Corinthians to grasp something basic about Christian identity. Your bodies are members of Christ isn't a vague spiritual idea. It means that as believers your physical bodies are united to Him, part of His body, the church, and in dwelt by the Spirit. Your body belongs to Christ.

This destroys the Greek idea that the body doesn't matter spiritually. Paul says the body is spiritual because it is united to Christ, and what you do with your body affects your relationship with Him. If your body belongs to Christ and you unite it to a prostitute,

you are taking what belongs to Christ and joining it to sin. Paul's shocked "Certainly not!" shows how unthinkable this is. It's not just breaking a rule. It's defiling what God has made holy.

Paul uses the example of a prostitute not because he's focused on that one situation, but because sexual intimacy creates a deep union that God intends only within the covenant of marriage. The principle applies to any sexual activity outside that covenant.

Just as marriage creates bonds that go beyond the physical, sexual union creates a "one flesh" bond that God never intended apart from covenant. Paul contrasts this with spiritual union with Christ: "he who is joined to the Lord is one spirit with Him." You cannot be "one spirit" with Christ and "one body" with sin at the same time. Trying to belong to both is like being joined to two masters. It doesn't work. When people enter a covenant with God, they become united with Him in a relationship that, like marriage, is exclusive. You can't be faithful to the Lord and joined to sin. Immorality isn't just a bad choice. It's spiritual unfaithfulness to the One you are united with in Christ.

If you are one spirit with Christ, sexual immorality isn't just a personal failing. It's a contradiction of your deepest identity. So Paul's command is urgent and direct.

> 6:18-20 Flee sexual immorality. Every sin that a man does is outside the body, but he who commits sexual immorality sins against his own body. 6:19 Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? 20 For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's.

Paul gives a powerful and urgent command: "Flee sexual immorality." The word flee isn't a mild suggestion like resist or avoid. It's a call to run away from sexual sin as quickly as possible, much like Joseph did in Genesis 39:6–12 when he escaped temptation by leaving the situation entirely.

Paul then says, “Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the sexually immoral person sins against his own body.” This doesn’t mean that other sins never affect the body, but it highlights how sexual sin uniquely involves the body in a way that contradicts God’s design for it.

Sinning against your own body means sexual immorality harms you at every level — physically, emotionally, morally, and spiritually. Because sexual union was created by God as a meaningful bond, misusing it outside His design brings damage into a person's life in ways other sins do not.

Then Paul reminds the Corinthians that their bodies are not neutral or merely biological. They are temples — sacred spaces — where the Holy Spirit lives. That means sin isn’t just breaking a rule. It’s polluting the dwelling place of God’s Spirit.

Finally, Paul says, “For you were bought at a price.” The price is the life of Jesus Christ. In Paul’s day, when someone was bought from slavery, ownership changed. They belonged to the one who purchased them. In the same way, believers have been bought from slavery to sin by Christ’s death and now belong to God.

So Paul’s conclusion flows naturally. Because your body is God’s — a temple of the Spirit, purchased by Christ — you are to glorify God in both body and spirit. Keep this verse in mind as you read the rest of the letter, alongside "what do you have that you did not receive" from chapter 4. Together, these two verses cover the whole argument Paul is making. Nothing you have is self-made, and you yourself are not self-owned. Nearly every issue still ahead — food offered to idols, head coverings, spiritual gifts, even conduct at the Lord's Supper — traces back to this same claim.

You are not your own. You were bought at a price. That changes everything about how you live, not just what you do with your body, but who you understand yourself to be.



Reflective Questions for 1 Corinthians 6:12-20

1. ”All things are lawful for me" was a popular slogan in Corinth. What two qualifications did Paul add, and what do they tell us about the true nature of Christian freedom?

2. The Corinthians argued that sex was like eating — just a natural appetite. How does Paul show that the two are not comparable?

3. Being one flesh with a sexual partner and one spirit with Christ are placed side by side in verses 16-17. What does this contrast tell us about the seriousness of sexual sin for a believer?

4. Three reasons appear in verses 19-20 for why believers must honor God with their bodies. What are they, and what picture do they paint together about how God views the human body?

5. Paul’s command is flee, not resist or avoid. Is there a situation in your life where the right response is not to manage temptation more carefully but to remove yourself from it entirely?

Challenge Questions

6. Paul’s argument rests on a high view of the physical body — united to Christ, indwelt by the Spirit, and destined for resurrection. Where do you see the opposite idea showing up in your cultural context — the assumption that what we do physically doesn't affect us spiritually?

7. ”You are not your own — you were bought at a price" means Christian freedom is not self-ownership but a transfer of ownership from sin to God. How does this challenge the way many people think about personal rights when they come to faith?

1 Corinthians 7

Principles of Marriage

> 7:1-4 Now concerning the things of which you wrote to me: It is good for a man
> not to touch a woman. 2 Nevertheless, because of sexual immorality, let each
> man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband. 3 Let the
> husband render to his wife the affection due her, and likewise also the wife to her
> husband. 4 The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband
> does. And likewise the husband does not have authority over his own body, but
> the wife does.

Some church leaders in Corinth wrote to Paul with questions about marriage, divorce, and other issues. In response, Paul addresses not only what they asked but also other problems he knows are happening in the church. The first one he addresses is marriage.

There were two mistaken ideas circulating in Corinth. One group thought they were free to do anything, including sexual immorality, because they believed Christian freedom meant no moral boundaries. Paul has already confronted that idea in chapter 6.

The other group thought the body was unimportant or even evil. Some philosophies at the time taught that avoiding all physical pleasure, including sex in marriage, was the way to be spiritual. So they quoted a saying: “It is good for a man not to touch a woman.” The word touch was a polite way of referring to sexual relations.

Paul himself is unmarried, and he acknowledges that singleness can be a wonderful gift. But he knows that when believers misunderstand celibacy as superior or necessary for spirituality, it can lead to harmful behavior — especially in a city like Corinth, where sexual temptation was everywhere.

So Paul gives a practical word. “Because of sexual immorality, let each man have his own wife and each woman her own husband.” The word translated “have” is a way of talking about sexual relations within marriage. Paul isn’t saying everyone must marry, but he is saying that sexual intimacy belongs within the covenant of marriage, not outside it.

Paul recognizes that married couples who deny one another sexual relations may put themselves at risk of temptation. Marriage provides a God-given context where sexual desire can be expressed in a way that honors both spouses and honors God.

When Paul says the husband should render to his wife the affection due her, and likewise the wife to her husband, he emphasizes mutual giving rather than selfish taking. Neither spouse should say, “I’ll give you sex only if you do something for me.” Sexual relations in marriage are to be marked by love, care, and mutual respect.

Paul is also making a point about authority. Neither husband nor wife has independent authority over their own body. Each belongs to the other in marriage. This was counter-cultural in the ancient world, where men typically had control over women’s bodies. It would be controversial to say the husband doesn’t have authority over his own body, the wife does. Paul’s teaching emphasizes mutual respect and the idea that spouses care for and honor each other’s bodies in marriage.

> 7:5-7 Do not deprive one another except with consent for a time, that you may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again so that Satan does not tempt you because of your lack of self-control. 6 But I say this as a concession, not as a commandment. 7 For I wish that all men were even as I myself. But each one has his own gift from God, one in this manner and another in that.

Paul’s instruction here flows directly from his teaching in verses 2–4. He emphasizes that husbands and wives should not withhold sex from one another, because sexual desire is real and, if ignored without agreement, can become a source of temptation.

Paul allows for one exception. If both spouses mutually agree to abstain for a limited time in order to devote themselves to prayer and fasting, that is permissible, but only for a time. Paul warns that if abstinence is extended without agreement, it may give Satan an opportunity to tempt them because of a lack of self-control.

Then Paul shifts to his personal perspective. He wishes everyone could be single as he is and fully devoted to the Lord. Singleness can free a person from certain worldly concerns. But Paul also recognizes that each person has their own gift from God. For some, that gift is singleness; for others, it is marriage.

The Greek word behind "gift" here is charisma. This is the same word that Paul uses in his teaching on spiritual gifts in chapters 12–14. Paul's idea of "gift" is broader than tongues, prophecy, or healing. It includes ordinary life callings like marital status. Not every charisma God gives is spectacular.

Paul's point isn't that marriage is inferior, or that sex is wrong. It's that both singleness and marriage are gifts from God, and each person should live in the way God has called them, with mutual love and respect in marriage.

> 7:8-9 But I say to the unmarried and to the widows: It is good for them if they remain even as I am; 9 but if they cannot exercise self-control, let them marry. For it is better to marry than to burn with passion.

Paul has some counsel for people who have been married but are not now. That includes those who are divorced, widowed, or have never married. He begins with the simple, encouraging statement that it is good for unmarried people to remain single, just as he is. Paul is not saying singleness is morally superior to marriage. He is pointing out that singleness can be a gift from God that allows a person to serve the Lord without the added responsibilities that marriage brings. His own life illustrates this. Because he was single he could devote himself entirely to the gospel.

But Paul also recognizes human reality. Not everyone has the gift of lifelong self-control. For those who find that sexual desire is strong and difficult to manage, Paul gives practical counsel. It is better to marry than to burn with passion. That phrase refers to intense desire that, if left unchecked, leads to temptation and sin. In a city like Corinth, where sexual temptation was everywhere, marriage was God's good design to provide a righteous and honoring way to satisfy that desire.

This might seem to conflict with 1 Timothy 5:14, where Paul encourages younger widows to remarry. But the situations are different. Here Paul gives a personal concession rather than a command, and he adds in verse 28 that those who marry have not sinned. In 1 Timothy, younger widows were becoming idle and harming the church's witness, making remarriage the wiser path. Same theology, different circumstances.

During the first century, divorce and remarriage were common, especially among the upper classes, and there was strong social pressure for divorced and widowed people — especially women — to remarry quickly. Paul gives guidance here, not a strict rule.

It is worth noting that Paul was unmarried when he wrote this letter, though most Jewish men of his background and training would have been expected to marry. It is possible he had been married at some point, though Scripture does not confirm this. What is clear is that his concern throughout this passage is not against marriage — in 1 Timothy 4:3 he called forbidding marriage a doctrine of demons. His concern is immorality. Marriage is God's good gift and the ordained context in which sexual desire is honored without sin.

Having addressed the unmarried and widowed, Paul now turns to those already in marriage, and here his counsel is even more direct.

Keep Your Marriage Vows

> 7:10-11 Now to the married I command, yet not I but the Lord: A wife is not to depart from her husband. 11 But even if she does depart, let her remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband. And a husband is not to divorce his wife.

Paul now turns his attention to believers who are already married to one another. He gives a strong, clear command. Married couples should not separate or divorce. When Paul says "not I but the Lord," he is pointing his readers back to what Jesus Himself taught about the permanence of marriage. In the Gospel accounts, Jesus was asked whether it was lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason. He replied by pointing to God's design at creation. A husband and wife become "one flesh," and "what God has joined together, let no one separate." Divorce was permitted under Moses' law because of human hardness of heart, but it was never God's original intention for marriage to be dissolved.

The word translated depart can mean separation or divorce. In Corinth, either the husband or the wife could start a divorce. Paul insists that Christian marriage is not something to be taken lightly. If a wife leaves her husband, she should remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband. This reflects Paul's desire for reconciliation rather than brokenness. He understands that sometimes separation happens, but the goal is restoration.

Paul also says that a husband should not divorce his wife. In that culture, divorce often left the wife with little means of support. Paul's command protects the covenant of marriage and the wife, and it reflects Jesus' teaching that divorce is not God's plan and should be avoided.

Paul doesn't deal here with every possible situation (such as adultery, abandonment, or abuse), but his general principle is clear. Christian marriage is meant to be permanent, and divorce should never be the first response to difficulty.

> 7:12-13 But to the rest I, not the Lord, say: If any brother has a wife who does not believe, and she is willing to live with him, let him not divorce her. 13 And a woman who has a husband who does not believe, if he is willing to live with her, let her not divorce him.

In verses 10–11 Paul spoke about believers married to believers and quoted Jesus' teaching on the permanence of marriage. Now in verses 12–16 he addresses a different situation: believers who are married to unbelievers. This was a common circumstance in the early church when one spouse came to faith after marriage. Paul begins this section by saying "I, not the Lord," because Jesus had not specifically spoken about this situation in the Gospels, but Paul is giving inspired pastoral guidance for it.

Paul's counsel is simple. If a believing spouse is married to an unbelieving spouse, and the unbeliever is willing to remain in the marriage, the believer should not seek a divorce. This isn't about a Christian marrying an unbeliever to save them (that isn't Paul's point here), but about honoring the existing marriage covenant and trusting God's grace in the relationship.

Some in the Corinthian church thought that because they had come out of spiritual darkness, they should also separate from an unbelieving spouse who remained in that darkness. But Paul says that the believer's presence in the marriage can be a powerful witness to God's transforming grace, and staying together offers the possibility that the unbelieving partner may come to faith.

Paul isn't dismissing the reality that unbelieving spouses may struggle with the faith, but he strongly discourages divorce when the unbelieving partner is willing to stay. The believing spouse should continue in the marriage, loving and honoring their partner, and trusting God with the outcome.

> 7:14-16 For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband; otherwise your children would be

> unclean, but now they are holy. 15 But if the unbeliever departs, let him depart; a brother or a sister is not under bondage in such cases. But God has called us to peace. 16 For how do you know, O wife, whether you will save your husband? Or how do you know, O husband, whether you will save your wife?

Here is Paul's reasoning for a believer staying married to an unbeliever, provided the unbeliever is willing. He says the unbelieving spouse is "sanctified" through the believing partner. This does not mean the unbeliever is automatically saved. Instead, the marriage is set apart and honored by God, and the unbelieving spouse is brought into a home where God's influence is present through the believer.

Paul says this applies to the children as well. They are "holy." This does not mean they are saved through their parents' faith, but that they are set apart within a home where God is at work. The family is not defiled because one spouse is an unbeliever. Instead, God's grace is active in that household.

This corrects a mistaken idea some Corinthians may have had. Some thought that being joined to an unbeliever would make them spiritually unclean. Paul turns this thinking upside down. Holiness is more powerful than uncleanness. The presence of a believer brings spiritual influence, not contamination.

Paul is also realistic. He says, "If the unbeliever departs, let him depart." If the unbelieving spouse leaves, the believer is "not under bondage" in such cases. The meaning of this phrase has been discussed by Christians for many centuries. Some understand Paul to mean only that the believer is no longer obligated to prevent the separation if the unbelieving spouse chooses to leave. Others believe Paul is saying something broader — that abandonment by the unbelieving spouse breaks the marriage covenant in a way that frees the believer to remarry. Since Paul does not directly mention remarriage here, faithful Christians have reached different conclusions.

What is clear is Paul's pastoral concern. The believer is not meant to live under endless guilt, fear, or slavery because of the unbeliever's decision to abandon the marriage. Paul says, "let him depart," showing that the Christian is not required to pursue the unbelieving spouse at all costs or remain trapped in constant turmoil. God has called His people to peace. Even if interpreters differ on whether remarriage is included in this freedom, Paul's main point is that abandoned believers should not carry responsibility for a broken marriage they did not choose to end.

Finally, Paul gives a hopeful but humble perspective: "How do you know whether you will save your spouse?" There is genuine hope that an unbelieving husband or wife may come to faith through the witness of the believer. But it is not guaranteed. The Christian is called to be faithful, loving, and steady, while trusting God with the outcome.



Reflective Questions for 1 Corinthians 7:1-16

1. Two mistaken ideas about marriage were circulating in Corinth — one group claimed total sexual freedom, the other said all physical relations were unspiritual. How does Paul correct both?

2. Paul says neither spouse has authority over their own body. Each belongs to the other. How counter-cultural was this, and what difference should it make in a Christian marriage today?

3. Paul calls both singleness and marriage gifts from God. What does it mean to call singleness a gift, and how does his own example challenge the idea that marriage is always the better option?

4. When Paul says "not I but the Lord" in verse 10 and "I, not the Lord" in verse 12, what is the difference, and does the second type of instruction carry less authority?

5. A believer married to an unbeliever faces a genuinely difficult situation. How does Paul's teaching in verses 12-16 shape the counsel you would give someone in that situation?

Challenge Questions

6. How should we understand Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 7:15 that the believer is "not under bondage"? Does abandonment dissolve the marriage covenant in a way that allows remarriage, or does it only acknowledge the separation?

7. Why do you think Paul focuses more on faithfulness and peace than on controlling the outcome of a relationship and what does this teach us about trusting God in difficult family situations?

Live as You Are Called

> 7:17-20 But as God has distributed to each one, as the Lord has called each one, so let him walk. And so I ordain in all the churches. 18 Was anyone called while circumcised? Let him not become uncircumcised. Was anyone called while uncircumcised? Let him not be circumcised. 19 Circumcision is nothing and uncircumcision is nothing, but keeping the commandments of God is what matters. 20 Let each one remain in the same calling in which he was called.

Paul teaches that a believer can live for God right where he is. Instead of waiting for your circumstances to change, follow Jesus now, in whatever situation you find yourself. This also serves as a warning against trying to undo the past in unhealthy ways. Repent of sin, receive God's forgiveness, and then move forward. Do not assume that spiritual

growth requires changing your current circumstances. As God has called you, walk faithfully in that place.

For example, if someone is married after a previous wrong decision, Paul is not saying they should now try to reverse everything. The focus is not on rearranging the past but on living rightly in the present.

Paul gives practical counsel that does not require external change. His counsel is simple. Remain in the condition you were in when you came to Christ, and live faithfully there. What matters is not outward status but obedience to God.

To illustrate this, Paul uses circumcision. In his day, Jews were circumcised, while Gentiles were not. Some Jewish believers felt pressure to conform outwardly, and some Gentiles may have felt pressure to become circumcised to fit in. Paul says neither circumcision nor uncircumcision matters. What matters is keeping God's commandments.

Although Paul is addressing marriage, he uses examples like circumcision and, in the following verses, slavery to make a broader point. In Christ, outward social distinctions do not determine a person's standing before God. As he writes in Galatians 3:28, there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female—we are all one in Christ. Paul's point is that believers should not feel pressured to change their social status in order to serve God better. Whether Jew or Gentile, slave or free, married or single, God calls each person to live faithfully in the situation they are already in.

The gifts and calling God gives remain with the believer, regardless of life circumstances. Therefore, Christians should not allow social pressure to make them think they must change their status before they can truly serve the Lord. Instead, they are to walk with God right where they are.

> 7:21-24 Were you called while a slave? Do not be concerned about it; but if you can be made free, rather use it. 22 For he who is called in the Lord while a slave is the Lord’s freedman. Likewise he who is called while free is Christ’s slave. 23 You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men. 24 Brethren, let each one remain with God in that state in which he was called.

For the third time, Paul repeats the principle: remain in the state in which you were called. This applies to all situations—married or unmarried, circumcised or uncircumcised, slave or free.

Paul now uses slavery as an example. If you are a slave, do not think that God cannot use you. Do not use your situation as an excuse to think you cannot serve the Lord. Likewise, if you are married to an unbeliever, do not assume you are limited in serving God. The focus is not on changing your circumstances, but on faithfully serving God where you are.

Paul recognizes that change may be possible. If a slave has the opportunity to become free, they should take it. But your usefulness to God is not determined by your social status. You can serve the Lord right where you are.

Paul reminds believers that they belong to Christ. Jesus purchased His people at a great price. This is nearly the same phrase Paul used in 6:20, ”you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body." There it was about sexual purity. Here it's about slavery and social status. Paul keeps returning to this one truth, you are not your own, because it's the answer to nearly every problem in this letter, not just one. Because of this, He has authority over their lives. If Christ is your master, you should not become enslaved to the expectations or pressures of men. God’s calling is far more important than social or cultural status.

Paul's teaching on slavery must be understood in context. He isn't endorsing slavery as an ideal. He is instructing believers how to live faithfully within their present situation.

Openly opposing the system would have brought serious consequences on the church, so Paul focuses on something more powerful: living for Christ within it.

To the Unmarried and Widows

> 7:25-28 Now concerning virgins: I have no commandment from the Lord; yet I give judgment as one whom the Lord in His mercy has made trustworthy. 26 I suppose therefore that this is good because of the present distress—that it is good for a man to remain as he is: 27 Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be loosed. Are you loosed from a wife? Do not seek a wife. 28 But even if you do marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. Nevertheless such will have trouble in the flesh, but I would spare you.

Now Paul turns to those who have never been married. In Paul's world, young women rarely chose their own husbands; their fathers did. Marriage was a family decision, not just a personal one. Paul is not just giving advice to young singles. He is also speaking to the parents who are trying to make a wise decision on their behalf. Paul is clear that he has no direct command from the Lord on this, but he does have God-given wisdom to share.

He points to something he calls the “present distress”. Some think it refers to a grain shortage happening right around the time Paul wrote this letter. A severe famine had hit the Roman Empire, and most Christians in Corinth were poor. Would things get worse? Would they have to leave home to find food? Others think Paul may be referring to the troubles that would come before the Lord's return — persecution, disasters, and upheaval. In verse 29, he says the time is short, which supports this idea.

Either way, his point is the same. This is not an easy season, and marriage brings added responsibilities and added pain when times are hard. Difficulty falls harder on those with more to lose.

So Paul's advice is simply this: don't let the pressure of circumstances push you into a decision. Stay where you are. If you are married, remain married. If you are single, remain single. God can use you right where you are.

But he is careful to say that this is wisdom, not a rule. Getting married is not a sin. Paul simply wants them to go in with their eyes open. Marriage is a gift, but it also brings troubles in this life (v.28), and in a time of distress, those troubles are multiplied.

Having made clear that marriage is not sin, Paul now gives a broader reason why singleness has a practical advantage in their particular moment.

> 7:29-34 But this I say, brethren, the time is short, so that from now on even those who have wives should be as though they had none, 30 those who weep as though they did not weep, those who rejoice as though they did not rejoice, those who buy as though they did not possess, 31 and those who use this world as not misusing it. For the form of this world is passing away. 32 But I want you to be without care. He who is unmarried cares for the things of the Lord—how he may please the Lord. 33 But he who is married cares about the things of the world—how he may please his wife. 34 There is a difference between a wife and a virgin. The unmarried woman cares about the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and in spirit. But she who is married cares about the things of the world—how she may please her husband.

When Paul says the time is short, he is probably not saying the world is about to end. More likely he means the present crisis will not last forever so don't make any drastic decisions in the middle of it.

But then he says something surprising. Those who have wives should live as if they had none. Does he mean leave your wife? No, he already said the opposite back in verse 27. What he means is this: don't let marriage or anything else in this life pull your heart

away from God. Don't use your relationships, your responsibilities, or your circumstances as an excuse to step back from spiritual priorities.

He gives several examples. If you are grieving, don't be consumed by it. If you are celebrating, don't get carried away. If you own things, hold them loosely. Why? Because this world is passing away. Everything in it is temporary. Paul is not saying these things don't matter. He is saying that they should not have mastery over us. This isn't advice unique to a crisis moment in Corinth. Paul says something similar in 2 Corinthians 4:18, “fixing our eyes on what is unseen rather than what is seen”. Peter gives the same counsel in 1 Peter 4:7, urging watchfulness because "the end of all things is at hand." Holding ordinary life loosely, without being mastered by it, is a settled New Testament posture, not a one-time emergency measure. The goal is to live with a kind of inner freedom, not weighed down by worry, so that nothing keeps you from doing God's work.

He then makes a simple observation about marriage. When you are married, your heart is naturally divided — in a good way. You love God, and you love your spouse. You think about how to serve the Lord, and you think about how to care for your family. That is not wrong; that is faithfulness. But an unmarried person can give their full attention to one thing: serving the Lord.

Paul is not saying singleness is more spiritual. He is saying that it is simpler. For him personally, staying single meant fewer responsibilities pulling at him. But he knew that for others, a godly marriage could be the very thing that made their ministry stronger. The question is always: Am I fully surrendered to Jesus where I am?

> 7:35-36 And this I say for your own profit, not that I may put a leash on you, but for what is proper, and that you may serve the Lord without distraction. 36 But if any man thinks he is behaving improperly toward his virgin, if she is past the flower of youth, and thus it must be, let him do what he wishes. He does not sin; let them marry.

Paul wants to be clear; he is not trying to lay down a new set of rules. His concern is their well-being and their freedom to serve God without unnecessary distraction. The goal has never been to marry or don't marry. The goal is always pleasing God wherever you are.

His own life was an example. Being single allowed Paul to fulfill his calling in a way that would have been much harder with a family. And looking at those who traveled and worked alongside him — Timothy, Titus, Barnabas, Silas — most were likely single as well. It was simply more practical. Paul moved constantly, often in danger, with no fixed home. Single young men could follow him more easily.

But Paul never made singleness a measure of commitment. Demas was likely single and walked away when things got hard. Priscilla and Aquila were married and among the most faithful coworkers Paul ever had. Marital status does not determine faithfulness — character does.

Now Paul addresses a specific situation. When he refers to “his virgin”, he is speaking about a father and his daughter. In that culture, fathers arranged marriages for their children. The phrase “behaving improperly” is not about doing something wrong. It simply means the father may feel he is being unfair to his daughter by keeping her unmarried because of what Paul has said about the benefits of singleness.

Perhaps the daughter is getting older. Perhaps she fears her opportunity to marry is passing her by. In that case, Paul says clearly, let her marry. The father is not sinning by allowing it. There is no shame in marriage, and no spiritual failure in wanting a family. Paul simply wants the church to understand that both paths are honorable, and neither one should be chosen out of guilt or pressure.

> 7:37-40 Nevertheless he who stands steadfast in his heart, having no necessity, but has power over his own will, and has so determined in his heart that he will keep his virgin, does well. 38 So then he who gives her in marriage does well, but

> he who does not give her in marriage does better. 39 A wife is bound by law as long as her husband lives; but if her husband dies, she is at liberty to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord. 40 But she is happier if she remains as she is, according to my judgment—and I think I also have the Spirit of God.

If a person has genuinely thought it through, has the self-control to remain single, and has made that choice freely before God, Paul says they are doing well. This is not about willpower alone. It is about a settled conviction that this is where God has them. That kind of decision deserves respect, not pressure.

And again Paul reminds us that choosing not to marry is not a statement that marriage is sinful. It is simply the wiser choice given the present trouble. The season they are in makes singleness the more practical and focused path. But it is a choice, not a command.

Then Paul turns to widows. A woman whose husband has died is free to remarry because the bond of marriage ends at death. But Paul adds an important condition. She must marry in the Lord. She must marry a fellow believer. A Christian widow should not marry an unbeliever simply because he is available or because the pressure to remarry is strong. This was true then, and it is true now.

In many parts of Southeast Asia, widows face real social pressure. Some are expected to remarry quickly for financial security or family stability. Others are treated as a burden or even brought shame by their situation. Paul's words cut through all of that. She is free to remarry if she chooses, but also free not to. Neither choice carries shame.

Paul's own opinion is that she will be better off if she remains single. Not because remarriage is wrong, but because she has already learned what marriage requires. She knows the joys and the demands. Staying single may give her a kind of peace and undivided focus that a second marriage, however good, would not.

Then he closes with something that is both humble and quietly bold: "I think that I also have the Spirit of God." He is not issuing a command. But he is not just guessing either. He believes God has given him wisdom on this, and he offers it honestly and lets them decide.



Reflective Questions for 1 Corinthians 7:17-40

1. Three times Paul repeats the same principle — remain in the situation you were called in. What is his main point, and how do circumcision and slavery illustrate it?

2. Paul says a slave who belongs to Christ is the Lord's freedman, and a free person who belongs to Christ is Christ's slave. What does this reversal tell us about how the gospel redefines identity and status?

3. Paul points to a "present distress" in verse 26. What might he have been referring to, and how does a difficult season affect the wisdom of major decisions like marriage?

4. Verses 29-31 say those with wives should live as if they had none, those who mourn as if they did not mourn, those who buy as if they did not possess. What is Paul actually asking for here?

5. Paul addresses widows gently — offering freedom without pressure in either direction. How should his balanced approach shape the way you counsel single or widowed people in your church?

Challenge Questions

6. Paul distinguishes between his own judgment, direct commands from the Lord, and personal concessions. Yet treats his apostolic wisdom as genuinely trustworthy. How should a congregation evaluate wise counsel that goes beyond explicit Scripture — neither dismissing it as opinion nor treating it as a biblical command?

7. The core principle of this passage — remain where you are and serve God faithfully there — cuts against the tendency to wait for better circumstances before living faithfully. How does Paul's theology of calling challenge that thinking, and what would it look like for your church to cultivate a culture where people bloom where they are planted?

1 Corinthians 8

Be Sensitive to Conscience

> 8:1-3 Now concerning things offered to idols: We know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies. 2 And if anyone thinks that he knows anything, he knows nothing yet as he ought to know. 3 But if anyone loves God, this one is known by Him.

How does a Christian live faithfully when idols are everywhere? This was not a theoretical question for the Corinthians, and for many of you reading this, it is not theoretical either. Temples, festivals, spirit houses, food offered to ancestors or Buddhist monks are part of everyday life in much of Southeast Asia, just as idol worship was woven into every corner of life in ancient Corinth. This is the next question the church brought to Paul.

There were two specific problems. First, many social gatherings — celebrations, business meals, and family events — took place in or around temples. Refusing to attend would have been like refusing to go to a wedding or a community festival. It would have caused real social damage. Second, when an animal was sacrificed at a temple, the meat was divided into three portions. One was burned as an offering to the god, one was kept by the priest, and one was returned to the person who brought it. Priests who did not want their portion could sell it at the temple restaurant or market. This meat was cheaper than regular market meat. For the poor, who made up most of the Corinthian church, this was sometimes the only way they could afford to eat meat at all.

So the questions multiplied. Can a Christian buy meat from the temple market? What if you are a guest in someone's home and they serve meat that came from a temple? Can a believer eat at a temple restaurant? Paul works through these questions carefully, addressing temple meals here in chapter 8 and market meat later in chapter 10.

He begins with a statement some of the Corinthians were making: "We all have knowledge." They meant they knew the truth — there is one God, idols are powerless, and a ceremony in front of a worthless statue cannot change the nature of food that God created. Technically, they were right. But Paul is not impressed by their confidence. Why? Because knowledge without love is dangerous.

He gives a vivid contrast. Knowledge alone puffs up like air in a balloon. It swells quickly, looks impressive, and pops. Love builds up like a house being constructed brick by brick. It takes longer, but it lasts.

Some of the Corinthians had correct knowledge, but were using it as a weapon. They looked down on believers who were troubled by eating idol meat, treating them as spiritually weak or uninformed. Acting on right knowledge without love for others was already beginning to divide the church.

Paul's deeper point is that true knowledge of God always produces love. If our knowledge makes us arrogant rather than caring, something has gone wrong. The one who truly knows God will show it not by how much they understand, but by how well they love. And God, who knows us completely, recognizes us by that love. Knowledge is good, but it is love that marks us as His.

> 8:4-6 Therefore concerning the eating of things offered to idols, we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is no other God but one. 5 For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as there are many gods and many lords), 6 yet for us there is one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we for Him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and through whom we live.

Paul states that an idol is nothing. It is wood, stone, or metal shaped by human hands. It cannot think, cannot speak, and cannot love. There is only one God, and any so-called

god that people bow to is not a real god at all. So if meat is offered to an idol, it is offered to nothing. And if the god does not exist, it has no power to defile the food.

This was a radical statement in the Roman Empire, where most people believed in many gods — gods of the sea, the harvest, the household, and the city. Even some believers struggled to fully shake off this way of thinking, having grown up surrounded by it their whole lives. In some cultures, spirits are believed to inhabit trees, rivers, homes, and fields. Offerings are made to keep them happy or to gain their favor. Paul's message cuts through all of that. These beings have no real power or existence before the one true God.



Temple of Apollo

Then Paul does something remarkable. He takes the most famous verse in the Jewish faith, "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one" (Deuteronomy 6:4), and places Jesus right at the center of it. There is one God, the Father, from whom all things come. And there is one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things were made. In the Old Testament, the word Lord is the name used only for God himself. By giving that same title to Jesus, Paul is saying clearly that Jesus is not a lesser being, or a created messenger. He is God. Everything that exists came through him, and we live through him.

This is nearly the same language Paul uses in Colossians 1:16-17, "by Him all things were created... and in Him all things consist", and how John opens his Gospel, "all things were made through Him" (John 1:3). Paul is not just trying to settle an argument about meat. It's the church's conviction about who Jesus is, taught independently in at least three places in the New Testament.

> 8:7-9 However, there is not in everyone that knowledge; for some, with consciousness of the idol, until now eat it as a thing offered to an idol; and their conscience, being weak, is defiled. 8 But food does not commend us to God; for neither if we eat are we the better, nor if we do not eat are we the worse. 9 But beware lest somehow this liberty of yours become a stumbling block to those who are weak.

Not every believer in Corinth had the same understanding. Some knew clearly that idols were nothing but wood, stone, and metal. They felt free to eat meat sacrificed to them without any concern. But others were not so sure. Some had worshipped those idols before coming to faith. The idol had meant something to them. Old habits of thinking do not disappear overnight, and when they sat down to eat meat offered at a pagan temple, something inside them said, “This is wrong.” Their conscience troubled them.

Paul calls this a weak conscience. This is not an insult, but a description. Their conscience was operating on the false belief that there was a real power behind the idol. And here is the important thing. Even a conscience that is wrong still has to be respected and patiently renewed. You cannot simply tell someone to think differently and expect them to feel differently. The conscience is not changed by argument alone. It is changed slowly, through teaching, experience, and time. Forcing a person to act against their conscience — even when their conscience is mistaken — does not help them. It wounds them.



Marketplace (agora) where food was bought.

So Paul makes it clear that food has nothing to do with our standing before God. Eating meat offered to an idol does not make you more spiritual. Refusing to eat it does not make you more spiritual either. God is not keeping score on what is on your plate.

The danger he sees is this. Those with correct

knowledge about idols were acting with a kind of superiority, doing whatever they wanted without stopping to think about how their choices affected other believers. As we saw earlier, knowledge without love inflates us. It does not build anyone else up. Sometimes the most loving thing we can do is set aside what we have every right to do, for the sake of someone who is not yet where we are. Paul now shows exactly what happens when love is absent, and the consequences are more serious than the Corinthians realized.

This is where many Christians go wrong, not just in Corinth, but today. We take personal convictions about things like music, movies, drinking, or entertainment and turn them into measures of spirituality. We assume that because we feel strongly about something, our position is the more godly one. But Paul is saying that is not how it works.

> 8:10-13 For if anyone sees you who have knowledge eating in an idol’s temple, will not the conscience of him who is weak be emboldened to eat those things offered to idols? 8:11 And because of your knowledge shall the weak brother perish, for whom Christ died? 12 But when you thus sin against the brethren, and wound their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. 13 Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never again eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble.

Paul now gets very specific. Some Corinthian believers who had correct knowledge that idols are nothing, were not just buying meat from the temple market. They were eating meals inside the idol's temple itself. And weaker believers, seeing them there, were being pulled back toward idol worship. Their faith was collapsing not because of bad teaching, but because of someone else's freedom carelessly exercised.

Paul makes almost this exact argument, in nearly identical words, in Romans 14:15, "do not destroy with your food the one for whom Christ died." That chapter works through the weak-and-strong conscience question in even more depth than this one does.

This is Paul's concern. Right knowledge, used without love, can destroy someone. As he says plainly — when you sin against a weak believer by wounding their conscience, you sin against Christ. How we treat one another is how we treat him.

This is the very lesson that converted Paul. When he was persecuting believers, Jesus didn't ask "why are you persecuting my people". He asked, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" (Acts 9:4). Christ so identifies with His people that wounding a weak believer's conscience isn't just unkind. It's a direct offense against Jesus Himself.

It is worth considering who Paul calls weak. Many Christians would assume the one refusing to eat idol meat is the stronger, more cautious believer. But Paul is not measuring strength by how careful someone is. He is talking about knowledge, specifically, knowledge about idols. The weak believer still thinks the idol has power. That is not spiritual strength. It is a misunderstanding that still needs to be corrected. But it must be corrected with patience, not pressure.

For Paul, the answer is simple. If eating meat causes a brother or sister to stumble, he will never eat meat again. Not because the meat is wrong, but because the relationship is more important than being right. Our decisions can never be based solely on what we know to be correct. They must also be shaped by love for those around us.

And here Paul points us to Jesus himself. This is exactly what Christ did when he came to earth. He set aside his rights — his glory, his power, and his position. He who was everywhere became limited to one place. He who knew all things took on the limitations of a human mind. He who deserved worship became a servant. He did not have to do any of that. But he did it willingly, out of love for us.

This is Paul describing, almost word for word, what he writes in Philippians 2:6–8. Christ, though equal with God, emptied Himself, took the form of a servant, and humbled Himself. Paul keeps returning to this same picture of Christ's humility as the

pattern for how believers are meant to treat one another. We already saw it beneath the surface of "the mind of Christ" back in chapter 2, and here it surfaces again.

A pastor among the Akha people faced exactly this situation. A Christian family in his church was receiving meat from a non-Christian relative. The meat had been offered to an idol. Other church members were upset. They complained to the pastor. What would you tell him?

Here is what I said. The idol is not real, so there is nothing spiritually wrong with accepting that meat. But it is causing offense to other believers, people who may have once worshipped that very idol. If this family is mature in Christ and truly cares about their church family, they should decline the meat. Being right is not always the most important thing. Loving others is.

That is the whole point of chapter 8.



Reflective Questions for 1 Corinthians 8:1-13

1. The Corinthians said "we all have knowledge." What was their mistake in relying on correct knowledge alone, and what is the difference between knowledge that puffs up and love that builds up?

2. Before addressing the practical questions about idol meat, Paul lays a foundation in verses 4-6. What is that foundation, and why did it need to come first?

3. Paul calls some believers' consciences weak. What does that mean specifically in this passage, and why can't a weak conscience simply be corrected by argument?

4. Wounding the conscience of a weak believer is not just a sin against that person; it is a sin against Christ. What does this tell us about how God views the way stronger believers treat those who are younger in the faith?

5. The Akha pastor illustration brings this chapter into a real situation. Using the principles from chapter 8, how would you counsel a believer in your ministry who is caught between their freedom in Christ and the stumbling of others around them?

Challenge Questions

6. The stronger believers in Corinth were theologically correct about idols, yet Paul still calls them to limit their freedom. How does a church maintain both theological clarity and genuine love for those who are weaker, without either looking down on the weak or never teaching anything clearly?

7. At the heart of Paul's argument is the example of Christ, who set aside His rights out of love for us. What is the difference between limiting your freedom out of genuine love, as Paul describes, and doing it out of guilt or fear of conflict?

1 Corinthians 9

A Pattern of Self-Denial

> 9:1-2 Am I not an apostle? Am I not free? Have I not seen Jesus Christ our Lord? Are you not my work in the Lord? 2 If I am not an apostle to others, yet doubtless I am to you. For you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord.

Paul has just asked the Corinthians to set aside their right to eat meat offered to idols for the sake of weaker believers. Now he is going to show them what that looks like from his own life. As an apostle, Paul had certain rights. But he had chosen not to use all of them. He wants them to see that clinging to our rights, without thinking of others, leads to arrogance. Paul was willing to lay his rights aside whenever they got in the way of the gospel.

But first he has to deal with a problem. Some in Corinth were questioning whether Paul was even a true apostle. He asks four questions, each expecting an obvious yes. Has he seen the risen Christ? Yes, on the Damascus road (Acts 9:3-18). Is he free? Yes, an apostle had every right to financial support. Is he an apostle? Yes, though not one of the twelve, his encounter with the risen Lord was his qualification. And are the Corinthians not his work? Yes, the very existence of their church was the seal of his apostleship, proof that his message was genuine.

There is something worth noting in how Paul handled this criticism. In ministry, criticism is inevitable. The more responsibility a person carries, the more they become a target for it. But Paul's response is instructive. He never names his critics. He focuses on the criticism itself, not the people behind it. He defends himself, but without shouting over anyone. He corrects the church, but his letter ends with the words "my love be with you all" (16:24). Whatever they thought of him, he wanted them to know they were loved.

> 9:3-6 My defense to those who examine me is this: 4 Do we have no right to eat and drink? 5 Do we have no right to take along a believing wife, as do also the other apostles, the brothers of the Lord, and Cephas? 6 Or is it only Barnabas and I who have no right to refrain from working?

Paul responds directly to those who were challenging his authority. And there were several reasons they felt they could do so.

Paul was not one of the original twelve, so some considered his apostleship secondhand. His past as a persecutor of the church was hard to forget. And then there was the matter of the men who had shown up in Corinth claiming to be better qualified than he was.

Then there were the rival teachers who had arrived in Corinth. Paul refers to them elsewhere as "super apostles." They came with letters of recommendation, impressive speaking ability, and a polished presence. Paul himself admitted that his personal presence was unimpressive and his speaking was not polished (2 Corinthians 10:10). In a culture that deeply admired skilled public speaking, that was a real disadvantage. And the church factions we saw in chapter 1 made things worse. Those who followed Cephas or Apollos had every reason to undermine Paul and elevate their preferred leader.

Perhaps most ironically, Paul's refusal to accept money worked against him. In the Greco-Roman world, a teacher's reputation was partly measured by what he charged. A teacher who asked for nothing was sometimes seen as worth nothing. So the very thing Paul did to protect his integrity ended up being used against him.

This explains why he finds himself in the uncomfortable position of having to defend his apostleship to a church that would not even exist without him.

He does so with a series of questions, continuing from the previous verses, all of which have an obvious answer of yes. Yes, he has the right to be fed by the church. Yes, he has the right to bring a believing wife along in ministry, just as the other apostles and the

brothers of the Lord and Peter did. Yes, he has the right to stop working as a tentmaker and be fully supported by those he serves.

Paul is not embarrassed by any of this. He is simply making the point clear. These are genuine rights that he has voluntarily set aside. Not because he doubts their legitimacy, but because he never wants his motives for preaching the gospel to be questioned. The message must always be more important than the messenger's comfort.

That is a model worth following. Paul received criticism in this letter and he gave it. We all do the same of our governments, our churches, our employers, and our families. So what makes someone a good critic rather than a destructive one?

Three things are needed. First, a good critic must have a complete and honest understanding of the situation. Criticism based on partial information causes more harm than good. Second, a good critic must be free from bias. If you have already decided what you think before examining the facts, your criticism will not be fair. Third, a good critic must be honest enough to set aside their own emotions and judge the situation as it really is. Without these three things, criticism tears down. With them, it can actually help people grow.

In ministry, it is easy to focus on what we are owed — recognition, support, and respect. Paul shows us another way. He doesn't ask what his rights are, but what will best serve the gospel. Having established that he has these rights, Paul now shows from everyday life that his claim is simply common sense.

> 9:7-10 Who ever goes to war at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat of its fruit? Or who tends a flock and does not drink of the milk of the flock? 8 Do I say these things as a mere man? Or does not the law say the same also? 9 For it is written in the law of Moses, "You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain." Is it oxen God is concerned about? 10 Or does He say it altogether for our sakes? For our sakes, no doubt, this is written, that he who

> plows should plow in hope, and he who threshes in hope should be partaker of his hope.

Paul now backs up what he said in verse 6 with three simple examples from everyday life. A soldier does not pay for his own food and equipment. The one who sent him does. A farmer who plants a vineyard has every right to eat from it. A shepherd who tends a flock drinks the milk from his own animals.

Paul is not suddenly asking to be paid. He is making a point about rights — specifically about rights that can be set aside for the sake of others. He has these rights. He has not forgotten them. But he has chosen not to use them, and he wants the Corinthians to understand that distinction clearly.

When I got married, I gave up my right to put sugar in my tea. My wife, Debbie, is a type one diabetic and never uses sugar. So I decided I would stop too, even though I had always done it. Nobody made me. I gave it up voluntarily, hoping it would make things a little easier for her. That is exactly what Paul is talking about. A right given up freely, out of love, is a powerful thing.

Paul then takes this further by going to Scripture. He quotes Deuteronomy 25:4, a law that said farmers could not muzzle an ox while it was threshing grain. The ox was doing the work, so the ox should be allowed to eat. Was God simply concerned about the welfare of farm animals? Paul says no. The principle behind the law applies to people as well. Those who work deserve to benefit from their work. Just as the ox eats while it labors, those who plow and thresh expect a share of the harvest. And in the same way, those who work for the gospel have every right to receive their living from it.

This has a very practical meaning for pastors and church leaders. The church has a responsibility to care for those who serve it. A pastor who is worried about feeding his family cannot give his full attention to feeding his congregation. Supporting your pastor is not charity — it is simply good and right.

> 9:11-14 If we have sown spiritual things for you, is it a great thing if we reap your material things? 12 If others are partakers of this right over you, are we not even more? Nevertheless we have not used this right, but endure all things lest we hinder the gospel of Christ. 13 Do you not know that those who minister the holy things eat of the things of the temple, and those who serve at the altar partake of the offerings of the altar? 14 Even so the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel.

Paul makes a straightforward point. He has sown spiritual things into the Corinthian church — teaching, correction, encouragement, and the gospel itself. Is it really so surprising that he would have the right to receive material support in return? When we buy a Christian book or worship music, we receive something spiritually nourishing, but we also pay the person who created it. That is simply fair. Sometimes these things are given away freely, and the creator expects nothing in return. That is what Paul did in Corinth.

He also points out that he is arguably more deserving of support than others. If Apollos and Cephas received support from churches, surely Paul, who actually founded the Corinthian church, had at least as much right. But he never used it. His reason was simple. He didn't want anyone to think he was preaching the gospel just to make money. He wanted the message to be free of any suspicion.

To be clear, Paul is not saying it is wrong for a pastor to be paid. He gives two more examples to make that point. First, priests who served in the temple received a portion of the offerings as their provision. Numbers 18:8-24 spells this out clearly. Serving God was their work, and God's people supported them. Paul saw ministry as a form of priestly service, and therefore pastors deserved the same consideration.

Second, Paul points to the words of Jesus himself in Matthew 10:10 and Luke 10:7-8, where the Lord made it clear that workers deserve their wages. This is not just good

advice. Paul calls it a command from the Lord. Churches are required to honor and support those who preach the gospel. The purpose is practical and important. When a pastor does not have to worry about where his next meal is coming from, he can give his full attention to the growth of the church and the spread of the gospel.

When a church supports its pastors, it is not doing them a personal favor. They are fulfilling their God-given responsibility. It is an act of obedience. The gospel moves forward when those who preach can devote themselves fully to the work God has called them to do.



Reflective Questions for 1 Corinthians 9:1-14

1. Paul opens with four rhetorical questions, each expecting a yes. What was he defending, and why did he need to defend it to a church he had founded?

2. Several things made Paul vulnerable to criticism in Corinth — his background, his appearance, and his refusal to accept money. How did each of these work against him?

3. Three everyday examples appear in verse 7 — the soldier, the farmer, and the shepherd. What single principle do all three illustrate?

4. Paul quotes a law about not muzzling an ox and applies it to gospel workers. What principle does he draw from it, and what does it mean for how churches should treat those who lead them?

5. Verse 14 says those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel. Is your church adequately caring for those who lead and teach? If not, what is standing in the way?

Challenge Questions

6. Paul voluntarily gave up his right to financial support so the gospel would not be hindered. When is it right for a minister to insist on their rights, and when is it wiser to set them aside?

7. Paul had every right to support, a wife, and freedom from manual labor and used none of them in Corinth. What does his willingness to lay down rights tell us about the relationship between genuine authority and voluntary self-limitation?

> 9:15-18 But I have used none of these things, nor have I written these things that it should be done so to me; for it would be better for me to die than that anyone should make my boasting void. 16 For if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast of, for necessity is laid upon me; yes, woe is me if I do not preach the gospel! 17 For if I do this willingly, I have a reward; but if against my will, I have been entrusted with a stewardship. 18 What is my reward then? That when I preach the gospel, I may present the gospel of Christ without charge, that I may not abuse my authority in the gospel.

Paul felt so strongly about not accepting money from Corinth that he says he would rather die than take it. That is not exaggeration. That is how deeply he felt about protecting the integrity of his message. It is worth noting that Paul did accept financial gifts from other churches. The believers in Philippi and Thessalonica sent him support after he had left those cities, helping him minister in other places. But while he was actively serving a church, he refused to be supported by them. He never wanted anyone to question why he was there.

Corinth was full of traveling Greek teachers of philosophy and wisdom, and those teachers always charged for their services. People who showed interest in their ideas were invited to special classes, and of course they paid for the privilege. Paul wanted to

draw a clear line between himself and those teachers. The gospel of Jesus was not a product for sale. It was not available only to those who could afford it. It was for everyone. If Paul had charged for his preaching, he would have looked no different from any other traveling teacher selling his ideas to the highest bidder.

His driving motivation was simply this: he had to preach. He says, “woe to me if I do not preach the gospel”. Paul isn't describing a unique or unusual feeling here. Centuries earlier, Jeremiah described the same experience. God's word "was in my heart like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I was weary of holding it back, and I could not" (Jeremiah 20:9). This is what it actually feels like to be entrusted with God's word. It’s not a career choice, but a fire you cannot put out.

A woe in Scripture carries the weight of a curse or a coming judgment. Paul understood God had entrusted him with this message and that not preaching it was not an option. This was not a career he had chosen. It was a responsibility God had placed on him, and he could not walk away from it.

So what was his reward? Not money. His reward was the ability to offer the gospel completely free of charge, and to stand before God and men with a clean conscience. No one could ever accuse him of preaching for personal gain. In a world where trust is easily broken by the love of money, that kind of integrity was and still is priceless.

For those in ministry today, this is worth reflecting on. People are watching. They notice whether a pastor's lifestyle matches his message. They notice whether money seems to be a motivation. Paul understood that his credibility was inseparable from his integrity, and he guarded it carefully.

Serving All Men

> 9:19-23 For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win the more; 20 and to the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might

> win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law, that I might win those who are under the law; 21 to those who are without law, as without law (not being without law toward God, but under law toward Christ), that I might win those who are without law; 22 to the weak I became as weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. 23 Now this I do for the gospel's sake, that I may be partaker of it with you.

Christian freedom is not the freedom to do whatever you like. It is freedom from everything that prevents you from being who God wants you to be. God sets us free so we can serve him and serve others.

Because Paul belonged to Christ, he considered himself a servant to everyone Christ came to save — believer and unbeliever alike. He was free from any human authority over him, including the Corinthian church. Yet he willingly made himself a servant to all. Notice that he does not call himself an apostle or a leader here. He calls himself a servant. His motive was never status. It was always to win more people to Christ.

To do that, Paul learned to meet people where they were. With Jews, he placed himself under the Jewish law. He continued going to the synagogues, arguing from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Messiah. This was not without risk. He knew rejection and persecution would follow. But if he could win some, it was worth it.

With Gentiles, he set aside the Jewish law. This did not mean he lived like a pagan or threw out God's moral law. What it meant was that he did not place unnecessary religious requirements on non-Jewish people. There were teachers in that day called Judaizers who insisted that Gentiles had to follow Jewish customs and be circumcised before they could truly belong to Christ. Paul rejected that completely, as we see in Acts 15. The gospel was for everyone, and it did not come with cultural strings attached.

Paul lived this out in specific, recorded moments. He had Timothy circumcised to avoid needlessly offending Jews in that region (Acts 16:3), yet he firmly refused to let Titus be

circumcised when Judaizers tried to force the issue as a matter of gospel truth (Galatians 2:3). Same principle, opposite decisions, because one was a matter of cultural sensitivity and the other was a matter of the gospel itself.

With believers who were still growing in their understanding, Paul brought himself down to their level. He did not talk down to them or push them beyond where they were. He found common ground, walked alongside them, and trusted that in time they would mature. The way to win the weak is not to stand above them but to walk with them.

All of this leads to his famous conclusion. He became all things to all people. He was willing to restrict his own freedom, humble his own status, and set aside his own rights if it meant more people could hear and receive the gospel. His life may have looked inconsistent to some. Sometimes he acted like a Jew, sometimes like a Gentile, sometimes giving up rights and sometimes asserting them. But there was nothing inconsistent about his goal. He consistently pursued one thing: winning people to Jesus. He would not change his message, but he would change his behavior.

In most of the world, the person at the top receives the most honor. Leaders are expected to carry themselves with authority and keep a certain distance from those below them. Paul had every right to that kind of position. He was a Roman citizen, a person of real social standing, and an apostle of Christ. But he was willing to set all of that aside and make himself low if it would open a door for the gospel. That is not weakness. That is wisdom, and it is Christlike.

Striving for a Crown

> 9:24-27 Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it. 25 And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown. 26 Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. 27 But I discipline

> my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.

Everyone who has watched a race knows that serious athletes do not just show up on race day. They train for months, sometimes years. They give up ordinary pleasures. They eat carefully, sleep carefully, and push their bodies through discomfort day after day. All of that sacrifice has one purpose — winning. There is no point entering a race unless you intend to give everything you have.

Paul uses this picture to describe the Christian life. We are all running, and we are to run in such a way that we win. But he is careful to explain what he means. He is not saying that believers are competing against each other, with only one person actually winning. We have already won the race through Christ. What he is saying is this. Don't slack off. Don't drift. Run with purpose and self control, denying yourself when necessary, so that you finish well and receive the prize God has for you.

In the ancient world, the winner of a race received a crown — a wreath of flowers or leaves. It was a great honor, but it would wither and die within days. Paul says he is running for a crown that will never fade or be destroyed. That imperishable crown is the eternal reward that awaits those who finish faithfully. Years later, near his execution, Paul would write, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith… there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness" (2 Timothy 4:7–8). This was the race he actually ran, all the way to the end.

An athlete must sometimes refuse things that are not wrong in themselves — certain foods, certain freedoms, certain comforts — because holding onto them would slow him down. In the same way, a believer may need to give up things that are perfectly acceptable — like eating meat offered to idols, or in Paul's case, accepting money — because holding onto those rights is getting in the way of something far more important.

Then Paul switches to boxing. He describes a fighter throwing punch after punch, but none of them landing. What is the point? A boxer who cannot land a punch is just waving his arms around and tiring himself out. Paul does not want the Christian life to look like that — all effort and no impact. Sadly, he says, far too much of Christianity is exactly that today. Busy, active, but not actually winning anyone.

If you follow sporting events, you know what it looks like when an athlete is truly focused compared to one who is just going through the motions. The difference is not just talent. It's discipline and sacrifice.

Paul applies all of this to himself personally. He practices self denial and gives up his rights so that he can run effectively and land his punches. He does not want a lack of self control to disqualify him. In athletic competition, disqualification means breaking the rules. It does not mean you were never a runner. Paul is not talking about losing his salvation. He is talking about losing his reward. A runner who breaks the rules does not receive the prize, even if he crossed the finish line first. Paul wants to finish well, with nothing to be ashamed of, and receive the eternal reward that God has prepared for those who run faithfully to the end.



Reflective Questions for 1 Corinthians 9:15-27

1. Paul just proved he has every right to financial support, then immediately says he has used none of it. What was his reason, and what does this tell us about the relationship between rights and the gospel?

2. Paul says he became all things to all people. What does this mean, and what does it not mean?

3. Paul uses two athletic images — running a race and boxing. What point does each one make about the Christian life and ministry?

4. Paul says he disciplines his body so he will not be disqualified after preaching to others. What does this tell us about the relationship between preaching and personal holiness?

5. Think honestly about your own life and ministry. Where are you most tempted to run without discipline; to be active in ministry while neglecting your own spiritual condition?

Challenge Questions

6. Paul's "all things to all people" approach raises a question every church faces. How do you adapt your methods to reach different people without compromising the message itself? Where does that line tend to get crossed?

7. Paul says even he could be disqualified. How does this challenge any sense of spiritual security that comes from position, gifting, or years of ministry rather than from ongoing faithfulness to Christ?

1 Corinthians 10

Old Testament Examples

> 10:1-5 Moreover, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware that all our fathers were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, 2 all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, 3 all ate the same spiritual food, 4 and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them, and that Rock was Christ. 5 But with most of them God was not well pleased, for their bodies were scattered in the wilderness.

Paul has just warned the Corinthians about being disqualified. Now he reaches back into Israel's history to show them what that actually looks like. He is concerned that some in Corinth, feeling confident in their spiritual knowledge and gifts, think they have nothing to worry about. History, he says, tells a different story.

When Israel left Egypt, God was with them in an extraordinary way. By day he led them with a pillar of cloud. By night that cloud became a pillar of fire. His presence surrounded them and guided them every step of the way. When they reached the Red Sea, the waters parted and the whole nation passed through on dry ground. The Egyptian army that chased them was swallowed up. It was one of the greatest displays of God's power and protection in all of Scripture.

Notice how many times Paul uses the word all in these first four verses — five times. All were under the cloud, all passed through the sea, all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. Not one Israelite was left out of God's provision.

And yet — most of them never reached the Promised Land. They thought that because they were God's chosen people, because they had seen his miracles and eaten his food, they were guaranteed to arrive. They stopped living with self-discipline and obedience.

They complained. They rebelled. They turned to idols. And their bodies were scattered across the wilderness.

Paul draws a direct line between Israel's experience and the experience of believers in Corinth. When he calls the crossing of the Red Sea a baptism into Moses, he means that the cloud and the water together marked Israel as Moses's people, just as baptism and the Spirit mark Christians as belonging to Christ. The food and water God provided in the wilderness — the manna, the quail, the water from the rock — parallel the bread and cup of the Lord's Supper. God was nourishing his people then, just as he nourishes his people now.

Then Paul says something remarkable. The rock that gave Israel water in the wilderness, the rock Moses struck in Exodus 17 and Numbers 20, that rock followed them. He identifies that rock as Christ. The Old Testament often describes God as a rock (Deuteronomy 32:4; 2 Samuel 22:32), and Paul is making a bold statement. Christ was there with Israel in the wilderness, the invisible spiritual presence sustaining them all along. This is another clear statement of who Jesus truly is. He’s not a created being, but God himself.

This is the same conviction John opens his Gospel with. The Word existed "in the beginning" and was "with God" before anything was made (John 1:1–3). Christ was active and present even in the Old Testament story, long before His incarnation in Bethlehem.

So what is Paul's warning? Simply this. Having God's presence, receiving God's provision, and experiencing God's miracles does not guarantee that you will finish well. Israel had all of those things and most of them still failed. God's kindness does not mean there are no consequences for disobedience. The Corinthians had the Lord's Supper, the Spirit, and the gifts of God. But privilege always comes with responsibility. Don't assume you are safe just because you have been blessed. Run the race. Finish well.

Paul now gets specific about exactly what kinds of failure brought Israel down because the same dangers were alive and well in Corinth.

> 10:6-10 Now these things became our examples, to the intent that we should not lust after evil things as they also lusted. 7 And do not become idolaters as were some of them. As it is written, “The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play.” 8 Nor let us commit sexual immorality, as some of them did, and in one day twenty-three thousand fell; 9 nor let us tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed by serpents; 10 nor complain, as some of them also complained, and were destroyed by the destroyer.

Israel's story is not just history. Paul says it is an example — a warning written down for our benefit. The Corinthians had their spiritual experiences and their freedom, but so did Israel. And Israel still failed. The question is whether the Corinthians would learn from that failure or repeat it.

Paul identifies the root problem. Israel could not say no to their own desires. They craved evil things. When Moses went up the mountain to receive the law, the people were already at the bottom making a golden calf to worship. They ate, they drank, and they gave themselves over to immoral celebration. The Corinthians were doing the same thing. They insisted on eating meat in pagan temples even when it caused others to stumble. They excused sexual immorality in the church. They could not say no — not out of love for God, and not out of love for others.

Paul gives three specific examples from Israel's history as warnings.

The first is idolatry. He quotes from Exodus 32:6, the account of the golden calf. The Israelites sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play — a celebration that quickly became idol worship and sexual immorality. God's judgment fell and twenty-three thousand died in a single day. For the Corinthians, who were eating in pagan temples and tolerating sexual sin in the church, the comparison would have been impossible to

miss. God does not treat lightly those who claim to belong to him but give themselves to idolatry and immorality.

The second is testing Christ. Israel tested God repeatedly in the wilderness, pushing the limits of his patience, doing evil and waiting to see what he would do. God sent poisonous snakes among them as judgment, recorded in Numbers 21:4-9. When nothing immediately happens after we do wrong, it is easy to think God has not noticed. But His patience is not permission. Those who truly belong to God will not spend their time seeing how much they can get away with.

The third is complaining. In Numbers 16-17, Korah and others grumbled against Moses and Aaron, challenging God's appointed leadership. Judgment came swiftly through what Scripture calls the destroyer, an angel of judgment. Complaining against God's leaders is not a small thing. It is a sign of a deeper rebellion against God himself.

Paul's message is direct. Look at what happened to Israel. The same thing can happen to you.

> 10:11-13 Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come. 12 Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall. 13 No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.

Someone might ask, “What does Israel's story in the wilderness have to do with us today”? Paul's answer is everything. The Old Testament was written for our instruction. These things were recorded as warnings, so we need to pay careful attention to what they teach us.

The warning is simple. If you think you are standing firm, watch out. You may be closer to falling than you realize. That is exactly what Israel thought. They were God's chosen people, recipients of his miracles and his presence. Surely they were safe. But their confidence became carelessness, and their carelessness became disobedience, and their disobedience kept all of them except Joshua and Caleb from ever entering the land God had promised them.

But two men did enter the land, Joshua and Caleb. Scripture tells us why. Caleb followed the Lord "fully" and had "a different spirit" than the rest of the nation (Numbers 14:24). Same wilderness, same temptations, same forty years of hardship but a different heart produced a different outcome. Israel's failure was real, but it was never inevitable.

God's intention was always to bring his people directly into the Promised Land. In the same way, God's intention for us is that we live a Spirit-filled, fruitful life here on earth and finish well. But the same sins that stopped Israel — idolatry, immorality, and grumbling — will stop us from living the full life God has for us. Unrepentant sin always has consequences, whether for Israel in the wilderness or for believers in Corinth or for us today.

And yet Paul does not leave us without hope. He does not just warn — he also encourages. We all face temptation. There are no new temptations, no special temptations that have never been faced before. Satan uses the same strategies against us that he used against Israel. But here is the difference: God is faithful. He will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able to bear. Israel was not tempted beyond what they could handle either. Their failure was not because the temptation was too strong. It was because they chose to give in.

And when temptation comes, God always provides a way of escape. The Greek word Paul uses here is actually the word for a mountain pass. Picture an army that has been surrounded by its enemies on all sides, with no way out, and then someone finds a narrow pass through the mountains leading to safety. That is the image. The way of

escape is not always easy or obvious. It may be narrow and difficult. But it is always there.

Notice that this chapter already gave us a picture of exactly this. When Israel stood trapped between Pharaoh's army and the sea, God opened a way of escape no one could have seen coming (10:1–2). The same God who parted the sea for a nation with no way out is the God who promises a way of escape for you when temptation seems inescapable. God is not standing at a distance watching us struggle. He is present, guiding us toward the pass, ready to help us endure.



Reflective Questions for 1 Corinthians 10:1-13

1. Paul says all of Israel shared the same experiences — the cloud, the sea, the food, the water. What happened to most of them despite all of this, and what is Paul's warning to the Corinthians?

2. Paul says the rock in the wilderness was Christ. What does this tell us about who Jesus is?

3. Israel failed in three ways — idolatry, testing God, and complaining. How was each one showing up in Corinth?

4. ”Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall." Why were the Corinthians in danger of this, and what can we learn from Israel's example?

5. God always provides a way of escape from temptation. What is a temptation you are facing right now, and what might that way of escape look like for you?

Challenge Questions

6. Israel had God's presence, miracles, and provision, and still failed. The Corinthians had the Spirit and spiritual gifts and were in the same danger. What does this tell us about the difference between being blessed and being safe?

7. God promises a way of escape from every temptation, yet Israel gave in again and again. How do these two things fit together, and where is the real battle with temptation actually fought?

Flee from Idolatry

> 10:14-18 Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry. 15 I speak as to wise men; judge for yourselves what I say. 16 The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ? 17 For we, though many, are one bread and one body; for we all partake of that one bread. 18 Observe Israel after the flesh: Are not those who eat of the sacrifices partakers of the altar?

Paul opens this section with the words my beloved. Even in the middle of serious correction, he wants them to know that what he is saying comes from love, not judgment. That is always worth noticing in Paul. He corrects, but he never stops caring. His instruction is to flee from idolatry. This is the second time in this letter Paul uses the word flee. Earlier he said flee from sexual immorality. Now he says, flee from idolatry. He is not saying, handle it carefully or keep your distance. He is saying, run. Escape from idolatry the way Israel escaped from Egypt — completely and without looking back.

It is worth saying here that idolatry is not limited to wooden or stone statues. Anything that takes the place of God in our hearts can become an idol — possessions, money,

status, even relationships. But the specific idolatry Paul is addressing here is the worship taking place in the pagan temples of Corinth.

He then does something interesting. Rather than speaking to them as children who need to be told what to do, he speaks to them as wise adults capable of thinking this through for themselves. Back in chapter 3 he had said he could not speak to them as mature believers. They were not ready yet. Now he appeals to their wisdom. If they truly consider themselves wise, let them judge whether what he is saying is right.

To make his point, Paul draws a direct comparison between the Lord's Supper and a meal at a pagan temple. When believers share the bread and the cup together, they are participating in the body and blood of Christ. That shared meal creates a real bond — a unity with Christ and with one another. In a similar way, when someone eats at a pagan temple feast, they are entering into a bond with what is being worshipped there. In that culture, sharing a table with someone was a powerful statement of friendship, loyalty, and fellowship. You did not eat with someone you were not in relationship with.

But here is the deeper issue. Paul has already said that idols are nothing. So what is the danger? As he will explain more fully in the next verses, there are demonic forces at work behind idol worship. When someone sits at a pagan altar, even without realizing it, they are entering into fellowship with those forces. That is not a risk worth taking, no matter how free or knowledgeable a believer may feel.

This theme of the Lord's Supper will come back in much greater detail in chapter 11. For now Paul simply wants the Corinthians to see the connection. What you eat and who you eat with matters deeply, because every shared meal is a statement of where your loyalty lies.

Someone might object that if idols are nothing, what is the real danger? Paul now answers that directly.

> 10:19-22 What am I saying then? That an idol is anything, or what is offered to idols is anything? 20 Rather, that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice they sacrifice to demons and not to God, and I do not want you to have fellowship with demons. 21 You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the Lord's table and of the table of demons. 22 Or do we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than He?

Paul is not contradicting what he said in chapter 8. There he said it was perfectly acceptable to buy meat that had been offered to idols. He is still saying that. The issue is not the meat. It's the meeting. Buying meat in the marketplace is one thing. Sitting down to worship in a pagan temple is something else entirely.

But if idols are not real, what is the actual danger? Paul explains it this way. In the Old Testament, when Jews offered a sacrifice to God, they ate part of that sacrifice as a way of restoring their unity with him. Something similar happens in pagan worship, but instead of drawing the worshipper closer to God, it opens them up to something dangerous.

Think of a puppet show. You see the puppets moving, talking, and acting as though they are alive. But are they? Of course not. There is someone hidden behind the curtain making them move. The puppet itself is not real, but the puppeteer is. In the same way, the idol is nothing but wood, stone, or metal. But there is something real and unseen behind it. That is the demonic. Pagan worship gives demonic spirits an opportunity to deceive and enslave people. Without realizing it, idol worshippers are not worshipping a god. They are worshipping demons.

So here is Paul's concern. Some Corinthian Christians were reasoning like this. Since an idol is not real, it does not matter what we eat or where we eat it. And as long as we take part in the Lord's Supper, we are safe. Paul challenges both assumptions. Yes, the idol is nothing. But demons take advantage of human ignorance. And taking part in the Lord's Supper does not protect you if you are also sitting at the table of demons. You cannot

have fellowship with Christ and fellowship with demons at the same time. That is not a lifestyle; that is a contradiction.

When Christians deliberately engage in idol worship, take part in temple prostitution, or promote evil practices, they are not just making a choice. They are provoking God to jealousy. And jealousy in God is not pettiness; it's love. You are only jealous of someone you deeply love and do not want to lose.

Some today reason they can live however they like through the week and assume church on Sunday balances it out. God is not pleased with that kind of thinking. His table and the world's table are not interchangeable. Are we stronger than God, that we think we can live this way without consequence? Paul's answer is no, and Israel's story, scattered in the wilderness, is the proof.

All to the Glory of God

> 10:23-30 All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful; all things are lawful for me, but not all things edify. 24 Let no one seek his own, but each one the other's well-being. 25 Eat whatever is sold in the meat market, asking no questions for conscience' sake; 26 for "the earth is the Lord's, and all its fullness." 27 If any of those who do not believe invites you to dinner, and you desire to go, eat whatever is set before you, asking no question for conscience' sake. 28 But if anyone says to you, "This was offered to idols," do not eat it for the sake of the one who told you, and for conscience' sake; for "the earth is the Lord's, and all its fullness." 29 "Conscience," I say, not your own, but that of the other. For why is my liberty judged by another man's conscience? 30 But if I partake with thanks, why am I evil spoken of for the food over which I give thanks?

The Corinthians had a saying they liked to repeat: all things are permitted. They used it as a license to do whatever they wanted, as long as they could argue it was technically allowed. Paul does not completely disagree, but he reframes the whole question. The

issue is never just what you are permitted to do. The issue is what is helpful and what builds others up. Mature believers do not ask how much they can get away with. They ask how they can best serve the people around them.

With that in mind Paul gives some practical guidance.

When you are buying food for yourself, buy whatever you like and do not ask questions about where it came from. God created everything and declared it good. The remains of that very meat market have actually been discovered by archaeologists, confirming the details Paul writes about.

When a non-Christian invites you to eat at their home, accept their hospitality and eat what is placed in front of you without asking questions. It would have been considered very rude in that culture to interrogate your host about the food and then refuse to eat it. Your goal in that home is not to make a point about food. It is to be a witness to the gospel.

This situation came up recently among believers in Myanmar. A group of Christians went to share the gospel in a non-Christian village. The villagers welcomed them and prepared a meal. The Christians asked whether the meat had been offered to an idol. When the villagers said yes, the Christians refused to eat it. The villagers responded — if you will not eat with us, we will not listen to you.

So what should they have done? Before going, the group should have decided together if the goal was to share the gospel. Only those who are not bothered by eating idol meat should go.

An idol is nothing, as Paul has made clear. Eating meat offered to one changes nothing spiritually. This is similar to eating halal meat. The fact that words were spoken over it does not change its nature. The meat itself is not the issue. Only God is Lord over what He created.

Paul includes a quote from Psalm 24:1 — the earth is the Lord's and everything in it. If a particular food becomes a stumbling block, there is an entire world of other food to choose from. It all belongs to God. No believer needs to feel trapped by this question.

The key principle Paul leaves us with is this. The problem was never the food. As he said in verses 14-22, the problem was the place — the pagan temple, the act of worship, the fellowship with demons. Outside of that context, food is just food. If you can receive it with gratitude and a clear conscience, enjoy it. And if someone else cannot, love them enough to set it aside. That is what Christian freedom looks like when it is fully grown.

> 10:31-33 Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. 32 Give no offense, either to the Jews or to the Greeks or to the church of God, 33 Just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit, but the profit of many, that they may be saved.

Everything we do should be done for the glory of God. That is Paul's simple and sweeping conclusion to everything he has said about food, idols, and Christian freedom across these chapters. The freedom God gives us is not for our own satisfaction. It is a tool for his glory and the good of others. When strong believers set aside their rights for the sake of someone weaker, that glorifies God. When a believer chooses the needs of others over their own comfort, that glorifies God.

Paul extends this to everyone — Jews, Greeks, and the church. No one should be unnecessarily offended by the way a believer uses their freedom. Nothing, not even genuine liberty in Christ, should cause a believer to lose sight of their desire to win others to him.

When Paul says he pleases all people in all things, he does not mean he does whatever anyone asks. He means he shapes his behavior in a way that honors God and keeps the door open for the gospel. He is not compromising his faith. He is not trying to make

everyone happy. He is simply making sure that nothing about the way he lives becomes an obstacle between someone and Jesus.

The way we use our freedom and relate to others is one of the clearest signs of how mature we are in Christ.



Reflective Questions for 1 Corinthians 10:14-33

1. Paul says flee from idolatry — not handle it carefully, but run. What specific danger was he warning the Corinthians about, and why was sitting at a pagan temple meal more serious than buying meat at the market?

2. Paul says idols are nothing, but then warns about demons behind idol worship. How do these two things fit together, and what does the puppet illustration help us understand about the real danger?

3. The Lord's Supper creates a real bond with Christ and with other believers. How does Paul use this to show why eating at a pagan temple was so serious for a Christian?

4. Paul gives practical guidance for three situations — buying meat at the market, eating at a non-Christian's home, and being told the food was offered to an idol. What is his advice for each one, and what principle connects all three?

5. The Myanmar story shows Christians who refused idol meat and lost their opportunity to share the gospel. How does this illustrate Paul's point that love for others must shape how we use our freedom?

Challenge Questions

6. Paul says you cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot sit at both tables. Yet many Christians today try to live with one foot in the church and one foot in the world. How do we help people in our churches understand that this is not just unwise but a contradiction of who they are in Christ?

7. Paul closes with "do all to the glory of God." This is a simple statement but a demanding one. How does this single principle, glorifying God in everything, actually work as a guide for making decisions in areas where Scripture does not give a specific command?

1 Corinthians 11

> 11:1 Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ.

This verse actually belongs with the closing of chapter 10. Paul's final word before moving on is a personal challenge: follow my example as I follow Christ. He is not asking anyone to copy his personality or treat him as the final authority. He is pointing to a life that is intentionally shaped by following Jesus. He can say this with confidence not because he is perfect, but because his life is genuinely oriented toward Christ.

This is a healthy pattern for discipleship. We learn from godly examples — pastors, mentors, older believers — while always measuring everything against Christ himself. The call is never "follow me no matter what." It is always "follow me as I follow Christ." A leader worth following is one who is already following someone greater than himself.

Before we work through this passage verse by verse, it is worth stepping back to understand what Paul is dealing with, because this is one of the most debated and difficult sections in the whole letter.

Paul was responding to a real cultural situation in Corinth, but he grounded his response in a timeless theological principle — that within relationships, whether between God and Christ, or husband and wife, there is a God-given order that reflects not inferiority but mutual respect and love. The head covering was the cultural expression of that principle in first century Corinth. The principle itself — honor one another, don't let personal freedom divide the church, keep the focus of worship on Christ — remains as relevant as ever even if the practice does not.

Here are the four main interpretations. Read them carefully and judge for yourself.

The first is the cultural argument. Head coverings in that culture were a sign of respect and modesty. Some women in the church, knowing they were free in Christ, had stopped

wearing them. This offended Jewish believers for whom head coverings were an important tradition. Paul's response is similar to what he said about meat offered to idols. There is nothing wrong with not wearing a head covering, but if it is causing division in the church, put it back on. Unity is more important than personal freedom. In this reading, Paul is not giving a universal command but addressing a local situation.

The second is the male authority argument. Some teachers believe Paul is establishing a timeless principle about the authority structure God designed — God, Christ, man, woman — and that head coverings were an outward symbol of that order. In this reading the instruction is not limited to Corinth but applies to all churches in all times. Those who hold this view often also believe it has implications for the roles of men and women in church leadership.

The third is the correction of male leadership argument. This reading suggests that the men in the church were actually the problem. Some male leaders were imposing head covering requirements on women in a domineering way. In this case Paul would be defending the women and correcting the men, which fits the pattern we have seen throughout this letter of Paul challenging those who are puffed up and insisting on their authority over others.

The fourth is the hair as covering argument. Some scholars believe Paul is not talking about a cloth head covering at all. They argue that the covering he refers to is a woman's long hair itself. Paul is simply saying long hair is a woman's natural covering and glory, and that no additional covering is required.

As you read through this passage, keep two things in mind. First, whichever interpretation you find most convincing, the heart of what Paul is saying is not about what you wear on your head. It is about mutual respect, humility, and keeping the focus of worship on Christ rather than on personal rights. Second, this is a passage where good and sincere Bible teachers disagree. Approach it with humility and be careful about being dogmatic where Scripture itself leaves room for discussion.

Head Coverings

> 11:2-3 Now I praise you, brethren, that you remember me in all things and keep the traditions just as I delivered them to you. 3 But I want you to know that the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man, and the head of Christ is God.

Before Paul addresses what is troubling him, he takes a moment to acknowledge what the Corinthians have done well. They have remembered his teachings and held to the instructions he passed on to them — at least in some areas. Paul always looks for something genuine to affirm before he corrects. That is a good model for any pastor or leader.

Then he moves into new territory. He wants them to understand something they apparently did not fully grasp, so he explains it carefully. He introduces the concept of headship. This word can mean either authority or source, and the difference between those two meanings shapes how we understand everything that follows.

If head means authority, then Paul is saying men have authority over women in the church, and God has authority over Christ. But if God has permanent authority over Christ, that would make Christ eternally subordinate — a lesser being within the Trinity. That has never been the church's teaching. Father, Son, and Spirit are equal, even while relating to one another in distinct ways.

In John 8:28, Jesus says He does nothing on His own but speaks only what the Father has taught Him. He consistently points back to the Father as the one from whom He acts and speaks. That is the language of source. It's about origin and relationship, not inferiority.

With that meaning in place, the rest of the verse makes good sense. Christ is the head — the source — of every man in two ways. First, Christ was present at creation and is the creator of all things. Second, and more likely what Paul has in mind here, Christ is the source of new life for every believer. As Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:17, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. Our spiritual life flows from Christ as its source.

And man is the head, the source of woman, in the sense that Eve came from Adam. That is the straightforward meaning of Genesis 2, which Paul will refer to directly in verses 8 and 9. This is not a statement about superiority or inferiority. It is a statement about origin and relationship, and it is the same way that source language is used throughout this passage.

With all of that in mind, let's work through what Paul actually says.

> 11:4-10 Every man praying or prophesying, having his head covered, dishonors his head. 5 But every woman who prays or prophesies with her head uncovered dishonors her head, for that is one and the same as if her head were shaved. 6 For if a woman is not covered, let her also be shorn. But if it is shameful for a woman to be shorn or shaved, let her be covered. 7 For a man indeed ought not to cover his head, since he is the image and glory of God; but woman is the glory of man. 8 For man is not from woman, but woman from man. 9 Nor was man created for the woman, but woman for the man. 10 For this reason the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels.

Paul's main concern here is about a practice in Corinthian worship that was bringing shame on both men and women in the church. The shame was connected to how they wore their hair and whether or not they covered their heads.

In that culture, both men and women wore their hair long. Women typically wore a veil or covering over their head in public. Men did not. Prostitutes, however, were known for not wearing head coverings. It was part of how they presented themselves. So a woman

coming to worship without a covering was sending a message she almost certainly did not intend. It was a distraction, and it brought shame on her husband and gave the wrong impression about the church. A woman who did not yet know Christ and came to church uncovered did not know any better. Grace should be shown to her. But the women Paul is addressing were believers. They knew what their choice communicated.

The same issue applied to men, but in reverse. Some men were wearing head coverings during worship. In that culture, a man covering his head was making a statement. It said he was not in a position of authority, that he was under the authority of others. For a man leading worship, that sent the wrong message entirely.

Paul is not saying women cannot pray or prophesy in church. He is actually affirming that they can, which fits what Joel 2:28 and Acts 2:17 say about sons and daughters prophesying together. The question is not whether women can lead in worship. The question is whether the way they dress honors God and avoids unnecessary distraction.

A helpful comparison for today would be a woman wearing revealing or inappropriate clothing to church. People will focus on what she is wearing rather than on the Lord. What we wear and how we present ourselves in worship should never pull attention away from Christ.

Paul then says that “man is the image and glory of God”, and “woman is the glory of man.” This does not mean women are not made in the image of God. Genesis 1:27 makes clear that both men and women bear God's image equally. What Paul means is that women reflect and glorify men in a specific way. She was created as his helper and companion, and in that role she brings him honor. His point is practical. In worship, men should present themselves in a way that is distinctly male, and women in a way that is distinctly female. Crossing those lines caused confusion and shame in the congregation.

If a woman refuses to wear a covering, she might as well cut her hair off. In that culture, a shaved head on a woman carried serious shame. Jewish law associated it with adultery. In the Greek world, it could mark a woman as a prostitute.

Some think Paul is not giving his own view in these verses but is actually responding to the position of domineering men in the Corinthian church. These men had taken Paul's teaching on headship — which was always meant to apply to the husband and wife relationship in marriage and applied it to all men and women everywhere, using it to place themselves above women in the church. If that is the case, then verse 3 should actually be translated this way:

“The head of every husband is Christ. The head of a wife is her husband. The head of Christ is God.”

The word used here can mean either man or husband, woman or wife. If Paul is speaking specifically about the marriage relationship, husband and wife are the better translations. In that reading, Paul is not establishing a hierarchy between all men and all women. He is speaking about mutual respect and order within marriage.

Finally Paul mentions the angels. In chapter 4 he said that angels are watching us. Angels are present when God's people gather to worship, and some believe they observe and take note of what happens. Whether or not angels literally record our actions, the point is clear — our behavior in worship is not a private matter. We are always in the presence of God and his heavenly servants. The head covering in this context was not a sign of a woman's submission to men. It was a sign of her willingness to live under the authority of God which is exactly what men are also called to do. Both men and women in worship are called to honor God with how they present themselves, because worship always takes place before an audience greater than the people in the room.

> 11:11-16 Nevertheless, neither is man independent of woman, nor woman independent of man, in the Lord. 12 For as woman came from man, even so man

> also comes through woman; but all things are from God. 13 Judge among yourselves. Is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? 14 Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him? 15 But if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her; for her hair is given to her for a covering. 16 But if anyone seems to be contentious, we have no such custom, nor do the churches of God.

Having addressed the specific cultural situation, Paul makes sure no one draws the wrong conclusion. Nothing he has said about head coverings should be taken to mean that women are inferior to men or that men are independent of women. In the Lord, Paul says, men and women belong to each other and need each other. Yes, Eve came from Adam, but ever since then every man has been born from a woman. No one arrived here independently. Everything and everyone ultimately comes from God, who is the source of all that exists.

This is an important balance. Paul has been talking about order and respect within relationships, but order never means superiority. Men and women were created differently, and those differences are good and worth honoring. But they were also created equally — equally loved by God, equally saved by him, and equally made in his image.

When Paul appeals to nature in these verses, he is really appealing to cultural custom — the way things are naturally understood and practiced within a society. In Corinth, long hair on a man was associated with the male prostitutes who served in pagan temples. Short hair on a woman carried similar associations with temple prostitutes. Paul is not making a universal statement about hair length for all Christians at all times.

He is saying that in Corinth, a Christian woman with short hair would carry a stigma that made it harder for her to be a witness for Jesus. And a Christian man with unusually long hair would carry a different stigma that reflected badly on him and on

the church. The question Paul is really asking is this. Does the way you present yourself help or hinder your witness for Christ in your culture?

This is where the principle becomes timeless, even when the practice does not. In Myanmar, both men and women wear the longyi, a wraparound skrit. That is perfectly honorable in that culture. But in many other cultures, a man wearing a skirt would carry a very different meaning.

Every culture has its own understanding of dress and appearance. Paul is not giving a biblical command about clothing or hairstyle that applies to everyone everywhere. He is saying, look and behave in ways that are honorable and appropriate within your own culture, and make sure the way you present yourself never becomes an obstacle to the gospel.

Paul closes by saying that if anyone wants to argue about this, that is simply not the practice of the churches. He is not being dismissive. He is simply saying that what he has described reflects the consistent pattern of Christian communities. The goal has never been to win an argument about head coverings. The goal has always been worship that honors God, respects one another, and keeps the focus where it belongs — on Christ.



Reflective Questions for 1 Corinthians 11:1-16

1. Paul says "imitate me as I imitate Christ." What is the difference between following a leader blindly and following them in the way Paul describes here?

2. The word "head" in verse 3 can mean either authority or source. Why does the meaning of that one word matter so much for how we understand the rest of the passage?

3. Paul affirms that women prayed and prophesied in church. His concern was how they dressed while doing it. What was the problem with an uncovered head in Corinth, and why did it matter for the church's witness?

4. Verse 11-12 says neither men nor women are independent of each other, and everything comes from God. How does this balance what Paul said earlier about headship and order?

5. Paul's instruction about head coverings was tied to his specific culture. What is the timeless principle behind it, and how does that principle apply to the way you dress and present yourself in worship today?

Challenge Questions

6. Four interpretations of this passage are presented: cultural argument, male authority, correction of male leadership, and hair as covering. Which do you find most convincing and why? What principles do you use to decide between interpretations when good Bible teachers disagree?

7. Paul closes by saying that the consistent practice of all the churches settles the question. How much weight should the practice of the wider church carry when interpreting a difficult passage, and how do we balance that with the need to interpret Scripture in its own cultural context?

Conduct at the Lord's Supper

> 11:17-22 Now in giving these instructions I do not praise you, since you come together not for the better but for the worse. 18 For first of all, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you, and in part I believe it. 19 For there must also be factions among you, that those who are approved may be recognized among you. 20 Therefore when you come together in one place, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper. 21 For in eating, each one takes his own supper ahead of others; and one is hungry and another is drunk. 22 What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and shame those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you in this? I do not praise you.

Earlier in this chapter Paul found something to praise the Corinthians for. Now that changes. What he is about to address is serious enough that he says their gatherings are doing more harm than good. That is an extraordinary statement. It would be better for them not to meet at all than to meet the way they were meeting.

The issue is the Lord's Supper, and it goes back to something we have seen three times now in this letter — division. The first time Paul addressed division in chapter 1 it was centered on personalities, people lining up behind different leaders. Here the division is along social and economic lines, and in some ways that is even more troubling.

The early church did not have dedicated church buildings. They met in the homes of wealthier believers because those were the only spaces large enough to hold the congregation. In Corinth, these gatherings included a shared meal called a love feast. This was a full community meal that was followed by, or included, the celebration of the Lord's Supper. It was a picture of unity, everyone eating together as one family in Christ.

But that is not what was happening. The wealthy believers arrived early. They had the freedom to do so because they were not bound by long working hours or the demands of slavery. They did not wait for the others. By the time the poor and the slaves arrived

after their long working day, the food was gone. Some people had eaten well. Some had drunk too much. And some had nothing at all.

In that culture, drunkenness at a religious meal was not unusual. Pagan feasts held in honor of various gods were often wild affairs where people got drunk. Some of the Corinthian believers had simply carried that habit into the church without thinking. But Paul is shocked. This is not a pagan feast. This is the Lord's table.

The Greek word Paul uses for factions is the same word that gives us our English word heresy. We usually think of heresy as false doctrine, but here it simply means something that divides people and causes them to take sides. In this case, it had nothing to do with theology. It was about social classes. And Paul says that in times like these, mature leaders reveal themselves. A crisis shows who truly has wisdom and who is driven by self-interest.

What made this particularly painful was the humiliation of the poor. In that world, it was actually expected that wealthier guests would receive better food than poorer ones at a shared meal. The Corinthians had simply brought that social custom into the church. The wealthy brought more food and felt entitled to more. When the poor arrived, there was nothing left. They sat at the very table that declared there is no distinction in Christ and felt shame.

Paul's question cuts right through it all. Do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?

That question is worth thinking about today. Our problem is rarely how we physically take the Lord's Supper. But wealth and poverty still create divisions in churches. Do wealthy members expect more influence because they give more? Do those with less feel truly welcome, or do they sense they belong to a different tier? If Paul were writing to your church, would he find reason to say, I do not praise you for this?

Institution of the Lord's Supper

> 11:23-26 For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread; 24 and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, "Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me." 25 In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me." 26 For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes.

What Paul is about to share did not come to him from the other apostles. He was not present at the Last Supper. The Lord revealed this to him directly. That detail matters. Paul is not passing on a secondhand tradition. This came straight from Christ.

And the timing is significant. It was on the very night of his betrayal that Jesus took bread and gave thanks. He knew exactly what Judas was about to do. He knew what the next few hours would bring — the arrest, the trial, and the cross. And yet he gave thanks. Not just for the bread, but for everything that was about to happen. He gave thanks because he knew that through his death the power of sin and the enemy would be broken. There is no bitterness, no complaint, no anger. Just gratitude in the face of suffering.

Paul draws a powerful connection here. In a sense, the Corinthians were also betraying Jesus. It was not a kiss in a garden, but they were betraying Him just the same by turning His table into a place of selfishness, humiliation, and division.

When Jesus said, "This is my body broken for you", he was making the purpose of his suffering clear. His body was not broken by accident or by the power of his enemies. It was broken intentionally, for us. We gained from his death. His brokenness leads to our fullness. That is why we take the bread in remembrance. It's not an empty ritual, but a deliberate act of not forgetting.

This connects directly to the Passover thread from chapter 5. When Jesus says "do this in remembrance of Me," He's using the same language Passover used for itself. Exodus 12:14 calls it a perpetual "memorial." For a Jewish reader, remembering never meant simply recalling the past; it meant re-entering it. Later Jewish tradition would even say each person eating Passover should see themselves as having personally come out of Egypt.

Jesus reshapes that same idea around Himself. The Lord's Supper isn't a history lesson. It's believers re-entering the reality of the cross each time they eat. The Corinthians had forgotten that, and a church that forgets what Jesus did for them will soon start treating each other the way the Corinthians were treating each other.

The cup represents the new covenant. It’s the agreement God made with his people through the blood of Jesus, replacing the covenant of Moses established in Exodus 24. Through this new covenant, God offers what the old covenant could only point toward: forgiveness of sins, eternal life, and the Holy Spirit living within believers and empowering them to live for God. Jeremiah 31:31 had promised this day was coming. The cup says it has arrived.

Believers have understood the meaning of the bread and cup in different ways. Some see them as symbols of what Christ did. Others believe Christ is genuinely present in them. Whatever your view, Paul's point is clear. Something real happens when we gather at the Lord's table with faith and reverence. It is not an ordinary meal.

Finally, Paul says that every time we take the Lord's Supper, we proclaim his death. To proclaim his death means to declare his victory over sin, over death, and over Satan. It is a reminder that Jesus suffered for us and that his suffering accomplished something eternal. And Paul adds that we do this until he comes. The Lord's Supper holds two directions at once. We look back to the cross and remember what he did. We look forward to his return and anticipate what is still to come.

Jesus pointed forward at this very meal. He told His disciples, "I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in My Father's kingdom" (Matthew 26:29). This is a promise Revelation later pictures as the marriage supper of the Lamb (Revelation 19:9). The table looks two directions at once: back to the cross we remember, and forward to the feast still to come.

Every time we take communion, we are standing between those two great moments, the first coming and the second, and declaring that we belong to the one who connects them both.

Having reminded them of what the Lord's Supper truly is, Paul now turns to what happens when it is treated carelessly.

Examine Yourself

> 11:27-34 Therefore whoever eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. 28 But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. 29 For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord’s body. 30 For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep. 31 For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged. 32 But when we are judged, we are chastened by the Lord, that we may not be condemned with the world. 33 Therefore, my brethren, when you come together to eat, wait for one another. 34 But if anyone is hungry, let him eat at home, lest you come together for judgment. And the rest I will set in order when I come.

Paul says the Corinthians were taking communion in an unworthy manner. He has already told us what that looked like. The wealthy were eating ahead of the poor, people were getting drunk, and others were going hungry. The entire meal had become a

display of selfishness rather than a celebration of Christ. They were missing the entire point. The Lord's Supper drew believers together in unity around the memory of Jesus. Instead, it was pulling them apart.

Paul says that by doing this, they were guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. They were treating the Lord's Supper as though Jesus had never died. They were eating and drinking without giving a single thought to him. That is a serious charge.

So Paul calls them to examine themselves before they eat. But it is important to understand what he means by this. He is not asking them to measure whether they are good enough to come to the table. None of us are good enough. We cannot make ourselves worthy; Jesus has already done that. The examination Paul calls for is this: are you remembering the death of Jesus? Are you contributing to division in the church? Are you coming to the table with the right heart?

Many people avoid communion because they feel unworthy over something in their past. But those are exactly the people who need to come. The Lord's Supper is not a reward for the righteous. It is a gift for the broken. It is a place to receive his presence and his forgiveness. The Corinthians were not being judged for feeling unworthy. They were being judged because they did not care about worthiness at all. They were not discerning what the Lord's Supper truly was. They treated it like an ordinary meal and forgot that Jesus died for them.

It's worth considering what "the body" means here. The whole context of this passage is about wealthy believers ignoring the poor. There’s no theological confusion about the bread itself in view. Paul may be pointing back to what he already said in 10:17, "we, though many, are one bread and one body”, and forward to what he's about to develop at length in chapter 12. Read that way, the failure isn't primarily about how someone regards the elements. It's about failing to recognize a fellow believer, especially a poor one, as genuinely part of Christ's body.

The consequences were real. Paul says that because of this, many among them were weak, sick, and some had even died. Sleep in this context means physical death. This is a sobering reminder of how seriously God takes the way his people gather at his table.

If taking communion the wrong way could bring weakness, sickness, and even death, the question naturally follows: what might happen if we received it rightly, with genuine faith and reverence? Paul's warning shows this is no ordinary meal. It is a participation in Christ himself and a proclamation of His death until He comes. And what are we proclaiming? A cross that Scripture connects directly to healing and life — "by His wounds we are healed" (Isaiah 53:5; 1 Peter 2:24). If misuse brought real consequences, then proper participation should not be seen as empty or neutral.

This does not mean communion is a formula for automatic physical healing, but neither is it merely symbolic with no effect. It is a God-given means of grace that calls believers back to the cross in repentance and trust. The same God who forgives also heals (Psalm 103:3), and the Lord's Supper is a visible declaration of that reality. When received rightly, it steadies the heart, clears the conscience, and strengthens the inner life. In communion, we are not just remembering the cross — we are returning to it and finding again the life that flows from it.

Paul says if we judge ourselves rightly, we will not come under God's judgment. This is not about eternal condemnation. God is not sending believers to hell for taking communion carelessly. This is discipline — the kind a loving father gives to correct a child who is heading in the wrong direction. God disciplines those who belong to him so that they will not be swept away with the world in its final judgment. The correction is an act of mercy.

The practical solution Paul offers is simple. If you are truly hungry, eat at home before you come. The gathering is not primarily about food. It is about Christ. Come to the table hungry for him, not for a meal. And come together waiting for one another,

honoring one another, and remembering that every person at that table was purchased by the same blood.



Reflective Questions for 1 Corinthians 11:17-34

1. Paul says the Corinthians' gatherings were doing more harm than good. What was happening at their shared meals, and why did it make a mockery of the Lord's Supper?

2. Jesus gave thanks on the very night he was betrayed, knowing exactly what was coming. What does this tell us about Jesus, and what does it mean for how we come to the Lord's table?

3. The cup represents the new covenant. What is the new covenant, what did it replace, and what does it offer that the old covenant could not?

4. Paul calls believers to examine themselves before taking communion. What does this examination actually involve, and why is the Lord's Supper not a reward for those who feel worthy?

5. Think about how your church currently practices the Lord's Supper. Is it treated with genuine reverence and faith, or has it become a routine? What would it look like to receive it in a way that truly honors what Christ did?

Challenge Questions

6. Paul says many in Corinth were weak, sick, and some had died because of how they took communion. This raises a serious question about how God disciplines his people.

What is the difference between God's discipline of believers and his condemnation of the world, and how should this shape the way we think about suffering and hardship in the church?

7. The division at the Lord's table was not about theology. It was about wealth and social class. Rich believers ate well while poor believers went hungry at the same table. Where do wealth, status, and social class create similar divisions in churches today, and what would genuine equality at the Lord's table actually look like in your context?

1 Corinthians 12

Spiritual Gifts: Unity in Diversity

> 12:1-3 Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I do not want you to be ignorant:
> 2 You know that you were Gentiles, carried away to these dumb idols, however you were led. 3 Therefore I make known to you that no one speaking by the Spirit of God calls Jesus accursed, and no one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit.

Paul now turns to a new topic. Your Bible translation probably uses the phrase spiritual gifts, but the word gifts is not actually in the original Greek. Paul says spiritual things. The Corinthians had written to him with questions about this area, and he does not want them to remain confused or mistaken about how the Spirit works.

Despite all the problems in this church — the divisions, the immorality, the disorder at the Lord's Supper — Paul does not tell them to stop using the spiritual gifts. That is worth noting. God does not limit the use of his gifts to mature believers. Romans 11:29 tells us that the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable. They are not taken back because of immaturity or failure. Paul's concern is not that they stop, but that they understand what they are doing and do it the right way.

The Gentile believers in Corinth had spiritual experiences, but their theology was wrong. They had grown up believing in many gods. In their world, different gods did different things: one god for the harvest, another for the sea, another for healing, and so on. When they came to faith and began experiencing the different gifts of the Spirit, they naturally fell back into that way of thinking. Perhaps one god gives wisdom, another gives knowledge, and another performs miracles. If there are nine gifts, maybe there are nine different gods.

This is like Hinduism, where thousands of gods each handle different things. The idea of one God doing everything — healing this person, giving wisdom to that one, performing a miracle somewhere else — was foreign to the Greek mind and remains foreign to the Hindu mind. But that is exactly Paul's point. It is the same Spirit, the same Lord, the same God working all of these things which is why he uses the word same repeatedly in verses 4-11.

Before they came to faith, these Gentile believers had been led into idol worship. Paul uses a surprising image. They were carried away, swept along without fully understanding where they were going. The implication is that demons were behind that manipulation, driving them where they did not fully understand they were going. That background matters because it explains why some in the church were now misusing the gifts in ways that looked more like pagan worship than Christian community.

This brings Paul to the question of discernment. How do you know if someone is truly speaking by the Holy Spirit? He gives two tests. First, no one speaking by the Holy Spirit will use the name of Jesus as a curse. In pagan worship, it was common to invoke the name of a deity to curse enemies. Some in the Corinthian church had carried this practice over, using the name of Jesus in pagan style curses against other members of the congregation. The gifts are given to build the church up, not to tear people down. Anyone using the name of Jesus to harm others is not speaking by the Spirit.

Second, no one can truly say Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit. This is the positive test. The Holy Spirit always points to Jesus, always glorifies him, and always builds up his people. As Jesus himself said in John 16:14, the Spirit will glorify me. If someone claims to speak by the Spirit but their words tear down, curse, or dishonor Jesus — that is your answer. True spiritual speech always lifts Jesus higher.

John gives a companion test from a different angle:,”every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God" (1 John 4:2–3). Paul's test is about honoring Jesus as Lord; John's is about affirming His full humanity. Together they

cover both errors the early church faced — denying Christ's authority, and denying His incarnation.

> 12:4-7 There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. 5 There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord. 6 And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all. 7 But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all:

There are many kinds of spiritual gifts, but Paul wants the Corinthians to understand something clearly from the start: no gift is better than another. They all come from the same source and serve the same purpose. The Spirit distributes different gifts, the Lord Jesus assigns different ministries, and God the Father provides the power and strength to carry them out. The three persons of the Trinity work together in perfect unity, each carrying out a distinct role toward one unified purpose.

This is nearly the same language Paul uses in Ephesians 4:4–6, "one body, one Spirit… one Lord, one faith… one God and Father of all", written to a church with no division problem to correct. The office list a few verses later (12:28) closely parallels Ephesians 4:11 as well. This tells us something important. This isn't teaching Paul created to fix one troubled church. It's his settled theology of how the church works everywhere.

That unity is exactly what Paul wants reflected in the church. Some in Corinth treated certain gifts as signs of greater spirituality, as though one gift placed a person on a higher level than someone else. Paul firmly rejects that idea. A spiritual gift does not make someone more spiritual. It makes them useful in a particular way for the good of the church. God values every believer equally, regardless of how He works through them.

In many villages, community life works this way. One person builds. Another cooks for the workers. Another organizes the people. Another gathers supplies. No single role is more important than the others. The work succeeds because everyone contributes what

they have. In the same way, the church functions properly when believers stop competing and begin serving together in unity.

Paul then says that the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each believer. The word manifestation means something made visible or revealed. The Holy Spirit lives within every believer. John 14:16 tells us He abides with us forever. But there are moments when He makes himself more visible and more obvious, working through a person in a way that others can clearly see. That happens when the gifts are exercised. The invisible Spirit becomes visible through the people he works through.

The purpose is always the same — the profit of all. The gifts are not given for personal honor or to elevate one believer above another. They are given for the building up of the whole church. When gifts are used for self-promotion rather than for the good of others, they have been taken completely out of their intended purpose.

The gifts Paul lists in the verses that follow are not meant to be a complete list. They are the most common ones and serve as examples. Other expressions of the Spirit — music, intercessory prayer, hospitality — are not mentioned here but are no less genuine. The Spirit distributes as he wills, and his creativity in equipping his people is not limited to any single list.

Paul now gives specific examples of what those gifts look like in practice.

> 12:8-11 for to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, to another the word of knowledge through the same Spirit, 9 to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healings by the same Spirit, 10 to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another discerning of spirits, to another different kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. 11 But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually as He wills.

A word of wisdom and a word of knowledge are related but different. The term “word” shows something specific — not all wisdom or all knowledge, just a particular piece given for a particular moment. A word of knowledge is information that comes supernaturally, something no one else could know through natural means. In John 4, Jesus knew that the woman at the well had been married five times and was living with a sixth man who was not her husband. She had told him nothing. That is a word of knowledge. A word of wisdom takes that knowledge and knows what to do with it — how to apply it, how to respond, how to act. Both gifts, when genuine, will always agree with Scripture because the same Spirit who gives these words also inspired the Bible.

Faith as a spiritual gift differs from saving faith. Saving faith is for everyone who comes to Christ. This gift is given to believers for specific situations. It is a supernatural confidence that something will happen, a settled trust in God that goes beyond what the circumstances suggest. Sometimes this gift of faith works alongside the gifts of healing, giving a person a clear inner knowing that God is about to heal someone.

The gifts of healings — notice that both words are plural — cover a wide range. Just as there are different kinds of doctors for different kinds of physical conditions, there are different kinds of healings. Physical healing, emotional healing, freedom from demonic oppression — these all fall under this category. God's healing work is not limited to one type.

The working of miracles refers to supernatural acts that have no natural explanation — raising the dead, Philip being transported instantly from one place to another in Acts 8, food being multiplied, someone surviving a poisonous snakebite as happened to Paul in Acts 28. When something happens and the only explanation is God, that is a miracle.

Prophecy in this context is not necessarily about predicting the distant future. It is Spirit-inspired words of encouragement, direction, or correction that speak to a situation — sometimes present, sometimes future. It is important to note that a person can use the gift of prophecy without being a prophet, just as someone can teach without

being a teacher, or evangelize without holding the office of evangelist. The gift and the office are not the same thing.

Discerning of spirits is the ability to recognize where spiritual activity is coming from — whether it originates from God, from an evil spirit, or simply from a person's own emotions and thoughts. This gift is essential for testing the spirits, which Paul introduced earlier in this chapter.

Tongues can be known or unknown languages. According to 1 Corinthians 14:2 this gift is primarily used to speak to God rather than to people. It is how the individual believer is built up and edified. Interpretation of tongues allows what is spoken in tongues to be understood by others, which is how the gift then becomes useful for building up the whole church rather than just the individual.

The Spirit distributes these gifts as he wills — when he chooses, to whom he chooses. This means two important things. First, no gift is superior to another, since none of us earned what we have been given. Second, and this is critical for church leaders to understand, spiritual giftedness is never a measure of spiritual maturity. God gives gifts to people who may not yet be mature in their faith. This is why the qualifications for church leadership in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 focus entirely on character and maturity, not on spiritual gifts. A person can be highly gifted yet completely unqualified to lead.



Reflective Questions for 1 Corinthians 12:1-11

1. Paul says the Corinthians were ignorant about spiritual things. What was the main misunderstanding they brought with them from their background in idol worship, and how did Paul correct it?

2. Paul gives two tests to know whether someone is speaking by the Holy Spirit. What are they, and why are both needed?

3. The same Spirit, the same Lord, and the same God are all mentioned in verses 4-6. What does this tell us about how the Trinity works together in the church, and why does it matter for how we think about spiritual gifts?

4. Paul says the gifts are given for the profit of all, not for personal honor or status. How were the Corinthians using the gifts in the wrong way, and what does right use look like?

5. Look at the list of gifts in verses 8-11. Which of these gifts do you see operating in your church? Are there gifts that seem to be missing, and what might that mean for how your church is serving its community?

Challenge Questions

6. Paul makes a clear distinction between a spiritual gift and a spiritual office — someone can prophesy without being a prophet, and teach without being a teacher. How does this distinction help us think more clearly about how gifts operate in the church, and what problems arise when we confuse the two?

7. The Spirit distributes gifts as He wills — not based on maturity, character, or faithfulness. Yet the qualifications for leadership in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 focus entirely on character, not gifts. What does this tell us about the relationship between gifting and leadership, and how should it shape the way churches identify and appoint leaders?

Unity and Diversity in One Body

> 12:12-13 For as the body is one and has many members, but all the members of that one body, being many, are one body, so also is Christ. 13 For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to drink into one Spirit.

The human body is one of the best illustrations in all of Scripture for understanding how the church works. The "body with many parts" wasn't a new illustration to Paul's readers. The Roman historian Livy records a senator using almost the same story. The body's limbs refuse to work because they resented feeding the "lazy" stomach to persuade angry workers that every part of society needs every other part. Paul's original readers may have recognized the form immediately. But he fills it with a radically different message. The old version said society needs its ruling class. Paul's version says every believer, however humble, is genuinely necessary.

Your body has many parts — hands, eyes, ears, heart, lungs — each one different, each one with its own function. But they do not work independently. They work together as one body. If your heart stops working, it affects not only your heart. It affects everything. If your liver fails, the whole body is in danger. Every part needs every other part, and the whole body depends on each member doing what it was designed to do.

Paul says the church is exactly like this. Each believer is a different member with a different gift and a different role. The focus is never on any one part but on how all the parts work together so the entire body functions well. When my hand holds a cup of water so I can drink, the rest of my body is very glad my hand can do that. When my mouth eats food, every other part of my body benefits. No part exists for itself alone. Every member exists for the good of the entire body.

Next, Paul explains how we become members of this body. All believers are brought into the body of Christ through baptism, but he is not talking about water baptism here. He is talking about what happens at the moment of conversion. When a person puts their

faith in Christ, the Holy Spirit places them into the body of Christ. This happens at conversion. It's not as a second experience, but part of what it means to be born again.

Think of Adam, who was a body without life until God breathed into him. In the same way, we are spiritually dead until the Holy Spirit makes us alive in Christ. At conversion, we become a new creation; the Spirit gives us life the same way God gave life to Adam at the beginning.

What this means for the church is that there are no barriers at the door of the body of Christ. Jew or Greek, slave or free, rich or poor — all enter the same way, through the same Spirit, into the same body. No one gets a better entry. No one has a higher status because of their background or their gifts. We have all drunk from the same Spirit. That shared experience is the foundation of true unity in the church — not agreement on every question, not the same personality or culture, but the same Spirit living in every one of us.

> 12:14-26 For in fact the body is not one member but many. 15 If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I am not of the body," is it therefore not of the body? 16 And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I am not of the body," is it therefore not of the body? 17 If the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing? If the whole were hearing, where would be the smelling? 18 But now God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased. 19 And if they were all one member, where would the body be? 20 But now indeed there are many members, yet one body. 21 And the eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you"; nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." 22 No, much rather, those members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary. 23 And those members of the body which we think to be less honorable, on these we bestow greater honor, and our unpresentable parts have greater modesty, 24 but our presentable parts have no need. But God composed the body, having given greater honor to that part which lacks it. 25 that there should be no schism in the body, but that the members should have the

> same care for one another. 26 And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it.

Remember the divisions Paul addressed back in chapter 1 — people saying I follow Paul, I follow Apollos, or I follow Cephas? That same spirit of comparison and competition had spread to the spiritual gifts. Some gifts, and the people who had them, were being treated as more important than others. Paul uses the human body to show how destructive that thinking really is.

The body is not one part but many. Every part has a purpose it was designed for, and no part can do what another part does. Do not try to be something you are not. Do not compare yourself to someone else. God's purpose for them is different from God's purpose for you. Be what he has called you to be, and trust that it is enough.

Now Paul addresses the idea that some members seem more important than others. Think about what your hands can do — eat, cook, drive, build, hold, comfort. In many cultures the left hand is considered unclean and the feet even more so. Feet get dirty. Some people see them as inferior or worthless. But God made both hands and feet because both are needed. Neither is dispensable.

The same is true in the church. In some nations, certain ethnic groups are seen as inferior. Educated people look down on those without education. Paul says all of them are necessary. Weakness and uselessness are not the same thing.

Paul then makes a surprising point about the parts of the body we cover up and hide. The parts that seem unpresentable — those covered by clothing — are actually given the most protection. And the parts that are completely invisible, like the heart, liver, and kidneys, are actually the most essential. You can live without a hand. You cannot live without your liver. If your liver stops working, your eyes, hands, and feet will all stop working too. Yet nobody praises their liver or thinks about it unless something goes wrong.

Paul says we should honor exactly those kinds of people in the church: the ones doing vital work behind the scenes that nobody notices. A person who prays faithfully but never speaks publicly. Those who clean buildings, care for children, or quietly serve the poor. Churches cannot function without them. Giving honor to what lacks honor keeps the body healthy.

Here is a practical test of whether a church is functioning as a body should. When one member suffers, the whole body feels it. If I hurt my toe, my hands reach for it, my mouth cries out, and my whole body bends toward it. Pain in one place becomes pain everywhere. In the same way, when one believer suffers loss, sickness, persecution, or grieves, the rest of the church should feel it and respond. And when one member is honored, the whole body rejoices.

Paul states this directly as a command elsewhere: "rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep" (Romans 12:15). The body metaphor isn't only describing how the church naturally works. It's prescribing how believers are commanded to live toward one another. That is not competition or jealousy. That is health.

Paul also makes a profound theological point that is easy to miss. He says the head cannot say to the feet, I have no need of you. Who is the head of the church? Christ is. The head commands, directs, and tells the rest of the body where to go and what to do. But even Christ, as the head, needs his body to carry out his purposes in the world. When a part of the body does not respond to the direction of the head, something is wrong — it is a sign of injury or sickness. God has designed us so that we genuinely need one another, and that includes moving together under the direction of Christ himself.

A church that divides over gifts, personalities, social status, or ethnicity is a body fighting against itself. Paul's vision is a body where every member is honored, every weakness is protected, every hidden role is valued, and the entire community moves together under the direction of its head — Christ himself.

Having shown what a healthy body looks like, Paul now names specifically who makes up that body, and what roles God has appointed within it.

> 12:27-31 Now you are the body of Christ, and members individually. 28 And God has appointed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, varieties of tongues. 29 Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Are all workers of miracles? 30 Do all have gifts of healings? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? 31 But earnestly desire the best gifts. And yet I show you a more excellent way.

Paul brings this section to a clear conclusion. The church is the body of Christ, which means it must act like Christ in the world. We are his hands and his feet. Every single believer is a separate and necessary part of that body. No one is unimportant. No one is without a gift to contribute. And when every member plays their part, the entire body functions the way God designed it to.

God is the one who appoints people to their roles. We do not appoint ourselves. Paul lists a ranking of offices in the church. Apostles are first, prophets second, teachers third. These three have a higher ranking not because they are more important as people, but because their gifts are most directly connected to proclaiming and establishing the gospel. The gifts that follow — miracles, healings, helping, administration, tongues — support and strengthen what those foundational offices build.

Then Paul asks a series of questions. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all speak in tongues? In the Greek the answer to every one of these questions is clearly no. Paul is showing that in a worship gathering, not everyone uses the same gift at the same time. One gift should never dominate so completely that others have no room. This is why Paul says in chapter 14 that only two or three should speak in tongues

or prophesy at any one gathering — not because those gifts are limited, but because order and variety benefit the whole church.

Paul is not saying that certain gifts are permanently unavailable to certain people. He makes that clear in chapter 14, where he says he desires that all would prophesy, that he wishes all spoke in tongues, and that all can prophesy one by one. All the gifts are available to all believers at all times, as the Holy Spirit distributes them.

When Paul says to desire the greater gifts, he is not contradicting what he said about all gifts being equally important. He is referring to gifts that benefit the whole church most directly — prophecy, teaching, and apostleship — gifts that communicate truth, build up the congregation, and establish the gospel. This fits with what Paul argues in chapter 14, where he consistently prioritizes prophecy over tongues because it builds up the whole church rather than just the individual.

The word Paul uses for “earnestly desire” is the same word used for jealousy. It means to burn with zeal, to pursue something with intense passion and enthusiasm. This is not a casual interest. It is an active, wholehearted pursuit.

But if the Spirit distributes gifts as He wills, why are we told to eagerly desire them? The answer seems to be that God responds to hunger. We do not earn gifts or manufacture them ourselves. But a heart that actively desires to be used by God puts itself in a position to receive. It is similar to prayer. God already knows what we need, but we are still told to ask. Desire and dependence are not opposites. They work together.

After all Paul has said about gifts, offices, and the body of Christ, he points to something even greater — a way of using these gifts that makes them truly powerful. That way is love.



Reflective Questions for 1 Corinthians 12:12-31

1. Paul says all believers entered the body of Christ the same way — through the same Spirit. Why does this matter for how we treat people whose background, culture, or gifts differ from ours?

2. Paul says God placed each member in the body just as He pleased. What does this tell us about how we should feel about the gifts and roles we have been given, and how should it change the way we compare ourselves to others?

3. The parts of the body that seem weakest are actually necessary, and the parts we hide are often the most vital. Who are the equivalent people in your church, and how well does your church honor them?

4. Paul says when one member suffers, the whole body suffers, and when one is honored, the whole body rejoices. Is this actually true of your church? What would need to change for it to be?

5. Paul tells believers to eagerly desire the greater gifts. If God already distributes gifts as He wills, why are we told to desire them? What does your answer tell you about your own hunger to be used by God?

Challenge Questions

6. Paul says even the head, Christ, cannot say to the rest of the body "I have no need of you." God has designed the church so that Christ carries out His purposes in the world through His people. What does this tell us about how seriously God takes the participation of every member, and what happens to a church where most people are passive spectators rather than active contributors?

7. Paul lists apostles, prophets, and teachers as first, second, and third — a clear ranking. Yet he also says all gifts are equally important and come from the same Spirit. How do we hold these two things together: that some gifts have a greater impact on the whole church while no gift or person is more valuable than another? And what does this tell us about the difference between function and worth?

1 Corinthians 13

The Greatest Gift

> 13:1-3 Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. 2 And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. 3 And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing.

Everything Paul has said in this letter comes down to one thing — love. The divisions in the church, the arguments about food and idols, the misuse of spiritual gifts, the disorder at the Lord's Supper — all of it traces back to a failure to love. Love, Paul says, is what gives everything else its value. Without it even the greatest gifts amount to nothing.

Notice something interesting in verses 1-3. Paul uses the word I repeatedly — I speak, I prophesy, I give my goods, I give my body. But love is not about I. Love is about others. It is about denying yourself and putting someone else first. That is the heart of everything Paul has been trying to say throughout this letter.

He begins with tongues. If he speaks in every human language and even in the languages of angels, but has no love, he is nothing more than an annoying noise. In Corinth there was a place where craftsmen made objects out of brass, banging on metal all day long — a loud, harsh, grating sound that hurt the ears. Paul says speaking without love is exactly like that. This is not just about the gift of tongues. It applies to every word we speak in any language. Words without love are just noise, no matter how gifted the speaker.

Then Paul mentions three gifts. First, prophecy. Prophecy builds people up, but it is very difficult to build anyone up without love. You can predict future events accurately and still leave people feeling worthless if love is absent.

Second, Paul mentions knowing all mysteries and all knowledge. And here he is not talking about a word of knowledge. He is talking about knowing everything God knows, having a complete understanding of every hidden thing. Even that level of knowledge, without love, counts for nothing. Love is more important than what we know.

Third, is mountain-moving faith. This is not ordinary faith. This is the highest level, the kind that does the humanly impossible. But even this kind of extraordinary faith, without love, leaves the person with nothing.

Then he gives two examples of sacrifice. The first is giving everything you own to feed the poor. This is a complete giving that leaves you with nothing yourself. The second is giving your own body to be burned as an offering or sacrifice. Both seem like the ultimate acts of devotion. And yet Paul says if love is not behind them they profit nothing. Gifts given and sacrifices made without love count for nothing, no matter how impressive they appear. God wants our love more than our offerings.

When Paul says I am nothing he is not just talking about the value of gifts without love. He is talking about a person's worth and their impact on the world. Human value is not the sum of our achievements. You can have extraordinary gifts, world-changing knowledge, and heroic faith, and still be nothing if love is absent. Think of it this way. Gift plus ability plus knowledge minus love equals nothing. Or, to put it another way — no matter how large a number is, if you multiply it by zero, the answer is always zero. Love is not just one ingredient among many. It is the multiplier that gives everything else its value. Remove it and everything collapses to zero.

This forces us to ask an honest question about our own motives. Am I using my gifts out of love for those I serve, or for personal recognition? Do I give because I care about the

poor, or because I want to be seen as generous? Am I sacrificing because I love God or because I want others to admire my devotion? The Corinthians were using their gifts in exactly that way — for self-promotion rather than for love. Paul says that kind of giving, no matter how impressive it looks, profits nothing. In many cultures, people respect power, knowledge, or position. But God looks for something different. He looks for love.

The most common word in this chapter is love. The next most common word is nothing. Remove love, and everything we do for God, no matter how spectacular, amounts to nothing. But add love to even the smallest act of service, and God can use it powerfully.

> 13:4-7 Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; 5 does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; 6 does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; 7 bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Verses 4-7 describe what love actually looks like in practice. Look closely at the list Paul gives here — patience, kindness, self-control — and you'll find nearly every quality also appears in the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22–23). Paul may not be describing two separate things. Love is the root; the fruit of the Spirit is love expressing itself in specific situations. This chapter isn't just a poem about love. It's Paul's fullest picture of what a Spirit-filled life actually looks like.

Paul gives fifteen characteristics. Eight of them describe what love does not do, and the rest describe what love does. As you read through them, notice how each one speaks directly to something that was going wrong in the Corinthian church. This is not abstract poetry. It is a mirror held up to a specific congregation. And it is a mirror held up to us as well.

Love is patient. The word Paul uses means to delay your anger — to hold back when you have every right to respond. Think of David hiding in a cave while Saul, who was hunting him to kill him, walked in without knowing David was there. David could have

ended it right then. Instead, he quietly cut off a piece of Saul's robe and slipped away. That is patience, not weakness. It is the restraint of someone who has the power to act but chooses not to.

Why is patience so important? Because it gives people time to change. People can change their minds and their hearts if given enough time. Patience is the gift of time. This is even why the Lord delays his return, not because he has forgotten, but because he is giving people time to come to him (2 Peter 3:9).

Love is kind. Kindness is easy when someone is kind to us in return. But Paul means something harder than that. Love is kind even to enemies, even to those who disagree with us, even to those who have hurt us. Jesus pointed out that even the worst of people love those who love them back. That is not remarkable. What is remarkable is loving someone who gives you nothing in return.

Love does not envy. Envy happens when someone else's success makes us feel worse about ourselves. We resent what they have instead of rejoicing with them. Paul already said in chapter 12 that when one member is honored, all should rejoice. Envy is the opposite of that. It means we cannot control the desires of our hearts. Love does not want what someone else has. It celebrates when others are blessed.

Love does not parade itself and is not puffed up. These two belong together. Parading yourself means drawing attention to yourself, boasting about what you can do in order to get what you want or to appear better than others. Being puffed up means thinking of yourself as more important than everyone else. Love has no need for any of that. A person who truly loves others has nothing to prove. They are more interested in boasting about what others have done than in promoting themselves.

Love does not behave rudely, and does not seek its own. Love always shows honor and respect to others, regardless of their status. When the wealthy Corinthians helped themselves to food at the Lord's Supper while the poor went hungry, they were being

rude and seeking their own comfort at someone else's expense. Love does the opposite. It puts others first, yields its own preferences, and as Paul said in chapter 10, seeks the other person's well-being rather than its own.

Love is not provoked and thinks no evil. Being provoked means being easily angered, and quick to assume the worst about someone's motives. Love keeps quiet when speaking would only make things worse. And love does not keep a record of wrongs. It does not store up past hurts, waiting for the right moment to use them. You may not erase the memory of what someone did to you, but love chooses not to live in the pain and anger of that memory. It refuses to let the wrongs others have done take control. When we hold on to those records, we eventually take matters into our own hands. Love lets go.

Peter states this same idea in one line, "above all things have fervent love for one another, for love will cover a multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4:8). Love doesn't pretend the wrong never happened. It refuses to let that wrong define the relationship going forward.

Love does not rejoice in iniquity but rejoices in the truth. Love takes no pleasure in seeing someone fall or fail. In Paul's day, suffering and death were forms of public entertainment. People crowded into arenas to watch others be harmed. Love finds no satisfaction in that. Instead, love is glad when truth wins, when righteousness prevails, and when Jesus, who is truth, is honored.

Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Paul concludes with four sweeping statements that cover every situation imaginable. To bear all things means love carries difficulties. Not just its own, but the difficulties of others. It provides protection. It keeps confidences. It can be trusted with someone's deepest secrets. To believe all things means love does not throw away its trust at the first sign of failure. It keeps faith in people, and above all in God. To hope all things means love

looks forward with confidence. Things will not always stay this way. God is at work and the future is in his hands.

To endure all things means love keeps moving forward no matter what comes against it — persecution, loss, disappointment, or powerlessness. Even when there is nothing a person can do to change their situation, love endures, trusting that God will act.

Before moving on, it is worth pausing on a simple but powerful observation. Everything Paul has said about love in these verses is also true of Jesus. Go back and replace the word love with the name of Jesus. Jesus is patient, Jesus is kind, Jesus does not envy, Jesus does not boast, and every statement still holds perfectly. Then try something harder. Put your own name in place of the word love. This is what we are aiming for. This is what it looks like to follow Christ.

> 13:8-13 Love never fails. But whether there are prophecies, they will fail; whether there are tongues, they will cease; whether there is knowledge, it will vanish away. 9 For we know in part and we prophesy in part. 10 But when that which is perfect has come, then that which is in part will be done away. 11 When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things. 12 For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known. 13 And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

The final characteristic of love is that it never fails. Human love can fail and often does. But God's love never ends and never gives up. Other things will eventually run their course. Prophecy will be fulfilled, and will no longer be needed. Tongues will cease when we all understand one another perfectly. Knowledge will be superseded by complete and direct knowledge of God. But love? Love outlasts everything.

When Paul was a child, he thought, spoke, and reasoned like a child. When he grew up, those childish ways were set aside naturally, not because they were wrong for a child, but because they were no longer appropriate for an adult. In the same way, the spiritual gifts are appropriate and necessary for this present age. But when Christ returns and we reach full maturity in him, they will no longer be needed in the same way. Paul is not saying that spiritually mature believers have no need for spiritual gifts now. He is saying that a spiritually mature believer will never overemphasize gifts at the expense of love. The Corinthians had it backwards. They were chasing gifts and neglecting love. Paul says love is the mark of maturity, not giftedness.

Paul makes almost the same move in Ephesians 4:14-15. No longer be children "tossed to and fro" by every wind of teaching, but grow up into maturity by "speaking the truth in love." In both letters, spiritual maturity is measured the same way: not by how much someone knows or how gifted they are, but by how well they love.

Mirrors in Paul's day differed from the clear glass mirrors we use today. They were made from polished brass and gave a dim, unclear reflection. You could see yourself, but not sharply or completely. Paul says our knowledge of God in this present age is like looking into one of those brass mirrors. We see something real, but it is partial and unclear. When Christ returns, we will see him face to face. No distortion, no uncertainty, no partial understanding. We will see God clearly and completely.

This is language Scripture once reserved for Moses alone. God spoke with him "face to face, as a man speaks to his friend" (Exodus 33:11). This was a privilege no other prophet had; everyone else received only visions and dreams (Numbers 12:6–8). John says nearly the same thing about what awaits believers, "we shall see Him as He is" (1 John 3:2). What was once true for one man, in a limited way, will one day be true for every believer, fully and completely.

Right now we know God only in part. He has chosen not to reveal everything to us in this age. Prophecies give us part of the picture. Knowledge gives us part of the picture.

But at the coming of Christ, all of that will give way to complete and perfect knowledge. And here is something remarkable. God's knowledge of us is already complete and perfect right now. He knows us completely. What changes at the return of Christ is that our knowledge of him will finally match his knowledge of us. We will know as we are known.

When Paul says the perfect will come, he is referring to the second coming of Christ. At his return our salvation will be complete, all prophecy will be fulfilled, and we will no longer need partial revelation because we will have the full thing.

So what remains? Not the gifts; they are temporary. What remains is faith, hope, and love. The word abide means to remain or to make your home in something. We do not make our home in spiritual gifts because they are not permanent. We make our home in faith, hope, and love because these are eternal. Jeremiah 31:3 says God's love is everlasting. It has no end.

And of these three, the greatest is love. Faith will one day become sight. When we see Christ face to face, we will no longer need to believe what we cannot see. Hope will one day become a reality. When everything God promised is fulfilled, there will be nothing left to hope for. But love? Love will never be unnecessary. Love will never be replaced. In the age to come, and in the presence of God, love will still be the language of eternity.



Reflective Questions for 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

1. Paul says that without love, even the greatest gifts amount to nothing. What are the five examples he gives in verses 1-3, and what is his point in stacking them up like this?

2. The multiply-by-zero illustration shows that love is not just one ingredient among many — it is the multiplier that gives everything else its value. How does this change the way you think about your own gifts and service?

3. Paul lists fifteen characteristics of love in verses 4-7. Which one is hardest for you personally, and what does that tell you about where you most need to grow?

4. Paul says to replace the word love with the name of Jesus — and every statement still holds perfectly. Then he says try replacing it with your own name. How does that exercise land for you honestly?

5. Faith will one day become sight and hope will one day become reality — but love will never be unnecessary. What does this tell us about why love is the greatest of the three, and how should it shape our priorities now?

Challenge Questions

6. Paul wrote this chapter to a church that had plenty of spiritual gifts but was using them without love — for self-promotion, status, and division. Is it possible for a church today to be active, gifted, and growing — and still be failing at love in the way Paul describes? What would the warning signs look like?

7. Paul says love "thinks no evil" and "does not rejoice in iniquity." In a culture where gossip, slander, and public shaming of others are common — even among Christians — what does it actually look like to practice these two characteristics of love? And what is the cost of genuinely doing so?

1 Corinthians 14

Prophecy and Tongues

> 14:1-5 Pursue love, and desire spiritual gifts, but especially that you may prophesy. 2 For he who speaks in a tongue does not speak to men but to God, for no one understands him; however, in the spirit he speaks mysteries. 3 But he who prophesies speaks edification and exhortation and comfort to men. 4 He who speaks in a tongue edifies himself, but he who prophesies edifies the church. 5 I wish you all spoke with tongues, but even more that you prophesied; for he who prophesies is greater than he who speaks with tongues, unless indeed he interprets, that the church may receive edification.

Chapter 13 ends by telling us that love is the greatest thing we can pursue. Now Paul opens chapter 14 with the same word: pursue. The word pursue gives a vivid picture of a runner chasing something down with everything he has. Paul has used running imagery several times in this letter, and it fits naturally in Corinth, a city that hosted games similar to the Olympics. Now he says run after love with that same intensity.

As you pursue love, also desire the spiritual gifts, especially prophecy. The Corinthians were already enthusiastic about gifts, particularly tongues. Paul is not telling them to stop. He is redirecting their enthusiasm toward the gifts that build up the whole church, not just the individual.

This is something that has divided churches for a long time. Some Christian groups still misuse and overemphasize spiritual gifts. In other cases, they have been almost completely ignored. But the answer to abuse is not non-use. It is proper use. If you see someone driving a motorbike recklessly and causing accidents, you do not say I will never ride a motorbike again. The answer is not to abandon the motorbike, but to learn to ride it properly. In the same way, the answer to the misuse of spiritual gifts is not to

ignore them or deny the work of the Spirit. It is to understand them and use them correctly.

Paul describes tongues as prayer that comes from the human spirit enabled by the Holy Spirit, where the mind is not fully engaged in understanding (1 Corinthians 14:14). This kind of prayer goes deeper than words we carefully construct. Some believers describe it as something rising from within—an overflow of prayer when ordinary language feels insufficient. But Paul's focus is not the sensation, it's the source. It is prayer enabled by the Holy Spirit, directed to God, and always meant to build up faith in an orderly and loving way.

Paul goes on to explain the difference between tongues and prophecy, and why prophecy is more valuable in a church gathering. Unlike Acts 2, where the crowd understood the languages being spoken, the tongues in Corinth required interpretation. What Paul describes here is a prayer language unknown to the speaker and to those listening, a private form of communication between the believer and God. God understands it perfectly, with no interpreter. But those listening cannot understand it at all, which means it does not build them up.

Prophecy is different. Prophecy always edifies, exhorts, and comforts. To edify means to build up like a building, brick by brick. To exhort means to call someone toward something difficult but necessary. To comfort means to reassure someone who is struggling. All three of these words have to do with growth. And all three of them require that the words be understood. This is why prophecy is more valuable in a public gathering, because everyone can hear it, understand it, and be strengthened by it.

Imagine you are building a village house. Every word of prophecy is like adding a strong bamboo beam or a sturdy floorboard. This is exactly what a suffering or persecuted church needs. While tongues build up the individual's spirit, prophecy builds up the "body." Paul isn't saying that tongues are bad. He actually says he wishes everyone had that gift! He just wants us to prioritize what helps our brothers and sisters. In a worship

service, clear teaching and prophecy are better because everyone can understand the message and grow together.

Paul valued tongues as a means of personal communion with God. His only concern was that it had been elevated above everything else in Corinth, including love and prophecy. But there is a way to have both. When tongues are accompanied by interpretation, the whole church can understand and benefit. In that case, tongues plus interpretation equals prophecy. They become the same thing.

The manifestation of tongues in Corinth raises questions about its relationship to Acts 2. On the day of Pentecost, tongues were clearly known human languages that enabled Jews from various nations to hear the gospel in their native tongues. No interpretation was needed. Here in Corinth, tongues are unknown languages that require the gift of interpretation for corporate benefit (14:27-28). Without interpretation, even believers don't understand, and unbelievers may think Christians are 'out of their mind' (14:23).

Paul's main concern is clear. Whatever builds up the church is what matters. Love must govern all gifts (chapter 13), understanding is essential in corporate worship (14:6-19), and everything should be done for edification and in orderly fashion (14:26, 40). Paul is not attacking spiritual experience. He is insisting that public worship must strengthen the whole church, not just the individual.

The differences between Acts 2 and 1 Corinthians 14 can be summarized like this:

Tongues in Acts 2 and 1 Corinthians 12–14 Compared

Aspect	Acts 2	1 Corinthians 12–14
Languages	Known languages	Unknown tongues
Understanding	Immediately understood	Needs interpretation
Setting	Evangelism	Worship and prayer
Purpose	Sign to unbelievers	Edification for believers
Effect	Led people to faith	Confusion without interpretation
Interpretation	Not needed	Required (14:27–28)
Context	Pentecost	Church gatherings

Tongues Must Be Interpreted

> 14:6-9 But now, brethren, if I come to you speaking with tongues, what shall I profit you unless I speak to you either by revelation, by knowledge, by prophesying, or by teaching? 7 Even things without life, whether flute or harp, when they make a sound, unless they make a distinction in the sounds, how will it be known what is piped or played? 8 For if the trumpet makes an uncertain sound, who will prepare for battle? 9 So likewise you, unless you utter by the tongue words easy to understand, how will it be known what is spoken? For you will be speaking into the air.

Paul says if he himself came to them and spoke only in tongues with no interpretation, what good would it do them? None at all. But if he came speaking revelation, knowledge, prophecy, or teaching, things they could actually understand, then they would be strengthened and built up. The value of any communication in church is not in how it sounds but in whether it can be received and understood.

He then uses three illustrations to make this clear.

The first is music. A flute or a harp can produce beautiful sounds, but if the notes follow no recognizable pattern they mean nothing to the listener. Music only communicates when there is a structure the listener can follow. Many will know the sound of traditional instruments in your own culture — a bamboo flute, a set of gongs, a stringed instrument. When played correctly in a familiar pattern, everyone understands the feeling and meaning behind the music. But if someone picks up that instrument and plays random notes with no pattern, it is just noise. Speaking in tongues without interpretation in a public gathering is exactly like that. It’s sound without meaning.

The second illustration is a battle trumpet. In Paul's day soldiers on a battlefield listened for specific trumpet calls that told them what to do — advance, retreat, hold your position. Every soldier knew what each call meant and responded accordingly. But imagine if the trumpet player suddenly played a cheerful or unfamiliar tune in the middle of battle. Nobody would know what to do. The result would be confusion at exactly the moment when clarity was most needed.

Paul's point goes deeper than just understanding. He is saying that words spoken in church should not only be understood; they should move people to action. A trumpet call does not just inform soldiers; it mobilizes them. In a similar way, what is spoken in a worship gathering should equip believers to serve God in the world. If no one understands what is being said, no one is moved, no one is equipped, and the words simply disappear into the air.

The challenge for the Corinthian church was real. They were so focused on the experience of tongues that they had forgotten its purpose. A gift that cannot be received by others is not functioning as a gift at all. It is sound without meaning and notes without a song.

Next, Paul will give a real world example that the Corinthians would have experienced first hand.

> 14:10-12 There are, it may be, so many kinds of languages in the world, and none of them is without significance. 11 Therefore, if I do not know the meaning of the language, I shall be a foreigner to him who speaks, and he who speaks will be a foreigner to me. 12 Even so you, since you are zealous for spiritual gifts, let it be for the edification of the church that you seek to excel.

Anyone who has traveled to a foreign country will understand what Paul is saying. The world is full of languages, and every one of them has meaning to the people who speak it. But step into a conversation in a language you do not know, and you are suddenly a foreigner. The words flowing around you carry real meaning for everyone else in the room, but to you they are just sounds. You have been cut off and cannot take part. You feel like an outsider even if you are standing in the middle of the group.

Corinth was a busy port city where people from all over the Roman Empire passed through. Many languages would have been heard in its streets every day — Greek, Latin, Aramaic, and others. The Corinthians knew very well what it felt like to encounter someone speaking a completely different language. Paul uses that familiar experience to make his point about tongues without interpretation. If someone stands up in a worship gathering and speaks in a language no one understands, every person listening becomes a foreigner in their own church. They are present in body but excluded from what is happening. That is not community, it's division.

Division was the last thing the Corinthian church needed. Paul's conclusion is simple and practical. Since you are so eager for spiritual gifts, and that eagerness is good, direct it toward gifts that build up the whole church. Let your enthusiasm work for everyone in the room, not just for yourself.

> 14:13-19 Therefore let him who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret. 14 For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my understanding is unfruitful. 15 What is the conclusion then? I will pray with the spirit, and I will also pray with the understanding. I will sing with the spirit, and I will also sing with the understanding. 16 Otherwise, if you bless with the spirit, how will he who occupies the place of the uninformed say “Amen” at your giving of thanks, since he does not understand what you say? 17 For you indeed give thanks well, but the other is not edified. 18 I thank my God I speak with tongues more than you all; 19 yet in the church I would rather speak five words with my understanding, that I may teach others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue.

Paul has established that tongues without interpretation does not build up the church. Now he offers a practical solution. If someone genuinely wants to use tongues in a public worship setting, let them pray for the gift of interpretation as well. In fact Paul says the person who speaks in tongues can interpret their own words. The two gifts can work together in the same person. This opens the door for tongues to be used publicly in a way that benefits everyone in the room.

To make his point, Paul uses the word I. He is not speaking theoretically. He himself prays in tongues. When he does, his spirit is communicating directly with God, but his mind is not engaged in the same way. He does not fully understand what he is saying. So what should he do? He will pray and sing with his spirit. That is his private devotional life, his personal communion with God, where no interpretation is needed. And he will also pray and sing with his understanding. That is his public ministry, where he speaks clearly so that everyone present can follow along, agree, and be strengthened.

This private and public distinction is important. In his personal prayer time, Paul used tongues freely. His spirit would commune with God without needing interpretation. But in a congregation, he spoke clearly so everyone could follow, agree, and be strengthened. If you give thanks in a tongue no one understands, those around you cannot add their agreement to your prayer. And Jesus taught that there is power when believers agree together.

Paul then says something that might surprise us. He speaks in tongues more than all of them. He is not against the gift. He understands its value for personal edification, for private communion with God, and for the building up of the individual believer. But he also understands its limitations in a public setting. And so he makes a stunning statement. He would rather speak five words that people can understand than ten thousand words in a tongue that no one can follow. Five understandable words that instruct and strengthen others are worth more than ten thousand impressive words that benefit no one but the speaker. Paul's concern was always to give a blessing rather than to receive one.

Some people worry that someone might speak in tongues and without knowing it say something profane or blasphemous. Paul addressed this back in chapter 12. No one speaking by the Holy Spirit can curse Jesus. And Jesus himself said in Luke 11 that a father who loves his children will not give them a snake when they ask for a fish, or a scorpion when they ask for an egg. How much more will our heavenly Father give good things to those who ask him for the Holy Spirit? We do not need to be afraid that God will allow something dark or ungodly to come through a sincere heart that is genuinely seeking him. The Spirit is a wonderful gift from a good Father.



Reflective Questions for 1 Corinthians 14:1-19

1. Paul says to pursue love and then desire spiritual gifts, especially prophecy. Why does prophecy rank higher than tongues in a worship gathering, and what are the three things prophecy does for the church?

2. Paul uses three illustrations: music, a battle trumpet, and foreign languages. What is the single point all three are making, and which illustration connects most with your own experience?

3. Paul draws a clear line between the private use of tongues and the public use. What is the difference, and why does that distinction matter for how a church conducts its worship?

4. Paul says he speaks in tongues more than all of them. Yet in church he would rather speak five words people can understand than ten thousand words in a tongue. What does this tell us about Paul's priorities, and what does it challenge in the way your church worships?

5. The motorbike illustration makes the point that the answer to misuse of spiritual gifts is not non-use but proper use. Is there a gift — tongues, prophecy, healing, or another — that your church has either overemphasized or avoided entirely? What would proper usage look like?

Challenge Questions

6. Paul values tongues highly as a personal gift for communion with God, but limits its use in public worship unless interpreted. How does your church currently handle this, and does its practice align with what Paul actually teaches here — neither dismissing the gift nor allowing it to dominate the gathering?

7. The battle trumpet illustration makes a point beyond just understanding. Words in worship should not only be heard but should move people to action. By that standard, how do you evaluate what typically happens in your church's worship gatherings? Are people leaving equipped and mobilized, or merely informed?

Tongues a Sign to Unbelievers

> 14:20-22 Brethren, do not be children in understanding; however, in malice be babes, but in understanding be mature. 21 In the law it is written: “With men of other tongues and other lips I will speak to this people; And yet, for all that, they will not hear Me,” says the Lord. 22 Therefore tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe but to unbelievers; but prophesying is not for unbelievers but for those who believe.

The Corinthians had been acting like children. Their obsession with tongues without interpretation had kept them in a kind of spiritual immaturity — enjoying an experience without asking whether it was actually helping anyone. He is not asking them to become innocent like children when it comes to evil. That kind of innocence is good and worth keeping. But when it comes to understanding how the gifts work and why they matter, it is time to grow up and think like mature believers.

To make his point, Paul reaches back into the Old Testament and quotes from Isaiah 28. In that passage, God warned Israel through the prophet Isaiah that if they refused to listen to him speaking clearly through his servants, he would speak to them through a foreign nation, Assyria, whose language they could not understand. The strange foreign tongue would not be a blessing. It would be a sign of judgment that they had drifted so far from God that he was now speaking to them so that they could not receive. They would hear words but gain no understanding.

This pattern goes back further than Isaiah. In Deuteronomy 28:49, Moses had already warned that if Israel broke covenant, God would bring against them a nation "whose

language you will not understand." Isaiah isn't introducing a new idea in chapter 28. He's applying a warning his readers would have already recognized. Paul, in turn, is drawing on a pattern that ran consistently through Israel's history.

A sign in Greek is a distinguishing mark that points to something beyond itself. It is the same word used for the miraculous signs Jesus performed in the Gospel of John. A sign is never the thing itself. It always points to something else. Paul applies this directly to the situation in Corinth in two very different ways.

Tongues without interpretation function as a negative sign for unbelievers. Just as the Assyrian language was a sign to Israel that they had wandered so far from God that he was now speaking to them in a way they could not understand, unintelligible tongues in a worship service signal to an unbeliever that something is happening they cannot access. It does not draw them in. It marks them as outsiders and pushes them further away.

Prophecy on the other hand functions as a positive sign for believers. It confirms and strengthens what believers already know to be true. It is a clear indicator that God is present and speaking among his people in a way that everyone can receive.

Here is the irony that Paul is getting at. The Corinthians thought that tongues were the impressive sign that would attract unbelievers and demonstrate God's power. Paul says they had it completely backwards. Unintelligible tongues push unbelievers away while prophecy is what genuinely confirms God's presence to everyone in the room — believer and unbeliever alike.

This is exactly what happened at Pentecost in Acts 2. The crowd heard the disciples speaking in their own languages, understood what was being said, and were confronted with the reality of God in a way they could not dismiss. Thousands came to faith. The tongues were a doorway into the gospel, not a barrier. Paul is saying that tongues in Corinth, without interpretation, had become a barrier rather than a doorway.

Maturity means knowing what behavior is appropriate for the moment. Speaking in tongues without interpretation in a public gathering may feel spiritually impressive, but it is actually a sign of immaturity — choosing personal experience over the good of others. Choosing prophecy, or tongues with interpretation, is the mature choice because it puts the needs of the whole church first.

> 14:23-25 Therefore if the whole church comes together in one place, and all speak with tongues, and there come in those who are uninformed or unbelievers, will they not say that you are out of your mind? 24 But if all prophesy, and an unbeliever or an uninformed person comes in, he is convinced by all, he is convicted by all. 25 And thus the secrets of his heart are revealed; and so, falling down on his face, he will worship God and report that God is truly among you.

In the first century, churches met in private homes. These were intimate gatherings of thirty or forty people where what happened affected everyone present. That is actually an ideal size for spiritual gifts to function naturally.

But what happens when an outsider walks into one of these gatherings? Paul mentions two kinds of visitors — the unbeliever, someone who has not yet come to faith, and the uninformed, someone who is new to the faith or unfamiliar with how the church operates, perhaps someone investigating Christianity for the first time. Both of them matter. Both of them are watching.

If the whole gathering erupts in tongues with no interpretation, what will these visitors think? Paul does not soften his answer. They will think you are out of your minds. And they will leave. The witness of the church will be damaged not by persecution from outside but by disorder from within. The very people the church exists to reach will be driven away by an experience they cannot understand.

But imagine the opposite. The gathering is orderly. People are speaking clearly, prophesying and bringing words of encouragement, correction, and truth that everyone can follow. An unbeliever sitting in that room begins to feel something unexpected. The words being spoken seem to reach past the surface of their life and touch something hidden — a secret struggle, a private sin, or a question that has never been voiced out loud. The Holy Spirit is at work, using the spoken word to expose what is buried in the heart.

Think of Jesus and the woman at the well in John 4. He knew things about her life she had never told him. That moment of exposure did not destroy her. It opened her heart. She ran back to her village saying 'come and see a man who told me everything I ever did.' That is the power of prophecy. It does not just inform the mind. It confronts the heart in a way that only God can.

When something like this happens in a worship gathering, the response Paul describes is worship. The visitor falls on their face and declares, “God is truly among you”. They are not just impressed by an experience. They are convinced of a reality. They have encountered the living God through the gathered church.

This is what Paul wants the Corinthians to understand. A worship gathering is never only for those already inside. It is always a potential moment of encounter for someone who has not yet met Christ. The way the church conducts itself either opens that door or closes it. Tongues without interpretation closes it. Clear, Spirit-filled, understandable speech swings it wide open.

Order in Church Meetings

> 14:26-33 How is it then, brethren? Whenever you come together, each of you has a psalm, has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for edification. 27 If anyone speaks in a tongue, let there be two or at the most three, each in turn, and let one interpret. 28 But if there is no

> interpreter, let him keep silent in church, and let him speak to himself and to God. 29 Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others judge. 30 But if anything is revealed to another who sits by, let the first keep silent. 31 For you can all prophesy one by one, that all may learn and all may be encouraged. 32 And the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets. 33 For God is not the author of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints.

Paul is not giving the Corinthians a fixed order of service to follow every week. He is making a broader point. In a healthy worship gathering, everyone has something to contribute. A psalm, a teaching, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. The gifts are not the possession of a few people at the front. They belong to the whole body. Everyone is both giving and receiving. And whatever is brought to the gathering must pass one test. Does it build everyone up?

With that in mind Paul gives some practical guidelines for two specific gifts that had been causing problems in Corinth — tongues and prophecy.

For tongues, Paul sets a limit of two or three speakers in any one gathering, each taking a turn, and always with interpretation. Why the limit? Partly to keep the service from being dominated by one gift at the expense of others. As verse 26 makes clear there are many expressions of the Spirit and all of them deserve room. If someone feels prompted to speak in tongues but there is no interpreter present, either within themselves or in the congregation, they should remain silent and speak privately to God. Paul is not forbidding the gift. He is protecting the gathering from confusion.

For prophecy, Paul sets a similar limit of two or three, followed by the congregation evaluating what was said. The principle behind this comes from a pattern repeated at least six times in Scripture: by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word is established. The church needs to test what it hears.

Paul gives nearly identical guidance to a completely different church: "do not despise prophecies. Test all things; hold fast what is good" (1 Thessalonians 5:19-21). This wasn't a rule improvised for one chaotic congregation. It was Paul's standard instruction everywhere prophecy was exercised which means it applies just as much to a healthy, orderly church as it did to Corinth.

A prophecy might be judged as not from God not necessarily because it contradicts Scripture, but because the leadership discerns it is not what God wants to say to the church at that particular time.

What do you do when a prophecy is judged not to be from God? Paul implies gentleness. Leadership should quietly say they do not bear witness with that word, remembering that we know in part and prophesy in part. A person with a right heart should never be branded a false prophet for an honest mistake. They should be encouraged to keep stepping out in faith. But a pattern of false words or a wrong heart behind prophecy needs to be addressed directly.

For those wanting practical guidance on how to handle prophecy in a church setting, Paul implies three helpful guidelines. The person giving the prophecy should be known by the church leaders. They should be submitted to those leaders. And they should be committed to a local church. These boundaries protect both the person prophesying and the congregation receiving the word.

Paul also makes clear that both men and women can prophesy. He already acknowledged this in chapter 11:5, and Acts 2:17-18 confirms it, “your sons and daughters will prophesy, your servants both men and women will prophesy”. This is not a new idea. It is consistent with what Paul has said throughout this letter.

Then Paul addresses something that still comes up in churches today. Some people justify disruptive or uncontrolled behavior in worship by saying they were overwhelmed by the Spirit and could not help themselves. Paul says that is not how the Spirit works.

The spirit of the prophet is subject to the prophet. You are in control of what you say and when you say it. You can wait your turn. You can let someone else finish before you begin. If a genuine word from God comes to someone while another person is speaking, God is patient enough to wait. He will not interrupt himself.

The reason for all of this order is stated simply and clearly. God is not the author of confusion but of peace. Disorder in worship does not come from the Spirit. This isn't only a practical instruction about orderly services. In Genesis 1, God's first recorded act is bringing order out of formless chaos. A church that worships in order isn't simply being efficient. It's reflecting the character of the God it worships. A church in disarray isn't just inconvenient. It misrepresents who God is. It comes from self-centeredness, immaturity, or a lack of love for others in the room. When gifts are used with love, in order, and for the building up of everyone, that is when the Spirit of God moves most freely and most powerfully.

> 14:34-35 Let your women keep silent in the churches, for they are not permitted to speak; but they are to be submissive, as the law also says. 35 And if they want to learn something, let them ask their own husbands at home; for it is shameful for women to speak in church.

These verses have caused much confusion and debate. Taken in isolation they seem to say that women should never speak in church. But as we have seen throughout this chapter, that is not what Paul means, and the context makes that clear.

Remember that Paul already acknowledged in chapter 11:5 that women pray and prophesy in church. He did not correct that practice. He simply gave instructions about how to do it appropriately. So whatever Paul means here, he cannot mean that women should never open their mouths in a worship gathering. Something else is going on.

The most likely explanation has to do with the physical setting of worship in that culture. Men and women were often seated on opposite sides of the room during

worship gatherings. This is a practice still followed in some churches and mosques today. If the service was conducted in Greek, women who only understood their local dialect would struggle to follow what was being said. Naturally some would grow restless and begin talking among themselves. Others might call across the room to their husbands asking them to explain what had just been said. Either way the result was the same — disruption, noise, and a loss of order Paul has been carefully building toward throughout this chapter.

This also fits the pattern of the whole chapter. Paul has now told three different groups to be silent at specific moments in the service. In verse 28 those who speak in tongues are told to be silent if there is no interpreter. In verse 30 a prophet is told to be silent when another prophet receives a revelation. And here in verse 34 certain women are told to be silent rather than asking disruptive questions during the service. The Greek word for silent is exactly the same in all three cases. And in none of the other two cases does silent mean never speak again. It means be silent under these specific conditions. The same logic applies here.

Pastors reading this will likely be asked how this relates to Paul's other instruction about women and teaching in 1 Timothy 2:11-12. That is a related but distinct passage, addressing a different situation with its own questions. It deserves its own careful reading rather than assuming it says the same thing as this one.

What Paul is calling for is not the permanent silencing of women but the submission of everyone, men and women alike, to the order established by church leadership. When he says let them be submissive he means that speaking up whenever you feel like it, without regard for the flow of worship or the authority of those leading it, is not acceptable. That applies to everyone. Disrupting the service to ask questions that could easily be answered at home is placing your own needs above the good of the whole gathering.

As we step back and look at the whole of chapter 14, Paul's concern was never really about which group could speak and which was not. His concern was preventing self-

centered, attention-seeking behavior from dominating the worship service. Whether it was someone monopolizing the service with tongues, a prophet speaking out of turn, or women calling across the room to their husbands — all of it was the same root problem. People putting themselves first instead of considering the good of everyone around them. Order, peace, and the building up of the whole congregation is what worship is for.

Having addressed the specific issue of disruptive questions, Paul now speaks to the whole church, and his tone shifts from correction to invitation.

> 14:36-40 Or did the word of God come originally from you? Or was it you only that it reached? 37 If anyone thinks himself to be a prophet or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things which I write to you are the commandments of the Lord. 38 But if anyone is ignorant, let him be ignorant. 39 Therefore, brethren, desire earnestly to prophesy, and do not forbid to speak with tongues. 40 Let all things be done decently and in order.

Paul closes with a touch of sarcasm. Did the word of God originate with you? Are you the only ones it has reached? The Corinthians had been acting as though their church was the center of the Christian universe — as though their practices, their preferences, and their experiences were the standard by which everything else should be measured. Paul punctures that pride quickly. The gospel did not begin in Corinth. The Corinthians were not the final authority on how the church should function.

Anyone in Corinth who genuinely had the gift of prophecy should be able to recognize that Paul's words carry the authority of the Lord. According to chapter 12, apostles hold a higher rank than prophets in the church. Paul was an apostle. His instructions were not suggestions to be debated or selectively applied. A true prophet would recognize that and submit to it. Those who refused to acknowledge Paul's authority were to be ignored by the church — not argued with, not given a platform, simply not recognized. This is

not harshness. It is the protection of the congregation from those who place their own judgment above the word of God.

Then Paul speaks to the whole church — brothers and sisters together. His conclusion is not a list of restrictions. It is an invitation. Desire earnestly to prophesy. Do not forbid speaking in tongues. The gifts are good, they are needed, and they are available. Paul has spent this entire chapter not trying to shut the gifts down but trying to make sure they function in a way that genuinely builds people up.

The standard he leaves them with is simple. Let everything be done decently and in order. Decently means in a way that is honorable and appropriate. In order means without confusion, without chaos, without one person or one gift dominating at the expense of everyone else. These two words summarize everything Paul has been saying since chapter 12. The Spirit moves in freedom, but never in disorder. Passion and structure are not opposites. In a healthy church they work together. The gifts flow most powerfully not when there are no boundaries but when everyone is submitted to God, to one another, and to the leaders he has placed in the church.

It is the church worth building today.



Reflective Questions for 1 Corinthians 14:20-40

1. Paul says tongues are a sign for unbelievers and prophecy is for believers. What does he mean by sign, and how had the Corinthians gotten this completely backwards?

2. Paul describes an unbeliever walking into a worship gathering where everyone is prophesying clearly. What happens to that person, and what does this tell us about what worship gatherings are actually for?

3. Paul tells three different groups to be silent at specific moments — tongue speakers without an interpreter, prophets when another receives a revelation, and women asking disruptive questions. What does this pattern tell us about what Paul is actually concerned with in this passage?

4. Paul says the spirit of the prophet is subject to the prophet, meaning you are always in control of what you say and when you say it. How does this challenge the idea that disruptive or uncontrolled behavior in worship is caused by the Holy Spirit?

5. Paul closes with "Let all things be done decently and in order." How does your church currently measure up to this standard? Is there a gift being overused, a voice dominating, or a pattern of disorder that needs to be addressed?

Challenge Questions

6. The women's silence passage has been used to silence women in church entirely — yet Paul already affirmed women praying and prophesying in chapter 11. How does reading verse 34 in its full context change its meaning, and what principles should guide us when one verse seems to contradict another in the same letter?

7. Paul ends by saying, do not forbid speaking in tongues, and desire earnestly to prophesy. His concern throughout chapters 12-14 was never to shut the gifts down but to make sure they build people up. How does a church find the balance between being genuinely open to the Spirit and maintaining the order Paul requires? And what tends to push churches too far in either direction?

1 Corinthians 15

The Risen Christ, Faith's Reality

> 15:1-4 Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, 2 by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. 3 For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures,

Every time the word gospel appears in the New Testament it is connected to Jesus. Paul preached the same gospel that Jesus preached. The message was always Christ: his life, his death, and his resurrection. The gospel is not a set of principles or a list of rules. It is a story. And it is the most life changing story ever told.

But some in Corinth had begun distorting that story. As we will see in verse 12, there were people in the church who denied that the dead would be raised. If that is true, Paul says, then the whole foundation collapses. There is no gospel without the resurrection. The word gospel means good news, but what good news is there if Jesus is still in the tomb?

Paul takes them back to the beginning. He reminds them of what he preached when he first came to them, what they received and believed, and what they are continuing to be saved through. That phrase, continuing to be saved, is worth pausing on. Salvation is not only a past event, it is an ongoing reality that will be complete when Jesus returns. Paul is not saying salvation can be earned or lost through effort. He is saying that genuine faith is not a one time decision that requires nothing from us afterward. It is a living

trust that continues. A faith that simply stops is a faith that never had deep roots. Past belief has no power in the present if it has been completely abandoned.

The resurrection is what gives faith its meaning and its power. Without it our belief has no purpose. It is, as Paul says, in vain.

So what exactly is this gospel that Paul received and delivered? He outlines four foundational facts.

First, Christ died for our sins. This is not simply that Jesus died. His death had a purpose. As the sinless Son of God he took the punishment that our sins deserved, so that everyone who believes can have those sins completely removed. This was not a surprise ending. The Old Testament had been pointing toward it for centuries. Isaiah 53 described a suffering servant who would be pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities. Psalm 16 spoke of one who would not be abandoned to the grave. The story of Israel was always moving toward this moment.

Second, he was buried. This detail matters more than it might seem. A burial is proof of a real death. Jesus did not simply appear to die or fall into a deep sleep. He was placed in a tomb, wrapped in grave cloths, and sealed behind a stone. The burial confirms the death.

Third, he rose on the third day according to the Scriptures. This is the turning point of all of history. The Bible had been building toward an ending that no one could fully see. When Jesus walked out of that tomb the ending was finally revealed. Everything that came before found its meaning in this moment. Death had been defeated. The grave had been emptied. What God had promised through the prophets had come to pass.

Fourth, he was seen. And this is where Paul will spend the next several verses because the appearances of the risen Jesus to real people in real places are not just encouraging

details. They are proof that the resurrection was not a vision or a legend but a historical event that changed everything.

> 15:5-8 and that He was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve. 6 After that He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep. 7 After that He was seen by James, then by all the apostles. 8 Then last of all He was seen by me also, as by one born out of due time.

After his resurrection, Jesus appeared to many people over forty days. Paul lists the key witnesses here, building a case that the resurrection was not a private vision or a rumor passed between a small group of frightened disciples. It was witnessed by real people in real places. People who could be questioned and whose testimony could be tested.

The first person Paul mentions is Peter. This is significant. Peter had denied Jesus three times on the night of his arrest — publicly, emphatically, and with curses. If anyone had reason to wonder whether Jesus would want to see him again, it was Peter. But Jesus appeared to him personally. Before the wider group and before the crowds, Jesus sought the one who had failed him most visibly. Peter needed to see Jesus himself in order to be restored. The resurrection was not just a theological event. For Peter, it was a personal encounter with the one he had betrayed.

After Peter, Jesus appeared to the twelve, and then to more than five hundred people at the same time. This is one of the most powerful points Paul could make. Five hundred people do not share the same hallucination. Five hundred people in the same place at the same time, all seeing the same risen Jesus. That is not a grief induced vision or a case of wishful thinking. And Paul adds something remarkable. At the time he is writing this letter, most of those five hundred people are still alive. He is essentially inviting the Corinthians to go and ask them. The witnesses are available. The testimony can be verified.

Then Jesus appeared to James, his own brother. This detail carries enormous weight. During Jesus' ministry his brothers did not believe in him. John 7:5 says plainly that even his brothers did not believe. But something happened to James between the crucifixion and Acts 1:14, where we find the brothers of Jesus praying with the disciples.

That something was a personal encounter with the risen Christ. James went on to become one of the most respected leaders in the Jerusalem church. A man does not give his life to leading a movement built around his brother unless he has seen something that totally convinced him.

Finally Paul mentions himself. He was the last to see the risen Jesus, on the road to Damascus in Acts 9. He describes himself as one born out of due time meaning his calling came later and in an unusual way. The other apostles had walked with Jesus during his earthly ministry. Paul had not. His encounter with the risen Christ was not part of the normal pattern. But it was no less real, and no less valid. It was outside the normal timing, but it was still God's timing.

One more thing deserves mention. Paul does not include Mary Magdalene, who was the first to see the risen Christ. Under Jewish law, women were not considered qualified witnesses in court. Paul is not writing a gospel account. He is building the most persuasive case possible for a skeptical audience. Including women, however right and true, might have given doubters an excuse to dismiss his argument on cultural grounds rather than engaging with the evidence. He is applying his own principle from chapters 8 and 10: do what is most helpful for others, not just what you know to be right.

> 15:9-11 For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. 10 But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me. 11 Therefore, whether it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.

When Paul listed the eyewitnesses to the resurrection, he placed himself last. He calls himself the least of the apostles and means it. He had persecuted the church. He had been responsible for the suffering and death of believers. He had approved Stephen's stoning. For Paul, the memory of those things never fully faded. In Ephesians 3:8 he calls himself the least of all the saints. In 1 Timothy 1:15 he calls himself the chief of sinners. Notice the progression. The longer Paul walked with God, the more clearly he saw his own sin. That is not a sign of spiritual decline. It is a sign of growing closeness to a holy God. The nearer we draw to the light, the more clearly we see the dirt.

And yet grace found him anyway. Grace is not limited by what we have done in the past. It does not check our record before deciding whether we are worth saving. Paul understood this better than almost anyone. When he says I am what I am, he means that everything good in him — the apostleship, the ministry, the letters, and the churches planted across the Roman world — none of it came from his own strength or worthiness. It was all God's grace working through a man who had no right to expect it.

But Paul also says that grace was not wasted on him. He did not receive it and then do nothing with it. He labored more abundantly than all the other apostles. He does not say this to boast but to explain. Because of his past as a persecutor of the church, Paul faced a level of opposition that the other apostles did not. He had to work harder to preach the same message. Every city he entered, his reputation preceded him. People remembered what he had done. Some never fully trusted him. Yet he kept going — through beatings, imprisonments, shipwrecks, and rejection — because grace had been given to him for a purpose and he was determined not to let it go to waste.

There are many believers whose past makes their ministry harder. Perhaps they were involved in things that people remember. Perhaps they carry a reputation that follows them from village to village. Paul's story speaks directly to them. Your past does not disqualify you from grace. But grace received is grace that should be put to work.

In the end Paul steps back from all of it. Whether it was he or the other apostles who brought the message, the result was the same. People heard, people believed, and people were saved. The messenger matters less than the message. And the message is this: Christ died, was buried, rose again, and was seen. That gospel, whoever preaches it, has the power to change lives.

Having established the resurrection on the testimony of multiple witnesses, Paul now confronts the problem directly. Some in Corinth were denying it.

The Risen Christ, Our Hope

> 15:12-13 Now if Christ is preached that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? 13 But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ is not risen.

How could some people in the Corinthian church believe in Jesus and yet deny that the dead are raised? It seems like a contradiction, and it is. But it makes sense when you understand the cultural background.

The Greeks believed that the physical body was inferior to the spirit, and not just inferior, but evil. All physical matter was considered corrupt and temporary. The spirit, by contrast, was pure and eternal. From that point of view, the idea of a body rising from the dead was not just unlikely, it was undesirable. Why would anyone want their spirit trapped in a physical body again? The Corinthian believers had grown up thinking this way, and those thought patterns do not disappear overnight simply because someone becomes a Christian.

The result was a strange hybrid belief in Corinth. These believers accepted that Jesus had somehow survived death in a spiritual sense, and that believers would live on spiritually after they died. But a bodily resurrection — a physical body coming back to life and being transformed — that they could not accept.

This kind of thinking is not limited to ancient Greece. In much of Southeast Asia, animist and Buddhist beliefs teach that the spirit lives on after death while the body returns to the earth. The spirit is what matters. The body is temporary and disposable. For believers coming out of those backgrounds, the idea of a bodily resurrection can feel just as strange as it did to the Corinthians.

But Paul will not allow this compromise. He takes their logic and follows it all the way to its devastating conclusion. If there is no resurrection of the dead then Christ himself has not been raised. You cannot believe in a bodily resurrection for Jesus while denying it as a possibility for everyone else. Either resurrection happens or it does not.

If Christ has not been raised, Paul says, then everything collapses. The preaching of the apostles is useless. They have been proclaiming something that never happened. The faith of every believer is useless. It's built on a foundation that does not exist. And most sobering of all — if Christ is still in the grave, then his death accomplished nothing. The sins of every person who has ever trusted in him remain unforgiven. We are still in our sins, without hope, without a Savior, and without any reason to believe.

Paul is not being dramatic for effect. He is being ruthlessly logical. The resurrection is not one doctrine among many that can be quietly set aside while keeping the rest of the faith intact. It is the load bearing wall of the entire gospel. Remove it and the whole structure falls.

> 15:14-19 And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty. 15 Yes, and we are found false witnesses of God, because we have testified of God that He raised up Christ, whom He did not raise up—if in fact the dead do not rise. 16 For if the dead do not rise, then Christ is not risen. 17 And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins! 18 Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. 19 If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable.

Paul presses the logic further. If Christ was not raised, then he and the other apostles were liars. They have been standing before crowds, before churches, before kings and governors, and testifying to something that never happened. That would make them not just mistaken but deliberately false witnesses — frauds building a movement on a fabricated story. Everything they suffered for would have been for nothing.

The consequences for believers are just as serious. If Christ is still in the grave, then his death accomplished nothing unique. People die every day. What makes the death of Jesus different from the death of anyone else? Paul's answer is the resurrection. Without it, nothing. The resurrection is not a footnote to the cross. It is the Father's declaration that the sacrifice of His Son was accepted. When God raised Jesus from the dead He was saying, it is enough. The penalty is paid. The debt is cleared.

Consider this. Imagine that God took Jesus to heaven the moment he said it is finished on the cross, without any bodily resurrection. Would there be salvation? Some might say yes — the penalty was paid. But Paul would not agree. Without the resurrection, he says, believers are still in their sins. Why? Because the resurrection is the proof that sin and death have been defeated. Sin leads to death. If death is not overcome, neither is sin. The empty tomb is not just good news. It is the evidence that the good news is true.

If there is no resurrection then those who have already died believing in Christ have simply perished. They are gone. There is no reunion, no eternal life, no vindication for their suffering. And if that is true then Christianity is not just incomplete — it is cruel. It would be a system that asks people to suffer, sacrifice, and die for a hope that does not exist.

This is why Paul says that if Christ has not been raised, we are of all people most to be pitied. Not admired for our values. Not respected for our community. Pitied. Because we have built our entire lives on something that is not real.

The stakes could not be higher. The resurrection is the foundation of everything. It declares Jesus to be the Son of God (Romans 1:4), establishes His lordship over the living and the dead (Romans 14:9), secures our justification (Romans 4:25), gives us our new birth (1 Peter 1:3), and guarantees our own resurrection (Romans 8:11). Pull it out and every one of those things collapses.

Paul's argument can be easily summarized. If Christ has not been raised, there is no resurrection at all, all preaching is meaningless, all faith is empty, the apostles are liars, believers are still in their sins, those who died in Christ have perished, and we are of all people most to be pitied. Either Jesus is alive, or everything is a lie. There is no comfortable middle ground.



Reflective Questions for 1 Corinthians 15:1-19

1. Paul outlines four foundational facts of the gospel in verses 3-4. What are they, and why does each one matter?

2. Paul lists multiple witnesses to the resurrection — Peter, the twelve, five hundred people at once, James, and himself. Why does he build such a long list, and what is he trying to prove?

3. Paul describes himself as the least of the apostles, yet says grace was not wasted on him. What does his story tell us about who God chooses to use, and what does it mean to not let grace be wasted?

4. Some in Corinth believed in Jesus but denied that the dead would be raised. Where did that idea come from, and why does Paul say you cannot separate the two?

5. Paul says the resurrection is not a footnote to the cross. It is the Father's declaration that the sacrifice of His Son was accepted. How does this change the way you think about Easter and what it means for your own life right now?

Challenge Questions

6. Paul says if Christ has not been raised then believers are still in their sins, those who died in Christ have perished, and we are of all people most to be pitied. He is saying the resurrection is not one doctrine among many. It is the load-bearing wall of the entire gospel. How do you explain the importance of the resurrection to someone who thinks it is a secondary detail that does not affect their faith in Jesus?

7. Paul chose not to include Mary Magdalene in his list of witnesses. It wasn't because her testimony was false, but because it would have been dismissed in that culture. He applied his own principle from chapters 8 and 10: do what is most helpful for others. Where do you face similar tensions in ministry between what is true and right and what will actually be heard and received by your audience?

The Last Enemy Destroyed

> 15:20-22 But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. 21 For since by man came death, by Man also came the resurrection of the dead. 22 For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive.

After laying out the devastating consequences of a world without resurrection, Paul now turns the corner. But in fact, he says Christ has been raised from the dead.

He describes Jesus as the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. This is a picture drawn straight from the Old Testament harvest calendar. In Leviticus 23, God instructed

Israel to bring the very first bundle of grain from the harvest as an offering to him. That bundle was not the whole harvest. It was the promise of the harvest. It said there is more coming.

This is not only a fitting metaphor. The Feast of Firstfruits fell on the day after the Sabbath following Passover. This is the very day Jesus rose from the dead. Israel had been offering firstfruits to God on that exact day for over a thousand years. In the same way, the resurrection of Jesus is not the end of the story. It is the first bundle of a great harvest of people who will one day be raised to eternal life. His resurrection guarantees ours.

When the first grain ripens or the first fruit appears on the tree, you know the rest is coming. You do not worry about whether the harvest will arrive. The firstfruits tell you it is already on its way. That is exactly what Paul is saying about the resurrection of Jesus. His rising from the dead is God's guarantee that ours is coming.

Was Jesus really the first person ever raised from the dead? What about Lazarus, or the widow's son raised by Elijah? Paul is not saying Jesus was the first ever brought back to life. He is saying Jesus was the first raised never to die again. Lazarus was brought back to the same life, in the same body, to die again eventually. Jesus was resurrected — transformed into a new life that death can never touch. That is the difference.

Now Paul draws a parallel that runs through all of Scripture. Every human being is connected to Adam. We did not choose that connection. We were born into it. And with it came two things: sin and death. Adam's choice in the garden did not just affect him. It affected every person who would ever live. Sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all.

But Christ is the new Adam. Just as one man's failure brought condemnation and death to all who are joined to him by birth, one man's obedience and resurrection brings life to all who are joined to him by faith. Through one human being death entered the world.

And only a human being — the right one, the sinless Son of God who took on flesh — could reverse it.

The resurrection of Jesus is therefore not just his personal victory. It is the turning point of all of human history. In Adam, all die. In Christ, all who belong to him will be made alive. This is Paul's condensed version of an argument he develops at much greater length in Romans 5:12-21, working through the same parallel verse by verse — one trespass against one act of righteousness, condemnation against justification.

The harvest has begun. The firstfruits have been offered. And everything that follows is guaranteed by the empty tomb.

> 15:23-28 But each one in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ's at His coming. 24 Then comes the end, when He delivers the kingdom to God the Father, when He puts an end to all rule and all authority and power. 25 For He must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet. 26 The last enemy that will be destroyed is death. 27 For "He has put all things under His feet." But when He says "all things are put under Him," it is evident that He who put all things under Him is excepted. 28 Now when all things are made subject to Him, then the Son Himself will also be subject to Him who put all things under Him, that God may be all in all.

Something extraordinary happened in the middle of human history. Throughout the Old Testament the expectation was that God would raise all his people at the end of history — a great final resurrection at the close of the age. But instead, one person was raised in the middle of history. That was not what anyone expected. And it changed everything.

Paul says this happened in a specific order and for a specific purpose. Christ was raised first as the firstfruits, the guarantee and the beginning of the harvest. The rest will follow when he returns. At his second coming those who belong to him will be raised from death to eternal life.

Then comes the end. Jesus will have conquered every enemy, every power, every authority, and every force that stands against God's purposes in the world. The destruction of Satan and his dominion began the moment Jesus rose from the dead. At the final resurrection that destruction will be complete. Christ must reign, Paul says, because God has commanded it and what God commands cannot be reversed. Psalm 110:1 said it long ago, God will put all his enemies under his feet. That word is being fulfilled.

The last enemy to be destroyed is death. Paul calls it an enemy, and rightly so. Death separates us from those we love. It was never part of God's original intention for his creation. In Scripture, death and Satan first appear together in Genesis 3, and they are destroyed together in Revelation 20. They entered the story as a pair, and they will leave it as a pair. Death should never be thought of as a friend. It is an enemy that Christ has already defeated and will finally eliminate.

There is one thing that can be said in death's favor in this fallen world. It eventually removes evil rulers from the earth. Every tyrant, every oppressor, and every person who uses power to harm others will one day die. But that is not what death was made for. For those who belong to Christ, death is not the end. It is a doorway. And the resurrection lies on the other side. Not a return to the same life, but the remaking of everything that death unmade.

Paul draws on two psalms. Psalm 110:1 speaks of God putting all enemies under the feet of His chosen king. Psalm 8:6 speaks of humanity, made in God's image and intended from the beginning to reign over creation. Paul's point is that the reign of Christ fulfills not just messianic prophecy but what God always intended for humanity. What Adam failed to be, Jesus is.

Through his resurrection, death, Satan, and sin are placed under Christ's feet. Everything is in submission to him except God the Father. And when that final

submission is complete, Christ himself will submit to the Father, so that God may be all in all.

This is not a statement about Christ being inferior to the Father. Paul has already been careful about this throughout the letter. All three persons of the Trinity are equal in their nature and dignity. But within the Trinity each person has a role, and those roles involve a chosen submission to one another. As Philippians 2:7-8 tells us, Christ chose to humble himself and the effects of that choice continue. The goal of everything is that God's will would be done in all things, through all people, at all times. The entire sweep of history — creation, fall, redemption, resurrection, new creation — is moving toward that single destination.

Having laid out the full sweep of God's redemptive plan, Paul now addresses some practical consequences of denying the resurrection; starting with a practice that puzzles scholars to this day.

Effects of Denying the Resurrection

> 15:29-34 Otherwise, what will they do who are baptized for the dead, if the dead do not rise at all? Why then are they baptized for the dead? 30 And why do we stand in jeopardy every hour? 31 I affirm, by the boasting in you which I have in Christ Jesus our Lord, I die daily. 32 If, in the manner of men, I have fought with beasts at Ephesus, what advantage is it to me? If the dead do not rise, “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die!” 33 Do not be deceived: “Evil company corrupts good habits.” 34 Awake to righteousness, and do not sin; for some do not have the knowledge of God. I speak this to your shame.

Paul raises a custom that puzzles Bible scholars to this day: baptism for the dead. We do not know exactly what this was. It may have been a way of honoring believers who had died before being baptized, with someone being baptized on their behalf.

Whatever it was, Paul does not endorse or condemn it. He simply uses it as evidence. If there is no resurrection, why would anyone bother doing this? The very practice, whatever it meant, only makes sense if there is something to look forward to on the other side of death. Since it is not mentioned elsewhere in church history, it was likely a local custom of limited significance. But Paul's point stands: even this practice testifies to a deep human conviction that death is not the end.

Then Paul makes it personal. Why does he risk his life every single day? Why would any of the apostles face beatings, imprisonment, and execution for the sake of a gospel message that if the resurrection is not true, ends only in death? There would be no reason. None at all.

When Paul says he fought with wild beasts at Ephesus he is using a metaphor. He is writing this letter from Ephesus, and something had happened there that felt to him like being thrown into an arena with wild animals. Acts 19 gives us a picture of the violent opposition he faced in that city. If there is no resurrection, Paul says, why bother standing up against that kind of opposition? Why not simply give in, protect yourself, and make the most of the life you have?

This brings him to the most serious application in the whole passage. If there is no resurrection then there is no accountability, no judgment, and no reward waiting on the other side. In that case the only rational philosophy is eat, drink, and do whatever you want because tomorrow we die and that is the end of it. That is not Paul's view. But he is honest enough to say that if the resurrection is not true, it should be.

If someone looked at the way we live — the risks we take, the sacrifices we make, the way we spend our time and money — would they conclude we believe in the resurrection? Or would our lives look like those of people who think this life is all there is? Paul's life was evidence of the resurrection. Is ours?

Paul then warns them about the company they are keeping. He quotes a well known Greek proverb, “bad company corrupts good character”. His Greek audience would have recognized it immediately. The people in Corinth who were denying the resurrection were not just holding a wrong belief privately. They were influencing others. Evil thinking, like evil behavior, spreads. Many of the problems Paul has addressed throughout this letter — the divisions, the immorality, and the disorder — may have had their roots in the corrupting influence of people who had brought Greek philosophy into the church and used it to undermine the gospel.

So Paul calls them to wake up. Stop sinning. And in this context, denying the resurrection is the sin he has in mind. Some of them, for all their pride in knowledge and spiritual gifts, do not truly know God. Back in chapter 8 Paul said that if anyone thinks he knows something, he does not yet know as he ought to know. The same is true here. They prided themselves on their wisdom and their understanding, yet they had gotten the most important thing wrong. The resurrection is not a secondary issue that mature believers can set aside. It is the foundation on which everything else stands.



Reflective Questions for 1 Corinthians 15:19-34

1. Paul calls Jesus the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. What does this image mean, and why does the resurrection of Jesus guarantee the resurrection of believers?

2. Paul draws a parallel between Adam and Christ. What did Adam bring to all who are connected to him, and what does Christ bring to all who are connected to Him?

3. Paul says death is the last enemy to be destroyed. Why does he call it an enemy, and what does the resurrection tell us about God's original intention for His creation?

4. Paul asks why he risks his life every day if there is no resurrection. What does his willingness to suffer tell us about his confidence in the resurrection, and what would change about his life if he stopped believing it?

5. If someone looked honestly at the way you live — the risks you take, the sacrifices you make, the way you spend your time and money — would they conclude you believe in the resurrection? What would need to change for your life to be better evidence of it?

Challenge Questions

6. Paul says the reign of Christ fulfills not just messianic prophecy but what God always intended for humanity. What Adam failed to be, Jesus is. How does this connect the story of creation to the story of resurrection, and why does it matter that Jesus is fully human as well as fully God?

7. Paul warns that bad company corrupts good character, and that the people denying the resurrection in Corinth were influencing others. Wrong theology, he is saying, always produces wrong behavior eventually. How does this challenge the idea that what people believe privately does not affect how they or others live? And how should church leaders respond when wrong teaching about the resurrection or any other foundational doctrine spreads within the congregation?

A Glorious Body

> 15:35-41 But someone will say, “How are the dead raised up? And with what body do they come?” 36 Foolish one, what you sow is not made alive unless it dies. 37 And what you sow, you do not sow that body that shall be, but mere grain—perhaps wheat or some other grain. 38 But God gives it a body as He pleases, and to each seed its own body. 39 All flesh is not the same flesh, but there is one kind of flesh of men, another flesh of animals, another of fish, and

> another of birds. 40 There are also celestial bodies and terrestrial bodies; but the glory of the celestial is one, and the glory of the terrestrial is another. 41 There is one glory of the sun, another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for one star differs from another star in glory.

Some of those who doubted the resurrection were asking what they thought were clever questions. What kind of body will the dead have when they rise? What will it look like? Paul calls these foolish questions. It is not because they are unimportant, but because the answer is visible everywhere in nature if you are willing to look.

Before he answers from nature, it is worth understanding what Paul means by a spiritual body because it is easy to misunderstand. When we hear the word spiritual today we tend to think of something invisible, immaterial, or ghost-like. But that is not what Paul means. In the first century world, the Greek and Roman gods were understood to have bodies. Not flesh and blood bodies like ours, but something superior. They had a form that could take on a physical appearance when interacting with humans while also existing beyond the limitations of ordinary matter.

Gods like Apollo, Diana, Zeus, and Hermes were believed to be real beings with real forms, capable of appearing in the physical world. Paul draws on this understanding to describe the resurrection body. It will be physical in some meaningful sense — real, tangible, and recognizable, but empowered and animated entirely by the Spirit of God rather than by ordinary biological life. It is not a ghost or a resuscitated corpse. It is something gloriously different.

Ezekiel 1:26-28 describes the glory of God taking the form of a human figure seated on a throne. It was not a cloud or a bright light, but a human form radiating divine glory. Paul connects this to the resurrection body in Philippians 3:21, where he says Christ has a body of glory — the body He received at His resurrection. That is what we will receive. Real, tangible, and recognizable, but animated entirely by the Spirit of God rather than by ordinary biological life.

Now Paul turns to nature to illustrate how this transformation works. He begins with a seed. When a farmer plants a seed in the ground it first dies or appears to die. It disappears into the earth, breaks open, and what emerges looks nothing like what was planted. A tiny wheat seed does not produce another wheat seed. It produces a stalk of wheat — something different, something larger, and something alive in a way the seed was not. What goes into the ground and what comes up are not the same thing, even though one came from the other.

Jesus used this same picture in John 12:24, “unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone. But if it dies it produces much grain”. Paul is making the same point about our bodies. When a believer dies and is buried, a seed is being planted. What will rise from that earth at the resurrection will be different from what went in. It won’t be an improved version of the same body, but a transformed body of an entirely different order, suited for an entirely different kind of existence.

God created an extraordinary variety of bodies for his creation. Human bodies, animal bodies, the bodies of fish and birds — each different, and each suited to where it lives. And beyond the earth, we have the heavenly bodies. The sun, moon, and stars each with its own kind of glory and radiance, are different from the others. The sun does not shine like the moon. The stars do not shine like the sun. All of them together are different from anything on earth. Watch the sun set in the evening. It appears to die. The light fades, and the sky goes dark. But in the morning it rises again in full glory. The same with the moon and stars. In the morning they seem to disappear. But when evening comes they return in brilliance. Paul sees in these daily cycles a picture of the resurrection. What seems to die does not stay dead. It returns in glory.

His point is this. If God can create such an extraordinary variety of bodies then certainly he can design a resurrection body perfectly suited for eternal life in his presence. The resurrection is not a problem for God. It is a continuation of the creative work he has been doing since the beginning.

> 15:42-44 So also is the resurrection of the dead. The body is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruption. 43 It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. 44 It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body.

Paul now draws out the contrast between what goes into the ground and what comes up from it. He does it in four sharp pairs.

- Sown in corruption — raised in incorruption. Our present bodies are perishable. They get sick. They age. They break down. Every human body ever born has been moving toward decay from the moment it arrived. The resurrection body will be completely free from that process. It will not age, will not decay, will not wear out.
- Sown in dishonor — raised in glory. To be sown in dishonor means to be buried as a sinful human being, marked by the shame and brokenness that sin brings. Death itself is a sign of that dishonor. It was never God's original intention for his creation. But the resurrection body will be raised in glory, completely free from sin and its effects, reflecting the image of God as it was always meant to.
- Sown in weakness — raised in power. Our present bodies have severe limitations. We get tired. We get hungry. We get sick. There are things we simply cannot do. The resurrection body will be free from all of that. Weakness and decay won't just be reduced. They'll be gone entirely, replaced by strength suited for a world where our fallen nature no longer exists.
- Sown a natural body — raised a spiritual body. This is the most important contrast, and the one most easily misunderstood. The natural body is not bad. God made it and called it good. But it belongs to this present world. It runs on what Paul calls the soul — the ordinary energy that keeps us breathing, circulates our blood, and sustains biological life. It is perfectly suited for life here. But it is not suited for the world to come.
- The spiritual body is not a body made of spirit. It is a body fully animated by the Spirit of God rather than by ordinary biological processes. Think of a family living for years

in a simple shelter — bamboo walls, a grass roof, enough to keep the rain out. It does the job. But one day they build a permanent home, solid and built to last. The shelter was not wrong or bad. It served its purpose. But the permanent home is what they were always working toward. Our present bodies are the temporary shelter. The resurrection body is the permanent home.

Paul grounds this in Romans 8:10-11. The Spirit of God already lives within every believer right now. And Paul says that same Spirit is the one who will give life to your mortal bodies at the resurrection. The resurrection is not something foreign being done to us from the outside. It is the completion of what the Spirit has already begun within us. The life of God that lives in you now is the seed of the life that will fully bloom at the resurrection.

> 15:45-49 And so it is written, “The first man Adam became a living being.” The last Adam became a life-giving spirit. 46 However, the spiritual is not first, but the natural, and afterward the spiritual. 47 The first man was of the earth, made of dust; the second Man is the Lord from heaven. 48 As was the man of dust, so also are those who are made of dust; and as is the heavenly Man, so also are those who are heavenly. 49 And as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly Man.

Paul now goes deeper into the contrast between the natural body and the spiritual body by going all the way back to Adam.

Adam was formed from the dust of the ground and given the breath of life. He became a living soul. He was a human, animated by that ordinary biological life that all of us share. Every person born since Adam has carried the same characteristics. We are made of earth, we live by the energy of our souls, and we return to the earth when we die. That is the natural body.

But when Jesus rose from the dead something entirely new entered human history. Paul calls the risen Christ a life-giving spirit. This does not mean Jesus became only a spirit with no body. As we have seen, the resurrection body is genuinely physical — touchable, recognizable, and real. What Paul means is that the risen Jesus is now the source of a new kind of life, a life that flows from the Spirit of God rather than from the ordinary energy of biological existence. Just as Adam was the source of natural human life for everyone who came after him, Christ is the source of resurrection life for everyone who belongs to him.

The sequence matters. Natural life comes first. We are born on this earth, we live here, we die here. Spiritual life — resurrection life — follows. First the earthly, then the heavenly. Adam came from the dust of the earth, so everyone descended from him is earthly. Christ came from heaven, from the Father, so those who belong to him will one day share his heavenly nature. He came as a baby with a body like every other human being, but his origin was not the earth. He was the second man, the new Adam, the beginning of a new humanity.

When Paul says we will bear the image of the heavenly man, he is not saying we will become God. We will not share God's eternal nature or his divine attributes. But we will be conformed to the image of Christ. We will be like him in the sense that we will no longer sin, no longer suffer, and no longer be limited by the weakness and decay of our fallen nature. Our bodies will be made of the same incorruptible material that Christ's resurrection body is made of. As 1 John 3:2says, “we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.”

Think about what that means practically. Even at the transfiguration, Moses and Elijah appeared in some kind of recognizable bodily form. They were not shadows or voices. They were present, visible, and real. And yet clearly different from ordinary human bodies. Paul's point throughout this chapter is that there are many bodies, each suited to the environment it inhabits. We are going to trade one kind of body for another. We will

not lose our bodies, but have them transformed into something perfectly suited for the world to come.

Here is a point that corrects a common misunderstanding. When Paul talks about earthly and heavenly humanity, he does not mean that we leave earth and go to heaven to receive our new bodies. God will bring the new humanity from heaven to earth. For those still alive at Christ's return, their present bodies will be transformed. For those who have died, they will be raised with the same renewed, glorious, deathless body that Jesus has right now.

This is the overall message of the whole chapter. In the resurrection of Jesus, the power of the creator God was at work to begin the renewal of all things. Through the work of the Spirit that same creator God will give new, glorious, deathless bodily life to all his people. The project begun in Genesis — humans made in the image of God, designed to bear his glory and fill his creation — will be completed. What sin and death interrupted, resurrection will restore. And it will be better than the original.

That is the thread running through this entire chapter. The theme is a new creation. God began a project in Genesis 1 — a good world, with humans made in his image, designed to bear his glory and steward his creation. Human rebellion in Genesis 3 introduced sin, death, and decay into that project. But God did not abandon it. The resurrection of Jesus is the beginning of the reversal. It’s the undoing of everything death and sin have done. And the resurrection of believers is the completion of that reversal. The new creation has begun. The seed has been planted. The harvest is coming.

But if resurrection bodies are the destination, how does the journey from here to there actually happen?

Our Final Victory

> 15:50-53 Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does corruption inherit incorruption. 51 Behold, I tell you a mystery: We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed—52 in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. 53 For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality.

Paul now states something that might seem surprising after everything he has said about the resurrection body being physical and real. Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God. Does that contradict what he has been saying? No, and the distinction is important. He is not saying physical bodies have no place in God's eternal kingdom. He is saying that our present bodies, marked by corruption, weakness, and mortality, are not suited for it. A body that gets sick, ages, and dies cannot simply walk into eternity unchanged. Something has to happen first.

What has to happen is transformation. And Paul calls this a mystery. In the New Testament a mystery is not something impossible to understand. It is something that was previously hidden but is now being revealed. What Paul is revealing here is something no one had fully understood before. Not everyone will die before Christ returns. Some believers will still be alive when he comes back. And yet all of them, the dead and the living alike, will be changed. The dead will be raised. The living will be transformed. No one enters the kingdom in their present body. Everyone receives the new resurrection body that Christ has prepared.

And it will happen fast. Paul reaches for the quickest measure of time he can find — the twinkling of an eye. Not a gradual process, not a slow fading from one state to another. In a single instant everything will change. At the sound of the last trumpet, which Paul connects to the seventh trumpet of Revelation 11:15, the trumpet that announces the arrival of God's kingdom in its fullness — the dead will rise and the living will be transformed.

Paul describes this same moment with more sequential detail in 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17 — the trumpet sounding, the dead in Christ rising first, and then those still alive being caught up together with them. Both passages describe the same event from different angles. Read together, they give the fuller picture of what actually happens, and in what order. All of it happening at once, instantly, for every believer everywhere.

Think of a sudden crack of thunder that splits a clear sky, or a flash of lightning that turns night into day for a single second. That kind of sudden, total, irresistible change is the picture Paul is painting. One moment the old. The next moment the new. No transition, no waiting, no gradual improvement. The perishable putting on the imperishable. The mortal putting on immortality.

This is one of the most comforting truths in the whole chapter. When that transformation happens, each person will still be themselves. You will not lose your identity or become someone unrecognizable. The disciples recognized Jesus after his resurrection. They knew his face, his voice, and his way of speaking. In the same way, believers will still be the people God created them to be, still known and recognizable to those who love them. But they will be made perfect. Every limitation, every weakness, every scar left by sin and suffering will be gone. The body that was planted in the ground like a seed will rise as something glorious, eternal, and completely free.

This is the destination the whole chapter has been building toward. The resurrection is not the end of what it means to be human. It is the fulfillment of it.

> 15:54-58 So when this corruptible has put on incorruption, and this mortal has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: “Death is swallowed up in victory.” 55 “O Death, where is your sting? O Hades, where is your victory?” 56 The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. 57 But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. 58 Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always

> abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.

Paul has been building toward this moment throughout the entire chapter. Now he arrives at the summit. When the transformation he described in the previous verses finally takes place — the perishable has put on the imperishable and the mortal has put on immortality — then a word spoken by the prophets centuries ago will finally be fulfilled in its fullness.

He quotes from Isaiah 25:8 and Hosea 13:14. Isaiah had promised that God would one day swallow up death forever. Hosea had taunted death directly, “Where is your victory? Where is your sting?” These were not just poetic images. They were God's promises, written into the story of Israel, waiting for the moment when they would come completely true. Paul says that moment is coming. When believers receive their resurrection bodies, death will have no more victory. Its power will be broken permanently and finally.

This promise finds its final picture in Revelation 21:4, "He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying." Isaiah gave the promise. Paul applies it to the resurrection here. Revelation shows it finally, and completely fulfilled.

But where does death get its power in the first place? Paul traces it back carefully. Sin is the sting of death. Sin is what makes death deadly. Without sin, death would have no ultimate claim on us. And sin gets its power from the law, and the law declares the standard of God's holiness, which every human falls short of. The law does not create sin, but it names it and condemns it. So the chain runs like this: the law reveals sin, sin leads to death, and death has been the great enemy of every human since Genesis 3.

Christ has broken that chain. His death absorbed the condemnation of the law. His resurrection defeated the power of death. For those who have come to him as Savior,

death is no longer a doorway into judgment. It is a doorway into eternal life. Death and Hades only have power over a body that is corrupt. They have no power whatsoever over an incorruptible body. The enemy that once seemed unconquerable has been defeated. First at the empty tomb, and finally and completely at the resurrection of all who belong to Christ.

The Bible is ultimately a story of God's victory over chaos and destruction. In the Old Testament his enemies were Egypt, Assyria, and Babylon. These empires seemed unstoppable. But behind all of them stood the same two ultimate enemies: sin and death. And God defeated them all. The resurrection of Jesus is the decisive battle. What remains is the victory celebration on the day when every believer receives a body that death can never touch.

So Paul closes with a call to action. Because this victory is real and certain, believers can be steadfast and immovable. Their faith does not need to waver in the face of death, suffering, or uncertainty. They can give themselves fully and enthusiastically to the work of the Lord knowing that nothing done for him is wasted, nothing done for him is forgotten, and nothing done for him is without meaning.

The word Paul uses for labor means work that costs something. It’s difficult work, exhausting work, and work that others may not notice or appreciate. Many know what that feels like. Years of ministry in difficult places, planting churches in resistant communities, teaching the word to small groups in challenging circumstances, and serving people who never say thank you. It can feel like the work is disappearing into the ground with nothing to show for it.

Paul has used the words “in vain” four times in this chapter. In verse 2 he warns that believing without holding fast is believing “in vain”. In verse 10 he says God's grace toward him was not “in vain” because he worked hard. In verse 14 he says if Christ is not raised, faith itself is “in vain”. And now in verse 58 he says your labor is not “in vain”.

The resurrection is the answer to all four. Because Christ is raised, belief has meaning, grace has purpose, faith has foundation, and labor has reward.

You are not wasting your life. You are planting seeds. And the God who raised Jesus from the dead will make sure that every seed planted in his name produces a harvest that will last forever.



Reflective Questions for 1 Corinthians 15:35-58

1. Paul uses a seed to explain the resurrection body. What does the seed illustration teach us about the relationship between our present body and our resurrection body, and what does it tell us about how God works?

2. Paul describes the resurrection body in four contrasting pairs — corruption/incorruption, dishonor/glory, weakness/power, natural/spiritual. What is the main point of all four contrasts taken together?

3. Paul says flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, yet he also says the resurrection body is real and physical. How do these two things fit together, and what exactly needs to change before we can enter God's eternal kingdom?

4. Paul says the transformation will happen in the twinkling of an eye. What does this tell us about how God will accomplish the resurrection, and what is comforting about the fact that believers will still be recognizable as themselves?

5. Paul ends with a call to action: be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, because your labor is not in vain. Think of an area of ministry or service where you have been tempted to give up because it feels like nothing is happening. How does the resurrection change the way you see that work?

Challenge Questions

6. Paul uses the word "in vain" four times in chapter 15 — believing in vain, grace not in vain, faith in vain, and labor not in vain. How does the resurrection answer all four? What does this tell us about the connection between what we believe about the future and how we live and work in the present?

7. Paul says the resurrection body will be like Christ's glorified body — the second Adam bringing a new humanity. What does it mean that the resurrection is not the end of what it means to be human but the fulfillment of it? How does this correct the common idea that eternal life means leaving the physical world behind and existing as a spirit forever?

1 Corinthians 16

Collection for the Saints

> 16:1-4 Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given orders to the churches of Galatia, so you must do also: 2 On the first day of the week let each one of you lay something aside, storing up as he may prosper, that there be no collections when I come. 3 And when I come, whomever you approve by your letters I will send to bear your gift to Jerusalem. 4 But if it is fitting that I go also, they will go with me.

After the soaring heights of chapter 15, Paul comes back to earth with something very practical — money. Specifically, he is responding to a question the Corinthians had asked him about taking a collection for the church in Jerusalem.

The Jerusalem church had suffered greatly. Persecution had scattered most of its members, and famine had made conditions worse. The believers there were poor, vulnerable, and in need. Paul wanted the Gentile churches in Corinth, Galatia, and others to gather funds and send them to Jerusalem as an act of practical love.

Jewish and Gentile believers were normally divided by centuries of cultural and religious separation. These two groups did not naturally like each other or help each other. But in Christ they were one family. By having Gentile churches give generously to Jewish believers in Jerusalem, Paul was making a powerful statement. We belong to each other. This is what the gospel looks like when it works.

With all the problems in Corinth, Paul still calls them to look beyond themselves and give to needs outside their own community. He does not want them so consumed by their own struggles that they lose sight of others who are hurting. Generosity toward others is itself a sign of spiritual health.

His instructions are practical and clear. Each family is to set aside some amount of money regularly on the Lord's day, the first day of the week. He does not specify an amount. Every person, including those who were slaves and had very little, could give something. The offering was to be collected and held by the church until Paul arrived. He deliberately did not want to take a special collection after he got there — his presence might make people feel pressured to give more than they had planned.

Paul also wanted the church itself to choose who would carry the funds to Jerusalem. He was not going to appoint his own people or control the process. And he made clear that he preferred not to handle the money alone. He would provide written letters signed by the church leaders confirming the amount of the gift and its intended purpose so that everything was transparent and accountable. If those carrying the funds encountered a needy person on the journey, they could help from their own personal resources, but not from the church funds. Every coin given for Jerusalem was to reach Jerusalem and Paul's careful instructions were designed to make sure of it.

This is a principle that matters just as much today. Corruption in the handling of church funds is a serious problem in many parts of the world. When people give money for a specific purpose such as building a church, supporting a pastor, or helping a poor family, every bit of that money must go to that purpose. If another need arises, go back to the donors and ask permission before redirecting the funds. Using money given for one purpose to meet a different need, even a good one, without the donor's knowledge is a form of dishonesty. Paul was careful to protect his integrity in this area, and church leaders today must be just as careful. The credibility of the gospel is partly at stake in how we handle money.

Personal Plans

> 16:5-9 Now I will come to you when I pass through Macedonia (for I am passing through Macedonia). 6 And it may be that I will remain, or even spend the

> winter with you, that you may send me on my journey, wherever I go. 7 For I do not wish to see you now on the way; but I hope to stay a while with you, if the Lord permits. 8 But I will tarry in Ephesus until Pentecost. 9 For a great and effective door has opened to me, and there are many adversaries.

Paul wants the Corinthians to know about his travel plans. He had originally considered taking the sea route directly to Corinth, but he changed his plans and decided instead to travel overland through Macedonia first. Some in Corinth took that change of plans as evidence that Paul was avoiding them. They thought he did not want to face their problems or deal with the difficult situation in the church. He will address that accusation more directly in 2 Corinthians. For now he simply assures them that he does intend to come, and that he hopes to stay with them for a significant time. He might stay the whole winter, which would have been from late November through March. Traveling by sea in winter was dangerous and difficult, so staying in one place made practical sense.

When Paul says he hopes they will send him on his journey, he is making his second request for financial help in this chapter. This is different from the collection for Jerusalem. That was for the poor believers in the Jerusalem church. This is help with his travel costs as he moves from place to place in ministry. Paul was always careful about this distinction. He refused to take payment for his preaching because he never wanted anyone to think they could control his message by controlling his income. But travel costs were another matter. Helping a missionary get from one place to another is not the same as paying for his sermons. It is simply practical support for the work of the gospel.

He also adds the phrase if the Lord permits. Paul made careful plans and had a clear itinerary and a purposeful strategy. But he held those plans loosely. He knew that God might redirect him, delay him, or open an entirely different door. We should all approach our plans that way. Make them carefully, hold them humbly, and expect divine interruptions along the way.

At the time of writing Paul was in Ephesus and planned to stay there until Pentecost — well into the spring. Why? Because a wide and effective door had opened for ministry there. Acts 19 gives us a vivid picture of what that looked like. There were people coming to faith, and the word of God spreading powerfully through the whole region. It was the kind of opportunity that does not come along every day, and Paul felt he could not leave it behind too quickly.

But he also says something that every person in ministry needs to hear. There were many adversaries. The open door came with real opposition. In Ephesus that opposition was fierce. Silversmiths who made idols for the goddess Artemis felt their income threatened by the spread of the gospel and stirred up a riot against Paul. An open door for the gospel rarely swings wide without someone on the other side pushing back.

You begin a new ministry in a village or a community, and just as things start to move, opposition rises. People who were friendly become hostile. Doors that seemed open begin to close. It is tempting to think something has gone wrong. But Paul's experience in Ephesus suggests something different. Opposition is often a sign that the gospel is doing exactly what it is supposed to do — threatening the kingdom of darkness. The door and the adversaries came together. They usually do.

Before closing, Paul has two more people on his mind — Timothy, who is already on his way to Corinth, and Apollos, whom the Corinthians had been asking about.

> 16:10-12 And if Timothy comes, see that he may be with you without fear; for he does the work of the Lord, as I also do. 11 Therefore let no one despise him. But send him on his journey in peace, that he may come to me; for I am waiting for him with the brethren. 12 Now concerning our brother Apollos, I strongly urged him to come to you with the brethren, but he was quite unwilling to come at this time; however, he will come when he has a convenient time.

Paul had already sent Timothy and Erastus out together into Macedonia (Acts 19:22). So when Paul later says, “If Timothy comes,” and speaks about him returning “with the brothers,” it is natural to think of Timothy traveling with others.

Erastus may have been one of them, since he was sent with Timothy. But Paul does not mention his name here, and the Bible never clearly says that Erastus reached Corinth. This reminds us that God often works through teams. Some names are mentioned, and some are not. But every servant matters, even when their role is not fully recorded.

As Paul wrote this letter, he expected Timothy to arrive before he did, and he was genuinely concerned about how Timothy would be received. The tension between Paul and the Corinthian church was real. Throughout this letter he has challenged them on division, immorality, the misuse of gifts, and disorder at the Lord's Supper. Not everyone would have welcomed that correction. Some were angry with Paul. And Timothy, going there as his representative, would almost certainly face that same hostility.

On top of that, Corinth had not been a safe place for Paul himself. He had faced persecution there, and the city remained volatile. Timothy was young. He may have been tempted to fear what was waiting for him.

So Paul asks the Corinthians to treat Timothy as they would treat Paul himself. And when he is ready to leave, send him on his way in peace. This is Paul's third financial request in this chapter. He is asking the Corinthians to provide for Timothy's travel costs back to Paul, just as he asked them to support his own travel costs in verse 6.

Timothy was not traveling with his own funds. Like most ministers in the early church, he depended completely on the support of the churches he visited. Paul had established this clearly back in chapter 9. Without the Corinthians providing for his journey home, Timothy could have found himself stranded with no means to return.

The phrase 'send him on his way in peace' was not simply a warm farewell. It was a recognized early church practice that included providing practical and financial support for the journey ahead. Paul fully expects the churches Timothy visits to take care of his needs for the journey home.

This is exactly how missionary work operated in the early church and in some places it still works this way today. In 1994, a church in China sent out seventy young evangelists to twenty two of China's thirty provinces. Each was given two hundred dollars and a one way ticket. They were told to return in six months using money from the churches they planted. Exactly six months later all seventy returned. Two had been briefly arrested. Many had worn out their shoes. Some had been rejected and forced to sleep in ditches and forests. A few had lived with pigs. But they had planted many new churches and those new churches paid for their return journey home. That is precisely what Paul had in mind. Timothy would be cared for by the churches he served, and the Corinthians were being asked to play their part in sending him safely back.

Then Paul turns to the question of Apollos. The Corinthians had apparently asked about him. They may have hoped he would come and visit. Apollos had preached powerfully in Corinth and had his own following there, as we saw back in chapter 1. But Paul makes clear there is no rivalry between them. He genuinely wanted Apollos to go to Corinth and even encouraged him to do so. Perhaps Paul felt that Apollos, with his own relationship to the church, might be able to help bring some of the unity that had been so elusive.

Apollos, however, was hesitant. We do not know his reasons. He may have sensed the timing was not right, or perhaps he was aware of the way his name had been used to create division and did not want to make things worse. Whatever the reason, he declined for now but left the door open for a future visit. What is worth noting is the spirit in which all of this is discussed. Paul and Apollos clearly respected each other. There was no competition, no bitterness, and no maneuvering for influence. They were fellow

workers serving the same Lord. That alone was a quiet rebuke to the factions in Corinth that had tried to set them against each other.



Reflective Questions for 1 Corinthians 16:1-12

1. Paul gives careful instructions for how the collection should be gathered — regularly, individually, and transparently. What do these instructions tell us about how the church should handle money, and why does financial integrity matter for the gospel's credibility?

2. Paul says each person should give according to how they have prospered — no fixed amount, no pressure. What does this tell us about God's expectations for giving, and how does it protect the integrity of the gift?

3. Paul says a wide and effective door has opened in Ephesus, and there are many adversaries. Why do the open door and the opposition come together, and what does this tell us about how to interpret resistance in ministry?

4. Paul asks the Corinthians to receive Timothy without fear and to send him on his way in peace. What does this tell us about the responsibility churches have toward those who serve them in ministry?

5. Think about how your church currently handles offerings and financial decisions. Are there areas where greater transparency or accountability is needed? What practical steps could be taken to make sure every gift reaches its intended purpose?

Challenge Questions

6. Paul refused to take payment for his preaching but was willing to accept help with travel costs. He drew a clear line between the two. Why did that distinction matter, and how does it speak to the ongoing question of how ministers should relate to money — neither refusing all support nor allowing finances to compromise their message?

7. Apollos was hesitant to visit Corinth even though Paul encouraged him to go. His name had been used to create division and he may have sensed the timing was not right. What does his response tell us about the wisdom sometimes needed in ministry — knowing not just what to do but when to do it? And what does the absence of rivalry between Paul and Apollos say to churches that use leaders' names to create factions today?

Final Exhortations

> 16:13-18 Watch, stand fast in the faith, be brave, be strong. 14 Let all that you do be done with love. 15 I urge you, brethren—you know the household of Stephanas, that it is the firstfruits of Achaia, and that they have devoted themselves to the ministry of the saints—16 that you also submit to such, and to everyone who works and labors with us. 17 I am glad about the coming of Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus, for what was lacking on your part they supplied. 18 For they refreshed my spirit and yours. Therefore acknowledge such men.

As Paul draws his letter toward a close he sounds like a military commander giving final orders to his troops before battle. Watch. Stand fast in the faith. Be brave. Be strong. Do everything in love. Five commands, each one building on the last.

Watch means stay alert. The spiritual enemies Paul has been addressing throughout this letter do not announce themselves. Division creeps in quietly. Pride disguises itself as confidence. False teaching presents itself as wisdom. Disorder dresses itself up as

spiritual freedom. The Corinthians needed to stay watchful because the threats were real and some of them were already inside the church.

Stand fast in the faith means do not be moved. No matter where pressure comes from, within the church or from the culture around it, they are to hold their ground in what they believe and how they live. Some of the problems Paul has addressed in this letter were attempts, whether deliberate or not, to shift the church away from the gospel it had received.

Be brave means face the problems. Some of these spiritual enemies might look like giants. Confronting sin in the church is never easy. Correcting wrong theology is uncomfortable. Restoring broken relationships takes courage. Paul does not want them to look away from the hard things hoping they will resolve themselves. Drifting along and hoping things work out is not a strategy. The Christian life requires people who are willing to take responsibility for what is happening around them and within them.

Be strong means do not rely on human strength alone. Everything Paul has asked of them in this letter is beyond natural ability to produce. Only the Spirit can bring the unity, the holiness, the love, and the order that a healthy church requires.

And every confrontation, every correction, every act of leadership must be done in love. Not with intimidation. Not with threats. Not with the kind of power plays Paul has been challenging throughout this letter. Love must be the atmosphere in which everything else happens.

Then Paul pauses to honor a specific group of people. The household of Stephanas were his first converts in the region of Achaia, the Roman province that included both Corinth and Athens. They were his firstfruits in that part of the world.

Notice the word Paul chooses here. It’s the same word he used just one chapter earlier to describe Christ as "the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep." Just as Christ's

resurrection guaranteed the harvest still to come, the first converts in a region are a sign of the larger harvest God intends to bring in. This is a small echo of the letter's biggest idea, tucked into a passing note of appreciation for a faithful family.

They had distinguished themselves by their devoted service to others. They gave themselves to caring for the saints quietly and faithfully, without needing recognition. Paul holds them up as an example worth following. Working alongside people like this, he says, is never a waste of time.

Stephanas along with Fortunatus and Achaicus had made the journey to Ephesus, likely carrying the letter from the Corinthian church with the very questions Paul has been answering throughout this letter. They were most likely returning to Corinth carrying Paul's reply. The other two were likely slaves — a reminder that in God's kingdom, faithfulness matters infinitely more than status.

Their presence with Paul had refreshed and encouraged him in a way that the wider Corinthian church, because of its distance and its problems, had not been able to do. They brought him news, they brought him the church's questions, and they brought him the comfort of faithful friends in the middle of a difficult ministry season. Paul wanted the church to honor people like this, not because of their position or power, but because of their character and their service.

Greetings and a Solemn Farewell

> 16:19-24 The churches of Asia greet you. Aquila and Priscilla greet you heartily in the Lord, with the church that is in their house. 20 All the brethren greet you. Greet one another with a holy kiss. 21 The salutation with my own hand—Paul’s. 22 If anyone does not love the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be accursed. O Lord, come! 23 The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. 24 My love be with you all in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Paul ends his letter with greetings from the churches of Asia where he had been planting churches across cities like Ephesus, Lystra, Derbe, Iconium, and others. The Corinthian church was not an isolated congregation struggling alone with its problems. It was part of a much larger movement of God spreading across the Roman world. What God was doing in Corinth he was also doing in Asia, in Macedonia, and in Jerusalem. The church in Corinth was connected to something far bigger than itself.

Among those sending greetings were Aquila and Priscilla. They were a married couple the Corinthians knew well. Their home and ministry were instrumental in establishing the church in Corinth, where they lived and worked with Paul as tentmakers. Later, they followed Paul to Ephesus, continuing to teach and serve there.

Paul then urges them to greet one another with a holy kiss. This was a common cultural greeting of warmth and affection in that world. But in a church divided into factions, this simple act was anything but simple. Those who claimed to follow Paul might not feel like embracing those who claimed to follow Apollos or Cephas. A kiss on the cheek is hard to give to someone you are not speaking to. That is precisely why Paul mentions it. The physical act of greeting one another in love was itself a small act of reconciliation. It was a way of saying with the body what the heart needed to learn.

Paul closes with nearly the same words in Romans 16:16, 2 Corinthians 13:12, and 1 Thessalonians 5:26, and Peter gives the same instruction in 1 Peter 5:14. Paul is simply asking a divided church to do what every healthy church was already expected to do.

At this point, Paul takes the pen from whoever has been writing for him and signs the letter in his own hand. This was his way of authenticating the letter and was proof that it came from him and not from someone writing in his name.

Then he writes something that at first sounds harsh. “Anyone who does not love the Lord must be cursed — Anathema.” Is Paul calling down a curse on people? Not exactly. The word anathema means to be handed over to God for judgment. It means you are

outside the protection and blessing of His grace. Paul is simply recognizing that those who reject Christ's love are already placing themselves in that position by their own choice.

He most likely had in mind the false teachers who were deceiving the church. These were people who claimed to be part of the church but were actively working against the truth of Christ. Paul is drawing a firm line around the gospel. This was not a minor disagreement about preferences. The gospel of Jesus Christ is a matter of eternal life and death.

Paul says something remarkably similar in Galatians 1:8-9, ”if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what we have preached… let him be accursed." This isn't an outburst aimed at Corinth's troublemakers. It's how Paul consistently responds whenever the gospel itself is being distorted or replaced.

Immediately after this sobering word, Paul writes Maranatha, an ancient Aramaic prayer that means our Lord, come. It is one of the oldest prayers of the Christian church, almost certainly used in worship gatherings from the very beginning. After speaking of judgment, Paul looks to hope. Come, Lord Jesus. The one who will set everything right is coming.

This ancient prayer reappears almost word for word as the very last line of Revelation, "Even so, come, Lord Jesus" (Revelation 22:20). One of the earliest written New Testament letters and the very last book of the Bible both end on the identical prayer. The church has been praying this one sentence since its earliest days, and it is still the church's prayer today.

The resurrection we have been promised, the new creation we have been waiting for, the victory over sin and death that has already begun will be complete when he returns. Until then, we pray. Maranatha. Come, Lord.

And then grace. The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you all. Paul began this letter with grace in chapter 1 and he ends it the same way. Everything in between — the correction, the instruction, the rebuke, the theology, the practical guidance — all of it was an act of grace. It took grace for Paul to write it. It would take grace for the Corinthians to receive it. And it would take grace for them to change. Grace is not just the opening and closing of a letter. It is the only thing that makes any of it possible.

Paul began this letter by thanking God for the Corinthians and affirming what was genuine in them. Then he spent most of the letter correcting them — sometimes sharply, sometimes tenderly, always honestly. It was not an easy letter to write and it would not have been an easy letter to receive. But he closes it the way a true father closes a hard conversation with a child he loves. Whatever mistakes they had made, whatever problems remained, and whatever work lay ahead, he still loved them. My love be with you all in Christ Jesus.

That is where he leaves them. And it is a good place to end.



Reflective Questions for 1 Corinthians 16:13-24

1. Paul gives five rapid commands — watch, stand fast, be brave, be strong, do everything in love. What does each one address specifically in the context of what the Corinthians had been struggling with throughout this letter?

2. Paul holds up the household of Stephanas as an example worth following. What specifically had they done, and what does their example tell us about the service God values most?

3. Paul urges the Corinthians to greet one another with a holy kiss. Why was this simple physical act significant in a church divided into factions, and what is the equivalent gesture of reconciliation in your own cultural context?

4. Paul writes Maranatha — come, Lord — immediately after the sobering word about those who do not love Christ. What does placing this ancient prayer right there tell us about how believers should live in light of both judgment and hope?

5. Paul closes with "my love be with you all in Christ Jesus" — after spending most of the letter correcting them sharply. What does this tell us about the relationship between honest correction and genuine love, and how does it challenge the way you approach difficult conversations in your own church or family?

Challenge Questions

6. Paul draws a firm line at the end of the letter. Those who do not love the Lord are anathema, handed over to God for judgment. Yet he closes with grace and love. How do we hold both of these together in pastoral ministry — maintaining firm boundaries around the gospel while genuinely loving those who are outside it or opposed to it?

7. Looking back over the whole letter, Paul has addressed division, immorality, lawsuits, marriage, idol food, spiritual gifts, the Lord's Supper, the resurrection, and giving — all in one letter to one church. What does the range of problems in Corinth tell us about the Christian life and the work of pastoral ministry? And what is the one thing Paul kept returning to as the answer to every problem?

Bibliography

Barton, Bruce. Life Application New Testament Commentary: 1 Corinthians, Carol Stream Illinois: Tyndall House, 2001.

Courson, Jon. Application Commentary: New Testament, Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003.

Guzik, David. 1 Corinthians, Santa Barbara, CA, 2013.

Keener, Craig S. Bible Background Commentary: New Testament, Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1993.

Utley, Bob. Paul's Letters to a Troubled Church: 1 and 2 Corinthians, Marshall, Texas: Bible Lessons International, 2002.

Wright, N. T. Paul for Everyone: 1 Corinthians, Great Britain: SPCK 2003.

APPENDIX A: Paul's Ministry in Corinth (Acts 18:1-17)

The story of how the Corinthian church was founded is recorded in Acts 18:1-17. These seventeen verses cover an eighteen-month period (AD 51-52) when Paul established one of the most important and most troubled churches in the New Testament.

This appendix provides background to help you understand the context of 1 Corinthians. Because of all the time Paul invested in Corinth and all the letters he wrote, we know more about the Corinthian church than any other church in the New Testament. This makes 1 Corinthians an invaluable case study in church planting, pastoral ministry, and handling church problems.

> ### Acts 18:1 — Paul Arrives in Corinth
>
> "After these things Paul departed from Athens and went to Corinth."

Paul had just left Athens, where he had preached his famous sermon at the Areopagus (Acts 17:16-34). While some believed, the results were limited. The philosophers of Athens dismissed Paul's message about the resurrection as foolishness. Disappointed but not discouraged, Paul traveled about 65 kilometers (40 miles) west to Corinth.

Why Corinth?

Paul chose Corinth deliberately. It wasn't an easy place to minister. It was known for immorality and pagan worship. But Paul saw opportunity where others might see only obstacles. Corinth was:

- A strategic trade center: Easy to reach by land and sea, with a constant flow of travelers
- Culturally influential: A center for Greek philosophy and Roman power
- Spiritually needy: Despite—or perhaps because of—its wealth and wisdom, Corinth was spiritually bankrupt

Paul could have chosen a safer, more receptive city. But he understood that the gospel is needed most where sin is greatest. Cities with the deepest darkness need the brightest light.

When considering where to plant churches or invest ministry effort, we often look for the easiest places—areas where people are open, where there's less opposition, where quick results seem likely. But Paul's example challenges us. Are there cities or areas in your region known for immorality, violence, or spiritual darkness that other ministers avoid? God may call you to bring the gospel to the hardest places, not the easiest. Where sin abounds, grace can abound even more (Romans 5:20).

> ### Acts 18:2-3 — Divine Appointments
>
> "And he found a certain Jew named Aquila, born in Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla (because Claudius had commanded all the Jews to depart from Rome); and he came to them. So, because he was of the same trade, he stayed with them and worked; for by occupation they were tentmakers."

Paul's first priority was finding the Jewish community. This was his standard pattern. He always went first to his own people, the Jews. If you were visiting a foreign country, you would naturally look for people from your own culture who speak your language. Paul did the same.

In the Jewish quarter, Paul met Aquila and Priscilla. They had recently arrived from Rome because Emperor Claudius had expelled all Jews from the city. The expulsion happened because of disputes among Jews about whether Jesus was the Messiah. These debates created unrest, and Claudius solved the problem by forcing all Jews to leave—believers and unbelievers alike.

Four Things in Common

Paul, Aquila, and Priscilla shared four significant connections. The same trade as tentmakers, the same Jewish heritage, the same experience of persecution from fellow Jews, and the same faith in Jesus as Messiah. These four threads wove them together.

God's Sovereign Timing

Think about the timing. Aquila and Priscilla were forced to leave their home in Rome. They lost their business, their community, and their security. They became refugees with no place to live. Because Corinth was a growing commercial city where tentmaker's could find work, they moved there, probably thinking this was just a temporary solution until they could return to Rome.

But God was orchestrating something greater. He brought them to Corinth at exactly the right time to meet Paul. What looked like disaster (expulsion from Rome) was actually a divine appointment. God was positioning them to become Paul's coworkers, lifelong friends, and key leaders in the church. Romans 16:3-4 tells us they later risked their lives for Paul.

The Lesson for Us

God brings the right people into your life at the right time. Aquila and Priscilla didn't know why they were forced to leave Rome. Paul didn't know who would be waiting for him in Corinth. But God knew. He had a plan to transform Corinth, and that plan included bringing these three people together.

Sometimes families are displaced by conflict, hardship, or persecution. A Karen family ending up in a refugee camp in Thailand, a Christian family forced to move when their business fails. These feel like disasters. But God may be repositioning you for His purposes. The interruption in your plans may be a divine appointment, and the people He brings into your life during that transition may become your greatest ministry partners.

Has God brought someone unexpected into your life recently—someone from a different background, someone going through hardship, someone who shares your faith but comes from different circumstances? Don't dismiss these connections as coincidence. God may be forming a ministry partnership.

> ### Acts 18:4 — Paul's Regular Ministry Pattern
>
> "And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and persuaded both Jews and Greeks."

Paul established a routine. Every Sabbath he went to the synagogue and reasoned with both Jews and Greek converts to Judaism (God-fearers). The word "reasoned" means Paul engaged in dialogue, answering questions and presenting evidence that Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah.

During the week, Paul worked as a tentmaker. Corinth had a large marketplace (the agora) where Paul and Aquila and Priscilla would have made and sold their tents and leather goods. This gave Paul the opportunity to meet people and build relationships while supporting himself financially.

The Bi-Vocational Model

Paul didn't rely on the synagogue or new believers for financial support. He worked with his hands to provide for his own needs (see 1 Corinthians 4:12; 9:12-18; 2 Corinthians 11:7-9). Working with his hands served several purposes. It prevented accusations that Paul preached for money, gave him access to people in the marketplace, demonstrated the dignity of manual labor, and modeled self-sufficiency for new believers.

In many places, church planters and pastors must work secular jobs to support themselves and their families. Some feel ashamed of this, thinking "real" ministers are fully supported. But Paul's example shows that bi-vocational ministry is biblical, strategic, and honorable. Your workplace is your mission field. The people you work alongside need the gospel just as much as those who come to church on Sunday.

Acts 18:5 — Intensified Ministry

"When Silas and Timothy had come from Macedonia, Paul was compelled by the Spirit, and testified to the Jews that Jesus is the Christ."

When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia (probably bringing financial gifts from the churches there—see 2 Corinthians 11:8-9; Philippians 4:15), something shifted. Paul was "compelled by the Spirit"—literally, he was driven with greater intensity. With financial support in place and ministry partners alongside him, Paul devoted himself more fully to preaching.

The phrase "compelled by the Spirit" shows this wasn't Paul's idea. It was God's leading. When the Spirit compels us, we feel an urgency, a holy pressure to act. Paul felt an urgency to testify to the Jews that Jesus is the Christ. More people began responding to the gospel. When we obey the Spirit's prompting, even when it requires sacrifice or risk, God brings results.

There may be times when the Spirit compels you to do more preaching, more evangelism, or more discipleship—even when it costs you time, comfort, or resources. Learn to recognize the Spirit's prompting and respond in obedience. When God provides resources (time, people, finances), He may be preparing you for a season of intensified ministry.

Acts 18:6 — Rejection and Redirection

"But when they opposed him and blasphemed, he shook his garments and said to them, 'Your blood be upon your own heads; I am clean. From now on I will go to the Gentiles.'"

Paul's intensified preaching brought intensified opposition. Some Jews not only rejected the message but blasphemed. They spoke evil against Jesus and against God. This was a turning point.

Shaking His Garments

This symbolic action (like shaking dust off one's feet in Matthew 10:14) signified that Paul had fulfilled his responsibility. He had clearly presented the gospel; they had clearly rejected it. The phrase "Your blood be upon your own heads" means they bear responsibility for their own spiritual condition. Paul is saying, "I have warned you. I have done my duty. You have no excuse."

"I Am Clean"

Paul echoes Ezekiel 3:18-19, where God tells the prophet that if he warns the wicked but they don't turn, their blood is on their own heads—but the prophet is "clean." Paul has discharged his responsibility as a watchman. He has spoken the truth faithfully. The results are between them and God.

"From Now On I Will Go to the Gentiles"

This doesn't mean Paul stopped ministering to Jews—later in this chapter we see a prominent Jew (Crispus) come to faith. Rather, Paul shifted his primary focus from the synagogue to the Gentile community. He would no longer attend the synagogue but would establish a separate meeting place for believers.

The Lesson: Opposition Is Normal

Even when we are "compelled by the Spirit," we will face rejection and opposition. Paul experienced this in every city he visited. We should expect the same. The gospel divides people—some believe, others oppose.

But notice, the opposition didn't stop Paul; it redirected him. When one door closed (the synagogue), God opened another (the Gentiles). When some reject the gospel, we don't give up. We turn to others who will listen.

In some countries, Christians face opposition from family, community leaders, or government authorities. When you share the gospel clearly and people reject it—or worse, oppose and blaspheme—you may feel discouraged. But remember Paul's

example: you are responsible to speak the truth, not to force people to accept it. If they reject the message, their rejection is between them and God. You are "clean" if you have been faithful. And often, when one door closes, God opens another you didn't expect.

> ## Acts 18:7 — A New Meeting Place
>
> "And he departed from there and entered the house of a certain man named Justus, one who worshiped God, whose house was next door to the synagogue."

Since believers could no longer meet in the synagogue, they needed a new location. God provided through Justus, a Gentile "God-fearer" (someone who worshiped the God of Israel but hadn't become a full convert to Judaism). Justus opened his home to the believers.

Next Door to the Synagogue

The detail that Justus's house was next door to the synagogue is significant. Every Sabbath, when Jews gathered at the synagogue, they could see and hear the Christians meeting next door in Justus's home. This was a bold statement: the gospel had created a new community that transcended the boundaries of Judaism.

This was the first house church in Corinth—a pattern that would become common throughout the early church. Homes, not dedicated buildings, were the primary meeting places for Christians in the first century.

In many locations, churches meet in homes—sometimes because there are no church buildings, sometimes because of restrictions on religious gatherings, sometimes because the congregation is small. This isn't a lesser form of church; it's the New Testament pattern. A home church can be just as biblical and powerful as a large building. What matters isn't the location but the presence of God and the faithfulness of His people.

> ## Acts 18:8 — Breakthrough: The Synagogue Ruler Believes

> "Then Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed on the Lord with all his household. And many of the Corinthians, hearing, believed and were baptized."

After Paul announced he was turning to the Gentiles, something unexpected happened. Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed in the Lord. This was a major breakthrough. As the synagogue leader, Crispus was one of the most prominent Jews in Corinth. His conversion had two significant effects:

1. Personal Cost

Crispus's decision was costly. He would no longer be welcome in the synagogue he once led. He lost his position, his influence, and probably many of his friendships. But he gained something far greater: eternal life in Christ. He is mentioned by name in 1 Corinthians 1:14 as one of the few people Paul baptized—showing his importance to the church.

2. Corporate Impact

Crispus's household believed with him (probably including extended family, servants, and dependents). And his conversion may have influenced "many of the Corinthians" who then believed and were baptized. When a person of influence comes to Christ, their faith can impact many others.

The Pattern: Hear, Believe, Be Baptized

Notice the sequence: they heard the gospel, they believed in Jesus, and they were baptized. This is the New Testament pattern of conversion. Baptism follows belief and publicly identifies the new believer with Christ and His church.

The Lesson: Don't Underestimate God's Reach

Paul had just been rejected by the synagogue. It would have been easy to assume that no more Jews would believe. But then the leader of the synagogue—the very place that rejected Paul—came to faith. God's arm is not too short to save (Isaiah 59:1). The people who seem most resistant may be the next to believe.

Don't write anyone off as "too hard" for God to reach. The persecutor may become the preacher (like Paul). The mocker may become the missionary. The skeptic may become the servant. Keep praying, keep witnessing, and trust God for breakthrough even in the hardest hearts.

> ### Acts 18:9-11 — God's Encouragement Through a Vision
>
> "Now the Lord spoke to Paul in the night by a vision, 'Do not be afraid, but speak, and do not keep silent; for I am with you, and no one will attack you to hurt you; for I have many people in this city.' And he continued there a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them."

The Timing of the Vision

This vision came at a strategic moment—after Paul had been compelled by the Spirit, after he faced opposition and blasphemy, and after he made the difficult decision to leave the synagogue. Paul may have been discouraged, wondering if he should leave Corinth like he had left other cities. God's encouragement came exactly when he needed it most.

The Content of the Vision

God gave Paul three specific reassurances:

1. "Do not be afraid, but speak, and do not keep silent"

This command reveals that Paul was tempted to be silent, probably out of fear. The opposition had been intense. But God tells him to keep speaking boldly. Fear is a natural human response to danger, but God calls us to speak anyway.

2. "For I am with you"

This is the antidote to fear. We don't face opposition alone. God's presence is our greatest source of courage. This promise echoes what God told Joshua (Joshua 1:9), Moses (Exodus 3:12), and many other servants throughout Scripture.

3. "No one will attack you to hurt you"

This doesn't mean no one would try to harm Paul. Verse 12 shows they tried. But God promised their attempts would fail. They wouldn't succeed in stopping Paul or driving him away. And indeed, when they brought Paul before Gallio, God protected him.

4. "For I have many people in this city"

This is the most encouraging statement. God could see people Paul couldn't yet see. He was preparing many in Corinth to respond to the gospel. They hadn't believed yet, but God knew they would.

The Result: Extended Ministry

Because of this vision, Paul stayed in Corinth for eighteen months—longer than he had stayed anywhere else up to that point. He "continued teaching the word of God among them." This extended time allowed the church to be firmly established and gave Paul opportunity to teach them thoroughly.

When you face opposition, discouragement, or fear in ministry, remember Paul's experience. God may give you reassurance through His Word, through other believers, or through circumstances that confirm His presence. The promise "I am with you" is given to all who serve Christ (Matthew 28:20). You are never alone in the battle.

And remember: God sees people you can't yet see. There are people in your city, your village, your workplace who are being prepared by God to respond to the gospel. They haven't believed yet, but God knows they will. Your job is to keep speaking, keep teaching, keep witnessing—and trust God to bring the harvest in His time.

Have you been tempted to give up on a person, a church, or a ministry because you see no results? God may be telling you what He told Paul: "Keep speaking. I have people in this place. Don't give up now."

Acts 18:12-13 — Attack Before the Judgment Seat

> "When Gallio was proconsul of Achaia, the Jews with one accord rose up against Paul and brought him to the judgment seat, saying, 'This fellow persuades men to worship God contrary to the law.'"

Gallio's Arrival

Gallio was appointed proconsul (Roman governor) of Achaia around AD 51-52. Archaeological evidence confirms he served during this period, which helps us date Paul's time in Corinth precisely. The Jews waited for the new proconsul to arrive, hoping he would side with them against Paul.

The Accusation

The Jews brought a legal charge: Paul was persuading people "to worship God contrary to the law." They were claiming Paul was promoting an illegal religion. In the Roman Empire, Judaism was a legal religion (religio licita), but Christianity was still viewed as a sect within Judaism. If Gallio ruled that Christianity violated Jewish law, it could lose legal protection.

The Judgment Seat

The "judgment seat" was a raised platform in the center of Corinth where official business was conducted, announcements were made, and legal cases were heard. Archaeologists have excavated this very platform in Corinth—you can visit it today. This was the place where government officials judged cases and where Greek philosophers addressed crowds.

The Jews hoped Gallio would rule against Paul, effectively banning Christian preaching in Corinth and throughout Achaia. If successful, this ruling could stop the spread of the gospel throughout Greece.

Sometimes opposition to the gospel takes legal form. Believers are accused of breaking laws, disturbing the peace, or undermining public order. This happened to Paul repeatedly. When facing legal opposition, remember: God is sovereign over all

authorities (Romans 13:1). The rulers who sit in judgment are themselves under God's judgment. We must trust God to protect and vindicate His work.

> ### Acts 18:14-17 — God's Protection Through Gallio's Ruling
>
> "And when Paul was about to open his mouth, Gallio said to the Jews, 'If it were a matter of wrongdoing or wicked crimes, O Jews, there would be reason why I should bear with you. But if it is a question of words and names and your own law, look to it yourselves; for I do not want to be a judge of such matters.' And he drove them from the judgment seat. Then all the Greeks took Sosthenes, the ruler of the synagogue, and beat him before the judgment seat. But Gallio took no notice of these things."

Gallio's Verdict

Before Paul could even speak in his defense, Gallio dismissed the case. His ruling was based on a crucial distinction between criminal matters and religious disputes. If Paul had committed wrongdoing or crimes, Gallio would hear the case. Questions about "words and names" and Jewish law were not matters for Roman courts.

Gallio essentially said, "This is an internal religious dispute among Jews. Handle it yourselves. I'm not a judge of such matters." Then he drove them from the judgment seat—a dramatic dismissal that must have been humiliating for the Jewish leaders.

The Significance of This Ruling

Gallio's verdict had two far-reaching implications. Christianity became a legal religion. By refusing to judge the case, Gallio implicitly recognized Christianity as distinct from Judaism. It was no longer viewed as merely a Jewish sect but as a separate religion. And since Gallio found no criminal activity, Christianity gained legal standing in Achaia and potentially throughout the Roman Empire.

Paul's ministry was protected. God had promised in the vision, "No one will attack you to hurt you" (verse 10). Gallio's ruling fulfilled that promise. The Jews tried to stop Paul

through legal means, but God used a Roman official to protect His servant and His work.

The Beating of Sosthenes

After Crispus believed (verse 8), Sosthenes had become the new ruler of the synagogue. He led the attack against Paul before Gallio. But when Gallio dismissed the case, something unexpected happened: "all the Greeks took Sosthenes, the ruler of the synagogue, and beat him before the judgment seat."

Why did the Greeks beat Sosthenes?

They likely were frustrated with the Jews for wasting the proconsul's time with religious squabbles. The beating may have been a mob reaction against Jewish influence in Corinth. It says Gallio "took no notice". He didn't intervene to protect Sosthenes.

The Irony

The Jews brought Paul to the judgment seat hoping he would be punished. Instead, Paul went free and their own leader was beaten. They tried to harm Paul, but God turned their scheme against them—exactly as He had promised.

A Possible Conversion

Here's an intriguing detail: 1 Corinthians 1:1 mentions "Sosthenes our brother" as Paul's coworker. If this is the same Sosthenes (and it may be, it's not a common name), then the man who led the attack against Paul later became a Christian and Paul's ministry partner.

How might this have happened? Paul was present when the Greeks beat Sosthenes. He may have tried to stop the beating or cared for Sosthenes afterward. This act of love toward an enemy could have opened Sosthenes's heart to the gospel.

The Lesson

This is the third time in Acts 18 we see God working in unexpected ways. Aquila and Priscilla were forced from Rome and met Paul in Corinth — a divine appointment. Crispus, the synagogue ruler who had opposed Paul, came to faith — an unlikely convert. And Sosthenes, who attacked Paul, may have become a believer — a transformed enemy. God specializes in turning opposition into opportunity.

In some countries, believers face opposition from family members, Buddhist monks, Muslim leaders, or government officials. Sometimes those who oppose you most fiercely today may become your strongest allies tomorrow. Paul could have written off Sosthenes as an enemy. Instead, he may have shown him kindness when he was beaten, and that kindness led to conversion. Never stop praying for those who oppose the gospel. God can change the hardest heart.

Conclusion: Lessons from Acts 18

Paul's ministry in Corinth teaches us several crucial lessons:

1. God Prepares the Way

Before Paul arrived, God had already prepared Aquila and Priscilla. God had prepared Justus to open his home. God knew about "many people" in Corinth who would believe. God prepares the harvest before He sends the workers.

2. Opposition Is Normal—and Surmountable

Paul faced rejection, blasphemy, and legal attacks. But God protected him and the work continued. Opposition doesn't mean you're outside God's will; often it means you're exactly where God wants you.

3. Stay Longer Than You Think You Should

Paul stayed eighteen months—his longest ministry stop yet. If he had left after the first opposition (verse 6), he would have missed Crispus's conversion, Gallio's favorable

ruling, and the establishment of a strong church. Sometimes the breakthrough comes just after you're ready to quit.

4. God Uses Unlikely People

Refugees (Aquila and Priscilla), a Gentile God-fearer (Justus), a Jewish synagogue ruler (Crispus), and possibly a former opponent (Sosthenes) all became key leaders in the Corinthian church. God builds His church with broken people, unlikely converts, and transformed enemies.

5. Trust God's Promises

God said, "I am with you" and "No one will hurt you" and "I have many people in this city." All three promises came true. When God makes a promise, He keeps it. Your job is to obey; His job is to fulfill His word.

Application for Church Planters and Pastors:

For those planting churches or pastoring in difficult places, these lessons have direct and practical application.

- Look for divine appointments—God will bring the right people to you
- Work faithfully, even when results seem small
- Expect opposition, but don't fear it
- Stay longer than feels comfortable—the breakthrough may be just ahead
- Trust God's promise: "I am with you"

The church in Corinth had serious problems (which 1 Corinthians addresses), but it was also a church that God used powerfully to spread the gospel throughout Achaia. The foundation Paul laid in those eighteen months would sustain the church through its struggles and enable it to become a light in one of the darkest cities in the Roman Empire.

About the Author

J. Mark Ayres is a passionate missionary and Bible teacher with a heart for serving the people of Southeast Asia. Having lived in four countries in that region, Mark has gained a deep understanding of the challenges and joys of spreading the Gospel in diverse contexts. With over 27 years of experience in cross-cultural ministry, he is dedicated to equipping pastors and church leaders through thoughtful, accessible biblical resources. Mark's commitment to teaching is reflected not only in his writing but also in his personal ministry, where he actively mentors and supports believers in their spiritual growth. He currently resides in Laguna Niguel, California, with his wife Debbie and enjoys exploring different cultures and languages, and spending time with his children and grandchildren.