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**Day 334 - November 30**

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## **Christ's Church and the Apostles (30-100 CE)**

### ***First Letter to the Corinthians***

**Readings: *1 Corinthians 1:1-4:21***

#### ***Reflections:***

- **First Letter to the Corinthians:** Corinth was the commercial capitol of Greece, the most metropolitan, sophisticated city in the region. Athens was the center of academic life, but the Corinthians liked to think that they were current in all the latest wisdom and insights of their day. Temple prostitution was also big business at the shrine of Aphrodite (goddess of love). Down the street was the shrine of Asclepius, the god of healing. Centuries later when all of the twelve pagan temples were converted to churches in Corinth under the conversion of the Roman Empire to Christendom, the healing shrine continued to be frequented. Once these facts are understood, Paul's letters make much more sense. Most scholars place this letter in the mid 50's CE. Paul apparently wrote a number of letters to the Corinthian church. 1) One letter we don't have in our possession. It was apparently taken to the city by Timothy on his way to Macedonia. 2) 1 Corinthians would be Paul's second letter that came in response to a letter from the Corinthian church brought to Paul in Ephesus by a group including Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus. 3) A harsh letter that Paul references in 2 Corinthians 1:23-2:4. This letter many scholars believe is found recorded in 2 Corinthians 10-13. 4) A fourth letter to provide comfort and additional teaching. This would be 2 Corinthians 1-9 if the previously mentioned theory is correct.
- **Salutation:** We see the basic elements of Paul's normal opening greeting ensuring people understand his role as an apostle by God's will. Those in leadership need to be able to clearly articulate their calling before God if they are going to live out of that sense of responsibility before God. Paul emphasizes the importance of those receiving the letter understanding that they are called to be holy and set apart to God alone. This emphasis makes sense in light of the content of the letter. "Grace and Peace" combined the Hebrew and Greek greeting and captures well the essence of the Good News.
- **Thanksgiving for grace:** Paul begins a letter filled with much correction and rebuke by clearly articulating their strengths as well as the certainty of God completing his will in their lives. Rather than diving immediately into all the reasons they should be embarrassed for how they are struggling, he wants them to be secure in God as well as his confidence of God at work in them. This is a good lesson to remember when we approach someone to correct or point out issues they need to address.

- Warning against divisions: Unity is something we must fight to achieve and preserve. We should fight for unity not fight against each other. We see Paul list the popular leaders of the early Jesus movement and how quickly people aligned behind key leaders like Paul, Apollos and Peter (or “Cephas”). It is funny that even in Paul’s day there are some so super-spiritual that they won’t admit they follow anyone but Christ. Paul actually affirms that all should simply be following Christ and not worry about who is your leader or who baptized you. There is no popularity contest in Christ’s community. Interestingly Paul’s stated that Christ did not send him to baptize but to preach. Apparently baptism was associated more with a longer term relational connection and investment in a person. Although Paul invested a lot in people he was there to get the message out and allow others to do the relational follow up. We can also note how honest Paul is in his letters when he can’t remember who he baptized. Some people see the letters and biographies in the New Testament as flowing from the pen of God and yet we must remember that God’s word to us is coming through humans and so there is clearly an honest, human element that comes through.
- God’s wisdom: Like in Athens, the Corinthians prided themselves in their learning and wisdom. Paul tackles this head on as he makes it clear that human wisdom is foolish to God just as human strength is nothing compared to God’s strength. We are naturally deceived by our own pride in what we know and can accomplish. Yet the cross of Jesus challenges us to realize that in sacrifice, foolishness, and complete weakness God triumphed through Jesus. It is the ultimate plot twist that reveals that in all things we can trust God because his wisdom is always higher than our wisdom and his power outstrips all of our power. In fact this is one of the reasons he delights to reveal his power in our weakness so that we learn to trust him in everything. The cross therefore is a stumbling block to those who love power (like the Jews who want signs and wonders) as well as those who love wisdom (like the Greeks who love their philosophies).
- Example of lowliness: Paul reminds them that the reason God chose them was for their weakness and lowliness. Again in the story as God reveals that humility and grace are his core attributes, we must remember that it is our weakness, failures, and need of God that qualifies us to be showcases of his grace, power and wisdom.
- Preaching not eloquent: Paul was self-admittedly not the best communicator but he was deeply dependent on God and allowed God’s Spirit to work through him. He was submitted to God in all things, even in his nervousness about speaking in such a sophisticated city.
- Wisdom from the Spirit: Paul does point out that there is a deeper spiritual wisdom revealed by God. It is not a wisdom that reflects the rulers of this age, the authority structures and spiritual forces that shape the dominant culture of society. It is the wisdom of God that speaks directly to the heart and calls people into submitted relationship. Much of God’s wisdom is counter-intuitive and so it is something that people only discover as they seek God with a heart motivated by love (see Isaiah 64:4). Yet, the Spirit will reveal God’s heart and insights to those who are seeking God and so we see Paul affirm the importance of the

Spirit in having a true relationship with God that is based on communications (see Joel 2:28-29).

- Wisdom for the spiritually minded: Paul now makes the connection between being filled with the Spirit, hearing God speak and that resulting in having the mind of Christ. Although Paul is not explaining this in detail at this point, the way to develop a Christ-like mindset is to be filled with the Spirit, experience God's deep love, and talk with God about his perspective and understanding his truth. As we have this kind of relationship and share it within Christ-centered community, we develop a mindset like Christ or in other words, we renew our minds to think like God thinks.
- Divisions prevent growth: Division and quarrelling is a sign of spiritual immaturity.
- Ministers are servants: Once we understand what it means to be a servant and that it is God that does all of the significant work of growing people in Christ, we can relax from our judgments, divisions and frustrations and simply focus on loving and serving others.
- Christ is foundation: Paul uses a construction metaphor to help us understanding that absolutely everything comes down to Jesus. Only what is valuable to God will stand the test of time. We must build as God wants us to build. What will stand the test of eternity? Only people. Nothing else.
- Division destroys temple: If we ruin our relationships we are destroying God's temple. This should strike holy fear in us.
- Loyalty to Christ alone: Paul calls them to repent of their pride and to take complete security from being of Christ, or as Paul says elsewhere, in Christ. Our identity is found in Christ because when we are in Christ we are therefore in God. Once we realize we are plunged (meaning of baptism) into God through being plunged into Christ, then we realize that everything we could ever want or need is now all ours. "All is yours" as Paul reminds them.
- Ministers to be judged: Paul makes a power statement here. "My conscience is clear but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me." We can't even judge ourselves. We can have a clear conscience as we obey God the best we can but that doesn't mean we will do things perfectly. In his grace we trust as we live humbly as his servants.
- Warning against pride: Paul gives another key principle. "Do not go beyond what it written." In other words, don't use your logic to develop a long list of additional rules and regulations based on deductive reasoning. When we try to sort things out perfectly, pride sneaks in and we start to judge people because we think we have it all sorted out. Paul then reminds his readers that everything they have come to understand was given to them. They apparently have become proud and Paul is challenging them that they have truly missed the point altogether. They think they are among the spiritually elite ("kings") when in fact they are not kings but are still foolish and prideful.
- Even apostles are debased: Here we see Paul's view of the story again that the human drama is being played out in front of the angels and spiritual realms. Paul makes it crystal

clear that the Gospel is not about wealth, success or living the good life. It is about serving others at all cost. The apostles, he declares, have become the scum of the earth because of their suffering and humility. They are impoverished and empty and yet carry in their lives the power of God.

- Paul appeals as father: Paul shares with us his vision for spiritual leadership – fathering. Although they could have ten-thousand babysitters (the meaning of the word guardian) they have few spiritual parents. The heart of a parent is to truly own and invest into their children everything they have. The role of the child is simply to receive the love of the parent and to imitate the parent. It is very simple actually. Timothy, who was bringing the letter, was an extension of Paul's parental role modeling and investment and so the church was called to receive him and the message he was carrying. Paul warns them though, are they going to remain in their proud and arrogant posture so that he has to come to rebuke? Or will they humble themselves and welcome him in gentleness? Paul is fearless for he knows God's power remains with him and yet he prefers to operate out of humility and gentleness than to continually rely on demonstrations of power to maintain authority over a proud and arrogant community. Like a horse that has been broken, are we easily led, gentle and humble? Is our will fully submitted to God?