
Day 335 – December 1

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

First Letter to the Corinthians

Readings: *1 Corinthians 5:1-11:16*

Reflections:

- Call for discipline: Here is one of the more controversial texts in the New Testament for various reasons. The Corinthians were living in a highly sexualized culture and so apparently a man in their community was publicly having a sexual relationship with one of his father's wives or his second wife. We don't know the details but it would appear that it was so offensive that even those prostitutes who regularly visited the temple would have found it offensive. The message of grace is often easily misinterpreted into a license for sin with no regards for allowing the Spirit to guide a person into true righteousness. Paul steps into correct the situation and tells them that they should ask the man to leave the fellowship until he repents of this sin. After Paul states this he explains a deeper spiritual layer to removing this man from fellowship. He describes a kind of prayer that is centered on Jesus ("gathered in the name of the Lord Jesus"), is done in unity ("when I am with you in spirit"), and is prayed through the power of the Spirit of Jesus ("the power of our Lord Jesus is present"). This prayer is to hand the person over to Satan so as to see his flesh destroyed and spirit saved on the day of the Lord. Basically Paul is saying that we should not just relationally discipline people but continue to pray for God to continue his work in their life and in this case, to allow a prodigal son to go to the depth of Satan's pig pen experience so that he comes to his senses and before his own death or Jesus' returns, he comes to his senses and repents. This prayer although it seems harsh is in fact the most loving thing we can do as we say to God, "We feel like we are sending this person to the wolves by removing him from the support of community, but in fact are trusting God even though it looks like we are handing this person over to Satan's complete influence. Now Paul's hope is that this man's flesh is destroyed. The word flesh in Paul's teaching does not mean his body but rather his sinful nature or sinful desires. It is the natural mode or motivation of a person rather than the motivation of the Spirit. Another way to translate "flesh" is self-centeredness.
- Danger of tolerating sin: Paul now uses the Hebrew image of yeast to describe the influence of sin within community. It is like yeast that works through the entire bread and although it is very small it has a huge influence. Remember the symbol of holy bread was bread without

yeast. The influences in community should be sincerity and truth not sin and destructive self-centeredness.

- **Duty of self-policing:** Paul calls the church to continue to reach out to everyone who has a sinful or messed up life but not to tolerate someone who claims to follow Christ but continues to live a completely sinful life and refuses to repent of their sin. Paul says that we should not even eat with them. In other words, don't hang out so that they get confused and think that their sin is no big deal. Paul challenges them to use their own discernment in challenging each other and calling one another to the life Christ wants for all believers.
- **Judgment among selves:** Those who are in Christ are seated with him in his authority in heaven. Paul reminds the Christ-followers in Corinth that they must take this authority and use it within their community rather than turning to external legal structures to settle matters. Paul points out how this kind of public legal action brings shame on Jesus' community. Paul challenges them that it is better to be cheated than to get into a greedy, attacking battle with another brother and as a result be guilty of the very things you claim the other person is doing to you. Here we see Paul again teaches enemy love rather than self-preservation and defense. Christians who are self-saving and self-centered are already defeated. Only as a Christ-follower rests in Christ and follows his lead in laying down his life for others, will that person experience the true provision and power of God.
- **Sin prevents inheritance:** Here we find another verse that has become controversial in the west as Paul outlines a list of sinful behaviors that will not enter into the kingdom of God. We must remember that for Paul the kingdom of God is not heaven or the new earth but rather the kingdom of God has already come and Christ-followers are now living in God's kingdom and experiencing the kind of community God intended. So Paul is saying that when a person lives a habitually sinful life they do not experience the life God intended. Paul goes on to make it clear that what God desires is to change a person from the inside out. The work of the Spirit through what Jesus accomplished is to forgive us, transform us, and restore us completely to God.
- **Bodies not meant for sin:** Paul is now most likely quoting himself. "Everything is permissible for me" in Christ. What Paul means is that they as a people are no longer under the strict code of the Law. They can live under the direction of the Spirit with complete freedom to do what God calls them to do even if people at first might think it is wrong. They have that freedom. Paul then comes back and reminds them that this freedom is given to us so that we can pursue the things of Christ rather than self-indulge. Everything is permissible but not everything is beneficial. We must ask what is completing God's will for our lives rather than what feels good right now. Paul goes on to remind his readers that if they are filled with God's Spirit then their bodies are the temple of God and this temple must be cared for accordingly. If the believer has sex with a prostitute then they become physically and spiritually unified. This ultimately becomes a sin against the believer's body and against the body of the prostitute. God purchases our entire being, body, soul and spirit through Christ and so Paul calls all his readers to honor God with their bodies. How we treat our bodies

whether it is over working, over eating, sexual sin, or not getting enough sleep, we are in either big or small ways not properly caring for the temple God has given to us and that his Spirit has as a home.

- Marital relations: We see in this passage how Paul always calls the husband to be the first to serve, reversing the power structures of his day. He clearly affirms mutual love and respect as the basis for a healthy marriage. He states overall singleness is preferred to marriage because of the challenges they were facing. If a person is married they have greater exposure and vulnerability when seeking to serve God. They can't just focus on God and his kingdom but have another person they must prefer. In a time when persecution was a real threat, we can understand why Paul says this. Paul realizes that not all people can live as single person and so he still affirms the basic principles of a healthy marriage. Paul also makes it clear that a healthy, active sexual life is protection against the temptation Satan will bring against a married person. Unless the motivation is prayer, a married couple should be regularly having sex to help guard their hearts against sexual temptation.
- Singleness: This verse makes it sound like a person's primary reason to get married is simply to have sex. In light of Paul's other writings, particularly in Ephesians, this would be a misunderstanding. Paul is saying that if you want to get married, get married. But if you feel called to being single and can do this under God's leadership, you have chosen something better in light of their present circumstances.
- Regarding separation: Paul gives the Corinthians the basic principle of Jesus. Women (those without power) have the freedom to leave their husbands as long as they remain single and don't remarry. In other words, the wives were not allowed to upgrade to a better guy. The men on the other hand were not allowed to divorce their wives (those without power), most likely because the women could not easily care for themselves and may have to turn to prostitution or begging to survive.
- Unbelieving spouses: Paul now adds his own additional thoughts acknowledging that this is his best discernment and not a direct teaching of Jesus but rather an application of Jesus' principles. Paul now makes provision for believers to participate in a divorce if the spouse is not a believer. In other words, don't sacrifice your relationship with Jesus just to stay married (see Luke 14:26). Now Paul says if the unbelieving spouse wants to remain married than that unbelieving spouse is viewed by God as set apart because of being in covenant with a believing spouse so that their children are fully blessed by God. If the unbelieving spouse wants to leave then the person must let them go and remain committed to peace. Paul does not address here what happens when a person claims to be a believer but acts like an unbeliever. The previous principle is that the church should hold that person to account. If the church or the spouse is unwilling to do participate in this, then we have no direction on what is the right course of action for a believing spouse who is being abandoned or wounded in such a circumstance. This is one of those situations where Christ-followers must work together to apply the love ethic of Jesus in a case by case approach.

- Remain in present state: Paul notes again people should seek to be content in their circumstances. People who are uncircumcised don't need to be circumcised. Grace means God accepts you just as you are. With this said Paul notes that slaves if they can gain their freedom should do this. This means that if you can gain your freedom from an unhealthy and dysfunction situation, then do that. But don't try to make changes for change sake. Trust God to meet your needs as you serve him.
- Reason for advice: Paul explains that the reason he is emphasizing this is the present persecution they are all facing and the ultimate temporality of this life. Paul doesn't want to restrict people but rather spare them additional pain. Rather than running around trying to find peace by getting married or getting a divorce. Simply focus on serving God and remain as you are. This principle is generally true but particularly true when Christ-followers are facing public persecution.
- Advantages of singleness: Ultimately we will all be only married to Christ and human covenant of marriage will remain. Paul affirms the benefits of remaining single that he himself is experiencing. The ultimate goal for all of us is to live lives of undivided devotion.
- Regarding marriage: This doesn't mean that people can't get married but must carefully check their hearts out to make sure they are doing this with a clear conscience before the Lord.
- Regarding widows: Paul again gives freedom to the women whose husbands have died to remarry (again because of the real need for women in that culture to have a provider) but still be wise about remarriage as Paul believes in the long run the widow would be happier in that circumstance not to marry. Paul may be going over the top affirming singleness but probably in the history of the church we have gone overboard affirming marriage and not given the honor and respect to those who remain only married to Christ.
- Regarding mutual submission – Knowledge with love: Paul now changes topics and wants to address the divisive issue of whether or not Christ-followers can eat foods sacrificed to idols. A large portion of the meat market came through the sacrificial system of the pagan temples of Corinth. Paul makes an important point right off the top. Head knowledge makes us think we are better than others (puffs up) while love looks for opportunities to lift other people up (builds up). Love, not head knowledge is what gets us on God's radar and into relationship with him.
- Knowledge regarding idols: Paul completely dismisses idols even though he acknowledges the spiritual realities behind the idols.
- Weak without knowledge: Paul dismisses the importance of dietary purity in connecting us to God or keeping us from him. To Paul it is a non-issue. What is interesting is that it is the person who has strict conscience or a conservative position on this that is viewed by Paul as being spiritually weak. A spiritually mature person sees through the outward appearance and realizes that idols mean nothing.

- Responsibility toward the weak: Now he also notes that those who are spiritual mature should be wise not to cause those who are weak to stumble or struggle. If something that is not a sin still causes a weaker sister or brother to stumble, than be wise and look how to serve them. Now with this said, we must be careful as well as to not be more conservative than God. Often times those who claim to be mature are the ones offended by someone's freedom in Christ. In the end though, each person must stand before God and stand with a clear conscience. We see here the love ethic being worked out as Paul points people towards a case by case approach to relationships.
- Freedom is not the issue: Paul points out again his apostleship based on him having met the risen Christ. He is free as an apostle but that doesn't matter.
- Rights are not the issue: Paul lists all of his rights and how he is not exercising those rights.
- Example of a lawful claim: Paul continues to argue that he rightfully should be receiving financial support from Corinth.
- Forgoing rights: Paul uses himself as an example of laying down your rights to serve others in advancing the message of Jesus.
- Rewards for giving up rights: Paul explains why he does everything for free. Paul is looking for a higher reward. He doesn't want pay or support. He wants to do it all for free so that his reward is with God. He doesn't feel he has an option to proclaim this message but that God has required him to do this.
- Concession versus assertion: Paul here clearly explains that it is the role of the spiritually mature messenger to do the hard work of translating the message for his or her hearers so that they can easily understand the message. We must learn to culturally reinterpret the message of Jesus so that people can easily grasp what it means. Paul stands firmly against any form of Christian subculture. Just as Jesus was "God with us" so that we might understand the truth and love of God, so we must incarnate the message in a way that it is easy for people to understand.
- Value of self-discipline: This kind of leadership requires incredible discipline and self-control to ensure that we complete the tasks God has given us and do so with excellence. Paul is inspired by top performing athletes to apply the same principles of training.
- Example of overconfidence: Paul now shares a bit of the story of Israel and helps them see spiritual parallels of baptism (being plunged into God and into cleansing water) as well as feeding on what God provides (drinking from the rock and manna). Paul even points out that he believes that the rock that miraculously provided water was a sign of Christ with them. Yet, even though the Israelites had God in the desert, they didn't actually come to trust God and so fell under judgment.
- Example of self-indulgence: Paul now makes it clear that the story of Israel teaches us not to treat God's provision and grace lightly. Blatant sexual immorality and orgies – the people were killed! Rebellious idolatry – the were bitten by poisonous snakes! Angry grumbling –

killed by an angel of death! These are all major wake up calls to us to say we need to learn from Israel that God is angered by people who receive his grace and then snub their nose at him in rebellion and pride.

- Examples are warning: The temptations we feel, everyone feels. Paul gives this promise that “God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.” This is promise that all Christ-followers must hold on to. When temptation comes we must look for the escape hatch and then go for it. No rationalizations. God promises to help us in our time of need.
- Actions indicate loyalties: Interestingly Paul tells the people to flee idolatry but that eating meat sacrificed to idols doesn’t mean anything. We must always be careful to separate the substance from the form, the internal from the external. Religion wants to emphasize the outward but calls us to examine our hearts. We must remain relentlessly loyal to God in our hearts.
- Liberty yields forbearance: Paul returns to his simple mental hook – “Everything is permissible but not everything is beneficial.” We have complete freedom in Christ to do what God asks us to do but we must put it through the grid of love. We should use our freedom to build others up. Jesus is the Lord of everything and so we have complete freedom to follow his leadership always looking for how he wants us to love others. If someone invites you to have a drink at a bar, you are free to go but we should not use such freedom as a cover up for wanting to go there and get drunk.
- Yield self for others’ sake: Three key things to ask when faced with a tough decision. Does this bring glory to God? Will this cause others to stumble? Am I following the example of Christ? Now these three questions must not be asked of ourselves. We must ask them of God. Only he can tell us what brings him glory. Only he can show us what truly builds up the body of Christ. Only he can reveal what it means to live in obedience to Christ. If we answer these questions ourselves we will be tempted to decide these things based on what we think rather than on what God thinks for his ways are always higher than our ways.
- Regarding role distinctions – veils as symbols: There was a symbolism of reverence and submission in Paul’s day that involved having your head covered. Just as in the West men are not to have a hat on when praying, in Paul’s day all women were to wear a full head covering much like Muslim women today wear. The term “head” that is used when Paul says that Christ is the head of man and man is the head of woman can also mean “source” (like the “head” of a river). So you could also say “man came from Christ” and “woman came from man” (Eve was made from Adam). Paul argues from this creation order to suggest that the Corinthian women should not use their freedoms to start to culturally offend people. Paul’s argument has been viewed by some as sexist as he is emphasizing differences between men and women rather than affirming their fundamental equality as he does in Galatians 3:28. We should view Paul’s statement in Galatians 3:28 as foundational to our understanding that in Christ there is no male or female, both are equally valued and

reflective of the image of God. Paul is simply presenting that even within cultural settings there are distinctions between male and female that reflects the creative distinctions God revealed in how he created male and female, women being more glorious than men! We should remember that throughout Paul's writings, women are always given preferential treatment (e.g. free to divorce where husbands were not) because of the power inequality. Here another principle of Paul takes over. The women were using their freedom in Christ to remove their cultural head dress and expose their hair, a part of the body that was at that time (and still today within Arab culture) was considered a very sexual part of the body. Paul wants to correct this so as to not bring shame on the message of Jesus. Paul also mentions that they need to be sensitive to this issue because of the "angels." It is most likely a mistranslation. The Greek word can be translated "angels" or "messengers". In this case, it is more likely Paul is saying that messengers from other churches are coming to your church and also taking offense.

- Equality despite distinctions: Paul points out that in the Lord, there is complete mutual interdependence between men and women. In Christ, there is fundamental equality even though there are female and male distinctions. Paul's final argument is that nature teaches us that women should have long hair and men have short hair. Paul also states that it is for this reason long hair has been given as a covering for women. So here are a few interesting questions. Is long hair actually the covering Paul is talking about? Most likely not as it was expected in that culture for women to have a veil. Second, is it true that nature points to this basic short hair/long hair distinction? Generally speaking yes. In most cultures historically women have longer hair than men. Interestingly in Paul's Hebrew culture, men had long hair and particularly those who were spiritually set apart for God under a Nasserite vow. So in Israel men having long hair was a sign of spirituality. So should we take this section as something that should be practiced at all times and places? Should women wear a full head dress and have long hair? The answer is no. None of the groups that make women wear head coverings actually follow this practice because their small clothes in no way cover the entire head. It is better to see this as Paul challenging us to live humble lives within our cultures and not to use our freedoms to be culturally rude and inappropriate. As we are able, live at peace with all people (Hebrews 12:14).