



Catalog No. 779

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

First Message

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# A CONFIDENT GREETING TO AN IMPERFECT CHURCH

*SERIES: EXAMINING LIFE IN THE LOCAL CHURCH*

One of my worst fears is that sometime I am going to sleep through my alarm on a Sunday. I have been known to turn off an alarm in my sleep. Once I even had a conversation with my wife on the phone early one morning and went back to bed, never recalling the phone call. That is why I turn my alarm away from me so I can't easily reach it, and when I am away on a trip, I will request a wake-up call from the front desk. That shrill, irritating sound is enough to wake the dead.

In a very real sense what I would like to provide for you over the next couple of months is a wake-up call. I am concerned that some of us have become a bit drowsy, and others are fast asleep.

We who are living in the dawn of the 21st century are living in some of the most significant years in all of Christendom. Doors are opening all over the world for evangelism. Opportunities in the international scene are expanding and exciting. Yet it seems to me that many in the church have lost sight of the objectives. Long-time values are eroding. Small-time skirmishes and petty fighting are draining our energy. Instead of fulfilling our grand mandate, many of us have become myopic and consumed with selfish involvements. Instant gratification has replaced long-time goals.

This is why I appreciated very much Ray Stedman's series on the first three chapters of Revelation. As we looked at those seven churches we began to see that they were a lot like the church today. Each church had its own distinctives, its own opportunities and challenges. Each was a place where truth was taught and lives were changed. And then slowly something happened to each that silenced its witness. Like erosion, the slippage was slow but sure. Then, in the midst of the decay, an angel cupped his hands and shouted, "Wake up, and strengthen the things that remain." Again and again the Lord prodded them to wake up. In each of the seven commentaries we heard the same warning: "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

That is what we need—a wake-up call. I believe that is what the book of First Corinthians is: It is a wake-up call to a church that has forgotten who they are and why they exist. A number of years ago as Ray Stedman preached through the Corinthian letters, he called them "First and Second Californians." Having "lived," as it were, in First Corinthians for over seven months, I understand what he meant. The parallels to Corinth and the San Francisco Bay Area are many. In fact, let me summarize for you in three phrases the city of Corinth and see if you can identify with it: Intellectually alert, materially prosperous, and morally decadent. Do these sound familiar?

Corinth was a key city in Ancient Greece until it was destroyed by the Romans in 146 B.C. Julius Caesar rebuilt it as a Roman colony in 46 B.C. and it grew and prospered, largely because of its unique geographical location. It lay at the neck of a narrow isthmus connecting the two parts of Greece, and thus it controlled all north-south land traffic. In this important position it inevitably became a prosperous center of trade and commerce. By the time of Paul's visit, some

100 years after its rebuilding, Corinth had become the capital of the province of Achaia. It was a center of wealth and influence. Luxury and excess were the norm in this wealthy young city.

Corinth was filled with shrines and temples, but dominating the city was a large temple to Aphrodite, the goddess of love, which stood on a 2000-foot high hill outside the city. Every evening, the 1000 priestesses of the temple, who were sacred prostitutes, came down and plied their trade in the streets. The worship of Aphrodite was very similar to that of the Ashtoreth in the days of Solomon, Jeroboam and Josiah.

Intellectually alert, materially prosperous, but morally corrupt. These proud, sometimes wealthy, independent ex-pagans were having a difficult time learning how to live as Christians. It was at the issue of lifestyle, not theology, where they were confused. Where were the lines to be drawn? How much of one's culture must be abandoned when one becomes a Christian? Paul's answers are decisive, direct and, as we will see, extremely relevant.

First Corinthians is a practical, issue-oriented letter which relates the truth of the gospel to the ethical issues of daily life. In fact, it is the most practical of all Paul's letters. It is indeed a tract for our times. Listen to one man's exhortation on the value of this book:

I believe that the church in our generation needs to discover the apostolic gospel; and for this it needs the Epistle to the Romans. It needs also to discover the relation between this Gospel and its order, discipline, worship, and ethics; and for this it needs the 1st Epistle to the Corinthians. If it makes these discoveries, it may well find itself broken; and this may turn out to be meaning of the 2nd Epistle to the Corinthians... Yet an earthenware vessel that contains such treasure need not fear breaking; it is the apostolic vocation to carry about the killing of Jesus, and those who accept it are apt to find the funeral turned into a triumph, as they learn not to trust in themselves but in Him who raises the dead.

It is my prayer that you will find great help in this book for the issues and problems that face you as individuals, and for those that we face together as a body.

The opening three verses of the letter give Paul's greeting to the church.

## I. Paul's greeting to the church at Corinth (1:1-3)

Paul, called as an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Sosthenes, our brother, To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling, together with all who in every place, call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Cor 1:1-3 NASB)

Paul is writing this letter from Ephesus around A.D. 56. A description of the apostle's founding of the Corinthian church some five

years earlier is provided for us in Acts 18:1-18. He entered Corinth full of fear and trembling. In the second chapter of this letter he admits as much. In spite of his confidence in the power of the gospel, he was a bit shell-shocked by the savage opposition he had encountered in Macedonia a few weeks earlier. And it is certainly to be expected that he would be affected by the reputation of Corinth in the Mediterranean world. The fact that his companions, Silas and Timothy, were occupied in Macedonia, would not have made things any easier. Imagine beginning a ministry all by yourself in the city of San Francisco. Imagine trying to penetrate that city, all by yourself, with the gospel, and you probably have imagined a little of what the apostle felt as he entered Corinth.

As always, Paul initially preached in the synagogue, and he had some success in spite of opposition from the Jewish community. If you are familiar with the book of Acts, you will recognize the name Sosthenes in verse 1. He was at one time the ruler of the synagogue. Both he and the former ruler, Crispus, were converted. He is now with Paul in Ephesus.

Paul always looked back on his time in the city with great affection. He arrived feeling nothing but weakness; but he left having experienced the secret to all effective ministry—that God’s power is made perfect in weakness. He always felt close to the church in Corinth.

It had come to his attention that the church was struggling with a number of problems. He sent some men there to investigate these things and they had now come back to Paul, carrying a letter from the church. Though we do not have all the correspondence that passed between them, we can divide this letter into two parts. In the first six chapters, Paul deals with the problems the church was having. Then, beginning in chapter 7, he responds to questions which the church had asked concerning various issues.

There are a couple of observations I would like to make in the first three verses.

#### A. Our life as Christians is, in essence, a response to a call

In verse 2, Paul uses a number of pungent phrases to describe the church at Corinth. As you read on you begin to see an emphasis, in fact, a deliberate play on the word *call*, a theme which is central to Paul’s thinking, particularly in the opening paragraphs of the letter. Look at the text:

Verse 1: “Paul, *called* as an apostle.”

Verse 2: “to the church of God which is at Corinth, saints by *calling*, with all who in every place *call* upon the name of our Lord.”

Verse 9: “God is faithful, through whom you were *called* into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.”

Verses 23-24: “we preach Christ crucified...to those who are *called*...Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.”

Verse 26: “consider your *calling* brethren; that there were not many wise according the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble.”

Paul is conscious of this sense of God’s calling as he ponders the relationship between himself and the Corinthian church, and as he recollects the circumstances in which the Christian community came into being at Corinth. He is conscious of God’s initiative in his own call as an apostle and in the call of the Christians at Corinth, both individually and corporately.

We might paraphrase the apostle’s words this way: “God called me to be an apostle, God called each one of you to be saints, to

enjoy the fellowship of His son, Jesus.” If God hadn’t initiated this call, this would not be so. That is so important for us to remember. We become so caught up in all we need to do we forget that what we are about is all wrapped up in responding to God. He has called us. He has wooed us to himself. As many of our men have testified this morning, this was the theme of our Men’s Retreat last week. The Christian life is, in essence, a response to a call. Everything we are and everything we do is a response to that call.

Peter Marshall, who served as Chaplain of the United States Senate in the late ’40’s, was an extremely gifted preacher. One of his most powerful sermons was entitled “The Tap on the Shoulder.” The following excerpt illustrates so well this idea of calling.

...if you were walking down the street, and someone came up behind you and tapped you on the shoulder...what would you do? Naturally, you would turn around. Well, that is exactly what happens in the spiritual world. A man walks on though life—with the external call ringing in his ears, but with no response stirring in his heart, and then suddenly, without any warning, the Spirit taps him on the shoulder. The tap on the shoulder is the almighty power of God acting without help or hindrance...so as to produce a new creature, and to lead him into the particular work which God has for him.

At the retreat last weekend we had the privilege of seeing four men respond to that tap on the shoulder. There may be some here this morning who have heard that call ringing in their ears for a long time, but perhaps today you will feel that tap on the shoulder.

This calling has not only affected us personally but has dramatically changed our relationships as well. The word translated “church” in verse 2, *ekklesia*, means literally, “a company of those called out; the called-out ones” All those who hear God’s call and respond are members of the *ekklesia* of God. They have been set apart by God in that call and are reserved for Jesus Christ (sanctified in Christ Jesus). We are who we are because God has initiated the action. He has set us apart for himself. We are special and different. He has called us, and we can no longer cavalierly drift off to follow whatever voice we hear. Jesus said, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them and they follow me.” We belong to him. He has given us a new name: We are “a holy nation, a people for his possession.” He has chosen us.

That is why Paul does not talk about his church but of the church of God. He was as responsible for the birth and life of that church as it is possible for one human to be; but it was God’s church, not Paul’s. It is a healthy corrective to note Paul’s example. Many problems in a church revolve around a selfish possessiveness. No individual Christian or group of Christians has any special claim on Jesus. He is *both their Lord and ours*.

Let me make one other point.

#### B. Our call to salvation is a call to service

This is what it means to be sanctified, to be set apart for a special use. God has called us for a purpose. For Paul himself there was no distinction in time between his call to be a saint and his call to be an apostle. The one included the other; the former was something he shared with others, and the latter something that set him apart from others. When God called Paul from his persecution of believers, he called him into his apostolic ministry. That vocation was not a second call after his initial call.

In a very real sense, that is true for all Christians. Our appointed ministry is part of what it means to be saved. People sometimes ask me how one can know if he has been “called into the ministry.” What they mean by that is they are looking for some special experi-

ence, a sense that God has anointed them for a specific duty. We are all called into ministry when we were called out of this world and into his kingdom. I personally have never had a “call” to the ministry in the sense of having some experience. I had read most of the New Testament before I became a Christian, and when I finally responded to that call, I knew it was going to radically affect every future decision I would make. I knew that God wanted every part of my life. I did not even know what a pastor was when I responded to his call.

I believe we were all called into ministry when we were called into salvation by God. At salvation we are given spiritual gifts, divine abilities to serve. It may take some time to discover these gifts, and certainly it will take time to find the appropriate ministries in which to use them, but each Christian is called to serve.

Of course, Paul’s call to be an apostle was different from the other apostles. That was one reason his ministry was called into question by the Corinthians. He was harassed and had to establish his credentials before them. Although we don’t face that kind of struggle it is good to remember that our call to salvation is a call to service.

After his initial greeting, Paul expresses his confidence in the church’s future. Verses 4-9:

## II. Paul’s confidence in the church at Corinth (1:4-9)

**I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus, that in everything you were enriched in Him, in all speech and all knowledge even as the testimony concerning Christ was confirmed in you, so that you are not lacking in any gift, awaiting eagerly the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ, who shall also confirm you to the end, blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. (1:4-9)**

I was taken aback by Paul’s initial words to the Corinthian church. We know from reading the letters that it was a mess. Many Corinthians had been won to Christ, and the church was large. It was full of cliques, each following a different personality. Many were snobbish. At fellowship meals the rich stayed together and the poor were left alone. There was very little church discipline, either morally or doctrinally. There was a lack of humility and respect for others. Some were taking other believers to court. Others were celebrating their new freedom in Christ without the slightest regard for the conscience of their fellow believers. In general, they were very excited over the dramatic gifts of the Spirit, and were lacking in love which was rooted in the truth. This is the church Paul greets.

I was reminded of how similar this is to most churches. Even those churches with glowing reputations are well known by those on the inside to be full of weaknesses and sin. I remember how much in awe Kathy and I were when we came to PBC, but I was soon to discover that it had its own share of weaknesses. My first clue should have been when they hired me! We somehow think when we are dissatisfied with one church that if we attended another we wouldn’t have these struggles. The problem with that is, you are going to take all of your problems into that perfect church you dreamed of.

I was struck by Paul’s words: Paul looks at the Corinthian church as it is *in Christ Jesus* before he looks at anything else that is true of the church. How different that is from us. We examine the problems and lament over them. We look at everyone’s weaknesses before we look at what God has done in their lives. Often there is no vision of what God has already done in Christ. If we removed these nine verses

from the letter, it would be impossible to come away with anything but a pessimistic view of the Corinthian church. The statements of faith, hope and love that occur frequently through the letter would have no context, and would merely be pious dreams.

For lack of this kind of vision today the ministry of the church in many places has stagnated. Believers have no real expectation of significant spiritual growth because they have no sense of what God has already done in their lives. But unless we realize all that God has done for us already, and all the resources that are ours in him, all we will come away with is some hollow exhortation to more effort, more prayer or more faith—because those seem to be the right things.

We don’t need more activity. What we need is simply an understanding of the implications of our calling. God has called us into a very significant relationship, one that has changed us completely. We are no longer the same. Once we were dead, now we are alive. Once we depended on our own resources, now we have the Spirit of God residing within. He motivates and equips us for everything we need.

In spite of all these provisions the Corinthians were failing to understand how to apply these resources to their everyday life. And so they were struggling with divisions and strife that had escalated into lawsuits, sexual immorality, and other things. They needed a wake-up call. Instead of the church making an impact on the city, the city was making an impact on the church. Instead of the church being in the world, the world was in the church. Peter Marshall also made this statement concerning contemporary Christians: “Christians are like deep sea divers encased in suits designed for many fathoms deep, marching bravely forth to pull plugs out of bath tubs.”

So Paul wrote this letter as a wake-up call. It is a reminder of who we are and the resources that are ours as a result. Maybe you find yourselves here this morning simply going through the motions of being at church, with no real expectation of growth to maturity. But you are radically different from what you once were: You are a new creature in Christ. I encourage you to take a fresh look at who you are.

As we read these verses, take note of Paul’s confidence in the church at Corinth. It is based on God’s faithfulness and generosity.

There are two principles here.

### A. Our confidence is based on God’s generosity—He has given us every resource

These opening verses remind us of the tremendous resources that are ours in Christ. For instance:

Verse 4: “the grace of God...which was given you.”

Verse 5: “in everything you were enriched in Him.”

Verse 7: “so that you are not lacking in any gift.”

These statements speak of the lavish generosity of God towards these redeemed sinners at Corinth. Throughout this letter, Paul reminds these believers of the resources that are theirs in Christ, the wealth of power that is available to God’s people. That wealth is summed up so well in the word “grace”—God’s investment of himself in us. In giving us his son Jesus, God has given us all he has. He can give us no more. We have everything in him.

The word for “enriched” in verse 5 is the word from which we get the word “plutocrat,” which means a very wealthy person. The Corinthians were spiritually wealthy, particularly in two areas—in speech and in knowledge. They were gifted Bible students—able to

apprehend intellectually the meaning of the Scriptures—and they were extremely eloquent—able to express that knowledge in words. In fact, Paul goes on to say that they were not lacking in any gift. Corinth was an exciting place to be a Christian.

It is important to note that these statements are made about the church at Corinth, not about individual believers. If we are to know the fullness of God's blessing, if we are to experience all the gifts of his grace which are ours in Christ, it has to be together in fellowship. And as we focus on the richness of his grace these gifts will become a greater reality among us. Paul reminds us also in verse 7 that we need to keep our eyes fixed for our Lord's revealing. That kind of hope will motivate to move forward those destined to become the bride of Christ, because it is then (and only then) on that wedding day, that we shall enter into the full reality of all that is ours in Christ.

Notice one other thing.

**B. Our confidence is based on God's faithfulness—He has assured us of our destiny**

Not only is Paul positive about the present resources of the church of God at Corinth, he also confident for its future. Whatever ups and downs it might face, Paul is sure of the faithfulness of God. God has called them into the fellowship of his Son; he will *confirm* them to the end. If we have been called on the initiative of God himself to share in his Son, Jesus Christ, then God will not abandon us or go back on his promises. That is the force of the word *faithful*. We can totally depend on God. He is not a man. He cannot deny himself. He will keep his word. The church is God's responsibility. He is committed to the perfecting of the saints.

God's terminus is not merely the end of each individual's life-span, which he certainly guards with personal care, but the "day of our Lord Jesus Christ." God's faithfulness extends to that day, and beyond it into the fullness of eternity. He will keep his people *blameless* in that day, the day when the secrets of men's hearts, all of our thoughts and motives, are disclosed. If there is any day when we might have had legitimate fear of being finally found guilty before him, it is that day. But God will ensure that absolutely no charge or accusation is laid against his people, whether by human beings, or by Satan, the great "accuser of the brethren." It is Jesus who matters on that day. It is his day. He calls the tune. He determines the issues. Because we have called to share in Jesus, we will share in his supremacy on that day. What a wonderful sense of confidence that should bring to us!

I pray that in the weeks ahead we will come to understand our calling. It has great implications in our lives. I pray also that as we will come to view one another with that sense of calling, we will learn to see one another first as we are in Christ.

Father, thank you so much for that sense of confidence that is ours through you. Thank you for tapping us on the shoulder, and inclining our ear to your voice. We are your sheep. We need you. Without your loving care we tend to stray. Keep us better attuned to your voice, and ever mindful that you are our Good Shepherd. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

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1 Corinthians 11:10-17

Second Message

Gary Vanderet

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# CONFRONTING CLIQUES IN THE CHURCH

*SERIES: EXAMINING LIFE IN THE LOCAL CHURCH*

The hymns we sang this morning articulate so beautifully the calling that is ours as Christians, that calling the apostle Paul emphasized in his introduction to First Corinthians. Unfortunately, however, our conduct sometimes betrays our calling. This is probably what led someone to write the following parody on the hymn "Onward Christian Soldiers":

Like a mighty turtle moves the church of God.  
Brethren we are treading where we've always trod.  
We are much divided; many bodies we;  
Strong in truth and doctrine; weak in purity.

I am reminded of a story I heard about a man was walking by a used book store. He happened to look in the display window and a certain book, entitled *How to Hug*, caught his eye. He was feeling a bit lonely and, being of a romantic nature, he thought to himself "That's what I need." He went inside to look further, but to his dismay discovered that the book was the eleventh volume of an encyclopedia, covering the subjects "How-Hug"!

When I heard that, I thought to myself that is a lot like the local church. People come into a church with deep needs. They often feel lonely, discouraged and confused. They expect to find help, but instead are sometimes treated to an encyclopedic, academic, theological treatise on a kind of love that means very little in the lives of the people present. The Christianity they see looks more like a philosophy than a personal relationship with God.

That too was the struggle in the church at Corinth. It seems the Corinthians had begun to view Christianity as a new philosophy (a "wisdom," they called it). They regarded apostles as itinerant philosophers. The church had over time developed a cold, academic, sterile atmosphere.

Ever since Apollos (and probably Peter) had visited the church the Corinthians had begun to pick sides, some preferring one man over another. Paul is very concerned about this matter of division in the church. In fact, he will take four chapters to deal with this problem of disunity. He will explain to the Corinthians what divine wisdom really is, and he will correct their view of Christian teachers, showing that they are not philosophers who are competing with one another but rather servants of the same God.

This morning we will examine the beginning of Paul's argument. From it we will gain help in examining the causes and cures to schisms in the church. The apostle opens with a powerful appeal for unity. Verse 10:

## I. Defining our unity: A powerful exhortation (1:10)

Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree, and there be no divisions among you, but you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment. (1 Cor 1:10 NASB)

Notice the urgency and the emotion of the apostle as he enters upon his subject with a tender appeal. As we saw last week, Paul held a very high view of the church. This is why he is hurt and distressed to have discovered division in the body.

Unity among Christians is a very important matter. Paul stresses this throughout his letters. This too was the our Lord's major concern for the church on the night before his crucifixion. He told his disciples that their love for one another would be the mark by which people would know that they belonged to him. Our unity was what he prayed for in his high priestly prayer, in John 17. This is why Paul addresses first the matter of disunity in the church in Corinth. Many other problems in the church surfaced due to these divisions.

Along with his appeal, the apostle shows in this verse the basis for our unity. Notice that the ground of his appeal is the unity that is already ours in Christ. That ground, of course, is the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. No other person could take such a diverse group of people from such different backgrounds, different races, different personalities, and bind them together. No other person could take the different individuals in this room and bind them together as one. If Jesus Christ by his grace has called us and made us one, and if we share in him, then we must learn to become what we are. We share a common life.

Notice that Paul calls the Corinthians *brethren*. We do not just belong to the same organization, we are part of the same family. We are brothers and sisters. It is our relationship to Christ that binds us together. Notice also the phrases Paul uses in his appeal in verse 11: "that you all agree" (literally, "say the same thing"); that "you be made complete." It is interesting that this phrase "that you all agree" was found on the gravestone of a first century couple to describe the harmonious relationship they shared. That is the relationship that we are to share in the body of Christ. Paul is about to describe four cliques that have formed in Corinth. His appeal is that these groups work together; that each has an emphasis that the body needs, and each must not allow their different emphases to produce division.

The phrase, that "you be made complete," is the same word used in the gospels for the mending of fishing nets. It was used in medical literature for the knitting back together of broken bones. It is also used in Ephesians 4 to describe the role of a pastor as he equips the saints, as he brings them together, shapes them up and mends them. It means "to be perfectly joined together." It pictures a mosaic or a puzzle where every piece fits and there is no break, no disharmony. Maturity in the Christian life is not merely a personal matter; it is also a corporate issue. It is the process of learning to function together as a body in love.

Notice that the call here is not to uniformity, but to harmony. We are not called to think alike about everything: raising our children the same way, reading the same books, thinking alike politically, having the same hobbies. Unity is not loving the same things but pos-

sessing the same love. The same mind we are called to is the mind of Christ.

The oneness of mind that Paul calls us to is described well in Philippians 2, where he reveals to us the mind of Christ:

**Have this mind in you which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! (Phil 2:5-8)**

That is the mind we are called to share. It is the mindset of learning to give up our rights and humbly value each other's opinion and judgment as much as we value our own. It is then that we will speak the same things, as we both exalt Christ together. It is the opposite of the selfish pursuit of our own interests, which produces quarrels.

Supposing we could bring together different believers from different generations who have impacted the world for Christ. Let's say Augustine, Bernard of Clairvaux, John Calvin, John Wesley, George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards and Charles Spurgeon were here this morning. There is one thing we could say for certain: They would not be in unanimous agreement on very many things. Yet, in the midst of all their diverse personalities, their gifts and theological distinctives, they would be unified in their diversity, as each would lift up Christ and focus on him.

John Wesley and George Whitefield were friends in their earlier years. As a matter of fact, it was Whitefield who encouraged Wesley to begin his preaching ministry. As time went on they disagreed, however. Whitefield leaned toward Calvinism, and Wesley toward Arminianism. When Whitefield died, someone asked Wesley if he expected to see Dr. Whitefield in heaven. Wesley answered, "No. He will be so near the throne of God that men like me will never even get a glimpse of him." Though all their differences these men never lost their sense of oneness in Christ.

It is harmony, unity in the midst of diversity which is the goal of the church. The church is designed to be a symphony, but when everyone insists that their particular role or emphasis is the only true emphasis, and does whatever they want to do in spite of how it effects others, the symphony becomes a cacophony. That is when the world laughs at the church. An orchestra made up of any one instrument could never produce the beautiful chords that strike our hearts so deeply. The same is true of God's congregational orchestra. It needs all the different instruments playing the full score to produce a rich, harmonious sound, one that is pleasing to his ears.

Having defined the church's unity, Paul now goes on to describe the Corinthian cliques.

## II. Describing the cliques: A discouraging situation (1:11-12)

**For I have been informed concerning you, my brethren, by Chloe's people, that there are quarrels among you. Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, "I am of Paul," and "I am of Apollos, and "I am of Cephas," and "I am of Christ." (1:11-12)**

We are not exactly sure what caused the divisions in Corinth, but we will discover some causes that are implicit in the text. These believers had taken their eyes off the Lord Jesus and they had begun to depend on men. Personality cults were emerging, focusing on three major figures in the early church. We might add that these groupings formed with no encouragement from either Paul, Apollos or Peter.

Four cliques had developed within the congregation. Each had its own slogans. Each rallied their support around one personality or another, although they had not broken away to form new churches. It will be beneficial for us to spend time looking at the nature of each clique because in a very real sense each manifests itself in the church throughout history, and they are present in the church today.

It is significant that Paul mentions personalities, not theological issues. I believe what often happens in churches is that differences grow around personalities, and afterwards become focused on doctrinal disputes. There may well be genuine doctrinal disagreement, but strife occurs because personal relationships are not good. When the love of God is allowed to control relationships, then the area of disagreement gets put in the proper perspective and no strife results. As we go through these four, see if you can identify any sources of temptation to division in your own life.

### A. The Paul Party

For many in Corinth there were natural reasons to be strongly attached to Paul. In chapter 4 Paul calls himself their "father in Jesus Christ through the gospel." He had brought them to faith, and they were forever grateful. The transformation they had experienced in their lives, from the darkness of sin to the light of God's grace, made them appreciate Paul's ministry. Whatever the apostle said, this group immediately responded and accepted it verbatim.

We can understand how this happens. We all have significant people in our lives who were in on the ground floor of our conversion or spiritual growth; people who have had a tremendous impact in our lives, and when they speak, we listen. David Roper was our speaker this year at the Men's Retreat. He had a significant influence in many lives in this congregation, and upon two men in particular on our staff, Brian Morgan and Steve Zeisler. A number of us were having brunch together on the last morning of the retreat and Steve was at our table. I asked how everyone was responding to what was being taught. A few shared how much the weekend had meant in their life but Steve's comment stuck with me. His answer was, "Dave could read the phone book and I would be on the edge of my seat!"

Every pastor of a church that has a great history behind it has discovered a Paul Party in their church. They have taken their eyes off Jesus and begun to think back on the good old days, what things were like "when so-and-so was here," what he would have said, etc. That is the Paul party.

### B. The Apollos Party

We do not have a great deal of information on Apollos, but what we do know is sufficient to give us a clear portrait surrounding this clique. According to Acts 18, Apollos came from Alexandria in Egypt, the most respected university city in the Mediterranean. The text speaks very highly of his gifts and abilities: His intellect, eloquence, expository skill in the Old Testament, his accurate teaching about Jesus, his enthusiasm and boldness in preaching as he confronted the Jews in public. It is not surprising that he would immediately attract a following, especially in Corinth, which placed such an emphasis on intellect and eloquence. The Book of Acts tells us that he had a great teaching ministry with young believers in Christ. There are some who feel that, with his intellectual background, this man was responsible for introducing an intellectual elite into the Corinthian church. Young Christians can certainly be seduced into personality cults centered on the gifts and abilities of impressive speakers, especially strong teachers. People began to compare Apollos with the apostle, who certainly could hold his own intellectually, and in his

mastery of the Old Testament, but who by his own admission did not possess great eloquence.

### C. The Peter Party

Those belonging to this group might well have said, “We don’t know about Paul and Apollos, but let’s get back to the beginnings. Peter was one of the first apostles whom Jesus himself called. We’re on solid ground with him.” These people probably represented Jewish Christianity in some form. Peter may have visited Corinth once, and some of his followers may have made follow-up visits to push his concerns. It is obvious in reading this book that there were certainly some there who had legalistic tendencies. For instance, read the debate about eating food offered to idols in chapters 8-10. Galatians 10 records that Peter and Paul had a clash about food laws, and the “kosher” issue may have continued to be troublesome in their relationship. In the midst of the immorality and license of the Corinthian church the tendency to return to legalism probably was strong.

When one is saved out of an utterly pagan lifestyle into the freedom of the gospel, that early freedom in Christ can easily turn into legalism. As one Bible teacher said, “Many Christians feel secure in straitjackets.” The temptation with people in this group is to begin to measure spirituality by outward evidence. We must be careful to not reduce to a set of rules what it means to be a Christian.

### D. The Christ Party

This fourth group, though sounding very spiritual, is probably the worst of the four. It is quite likely that the forming of the other three had led to this fourth group, to whom “hero-worship” was sickening. In their self-righteous smugness, they asked, “Who needs leaders anyway? Christ is our leader. He is the head of the body. We will depend on him and listen to him—not Peter or Paul or Apollos or anyone else. Jesus will let us know his will.”

This group is difficult to deal with because they can be intimidating. They act like they have a hotline to God, and this makes others feel inferior in their presence. People feel inadequate because they don’t have that kind of intimacy in prayer, that kind of certainty about God’s will. There is also an air of spiritual superiority with this group that is communicated with phrases like, “The Lord told me this or that.”

But when you examine this group further, you discover that the real problem at times is an insecurity that manifests itself in a resistance to being told what to do. They find they need to support what they say with some subjective experience—and these experiences are not up for evaluation. It may have been this mystical group that gave impetus to gnostic tendencies in the church at Corinth. It is this group that will most often break off and form their own church because they begin to feel that the average church just is not spiritual enough.

It is obvious that these same issues still divide people today. The temptations to do so are right here in this body. Some become emotionally attached to a teacher who has greatly helped them. They come to church only when he teaches. They have become accustomed to having their spiritual food served in one particular way. They respond only when he says something because he says it the “right” way: “Nobody can say it like Brian Morgan. I’m only going to buy Brian’s tapes,” etc. That temptation to act like this is right here among us. When Ray Stedman retires in May, we will have to fight the temptation to say, “That is not how Ray would have said it.”

Some of us like particular styles of worship. We have strong feelings about what we like and dislike. Certain doctrinal issues are important to some, and they feel those need to be emphasized more often. We could go on. But when any Christian or group of Christians becomes absorbed with one aspect of the truth to the neglect or exclusion of the whole truth as it is in Jesus, then the danger point has been reached. This is what Paul is warning against. We ought never to gather around one particular truth or one particular person. When we do, we’re in for trouble. I appreciate so much the healthy diversity we have here at PBC. We are free to be who God has called us to be, and to express the gifts that God has given us. I pray that we will never lose that.

In verses 13-17 Paul shows us what is wrong with these kind of divisions.

## III. Directing our focus: A compelling argument (1:13-17)

**Has Christ been divided? Paul was not crucified for you, was he? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, that no man should say you were baptized in my name. Now I did baptize also the household of Stephanus; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized any other. For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not in cleverness of speech, that the cross of Christ should not be made void. (1:13-17)**

Notice that the entirety of Paul’s reasoning against disunity focuses on Jesus Christ. It is still true today that most divisions arise because we focus our eyes on someone or something other than our Lord.

In verse 13 Paul asks three rhetorical questions, each of which gives us a clue to his reasoning, and why these divisions are wrong. I will phrase each question into an exhortation to help us apply it.

### A. Focus on His completeness

*Is Christ divided?* The word “divided” literally means, “to divide and distribute, to parcel out.” Paul asks, “Do you suppose there are fragments of Christ that can be distributed among the various groups?” There is only one, undivided Christ. If you have him, you have all of him. We cannot divide him up. That is why I get uncomfortable with phrases like, “I want more of Christ,” or, “I wish God would pour out more of his Spirit.” It is as if he came in doses.

We don’t need more of Christ. He needs more of us. The Spirit is not poured out like something out of a bottle. He is either living in us or he is not. Jesus is a person. What we should seek is not to get more of the Spirit, or more of Christ, but to allow him to have more of us. We are the broken ones whom Christ is making whole and complete. Let us focus on his completeness.

### B. Focus on His sacrifice

*Was Paul crucified for you?* The Corinthians owed their new life Jesus. It was he who died for their sins, not Paul or Apollos or any human being. There is no single teacher who can help us be forgiven of one sin. No one can heal the hurt of a broken heart, or supply the adequacy needed to someone who feels worthless. There is only one Savior, and his work was completed on the cross. The cross is the only place where true unity can take place among men and women. The cross of Christ will heal the disunity of Christians no matter where they find themselves.

When we understand the meaning of the cross, we will find all our divisions disappearing. The cross of Christ cuts across all hu-

man value systems. As someone has said, the ground is level at the cross. We are all equal there. T. S. Elliot suggested that the reason the cocktail glass has become so important is that the communion cup has lost its meaning. Communion is a sacrament of reconciliation. That is why disunity is such a serious matter. The communion cup reminds us of the special relationship we share because of the work of the cross.

### C. Focus on His Lordship

*Were you baptized in the name of Paul?* To be baptized into the name of someone is to be identified with that person. It means one has come under their authority and belongs to them. Paul is saying that in baptism we are declaring our allegiance to Jesus Christ and proclaiming that we have become his possession.

It seems there was some misunderstanding over this symbol of baptism. Paul wants to clarify that there is no mystical relationship between the baptized and the baptizer. Instead, he takes every believer back to their own baptism and reminds them that it was no empty ceremony, rather it was a picture of their total dedication to the Lordship of Christ. The significance of the sacrament is what is important, not the manner in which it was administered.

As we focus on Christ's completeness, his cross and his Lordship, we will express the unity that is ours in Christ. This is my prayer for us: that instead of glaring at each other's weaknesses we might focus on worshipping our common Strength.

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Catalog No. 781

1 Corinthians 1:18-31

Third Message

Gary Vanderet

February 18, 1990

# THE CROSS AND THE WISDOM OF GOD

*SERIES: EXAMINING LIFE IN THE LOCAL CHURCH*

Early in the 1980's, *Fortune* magazine published an article entitled "On the Fast Track to the Good Life." The story described the modern young entrepreneur, and gave research findings on the attitudes and values of 25-year-olds who were taking their places in the business world. The purpose of the research was to give readers an idea of what to expect from young adults during the next decade. Talk about an accurate crystal ball! One man has summarized the results in the following six observations:

1. These young people believe that a successful life means financial independence and that the best way to gain financial independence is to be at the top of a major corporation.
2. They believe in themselves. They believe that they have the abilities and capacities to be the best. There is no "humble talk" among them.
3. They believe in the corporate world. They are sure that the corporations they would lead are the most worthwhile corporations in the world.
4. They view as "a drag on success" any relationship that slows their ascent of the corporate ladder. Marriage is an acceptable option only if it does not interfere with their aspirations for success. Having children, for most of them, is something to which they will have to give a great deal of thought.
5. Loyalty is not high on their list of values. Unlike "The Organization Man," described by William Whyte Jr. in his book of the same name during the '50's, the young Turks of this new breed have their resumes ever at hand. They are ready to move from one company to another and believe that loyalty to one company could lead to staying in a system that might not maximize upward mobility.
6. They are convinced that they are more creative and imaginative than those who now hold top corporate positions, and they believe that there is not much they can learn from those older types before they take their places.

That attitude reflects the spirit of our age, and well portrays what the apostle Paul calls in his first Corinthian letter the "wisdom of the world." These young men would feel right at home in Corinth, with its exaltation of the human mind and its love of philosophies and status symbols, things which were producing division in the church in that city. The fact that the Corinthians boasted in party slogans is a clear indication that they overvalued human wisdom and misunderstood the nature of the gospel.

Last week we talked of the importance of our unity as a body of believers and of discovering the mind of Christ. This process involves "unlearning" the wisdom of the world as much as it does absorbing the wisdom of God. I don't think we appreciate how much we have been influenced by the secularism of our age. We need to become aware of and deal with this because it is a serious threat not only to the gospel but to the church as well. In our last study we saw that

it is the cross that heals our divisions. As we will see this morning, however, secular wisdom subtly empties the cross of its power.

In our passage, from 1:18-31, Paul contrasts this wisdom of the world with the wisdom of God. In verses 18-25 we will come to understand the centrality of the cross in discerning between these two wisdoms. In verses 25-31 the apostle illustrates this truth by showing us that our own lives are testimony to the fact that God does indeed work through weakness.

## I. The wisdom of God explained: The word of the Cross (1:18-25)

**For the word of the cross is to those who are perishing foolishness, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written:**

**"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise;  
and the cleverness of the clever I will set aside."**

Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block, and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. (1 Cor 1:18-25 NASB)

The theme of this section is the cross as the wisdom and the power of God, in contrast to the wisdom and power of the world.

Paul has already said he has been sent to preach the gospel. That has triggered his thoughts, because he knows immediately that he is faced with a decision about its content. He is faced with a choice between the "words of human wisdom" and the "cross of Christ." If he were to choose human wisdom the cross would be destroyed (1:17). So he chooses the cross, which he knows to be foolishness to those who are perishing, but at the same time it is the power of God to those who are being saved (1:18). *Powerless wisdom or foolish power:* it was and still is a fateful choice. The one combination which is not an option is the wisdom of the world plus the power of God. This is the choice we are faced with every day of our lives. I pray this will become clearer for all of us as a result of our study this morning.

We can summarize the wisdom of God and the wisdom of the world as follows: God's wisdom centers on the cross and symbolizes divine dependence; the world's wisdom centers on intellect and eloquence and symbolizes human rebellion.

But I don't think we feel the power of that symbol of the cross in our day. Many people wear the cross as a symbol around their necks.

We have become so familiar with it we have lost the sense of horror it represented for people in the first century. Ray Stedman once said we would better understand the cross if we substituted for it a symbol of an electric chair. Supposing we had an electric chair mounted on the wall here. Supposing all churches had electric chairs on the top of their steeples, or if those who wear crosses around their necks substituted an electric chair instead. We need to remember that Jesus Christ was crucified on that Roman gibbet. God's wisdom is seen in the Messiah hanging on a tree.

The cross is central in Paul's mind because it represents the basic difference between human and divine wisdom. In fact it is the cross that separates humanity into two camps: those who are being saved and those who are perishing. Although it is not obvious by outward appearances the fact remains, according to Scripture, that there are only two kinds of people; and the element that produces the divergence between those two groups is the cross.

Why is the cross so critical? When we begin to understand the meaning of the cross, we will know why. The cross makes a judgment on human life. When we say we believe in the cross, we are admitting that God substituted himself for our wickedness. The sinless One died in our place. The cross condemns my righteousness. It tells me that I am a sinner and that I am in need of a Savior. The cross declares that all my abilities and intellect and good works are deeply marred and therefore worthless. That is the word of the cross, and thus it is an offense to those who are perishing; a crude, absurd attack on their pride. But to those who are being saved the cross is the key that opens the gate to all of God's blessings in human life. The cross is the way to experience forgiveness, healing, wholeness, peace and joy.

I would like to make two observations from the text we have just read that will help us understand the importance of the cross in discerning the difference between God's wisdom and the wisdom of the world.

#### A. The Cross reminds us that God's wisdom is never acquired through human ingenuity

The gospel is not a product of human philosophy. In fact it involves a reversal of human expectation. Who would have thought that God would work through the scandal of the cross? Only God could demonstrate his power through a dying, powerless "criminal."

But Paul tells us that this is not a new thought. This has always been the way God has worked. He has never depended on human ingenuity. To illustrate his point, the apostle quotes a verse from Isaiah 29. Judah was being invaded by the Assyrians, and King Hezekiah called in the politicians and the intellectuals to discuss this dilemma. Their advice was that the only way to survive was to make an alliance with Egypt, a pagan nation. Sign a mutual defense treaty, they suggested. They were planning and acting out a scheme that completely ignored the transcendent God. Then God spoke through the prophet Isaiah and announced that he would deliver his people without any help from their so-called intellectuals. Isaiah goes on to record how God did that very thing. The Assyrian army came right up to the gates and surrounded the city, but God sent an angel who killed 185,000 Assyrians that very night. The rest of the pagan army fled in fear. God did exactly what he said he would do. He did not need any human help. He had set aside the cleverness of the wise.

Paul asks, "Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age?" Here he uses three terms that describe all the learned of the world, and asks, "Where are they?" He is not

asking for their address. He is asking what is the real value of human wisdom. What real standing does it give to you? How much value can be discerned by the degrees you have? How much trust should we put in men to solve their own problems? None, is Paul's implied answer.

Maybe there is an Assyrian crouching at your doorstep this morning demanding your surrender. It could be a difficult marriage, a debilitating illness with endless hospital bills, an immoral relationship. Who you are going to turn to for help? There are all kinds of people whom you can ask for human advice, but Paul's counsel is turn to the transcendent God who can help you.

Referring to the foolishness of this kind of wisdom, Paul in no way underestimates its impact. It is a subtle threat that strikes at the very heart of our message. He clearly admits the effectiveness of human wisdom. Notice the phrases he uses to describe it. In 1:17 he describes as *cleverness of speech*; in 1:19 He calls it the *cleverness of the clever*; in 2:1 he says he did not come with *superiority of speech or of wisdom*; in 2:4 he says his message and his preaching were not in *persuasive words of wisdom*. One of the ways you can detect human wisdom is by its emphasis on eloquent, persuasive presentation with its surplus of words.

Paul was not against the right use of persuasive arguments. He often used them himself. But he constantly discounted the dependence on persuasive speech alone for transformation. Throughout the pastoral epistles in his counsel to Timothy he explained the futility of endless verbal debates. He told him to look for changed lives: faith, love and purity. He told him to avoid the kind of religion that sounds religious but in essence was as myths, speculations, vain discussions, quarrels and stupid controversies. Such wisdom can achieve a lot of things. It can impress people and earn accolades, but because it is nothing but words it can never meet our deepest needs; it can never satisfy a hungry soul.

This was the kind of wisdom that walked the streets of Corinth, the kind that filled the boardrooms where decisions were being made. The Greeks were intoxicated with fine words. And, unfortunately, this had infiltrated the church. Christians were glorying in men and comparing each other's gifts.

We need to say at this point that Paul is not condemning knowledge or the pursuit of knowledge. God always encourages the discovery of truth. Christianity is not anti-intellectual. God gives us minds to use, and they are not to be set aside when we become Christians. To give yourself to the wonder of discovery in the fields of medicine, physics and psychology is perfectly right and good. But there is a distinction between human knowledge and wisdom. Wisdom is a skill. Wisdom is the ability to use knowledge and truth. And the Scripture says that there is something terribly wrong with human wisdom. It does not know how to use the truth it uncovers. It becomes obvious if you are well read that many secular writers surpass Christians in their discovery of truth. But the truth they discover is often misused, twisted and distorted. They end up worse than they were before they began their search.

It is this kind of intellectual pursuit that caused T. S. Elliot to write,

All our knowledge brings us closer to our ignorance.  
All our ignorance brings us nearer to death.  
But nearness to death, no nearer to God.  
Where is the life we have lost in living?

That is why you ought to be careful that you do not begin to worship human wisdom. The true nature of human wisdom is foolishness, says Paul. You young men and women who are about to go off to college need to understand this. You will be hearing from professors with persuasive arguments about the truth they have discovered. But listen for their application of the truth they know. It may sound impressive, it may radiate optimism, but in the final analysis it changes nothing. That is why every generation wrestles with the same problems. It is the Scriptures that put the discovery of truth in its proper perspective.

Here is a second observation on this passage.

### **B. The Cross reminds us that God's wisdom is obtained only through repentance and faith**

Isn't it amazing that in spite of man's claims to have penetrated the secrets of life he has failed to discover the greatest fact of all—God himself. On the contrary, whenever he comes across an inkling of the fact of God he suppresses it.

Despite man's denial of God, however, Paul says that man attempts to construct a way to God, in one of two ways. The Jews wanted irrefutable evidence and tangible proof, so they demanded a sign. Their idea of a Messiah was a victorious King reigning in majesty. A Messiah hanging on a tree was a stumbling block, a scandal. Deuteronomy said, "cursed is every one who hangs on a tree." To the Jew, a crucified Messiah was a contradiction in terms.

Whereas the Jews wanted signs, the Greeks sought wisdom. They preferred to speculate their way to God. They loved to reason and argue. Their God was a stoic philosopher who had no feelings. They argued that God could not feel. That God would become a man did not make sense, never mind that he would suffer and die. For the Son of God to be born in human form, then to grow up into manhood virtually unrecognized, to quietly go about doing good and healing sicknesses, to surrender his life to wicked men and die a criminal's death of crucifixion defied their human understanding. It didn't make sense. It was non-sense, foolishness, stupidity!

Paul indicates that this worldly wisdom arose out of man's rebellion against God, his refusal to bow his knee to God, and his determination to make God fit his criteria and needs. But God has chosen to set aside the searchings, the demands of proud, stubborn men and confront them with a simple story of a crucified Messiah. As long as man clings tenaciously to his own criteria he will continue to go around in circles on the spiral that descends ultimately to destruction.

The key question in Paul's mind to both Jew and Greek, and the key question for all of us this morning, is: Do you want to be saved or do you want to perish? Will you continue to hang on to your demand for signs rather than asking to be saved? Will you perish in your endless pursuit of wisdom instead of admitting that you need a Savior? It is to this issue of eternity in our souls that God addresses the word of the cross.

C. S. Lewis wrote:

It is hardly complimentary to God that we should choose him as an alternative to hell. Yet even this He accepts. The creature's illusion of self-sufficiency must, for the creature's sake, be shattered. And by trouble, or fear of trouble on earth, by crude fear of the eternal flames, God shatters it, unmindful of his glory's diminution. I call this "divine humility," because it's a poor thing to strike our colors to God when the ship is going down under us, a poor thing to come to Him as a last resort, to offer up our own when it is no longer worth keeping. If

God were proud, he would hardly have us on such terms. But He is not proud. He stoops to conquer. He would have us even though we have shown that we prefer everything else to Him, and come to Him because there is nothing better to be had.

It is human wisdom that has inflated man to the condition where he is unable to admit his need for a Savior, to talk about such things as eternal destruction, to bring him to his knees and cause him to say, "Lord, save me!" God has made himself unknown and unknowable by means of human wisdom. He has decided to save, not those who are particularly gifted intellectually, or who do good, or who work to the best of their ability, but those *who believe* in this crucified Christ. When you bow your knee to Jesus Christ as Lord, then and only then you begin to taste God's power to save.

We can see even more clearly God's wisdom in the way he operates. Verses 26-31:

## **II. The wisdom of God illustrated: The ways of God (1:26-31)**

**For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong. And the base things of the world and the despised, God has chosen, the things that are not, that he might nullify the things that are, that no man should boast before God. But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption, that, just as it is written, "Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord." (1:26-31)**

If you don't believe that is the way God works, then look around you, says Paul. He saves those who believe, not the wise or the mighty, and thus expresses his desire to knock down human pride. All through Scripture we are taught that God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble. He is so intent on destroying pride that he acts in a way that reveals its futility and emptiness. He did so at Corinth: "God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong. And the base things of the world and the despised, God has chosen, the things that are not, that he might nullify the things that are."

This new life of purity, hope and peace was evident there in the Christian community—and nowhere else in Corinth. God took that simple message and began to change lives. People who were swindlers became ethical in their business practices. Adulterous men went back to their wives. Harsh, cruel fathers began to love their children. Homosexuals had their orientation on life changed. The power of God to change lives was evident right in their midst. And yet, look around, says Paul: "there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble." The philosophers, the noble, the business executives, the people walking the corridors of power—they were notable by their absence. There were some exceptions, but not many.

Paul tells the Corinthians, and us as well, that we should learn something from this observation. By working in this manner God is revealing the error of one of our unspoken values, and that is, that those who matter to him are the wise, the gifted, the articulate, the wealthy, those who have power and influence. That value system is still present today, even in the church, and it hinders God's glory.

Corinth was by no means unusual in that Christianity spread in the lower classes of society. It was this fact in part that made it so offensive to some. God was making kings and priests in his kingdom among the poor and the shabby. Jesus himself told us that this would be his mission when he came and announced, "He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor." That is the way of God. James has a word to say to believers who give preferential treatment to influential people. But God's way is to give special treatment and honor only to his Son. God has made him to be everything to us: our *wisdom*, our *righteousness*, our *sanctification* and *redemption*. If you are looking for those things, you will find them only in Jesus: depth, status, purity and freedom. God's way is to exalt and glorify his Son. Those who are truly wise will humble themselves before the crucified Savior. And yet we must say that it is from a motive of love that God resists the proud. His method of humbling the proud is so that they can enter his presence in repentance and faith.

Dr Martyn Lloyd Jones writes:

We Christians often quote "not by might nor by power, but My Spirit saith the Lord," and yet in practice we seem to rely upon the mighty dollar and the power of press and advertising. We seem to think that our influence will depend on our technique and the program we can put forward and that it would be the numbers, the largeness, the bigness, that would prove effective. We seem to have forgotten that God has done most of his deeds in the church throughout its history through remnants. We seem to have forgotten the great story of Gideon, for instance, and how God insisted on reducing the 32,000 men down to 300 before he would make use of them. We have become fascinated by the idea of bigness, and we are quite convinced that if we can only stage, yes that's the word, stage something really big before the world, we will shake it and produce a mighty religious awakening. That seems to be the modern conception of authority.

Divine and human values are completely at variance with one another. Foolish power, or powerless wisdom: This is the choice we must make. The cross, the very figure of feebleness and folly to the world, is actually the greatest manifestation of God's wisdom and power. Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord!

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Catalog No. 782

1 Corinthians 2:1-16

Fourth Message

Gary Vanderet

February 25, 1990

# THE MINISTRY OF THE SPIRIT

*SERIES: EXAMINING LIFE IN THE LOCAL CHURCH*

In our studies in the apostle Paul's first Corinthian letter, Paul is in the midst of a lengthy explanation which sets out the difference between the wisdom of God, which is centered on the cross, and the wisdom of men, which is centered on intellect and eloquence. When I think of human wisdom, I am reminded of a humorous little story. Some of you may know the name Paul Tillich. He was a brilliant theologian, but he was not a believer. In his prelude to his theological works he clearly states, "I have never had a conversion experience." But he was a very intelligent man who taught for a number of years at the University of Chicago. The story is told that when he died, he appeared at the gates of heaven. Saint Peter was there guarding the gates, and the apostle asked Dr Tillich the question Jesus asked him, "Who do you say Jesus is?" Dr Tillich answered: "Theologically, he is the ground of all being. Existentially, he is the ground of the divine human encounter. And eschatologically, he is the ground of divine hope." To which Peter responded, "Huh?"

Paul has said that behind the Corinthians' struggle to get along with each other was an overdependence on man and on man's wisdom. In this respect Corinth was somewhat like our beloved Bay Area. It was a place of wealth, beauty and culture, and it was much impressed by the accomplishments of men. And yet, in spite of its prosperity, inwardly it was decaying. The apostle therefore encourages the church to act on a different basis—on the wisdom of God rather than the wisdom of men. These two themes, the wisdom of God and the wisdom of men, are contrasted for us throughout these first four chapters.

The apostle begins in chapter 2 with a brief autobiographical section to show that in his own life he depended on God's wisdom rather than men's; then he will show us the process by which we can attain this kind of wisdom.

## I. The Spirit's method: A simple and powerful ministry

And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and Him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. And my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, that your faith should not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God. (1 Cor 2:1-5 NASB)

Paul is continuing his argument contrasting the wisdom of God and the wisdom of men. He thinks back to his own ministry among them and recalls his arrival in Corinth. There are two things he remembers—his manner and his message. Both of those tell us a great deal about effective ministry in our own lives.

Notice, first, *his message was one of simplicity*. He made a conscious decision to reject the path of contemporary philosophers, who depended on persuasive presentations for effectiveness, and relied

instead on the power of the message, both spoken and in his own life. He didn't philosophize or psychologize, but simply shared the story of Jesus' death, burial and resurrection. Paul was a gifted man. He probably knew four or five languages. He perhaps was one of the great minds of all time. Yet he made a conscious choice to reject the path of philosophy and instead rely on a simple message.

Secondly, notice that *his manner was one of humility*. He summarized his own feelings when he arrived in Corinth as *weakness, fear* and *much trembling*. He knew about the reputation of the city. He had just come from Athens. Earlier he had been driven out of Thessalonica and beaten in Philippi. He was tired, lonely and fearful. Even after a few months of fruitful ministry the book of Acts tells us that he was still discouraged. One historian, John Pollock, imagines the situation:

He would never win another Corinthian to Christ, see the sparkle of new life in a man's eyes. And he dreaded the physical agony of another stoning or beating with rods; the desolation of being flung out again with winter now on them, the seas turbulent, and nowhere to take his stiff, aging joints but the mountain trails of the Peloponnese. He wanted to give up, stop preaching, take himself away to live quietly at peace, back to Tarsus, to Arabia, to anywhere.

The Lord knew the pressures Paul felt: his discouragement, depression and his desire to opt out. We are told in Acts that Jesus appeared to him in a vision and encouraged his heart by telling him, "Do not be afraid any longer, but go on speaking and do not be silent; for I am with you, and no man will attack you in order to harm you, for I have many people in this city." What an encouragement! And what the Lord promised did indeed happen. There was, as Paul calls it, "a demonstration of the Spirit and power." In spite of his weakness and fear he shared the simple message of the gospel, and the Spirit took that message, delivered in simplicity and humility, and began to change lives.

I have a friend who is a living demonstration of one who understands these principles of effective ministry. He is a senior executive in a local company, and recently he was faced with an important decision. A management training seminar had been voluntarily offered a number of times at his company, and it was touted as a wonderful tool for building teamwork and unity. The president of the company had heard about this seminar and thought it might be a great thing for senior management to take. However, my friend had done some research into this training and he was very concerned. The author of the seminar was one of the original leaders in the Human Potential movement, and the training material was a totally humanistic tool which promised to develop hidden powers inside people. The president, knowing my friend's hesitation, asked him to meet with this gentleman and see if he could work out their differences. My friend said to me, "I knew there was no way I could hold my own in a debate with this man. It wouldn't be profitable. He would wrap me around his finger."

He said that after an amiable time of sharing with this man, he said to him, "You need to know where I'm coming from. I don't doubt that your seminar has proved to be of some help to people. But I need to tell that we are worlds apart in our understanding of life. At the core of who I am is a commitment to Jesus Christ as the answer to our human problems. I believe your seminar in a very real way is evil, because it arouses all kinds of needs and questions in people and then sends them in the opposite direction from the only real answer to those needs and questions, and that is the person of Jesus Christ. In that way your seminar hurts them more than it helps them. In the long run it leaves them empty, confused and angry." The man responded, "I can see why you shouldn't be a part of the seminar, but do you think we can still offer it? My friend lovingly replied, "I'm sure you can, if our president wants it." Later on the president said to my friend, "If you don't think this seminar is good, then neither do I. We've been through a lot together. And I appreciate our relationship more than anything our company produces." My friend told me, "It's only a matter of time before he comes to know the Lord."

That is the method Paul is referring to in this passage. Real evangelism takes place when ordinary people like you and I share that simple message and allow others to see what God has done in our lives. That is the way Paul approached his ministry in Corinth. There was nothing dramatic or sizzling, no great awakening, but there was a quiet, irresistible movement of the Spirit of God touching and changing lives everywhere. That is what he means in the words, the "demonstration of the Spirit and of power." God took that simple message and began to change lives. The apostle reminds the Corinthians in chapter 6 of some of the wonderful things that were happening. "Some of you were idolaters, some of you were homosexuals, some of you were thieves. But it has all changed. *You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified.*" Paul cherished those precious memories of the people in Corinth; they had become to him living proof of the faithfulness of a God who cares for and encourages his weary servants. God took that simple message, delivered in weakness and fear, and brought freedom to captives.

And God is still in the business of doing that. I hope that is an encouragement to you. There are people in your world, a neighbor, a classmate, a fellow worker, who are in need of that simple message. God may open up an opportunity for you to share over a coke or a cup of coffee at lunch. You may not know how to say it, but let me promise you that he will use your genuine testimony of what Jesus Christ has meant to you in spite of how garbled it sounds to you. As you deliver your message in sincerity and honesty he will multiply that message. If you are willing to appear weak, perhaps even a little foolish, and begin to love people with the truth, then you will discover the joy of ministry.

Verse 5 reveals the purpose of it all: "that your faith should not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God." The purpose of that humble manner and that simple message is to produce a correct dependence. It is God who changes lives, not men. Our job is to turn people to the only One who can truly help them. We are merely vessels, clay pots. The treasure is what is inside the vessel. Though the manner was humble and the message simple, God was at work to change lives in Corinth. His method was the simple message of the gospel. We can learn much about effective ministry by observing what Paul rejected as well as by what he determined to pursue.

Up to this point the apostle has been speaking of the inadequacy of the world's wisdom. We could deduce from the argument he has

been making that wisdom is something that Christians should not be pursuing, but that would be a false conclusion. In vv. 6-16 we learn about this true wisdom. Christianity possesses the greatest wisdom of all, says the apostle. We have it described for us in vv. 6-9; and then, in vv. 10-16, we have the process by which we can obtain it.

## II. The Spirit's message: A secret and hidden wisdom

Let's look first at the description of wisdom:

### A. Understanding true wisdom: Three important characteristics

**Yet we do speak wisdom among those who are mature; a wisdom, however, not of this age, nor of the rulers of this age, who are passing away; but we speak God's wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom, which God predestined before the ages to our glory; the wisdom which none of the rulers of this age has understood; for if they had understood it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory; but just as it is written,**

**"Things which eye has not seen and ear has not heard,  
And which have not entered the heart of man,  
All that God has prepared for those who love Him." (2:6-9)**

There is a wisdom which comes from God, a body of truth which is the greatest wisdom of all. It is referred to in several ways in this chapter: "a mystery," "secret and hidden wisdom," "the depths of God," "the thoughts of God," "spiritual thoughts," "things given to us by God," "the mind of Christ." When we speak about these things, we are not referring to religious truth that only people who go to church care to know. We are talking about insight into life that allows us to understand ourselves and the world around us. These are the truths that people everywhere are searching to know: secrets about how to deal with our guilt and fear; how to get along with people; how to help a hurting marriage; how to love your children, or your parents. These are vital truths about man and God and the universe. They are what Ray Stedman calls "the lost secrets of our humanity." That is the wisdom of God. It is not just religious talk, but truth which people desperately want to hear. That is why, when this truth is preached clearly and accurately, churches will grow: because they are dispensing insights into life that men and women long to know.

Paul tells us a number of things about this wisdom. There are three observations I would like to make about it.

#### 1. This wisdom is permanent

In verse 6, Paul reasserts that God's wisdom is not *a wisdom of this age*. It does not originate in this passing world; it does not reveal the characteristics of the world; it cannot be obtained through worldly means. Nor is this wisdom known to *the rulers of this age*." He is referring to the opinion makers, those who shape our minds, the thinkers, the sociologists and psychologists. God's wisdom is far different from that of the leaders of our age, primarily because it is eternal rather than temporary. It endures; it is permanent. Because this age is *passing away*, any worldly wisdom will show all the inbuilt characteristics of this age. This wisdom, which comes from or is seen in *the rulers of this age*, will pass away as they will, because they are mortal, temporary, fleeting. One of the outstanding characteristics of human wisdom is that it does not last very long. The current thinking in psychology today will be set aside and someone will have another theory. But we have a body of truth that transcends time, and it will prepare us not only for this life but also the life to come.

## 2. This wisdom is hidden

Paul says “we speak God’s wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom.” That word *mystery* comes from the mystery religions of that day, those mystery cults that came from the East, from Babylon and other places, and filtered into Greek thought. Perhaps these were similar to our contemporary secret societies, such as the Masons. People who were initiated into these societies received the “mysteries,” as they were called—all the inside secrets, the special handshakes and so on. Paul says that God’s revelation is like that. It is hidden. It is not something you discern by observation alone. It is undiscoverable through natural processes.

That is the point Paul is making in verse 9, in the quote from Isaiah. God’s mind and thoughts are not discovered through the eye-gate or the ear-gate. The three great sources of human knowledge—seeing, hearing, and thought—all alike fail here. Man cannot penetrate the secret, but God has in his love unlocked it to those who humble themselves before him. You can’t find God through a microscope or through a telescope. God’s wisdom isn’t discerned in a laboratory. Do you remember when the first cosmonauts returned to earth? They proudly announced that they were assured that there was no God because they looked for him and couldn’t find him.

Paul reminds us that the only way you will get to know God is to love him. All of this hidden truth, this wisdom, is prepared for those who love him, those who submit themselves to him. It is then and only then that you will discover these lost secrets of humanity.

But if you continue to pursue wisdom in the manner of the rulers of the age, you will end up just like they did. They did not understand. If they did have understanding, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. Left to his own devices, that is the kind of mistake man makes. They murdered the only Man who had the answers to the searching questions that plague us. As my friend discovered with the leader of the seminar, man’s wisdom always leads us away from the only One who can help us.

I came across an insightful quote this week from Dorothy Sayers. She claims it is the church that has reduced Jesus to this meek and mild person who could be everyone’s pet; or, as she put it, we have “pared the claws of the lion of Judah.” And then she says:

To those who knew him, however, He in no way suggested a milk and water person; they objected to Him as a dangerous firebrand. True, He was tender to the unfortunate, patient with honest inquirers, and humble before Heaven; but he insulted respectable clergymen, calling them hypocrites; He referred to King Herod as “that fox”; He went to parties in disreputable company and was looked upon as a gluttonous man and a winebibber, a “friend of publicans and sinners”; He assaulted indignant tradesmen and threw them and their belongings out of the Temple; He drove a coach-and-four through a number of sacrosanct and hoary regulations; He cured diseases by any means that came handy, with a shocking casualness in the matter of other people’s pigs and property; He showed no proper deference for wealth or social position; when confronted with neat dialectical traps, he displayed a paradoxical humor that affronted serious-minded people, and he retorted by asking disagreeably searching questions that could not be answered by rule of thumb.

He was emphatically not a dull man in his human lifetime, and if He was God, there can be nothing dull about God either. But He had a daily beauty in His life that made us ugly, and officialdom felt that the established order of things would be more secure without Him. So they did away with God in the name of peace and quietness.

That sounds contemporary, doesn’t it? We still do this today because that is where human wisdom will always lead.

That is the end of the path of human wisdom. But Paul says for those who love God he has prepared the secrets of life, those truths that enable you to live life with grace and beauty.

This brings us to the third observation:

## 3. This wisdom is for our glory

Paul tells us this wisdom was created for our glory. It was given to make us into the people we were designed to be. Its purpose is to make us into healthy, whole people. That is what holy means—completely whole, beautiful people, not just outwardly, but inwardly: loving, joyful, patient, kind, strong, merciful, self-controlled, filled with grace and beauty, a glorified humanity. That is what this truth will do for you.

The process of obtaining this wisdom, these secrets, is given to us in vv. 10-16.

### B. Obtaining true wisdom: Two observations

**For to us God revealed them through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the spirit of a man, which is in him? Even so the thoughts of God no one knows except the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things freely given to us by God, which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words. But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised. But he who is spiritual appraises all things, yet he himself is appraised by no man. For who has known the mind of the Lord that he should instruct him? But we have the mind of Christ. (2:10-16)**

The key to these verses is understanding the meaning of the pronouns. The “us” and the “we” refer to the apostles. God has revealed to us through the apostles the deep things that are in his mind. That change of pronouns is very clear and purposeful. Up to verse 5, everything has been “I,” and it changes back to “I” in 3:1. It is clearly referring to the apostles: “for to us God revealed them.”

These verses reveal to us the process by which this teacher who has been sent from God, the Holy Spirit, will use the word of God to instruct us and lead us into the wisdom which will change our lives. Though this seems like a rather complicated passage I think we can summarize its message rather simply, in two statements:

### 1. This wisdom was revealed by the Spirit to the apostles

Paul reminds us that it is God who understands us. He is the one who created us and he has profound insight into how life was intended to be lived. But we would never know these deep things of God unless he revealed them. Paul illustrates that idea in simple terms that we can understand. He says we don’t know what others are thinking unless we inform each other. I don’t know what you are thinking right now. Some of you look very interested in what I am saying, but many of you are somewhere else. You may be thinking about what you are going to have for lunch. You may be working out in your mind some problem you are going to have to deal with later this week.



But God has revealed to the apostles these deep things that are in his mind, these lost secrets of humanity. Paul tells us in verse 10: "For to us God revealed them through the Spirit." Look at v. 12: "Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things freely given to us by God." He is referring to revelation: God spoke to the apostles. And then he goes on: "which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words." He is speaking about the way the Holy Spirit illuminated the minds of the apostles and spoke to them his secrets, and using their own personalities and gifts they spoke and wrote this truth. Thus in Scripture we not only have the thoughts of God, we have the words of God. If you are looking for a Scripture that speaks about the inerrancy of the Bible, here it is. Not only are the concepts and the thoughts of the Bible inspired, but the very words are important—combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words. That is why we look at words and their meanings, and verb tenses, not because we love grammar, but because the very words of Scripture are inspired. Doctrines can be discerned in word tenses.

What a wonderful process! God revealed his mind to the apostles. They spoke and wrote these truths that the Spirit revealed, and these words are what we have today in the Bible. We have in this book the prophetic and apostolic word. It is the word of God, the revealed mind of God.

This leads us to the second observation:

## 2. This wisdom is now revealed by the Spirit through the apostolic word

Paul says that even in the process of receiving the truth we are dependent on the Spirit. Look at verse 14: "But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised."

The inspiration of the Holy Spirit is necessary not only for the instruction, illumination and enabling of apostolic messengers, but for those who hear them as well. The man who has not received the Spirit (the "unspiritual man") does not have the resources to recognize, appreciate or welcome what the Spirit wants to impart through his messengers.

In verses 12-14 Paul uses six important verbs to describe the ministry of the Spirit to those who taught (the apostles) and those who hear the truth: The former he enabled *to know*, *to speak* and *to teach*; the latter he enables *to accept*, *to understand* and *to appraise*. Without such ministry of the Spirit there can be no communication and no growth into maturity. To the natural mind this truth is incomprehensible. The things of the Spirit are even regarded as foolishness.

That doesn't mean that non-Christians can't understand the Bible. They can. A year ago our pastoral staff spent several Wednesday morning study times studying the Scriptures with a Jewish professor from Stanford University. I was amazed at his insight into truth. He had a better grasp of much of the Scriptures than I do. But he did not submit himself to it. He didn't believe it. He didn't appropriate it. Some of you are in that very condition. You understand what I'm saying, but you have never submitted yourselves to the Lord or to his word. You will leave here this morning having absorbed knowledge of truth but it will make no change in your lives. That is the natural man.

But Paul says that "he who is spiritual appraises all things." The spiritual man, on the other hand, is the one who possesses the Spirit: the Christian, the one who loves God. That is what makes one a Christian: the presence of the Spirit of God in his life. This person "appraises all things." That is a remarkable statement. Paul is saying that as Christians we have revealed to us the basis for making moral judgments. We have a set of absolutes. We have the revealed mind of God.

It is this ability to appraise all things that allows us to stand up and have the courage to say, in spite of what anyone may declare, that abortion is wrong. That is clear from Scripture. It is this ability that allows us to know that homosexuality is wrong. You can pass laws to make it legal, but that will never make it moral. I find it beyond comprehension that some religious denominations debate whether to ordain practicing homosexuals. Certainly we can discuss our manner toward homosexuals, but we can say with conviction that homosexuality is wrong. We can say with conviction that greed is wrong, that materialism is wrong, that adultery is wrong, that bigotry is wrong. Because the spiritual man appraises all things he has the ability to make such judgments through the insight that is his through the revealed word of God.

Paul also says we will not be appraised ourselves. What I think he means is that many people will not be able to figure us out. Our actions will appear strange to many. C. S. Lewis in his novel *Till We Have Faces* tells the story of a young woman who married a prince. He tells of their wonderful love affair. This prince had a beautiful castle in which he cared for his new bride. She ate at his banquet table each day and he took care of all her needs. The only problem was that the prince was invisible and so was the castle. The people never saw any of these things and so they thought the young woman was crazy. She would keep talking about this lover who was providing all her needs. That is what many people will think of us because we walk to the beat of a different drummer. We have a different set of absolutes. We will be kind and compassionate when others are cruel. We will intolerant when others are tolerant. We will have convictions when others don't. It is because we have insight into the mind of God. It is that sense of conviction that allowed Martin Luther to stand before his accusers, with all the authorities of Europe before him, including the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire, and change the course of history. Here is what Luther said, "Unless my conscience be taught and corrected by the Word of God, I will not change or recant anything that I have written. Here I stand: I can do no other, God help me."

That is the conviction God will give us when our roots are down deep into the Word. And that is my exhortation to all of us this morning. We have revealed for us in this book the mind of God, the mind of Christ. The process of understanding this hidden wisdom unfolds as we begin to humbly understand and submit to this book. It doesn't happen all at once when you become a Christian. It doesn't happen through visions. In fact some of you have been Christians a long time and you still operate your life, your family and your business on the basis of human wisdom. This process begins as we humble ourselves before this word and give ourselves to it to study it and learn it consistently. It is my prayer that you will take the time to get to know God in his word. He longs to give to those who love him the riches of his wisdom.

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# BUILDING UP AND TEARING DOWN A CHURCH

*SERIES: EXAMINING LIFE IN THE LOCAL CHURCH*

Catalog No. 783

1 Corinthians 3:1-17

Fifth Message

Gary Vanderet

March 4, 1990

In our studies in Paul's first Corinthian letter we are in the midst of a discussion of two kinds of wisdom, the wisdom of God and the wisdom of men. We saw in chapter 2 that it is only God who understands life. He knows the secrets of life that enable us to live with grace and beauty. He has revealed these hidden insights to the apostles, and through the process of inspiration we have recorded for us in the Bible the wisdom of God. It is on this wisdom that we ought to base our lives, our marriages, our families, our businesses. All of life needs to be rooted in the word of God.

But instead of incorporating this wisdom of God into their thinking the Corinthians had adopted the wisdom of the world. Rather than the church invading the world, the world had penetrated the church. One area where this was evident was in their wrong view of Christian leadership. They were far too ready to spotlight one individual over another and play one off against another. They needed straight teaching on the nature and function of Christian leadership.

It is critical that the church have a correct perspective on the nature of authority, and chapters 3 and 4 of 1 Corinthians give us great insight into that subject. This idea of getting a right view of leadership reminds me a story that Ray Stedman shared at a staff meeting once. A certain man telephoned a church and said to the secretary, "Tell me, who is the head hog at the trough?" The secretary was taken back by the man's question, and feeling a little indignant, replied, "That's not the way we refer to the Right Reverend Johnson." The man said, "I don't care what you call him. I have a check for \$10,000 that I want to give to the church and I want to know who's the head hog at the trough." The secretary responded, "Oh, well, here comes the big pig down the hall right now!" That story always helps me keep the issue of church leadership in proper perspective.

As he corrects the false wisdom of the Corinthians, Paul's fertile and imaginative mind calls into play several vivid metaphors, three of which are contained in the verses we will look at this morning: the metaphors of a child, a field, and a building. All three symbolize the church, and all refer to the growth to maturity that the church is designed to experience. Each begins in a small, insignificant way, but the expectation is that in time each will grow into beauty and significance.

A principle arises out of each of these metaphors. We find the first principle in verses 1-4 of chapter 3.

## I. Jealousy and strife are the fruit of following the world's wisdom

And I brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to babes in Christ. I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not able to receive it. Indeed, even now you are not yet able, for you are still fleshly. For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you

**not walking like mere men? For when one says, "I am of Paul," and another, "I am of Apollos," are you not mere men? (1 Cor 3:1-4 NASB)**

Paul says that the Corinthians are not acting as spiritual men. Now they are believers. Paul addresses them as "brethren." They possess the Spirit, but they are not following the Spirit's direction—walking in the Spirit and demonstrating the unity of the Spirit. They have responded to the Spirit's call but they have not understood the implications of that call. They do not have a vision of what God has already done in Christ. Thus they are acting, as Paul says, like "mere men," "men of flesh," "babes in Christ," "fleshly." These people are believers, but they have not learned how to allow the Spirit to control their lives. They live life on the basis of their natural abilities. By "flesh," Paul does not mean the physical body alone. He is speaking of our fallen humanity, all the selfish desires we inherited in our natural birth.

This was not an issue when the apostle first came to Corinth. The fact that they were acting like mere men was not a problem then, because that is characteristic of a new Christian. As we learned last week, the mind of Christ is not something we immediately possess when we come to Christ. That comes as we study, understand and obey Scripture. It takes time to think like God thinks. It takes time to gain his perspective on the things we face in life. Growth in the Christian life is a process. My 15-month-old son Timothy has a way of telling us when he wants something: he yells at the top of his lungs! At his age he cannot communicate his needs with words. So, though we don't enjoy his screaming, we understand it. But when my 10-year-old acts that way, I am concerned. That is the apostle's point here. The problem is that although years have gone by, the Corinthians are still thinking like natural men. They should have grown up by now.

According to Paul, the grounds that put these Corinthians on a par with non-Christians is the presence of jealousy and strife among them. Jealousy and competition is the natural way in the world. And jealousy was widespread in the church. They were constantly looking over their shoulders, envying each other's gifts. There was little love and a lot of competitiveness. There was a lack of appreciation for the different contributions brought by God through people like Paul and Apollos. That is widespread today as well. We want appreciation. We want everyone to notice us. We want to be applauded. Instead of being content to serve quietly where God has placed us we become jealous of how God is using others. We long for positions of prominence. We worship our heroes and their gifts and think if we could imitate them we would be powerful like them. That is how we act without Christ. Jealousy and competition is the natural way of the world. That is the way most companies operate. But Jesus said that will not be so in the church. The Spirit of God desires to change all that when he takes over a life. There was such a dependence on men and man's power in Corinth, but that was all fleshly, says Paul.

I was interested in the remarks that James Baker, the Secretary of State, made at the National Prayer Breakfast recently. This man passionately confessed that power does not really bring fulfillment, as people think it does. He talked about the fleeting nature of power, and said that this was brought home to him one morning when he was being driven to the White House in his limousine. He noticed a man walking alone, and he said, "This man was someone everyone of you would recognize, a chief of staff in a previous administration. There he was, alone—no reporters, no security, no adoring public, no trappings of power—just one solitary man alone with his thoughts. That mental picture continually serves to remind me of the impermanence of power. The man had it all, but only for a time." He concluded, "Inner security and true inner fulfillment come by faith, not by wielding power." That is what Paul is saying. This man knows the difference between the wisdom of God and the wisdom of the world.

Galatians 5 gives a list of the works of the flesh, and the fruit that comes from the Spirit's control in our life. As I looked at them afresh last week I was taken back by the number of characteristics that had to do with relationships. Paul writes there in Galatians 5:19-22 that "the acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions, and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness."

Jealousy was Cain's sin. He resented God's acceptance of his brother, and his eyes filled with rage as God smiled on Abel's sacrifice. Jealousy leads to destruction. It will destroy a friendship, it will dissolve a romance. It can foster competition and bitterness in a church choir. It can ruin a church. Remember James' words in 3:13-14: "Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness (or the humility) of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth." Whenever the idea of promoting myself reigns, I am aligning myself with the wisdom of the world, and damaged relationships will be the result.

Ruth Harms Calkin reveals our hearts in this poem,

You know, Lord, how I serve You  
With great emotional fervor  
In the limelight.  
You know how eagerly I speak for You  
At a women's club.  
You know how I effervesce when I promote  
A fellowship group.  
You know my genuine enthusiasm  
At a Bible study.  
But how would I react, I wonder,  
If You pointed to a basin of water  
And asked me to wash the calloused feet  
Of a bent and wrinkled old woman  
Day after day  
Month after month  
In a room where nobody saw  
And nobody knew.

Those final words, "nobody saw, nobody knew," are the key to the wisdom of God.

Our second principle is revealed in Paul's second metaphor.

## II. Humility and cooperation are the fruit of God's wisdom

**What, then, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Servants, through whom you believed, even as the Lord gave opportunity to each one. I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth. So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God, who causes the growth. Now he who plants and he who waters are one; but each will receive his own reward according to his own labor. (3:5-8)**

Here we have revealed to us the correct view of ministry and of ministers. How are we to view leaders? I say that in the plural because the New Testament always speaks of a plurality of leadership. You never see one man controlling a church in the New Testament. That point of view is condemned by John when he refers to Diotrophes "who loved to have the preeminence." Scripture teaches that the church is led by a team of men who share authority equally and teach and serve in harmony with one another. How do we view them? Do we put them on pedestals, give them titles and separate them from ordinary people? Do we think they have some special hot-line to God? Are they the head hog at the trough?

Notice how Paul asks the question. He does not ask, "Who is Apollos?" or, "Who is Paul?" but "What is Apollos?" and "What is Paul?" By doing so he immediately defuses the personality cult controversy. Some of the Corinthians looked up to one leader and some looked up to another, but Paul is quite clear—they both were servants. We wait on tables to serve you, says Paul. We wait on God for our instructions. We move at his bidding. He has assigned to us our responsibilities.

Paul sees ministry in God's kingdom like working on a cooperative farm: "I planted," says the apostle. He planted the gospel seed there at Corinth and a church was begun. "Apollos watered": Apollos irrigated the crop through his teaching ministry. "But God gave the growth." Sowing and watering are human activities. Anyone can do that. Even a child can sow and water, but only God can cause growth. Which is more important, evangelism or Bible teaching? Paul's answer is, neither. The important thing is not what each of them can do, but what God alone can do! Only God can take that truth that has been implanted in people's lives and use it to change them. He is the one who works in people's hearts.

Therefore we are not in competition with one another. "He who plants and he who waters are one." We are working together. Peninsula Bible Church is not in competition with Valley Church or First Baptist of Los Altos or Menlo Park Presbyterian or Los Gatos Christian. The pastors in this church are not in competition with one another to see who has a more effective ministry. We are working together, serving one another. We are not threatened by your leadership or the use of your gifts. In fact your success and effectiveness in ministry is our greatest delight. I have served in churches where the pastor felt so insecure he would not allow home Bible studies or other ministries to take place without his approval because he was threatened by that.

Our greatest joy as a staff is your success in ministry. That doesn't threaten us; it thrills us. It would not surprise me that there are some people here this morning who have greater teaching gifts than anyone on our staff. That would cause us to rejoice. A young man in our body has taught our home fellowship this past month and I feel he

has been much more effective than I have been in leading the study. It was wonderful to watch him. He had people talking who hadn't said a thing in months! We want to encourage that. It doesn't matter to us even if someone chooses to go to another church. If God uses another person to touch a life in a way that we couldn't do, we need to rejoice in that. The important thing is that people grow, not who gets the credit for it.

In verses 9-17 Paul switches from an agricultural to an architectural metaphor. And here is our third principle:

### III. Leaders must be careful to model and teach the wisdom of God

For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building. According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building upon it. But let each man be careful how he builds upon it. For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man builds upon the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each man's work will become evident, for the day will show it, because it is to be revealed with fire; and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work. If any man's work which he has built upon it remains, he shall receive a reward. If any man's work is burned up, he shall suffer loss; but he himself shall be saved, yet so as through fire. Do you not know that you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him, for the temple of God is holy, and that is what you are. (3:9-17)

Laying the foundation is comparable to planting. Just as God gave Paul the task of planting the seed of the gospel in the hearts of the Corinthians, so God in his grace enabled him to lay the foundation for a strong church. A building needs both a foundation and a superstructure. Apollos is now building a structure upon the foundation that Paul laid.

It is important to understand that in this passage Paul is not talking about building individual lives, but about building a church. Verses 12-15 are commonly interpreted as referring to the quality of an individual Christian's life. In this context, however, Paul is describing the quality of workmanship done by those who contribute to the building of the church. Thus Paul gives a warning, not to individuals, but to the leaders in the church: "Let each man be careful how he builds." This is addressed to anyone involved in leadership in the church at Corinth. It can be done well or wrongly. Paul has done his job. He has laid the foundation by clearly proclaiming Jesus Christ and him crucified. His reason for doing that was to ensure that the faith of the Christians in Corinth rested securely on the power of God, on Jesus himself, the only sure foundation, not the persuasiveness of men.

Once the foundation has been securely laid, the building must go up. Paul laid the foundation, "and another man is building upon it."

Two wrong ways in which this can be done are pointed out in this passage. First, one can tamper with the foundation: "for no one can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid (emphasizing that man has no choice in the matter of the foundation of the church), which is Jesus Christ." You could construct a community of people on another basis but it would not be the church.

The second way in which a builder may go wrong is by using inferior materials in the superstructure. Unworthy material will be exposed, says Paul. He sees the day coming when the true nature of every Christian's work will "become evident" and will be plain for all to see, "because it will be revealed with fire." The fire "will test the quality of each man's work." It will not be a matter of how successful or effective or popular each one has been. The materials used will be exposed: Will they turn out to be "gold, silver, and precious stones?" Or will they actually be nothing but "wood, hay, and straw?" Combustible material will perish; the rest will abide.

Paul is speaking about the ministry of the servants in the body. Will the work of Christians in Corinth prove to be what God has done by his Spirit, or what men have erected by their own resources, for their own benefit and glory? It is easy to cover up the materials used in a building so that it looks sturdy and impressive. The Day will disclose it.

The question we need to ask is, how do we build with gold, silver, and precious stones? What are the permanent materials upon which we can build into other people's lives? I think I can safely say that no one here who has teaching ministry wants to build with wood, hay and straw. Whether you teach children in Sunday School, teach one of the women's Bible studies, or lead a home fellowship, all of us want to have ministries that are lasting.

We can discern from the context of Paul's argument in these chapters what exactly he is referring to. The wisdom of God is permanent; the wisdom of this world is temporary. One will abide; the other will burn up. Building with gold, silver, and precious stones is having a ministry and life centered in the wisdom of God. It involves teaching people these hidden truths in the word of God that will enable them to live life with grace and beauty. It is only God's wisdom that reveals how to have a fulfilling marriage. The world says this is done by finding the perfect mate who will meet all your physical, intellectual and emotional needs. But that is not the wisdom of God, is it? The word of God says that the way to a fulfilling marriage is not by finding the right person but by being the right person. Do you want a healthy ministry that will last? Then you will have to take the time that is necessary to invest your life in the Word of God: understanding, obeying, and communicating its truths.

This is what drew me to Peninsula Bible Church. I had been to seminary and I had worked in several churches. As a matter of fact I was on staff in a church in this area. I had a deep desire to have an effective ministry, and I realized that it was the Scriptures that change lives, but I didn't know them very well. I could gather a group of people and they would follow me, but I didn't know where to take them! What drew me here was that I knew this was a place where the Word of God was central to everything that was happening. What a privilege it is as a pastor to be encouraged to take time to study, to be surrounded by godly men and women who understand this book! It has made all the difference in the world in my ministry. If you are going to have a ministry that will be lasting and effective, then you are going to need to take the time to understand and obey and impart the hidden wisdom of God that is in contrast to the world's way of living.

We need to be careful to add that our eternal destiny is not at stake. Paul says that this man would "be saved," like a man pulled to safety through the smoke and flames of his burning house, for his salvation depends on God's grace, not his own works, but he would have nothing to show for all his labor. Nobody wants that. No doubt

every Christian's work is mixed in quality. No doubt we shall all be saddened to see much of our work burned up. But this should encourage us to take more care in how we are building.

These verses urge us to take seriously both the certainty of eternal life and the scrutiny which the Lord will bring to our daily service as Christians. He is passionately concerned for the church, his building, his people. It is his temple. His Spirit dwells in the church. It is not surprising therefore that he is prepared to "destroy" anyone who uses his God-given talents to suck the life out of his church and thus destroy God's temple. The church can be destroyed or defiled by the introduction of the wisdom of the world. Whenever we allow selfish ambition or the desire for position or power, or when we become angry because people don't recognize us for the great work we are doing, we have fallen prey to the world's thinking.

Martha Snell Nicholson's poem puts this beautifully,

When I stand at the judgment seat of Christ  
And He shows me His plan for me,  
The plan of my life as it might have been  
Had He had His way, and I see.

How I blocked Him here, and I checked Him there,  
And I would not yield my will—  
Will there be grief in my Saviour's eyes,  
Grief, though He loves me still?

He would have me rich, and I stand there poor,  
Stripped of all but His grace,  
While memory runs like a hunted thing,  
Down the paths I cannot retrace.

Then my desolate heart will well-nigh break  
With the tears that I cannot shed.  
I shall cover my face with my empty hands,  
I shall bow my uncrowned head...

Lord, of the years that are left to me,  
I give them to Thy hand.  
Take me and break me, mold me to  
The pattern Thou hast planned!

That should be the desire of our hearts—that we would follow the wisdom of God as it is revealed in the scriptures, and not be tempted to follow the wisdom of the world.

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Catalog No. 784

1 Corinthians 3:18-4:5

Sixth Message

Gary Vanderet

March 11, 1990

# EVALUATING A MINISTER

*SERIES: EXAMINING LIFE IN THE LOCAL CHURCH*

Vince Lombardi was one of the greatest football coaches of all time. He was a fanatic about basics, and always insisted that his teams execute the fundamentals of football. One scene in the movie of his life concerned the time when his team, the Green Bay Packers, lost to an inferior team. It was one thing to lose, but losing to an inferior team was inexcusable. Coach Lombardi called a practice the next morning. As the players gathered together he informed them that they were going back to the basics. Holding up a football for all to see, he yelled: "Gentlemen, this is a football!" That's pretty basic stuff to men who had been playing football for 15 or 20 years.

In a real sense that is what Paul is doing in 1 Corinthians. He is reminding Christians of a number of fundamental things that are essential for us to understand. There are a lot of things that one can do in a ministry. There are a lot of frills and programs that can be helpful at times, but if we don't have the fundamentals down we will never have a lasting ministry; we will never accomplish what it is that God wants us to do.

The church at Corinth had tremendous potential. They were extremely gifted, but their ministry was being undermined by divisions, jealousy and selfish ambition. Paul is attempting to get them to see what their real problem is. Behind their superficial difficulty of division lay a love of human wisdom, a pride in the ability of man to solve his own problems. Thus in the first three chapters of this letter Paul's main point has been to get the Corinthians to see the difference between the wisdom of God and the wisdom of man. Failure to discern the difference can result in a believer building his life and ministry on "wood, hay and stubble," rather than "gold, silver and precious stones," says the apostle.

In the passage we will be looking at this morning Paul will help us to understand more clearly how we ought to view ministers, and what is their role and purpose in the church. He will, as it were, hold up a person and say, "This is a minister." Remember last week we defined this word "minister" as anyone who serves in a position of leadership in the church. It not only describes those who serve as pastors, but others as well: Elders, Sunday School teachers, Home Fellowship leaders, Women's Bible Study leaders, those who labor to build up the body of Christ. Thus it applies to many of us here this morning.

Three valuable perspectives about ministers are revealed in these verses. I think it is safe to say that these principles may be far different from what some of us have experienced in the past. Here is the first perspective. Chapter 3, verses 18-23:

## I. A minister's purpose is to be a resource—do not exalt them

**Let no man deceive himself. If any man among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become foolish that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness before**

**God. For it is written: "He catches the wise in their craftiness"; and again, "The Lord knows the reasonings of the wise, that they are useless." So then, let no one boast in men. For all things belong to you, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or things present or things to come; all things belong to you, and you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God. (1 Cor 3:18-23 NASB)**

This discussion on the wisdom of the world and the wisdom of God now moves to its climax. Paul wants the Corinthians to know that what he has been saying is not just rhetoric but it lies at the heart of their problems of divisions.

This paragraph can be divided into two parts. In verses 18-20, Paul warns them not to be deceived by what appears to be wisdom but really is not; and in verses 21-23 he shows them the futility of boasting in powerful personalities as leaders. In doing so Paul turns their slogans around and reminds them that they do not belong to Apollos or Paul as they had been declaring, but rather it was Paul and Apollos and everything else that belonged to them.

"Do not be deceived," says Paul. "Stop deceiving yourselves!" is a better translation. Many Corinthians saw themselves as wise in themselves—but self-deception is the common fate of men who fancy themselves in that light. Perhaps that is where some of you find yourselves this morning. After hearing the apostle Paul's description of the wisdom of God and the wisdom of men these past few weeks, perhaps you have to conclude that you are following the wisdom of men; you are living your life based on your own efforts. All of us, unfortunately, lapse into this mode of living from time to time. If that describes your condition, let me remind you that Paul says you cannot advance from human to divine wisdom by becoming wiser. This passage tells us we must abandon the old wisdom in order to acquire the new.

Paul had painfully learned this insight in his own life. There was a time when he thought he was wise, when he depended on what man could do. He had prided himself on his ancestry, his morality, his zeal, his background as a Hebrew of Hebrews. But he learned that all those must be set aside (Phil. 3:6-9). The wisdom of this world cannot be improved upon or developed into the wisdom of God; it must be destroyed. That is how the world thinks, but Paul reminds us that "the wisdom of this world is foolishness before God." Those who are truly wise will adopt an attitude to people and to things which everyone else will call foolish. True wisdom is learning to evaluate everyone and everything according to the Word of God.

I have found this to be a liberating truth in my own life. For much of my life I got what I wanted by manipulating people and circumstances. That is how I got ahead in school. I figured out what the teacher wanted to hear and I concentrated on doing that. Naturally, that led to saying the right thing to the right person at the right time. This has been one of the major areas where God has been working in my life in recent years. Just last week I came face to face with a situ-

ation which I was tempted to manipulate, though I knew what God wanted me to do. I reasoned that I knew his will for the situation in question and I thought I would help him along a little and get things moving. But God rebuked me. He told me to be quiet, that he didn't need my help. His wisdom and the wisdom I was bringing to bear were mutually incompatible.

Paul's conclusion then is, "let no one boast in men." Do not base your thinking on the wisdom of men. Base it instead on the wisdom of God. Notice the apostle's words, "For all things belong to you, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or things present or things to come; all things belong to you." Notice that Paul turns their slogans around and tells the Corinthians they have it all wrong. They don't belong to Apollos or Paul; Paul and Apollos belong to them. Why do you seek to build your life on one man when the whole world belongs to you? Why would you try to divide yourselves between Paul and Apollos and Cephas and choose one of them? asks Paul. You can have them all! They are all yours: Paul's ministry, Apollos' ministry, Cephas' ministry. You can enjoy whatever value there is in each of their ministries. In fact, the whole world is open to you, says the apostle.

Many of us are accustomed to referring to a church as "Rev. So-and-so's church." Even pastors refer to a local church as "my" church. But Paul says it is just the opposite. It is the leaders who belong to the church. They are a resource to be used in whatever way God sees fit. That is all they are. In fact, Paul says everything is yours. The world is yours. God will lead you. Even death with its threat is already mastered; it is already yours. When you come to it, it will minister to you, not take from you. It will bring you into glory. The present and the future are all yours because you belong to Christ, and Christ belongs to God and, therefore, everything he owns is yours. All things belong to you because you belong to the One to whom all things belong. That is what Paul is saying.

Why be limited to the wisdom of men when you have at your disposal the wisdom and resources of God himself? When a body of believers grasps that truth, there are unlimited possibilities of ministry. We have the wisdom and the resources of God at our disposal, yet we make ourselves slaves of people and things when we were meant to be co-heirs with Christ of all things. When we grasp God's sovereignty and his Lordship in life, then we will begin to reign, not serve the created order.

William Barclay eloquently captures the apostle's point in his commentary:

In verse 22, as so often happens in his letters, the march of Paul's prose suddenly takes wings and becomes a lyric of passion and of poetry. The Corinthians are doing what is to Paul an inexplicable thing. They are seeking to give themselves over into the hands of some man. Paul tells them that, in point of fact, it is not they who belong to Paul but Paul belongs to them. This identification with some party is the acceptance of slavery by those who should be kings. In point of fact they are masters of all things, because they belong to Christ and Christ belongs to God. The man who gives his life, his strength, his energy, his heart to some little splinter of a party has surrendered everything to a petty thing, when he could have entered into possession of a fellowship and a love which is as wide as the universe. He has confined into narrow limits a life which should be limitless in its outlook.

A minister is a resource. Do not exalt him.

So the Corinthians had a wrong view of Paul and of Apollos. How should they have viewed them? Paul gives us two perspectives in the first five verses of chapter 4.

## II. A minister's role is that of a servant—do not manipulate them

Let a man regard us in this manner, as servants of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God. In this case, moreover, it is required of stewards that one be found trustworthy. But to me it is a very small thing that I should be examined by you, or by any human court; in fact, I do not even examine myself. For I am conscious of nothing against myself, yet I am not by this acquitted; but the one who examines me is the Lord. Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him from God. (4:1-5)

First, ministers are to be thought of as "servants." The word is different from the word used in 3:5. It is not the usual term for servant. The word means literally, "an under-rower." The Corinthians would understand that term. Corinth was the point at which the war galleys of the Roman Empire crossed through the isthmus that separated the Ionian Sea from the Aegean Sea. The rowers sat on the lowest deck of the war galleys, on single rows of benches on both sides of the ship. On a little deck raised up above them so that all could see him stood the captain of the ship. It was the rowers' task to row according to what he said. Their whole business was to obey his orders. They were "under-rowers."

Paul uses the same word to describe those who are teachers and shepherds in a church. We are "under-rowers of Christ." We row to the cadence of the coxswain. He determines both the speed and the direction. I don't know if you have ever had the opportunity to watch a college crew race, but it is a beautiful thing to behold. As the coxswain calls the cadence all the men row in unison, straining hard, but all working together. Paul says that is what it is like to serve the Lord. Each person puts in his or her individual effort, but everyone follows the cadence of the Lord. He is the One who determines the pace of a ministry. He is the One who determines the direction of a ministry. It is our responsibility to listen to and to follow.

That is how you ought to view us. We are not big-shots, lording it over you and ready to exhort you to submit to our leadership. We are brothers and sisters working together, listening intently to our Lord, following his cadence and direction. It is important to remember this as we think about our future as a church.

There is a second term used to describe a minister. In it we find our third perspective:

## III. A minister's responsibility is that of a steward—do not judge them

The second word, "stewards," is fairly common in the New Testament. It refers to someone who managed another's estate. We might call a person in that position today a housekeeper or butler, someone who is responsible for providing the family with food and other necessities. We might also think of a steward or stewardess on an airplane. They are entrusted with certain valuable commodities (although this is open to debate!) that they are responsible to dispense. Ministers too are responsible in this way. They have been entrusted

with valuable commodities, what Paul calls the “mysteries of God,” that deposit of truth that contains the secrets of life.

We have already talked about these mysteries. These deep things of God are the truth about life, about God, about ourselves. We saw that these are undiscoverable by observation, but that God has revealed them to the apostles. Then, through the process of illumination and inspiration, these men spoke and wrote those mysteries, and they are recorded for us in the Bible. And they are available to be revealed by the Spirit to those who love God. Remember the Bible is not just religious information that is important only for narrow-minded people. It doesn't tell us how to conduct religious services, or what a minister ought to wear. The Bible reveals the lost secrets of our humanity, the answers to the questions that plague us: how to heal a hurting marriage, how to be a loving father, mother, son or daughter, how to live ethically in the dog-eat-dog world of the Silicon Valley.

That has tremendous implications for our ministries. We are responsible to dispense these remarkable truths to those in our ministries so that lives are changed. That is why we preach expositionally from the Scriptures, week after week after week. It is not our job to come up with something clever to say on Sundays. Apart from God's word we have nothing to say. He has revealed the secrets of the mysteries of life, and it is our job to share these so that people can live lives of beauty and grace.

The steward is not to exercise his own initiative or authority, but he is to be “faithful and trustworthy” in his responsibility of looking after his Master's affairs. The only true judge of his faithfulness is his Master, therefore Paul exhorts the Corinthians not to slip into judgmental attitudes, not to condemn or to praise ministers. Leave that to the Lord; he will do all the judging, says Paul. If a man deserves to be commended for his stewardship, then the Lord will indeed commend him. What matters, he says, is not what other people think, or even what he thinks of himself. (“I do not even examine myself. I cannot discern my own motives”). What matters is how the Lord evaluates him. He is responsible not to his fellows, but to his Lord.

The reason why we are not to judge another's life and ministry is given to us in verse 5. Any judgment that we can make is both “premature” (it is before the time) and it is “presumptuous” (because only God can see our heart).

I am constantly aware that there is coming a time when God is going to examine my entire life and ministry. I used to have a sense of dread when I thought of that day. I imagined myself standing before the judgment seat of Christ and seeing a giant movie screen came down and there, projected on that screen, would be my entire life for everyone to see—a “totally hidden video” of all my shameful thoughts and deeds. Then God would then rebuke me and I would walk away humiliated.

But that is not the picture Paul gives us here, nor is it the picture of the God who is revealed to us in Scripture. Rather, this will be a private evaluation. God will go through and point out to us his estimation of various events in our lives. No doubt we will be surprised at what we will hear. We might expect him to see some great thing we accomplished for his Kingdom, and we will be anticipating his praise, but he will say “No, you missed the whole point there. You were not concerned for my Kingdom; you were thinking about your own glory. You did that because you wanted so-and-so's recognition.” And there may be some incidents of shame and humiliation that we will not want the Lord to see, only to discover his encouragement

that it was then that we pleased him. We could not see any results at the time, but God will point all the fruit that came as a result. Paul assures us that then we will receive praise. It will not be a time of condemnation, but of commendation.

We need to point out that Paul is not saying we are not to judge the actions of others when they do wrong. People often take verses like this and use them to excuse their sin. But in the very next chapter Paul corrects the Corinthians because they did not judge the actions of a man who had sinned. The apostle is not saying that we should not judge actions. What he is warning against is judging motives. Don't assume that you have somebody figured out and you know why he is acting in a certain way. We cannot discern motives.

Years ago David Roper shared a story of an incident that happened to a friend of his that illustrates what Paul is saying. It seems a group of men decided to play a practical joke on a co-worker who was a young, single executive in an insurance firm in Dallas. It was customary for the president of the firm to give free turkeys to all the employees at Thanksgiving. This co-worker had laughed at the idea, since he was single and didn't have any desire to cook a turkey. His friends confiscated his turkey and replaced it with one made out of paper mache. The only parts of the real turkey were the neck and tail sticking out at either end. The day before the holiday the turkeys were handed out in a ceremony, and this man took his bogus bird and got on the bus to go home.

As he was sitting there, feeling a little self-conscious, a man got on the bus and sat next to him. They struck up a conversation, and it transpired that this man had been out of work for quite some time and things were pretty tight. His hopes for a Thanksgiving feast were slim. In fact, all he had was a few pounds of hamburger meat that he was taking home for a Thanksgiving meal for his family. Our friend had a brilliant idea. “I will give him the turkey,” he said to himself. Then he thought, “No, this might hurt his pride. I'll sell it to him.” So he asked the man if he would like to buy the turkey for whatever change he had on him. The man of course was delighted and appreciative of such generosity. Feeling a great sense of gratitude, they both went their separate ways. You can imagine this man's thoughts when he unwrapped the turkey. In fact, the young man, when he found out what his friends had done, rode that same bus home each day for several days looking for the man in order to make amends, but he never found him. To this day this defrauded individual probably looks back to this incident as a classic example of man's inhumanity to man. Yet the young man's motives were pure.

That is the point Paul is making. We must not judge before the time. We just don't have the necessary facts. We cannot accurately discern what is going on in other people's lives. We don't know the circumstances that cause them to act the way they do. We must withhold judgment until the time.

Ministers of Christ are resources; they are not to be exalted. They are servants; they are not to be manipulated. And they are stewards; therefore they are not to be judged.

It is my prayer that we will never forget these fundamental truths as we seek to build a lasting and effective ministry.

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Catalog No. 785

1 Corinthians 4:6-21

Seventh Message

Gary Vanderet

March 18, 1990

# AUTHENTIC CHRISTIAN MINISTRY

*SERIES: EXAMINING LIFE IN THE LOCAL CHURCH*

In her book *Epistles Now*, Leslie Brandt writes a paraphrase of a portion of 2 Corinthians 11 that captures the thrust of the passage we will be looking at this morning:

There are times when it is necessary to consider amongst the scores of self-appointed preachers and prophets about us, who really speaks for God and who is merely padding his ego or filling his own pockets. Many of the sermons that saturate our airwaves, or the books that make best-selling lists, are, in spite of pious references to the Almighty, vain attempts at self-aggrandizement and do very little for the Kingdom of God. We must learn how to separate the wheat from the chaff, the truth from a myriad of half-truths, lest we be led astray by articulate speech or pulpit personality or the innumerable gimmicks designed to attract the bewildered masses. Unfortunately, we are often more impressed by statistics than we are by the quality of that which is foisted upon the public.

Whereas we must be careful in our judgements of God's servants, we need keen minds and sharp wits to determine who they are who really are serving the Lord and to whom we may listen with confidence and trust. We may all be suspected and accused of having ulterior motives in our pursuit of converts. But there are some who are genuine while others are not. We have no acid test that will immediately separate the authentic from the less than authentic. But we can ask certain questions that may resolve in strengthening or destroying our confidence in these people.

These helpful words form a good introduction to our study today.

In this section the apostle Paul concludes his teaching concerning division in the church in Corinth. As we read these verses we will notice that Paul had a great concern for the church there, as he did for all the churches. As soon as the apostle left, many teachers, some good, some false, began appearing at the doorstep of the Corinthian church. Some of them looked better than Paul. They preached better than he did, and they appeared to have more impressive credentials. They boasted about their credentials too, and Paul regarded that kind of talk as foolish. So these churches, Corinth included, found themselves swept away by the teaching of these other communicators, many of them false prophets, wolves in sheep's clothing. With both authority and love, Paul corrects his beloved children in the faith.

In the first part of our passage, verses 6-13 of chapter 4, which is reminiscent of Paul's powerful words in 2 Corinthians declaring his weakness and vulnerability, we find three characteristics of an authentic ministry.

## I. The marks of a true apostle (4:6-13)

Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively applied to Apollos and myself for your sakes, that in us you might learn not to exceed what is written, in order that no one of you might become arrogant in behalf of one against the other. For who

regards you as superior? And what do you have that you did not receive? But if you did receive it, why do you boast as if you had not received it? (1 Cor 4:6-7 NASB)

We find the first characteristic of authentic Christian ministry in these verses.

### A. Authentic ministry begins with humility and dependence

At the heart of the boasting at Corinth was the conviction that they really were a successful, lively, mature church. The Corinthians were satisfied with their spirituality, their leadership, and the general quality of their life together. They had settled down into the illusion that they had become the best they could be.

They imagined themselves to be superior because of their gift-ness. Remember the Corinthian church possessed all the gifts of the Spirit. They had miracles, healings, tongues and prophecy. Their billboard might have said, "Come Visit The Total Church—The Church That Has It All!" As he deals with their arrogance and complacency, Paul asks the Corinthians, and us as well, a most helpful and pertinent question, "What do you have that you did not receive?" The implied answer is, nothing! All the good that they possessed came from Another. Those of you with gifts of prophesying or teaching, where did you get them? They were imparted by the Holy Spirit. What a foolish thing it is to view our gifts as though we initiated them!

Have you ever met Christians who felt the way these Corinthians did? They feel they have arrived, that they have learned the whole truth and you can't teach them anything new. There are many reasons why a church adopts this false sense of having arrived, of being rich. Taking pride in the size of one's church can lead to this, as can material possessions and the amount of a church budget. Prominence, too, can lead to problems in this area.

We face that temptation here at Peninsula Bible Church. Our church is widely known. We have a reputation as an active, Bible-teaching church. There is a temptation to think that because this is true of us, we have arrived. Hardly a week goes by that I do not get a call from someone in another part of a country who has heard of PBC or has been touched by our ministry, wanting to know the secrets, the programs etc., that will make his ministry successful too. When I first came on staff as high school pastor, other pastors from around the country would call me up, asking how they should run their high school ministries. It was a heady experience. But I did not have any answers for them, any more than I had the day before I was called to the ministry. Prominence in ministry can be a temptation to arrogance.

The major point is clear: Boasting is foolish among people who owe everything to the grace of God.

Paul says he used himself and Apollos as examples, as illustrations, to help the Corinthians apply these truths. What we have said about ourselves is applicable to you, says the apostle. The illustrations and

descriptions we have used about our ministry—the figure of a garden, of a building, of servants and stewards—all these apply to you as well.

I did this, says Paul, “so that you might learn not to exceed what is written.” What was written was the Old Testament. This false wisdom was producing an arrogance that led the Corinthians to think that they could go beyond the Old Testament Scriptures. Paul says that this analysis of the nature of Christian leadership is valid for all of time. In fact, if you look in the Old Testament, you will see that this principle has always been true. Those whom God has used throughout history have been merely servants. They were not powerful or gifted people. Moses had a speech impediment. As a husband, Abraham had a lot of lessons to learn. We could name others—Hosea, Gideon, David—but God used them anyway. That has been the consistent pattern of God’s operation. He has “chosen the weak things of the world to shame the wise.” The people God uses are ordinary, common people like you and me. The greatest praise we could ever receive will be from our Lord when we see him, and he greets us with words, “Well done, good and faithful servant.”

Commenting on this verse, John Calvin wrote:

The true basis of humility is, on the one hand, not to be self-satisfied, for we know that we have no good in ourselves at all; and, on the other hand, if God has implanted any good in us, to be, for that reason, all the more indebted to his grace.

Grace always leads to gratitude.

There is a second principle. Verse 8:

#### **B. Authentic ministry always balances glory with the cross**

**You are already filled, you have already become rich, you have become kings without us; and I would indeed that you had become kings so that we might also reign with you. (4:8)**

Notice the irony in Paul’s double use of the word “already”: “you are filled already...you are rich already.” Paul’s use of this word indicates that he did regard what the Corinthians taught as a valid part of the Christian message, but it is not one that is fully experienced in this life on earth. We “have been” filled, enriched, lifted to reign with Christ, but we shall not enter fully into that inheritance here and now. It is a theology of glory, but it has to be in the context of the theology of the cross, which Paul will address in verses 9-13.

He acknowledges that he would love to be set fully free in Christ, together with the Corinthians: “Would that you had become kings so that we also might reign with you.” He would love to have gotten beyond all the persecution, the beatings, the depression, the sheer struggle of being “fools for Christ’s sake”. The Corinthians may have arrived, but he has not. They reckon they are strong, but he is all too aware of his weakness. They glory in their reputation and their respectability in society, but he is mocked and scorned by the world. In a passage similar to those paragraphs in 2 Corinthians which describe his weakness and vulnerability, Paul paints the authentic marks of Christ’s own ministry: “A servant is not greater than his master”; and for Christ’s sake he has become the “scum of the world.”

The Corinthians were living as if the age to come had already been consummated and the saints had taken over the Kingdom. But the Kingdom of God is both a present reality and a future hope. Our witness must always express the tension “already, but not yet.” The Corinthians had the “already”; they left little room for the “not yet.”

The authentic Christian life is not always fantastic. I have a feeling that many here understand what I am talking about. You get weary of plastic smiles and hollow words, such as “fantastic,” “wonderful,” and “glorious,” used with reference to Christianity. Those words do not describe your life at all. Take comfort: they do not describe the apostle’s life either.

I am reminded of the words of the author of Hebrews in his review of those faithful believers, the “Hall of Fame” of faith. This gives another side of the picture. Heb. 11:35-38:

**Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection. Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawn in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated—the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. (Heb 11:35-38)**

All Christians are, at the same time, both kings and paupers. It is the authentic Christian experience to be wealthy in Christ and to be despised by the world. We shall never experience perfect bliss here. We shall not have perfect health, we shall not have instant guidance, we shall not be in constant, beautiful contact with the Lord. We are still human, we are still in the world, we are still mortal, we are still exposed to sin, the world, the flesh and the devil. We must still wrestle and watch and pray. We all still fail, we still fall. There is victory, there is power, there is healing, there is guidance, there is salvation, but we have not arrived. We live in two worlds, and there must therefore be tension. Paul describes the Christian’s true situation in these terms in Philippians, “For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in Him but also suffer for His sake.”

There is a third principle in this paragraph. Verses 9-13:

#### **C. Authentic ministry is never measured by nor equated with material prosperity**

**For, I think, God has exhibited us apostles last of all, as men condemned to death; because we have become a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men. We are fools for Christ’s sake, but you are prudent in Christ; we are weak, but you are strong; you are distinguished, but we are without honor. To this present hour, we are both hungry and thirsty, and are poorly clothed, and are roughly treated, and are homeless; and we toil, working with our own hands; when we are reviled, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure; when we are slandered, we try to conciliate; we have become as the scum of the world, the dregs of all things, even until now. (4:9-13)**

The two themes, the Corinthians’ pride, and Paul’s weaknesses, dominate this section. The apostle starkly contrasts the differences between him and the Corinthians: they have “arrived,” but he is like a man condemned to die in the arena. He imagines a Roman general’s triumphal procession on his return to Rome. The captives and the trophies are paraded as a spectacle for the public to relish, and following behind is the captured general or king, who has already been “sentenced to death.” Afterwards the captives are taken to the arena to fight with wild beasts. The Corinthians in their pride were like the conquering general, displaying their trophies. The apostles were like the group of captives sentenced to die. The Corinthians are wise and strong and honored; Paul is foolish, weak and dishonored.

They were following the ideas of the Greek philosophers, and of the Stoics, the ultimate secular humanists. The Stoics taught that the goal of life was self-adequacy. It was vital that a man be cultured and well educated, they held. He should never work with his hands; that was for slaves. He must be eloquent, a good debater, and able to put others down. But notice, Paul says he boasts in the very things the Corinthians disdain. They thought he should act just like them, and regard himself as they perceived themselves. But Paul says that his evaluation of himself is how they all ought to regard themselves.

Notice Paul says, in effect, that the apostles were “hungry and thirsty, poorly clothed, roughly treated, homeless.” They possessed none of the things that Roman society thought were important. We need to reflect about how much we have absorbed from our own society in this regard. Even as Christians we sometimes believe that the way to have an influence in the world is to be successful in our business and personal lives: If we just could get that promotion, then people will listen to us. When we get a nicer home, then we will open it up for ministry. But when we buy that notion, we become sidetracked into peripheral matters—how we dress, where we buy our clothes, how educated we are, how large our vocabulary is, how big our portfolio, or our house, what kind of neighborhood we live in, how funny, or how persuasive we are, etc. But those things are unimportant in terms of influence and power in the Christian life. Paul is not saying that if we have those things we ought to try to get rid of them. He is simply saying they don’t matter.

I pray that as parents we are communicating and modeling these truths to our children. When I worked with high school students, I met many Christian parents who loved the Lord but communicated to their children that what really mattered in life was not whether they loved Jesus Christ, but which university they were going to attend, or their choice of a career. I remember pleading with some parents to allow their high schoolers to go on a ministry trip to Mexico for a week, only to be told that their education came first. And this was said of good students who were doing well in school! I tried to convince parents that 10 years from now they wouldn’t even remember that their son or daughter had missed a week in school, but I could promise them they would remember their kids had spent that week in Mexico. I pray we will give much thought to the values we are communicating to our children.

Recently I came across part of a letter written by John Quincy Adams to his daughter, counseling her about marriage and the type of man she should marry. His words reveal how highly he regarded this principle we have been talking about:

Daughter! Get an honest man and keep him honest. No matter whether he is rich, provided he be independent. Regard the honor and moral character of the man, more than all circumstances. Think of no other greatness but that of the soul, no other riches but those of the heart.

For people like the Corinthians, who were concerned for their own status, reputation and popularity, authentic Christian ministry was immensely difficult to accept, let alone embrace. The truth that God’s strength is made perfect in our weakness gets through to us slowly.

The apostle’s point is clear. Believers who live for Christ will not necessarily be treated in a way that gives them a superiority complex! Being in the will of God does not necessarily mean you will be successful and prosperous in this life. The Lord Jesus was constantly in the will of his Father and yet it was the Father’s will to cause his Son to suffer.

To be used effectively by God, Christians do not need any of the things that the world considers essential for success.

Having given the authentic marks of apostleship, Paul closes this section with the words of a loving father. Verses 14-21.

## II. The words of a loving father (4:14-21)

**I do not write things to shame you, but to admonish you as my beloved children. For if you were to have countless tutors in Christ, yet you would not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel. I exhort you therefore, be imitators of me. For this reason, I have sent to you Timothy, who is my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, and he will remind you of my ways which are in Christ, just as I teach everywhere in every church. Now some have become arrogant, as though I were not coming to you. But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills, and I shall find out, not the words of those who are arrogant, but their power. For the kingdom of God does not consist in words, but in power. What do you desire? Shall I come to you with a rod or with love and a spirit of gentleness? (4:14-21)**

Paul assures the Corinthians that though his words may appear sarcastic he is not trying to make them feel ashamed in any wrong sense of that word. He is speaking to them as a father would his beloved children. He holds a special place in their lives. He regarded the Corinthians not just as wayward saints but as his disobedient children. He had planted the gospel in the Corinthian soil, laid the foundation for their spiritual growth, and become their spiritual father. He delivered them, fed them and changed their diapers, and in that light he would discipline them as well. He reminds them that these principles do not apply merely to Corinth, but they are universal principles that are true throughout the church. It as a father then, that Paul promises to come back. And the last thing a father wants to do when he comes home from an extended trip is discipline his children. He wants to come “with love and a spirit of gentleness, not with a rod.”

Children often make loud, boastful claims. This is a sign of their immaturity—much talk, but not much power to put their words into action. Thus Paul ends with a heartfelt plea to the Corinthians to stop boasting and grow up. When I come, says Paul, I am going to look for the distinctive marks of maturity—that quiet, irresistible power of the Holy Spirit that transforms lives.

When I think of that kind of power, I am reminded of Paul’s prayer in Colossians 1:10-11: “And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, joyously.” I don’t know about you, but when I think of being strengthened with all the power of God’s glorious might, I think of something big and loud and fast that is capable of all kinds of spiritual heroics. But Paul reminds us that the purpose of all that power is that we might have endurance, patience and joy. If you are able to meet the pressures, disappointments and failures in life with more stability, and gain more patience and joy in the process, then you are experiencing the full force of the power of God. Endurance is the apex of God’s power.

It is my prayer that we as a church will begin to experience more and more this kind of power. We will do that as we continue to real-

ize that our effectiveness in ministry is dependent on the Spirit of God's work in and through us, not on our education, our personality, or our position in life. It depends upon God, and it begins with humility.

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1 Corinthians 5:1-13

Eighth Message

Gary Vanderet

March 25, 1990

# HANDLING A SCANDAL

*SERIES: EXAMINING LIFE IN THE LOCAL CHURCH*

In chapter 5 of his first Corinthian letter, to which we come this morning, Paul now tackles the second major problem—sexual immorality—underlying the immaturity of the believing community in Corinth. The struggles in Corinth were not merely intellectual, they were moral as well.

J. Allen Peterson has invested almost 40 years of his life ministering to marriages and families. A few years ago he wrote a very helpful book, *The Myth of the Greener Grass*. In one paragraph he writes:

A call to fidelity is like a solitary voice in today's sexual wilderness. What was once labeled adultery and carried a stigma of guilt and embarrassment now is an affair—a nice-sounding, almost inviting word, wrapped in mystery, fascination and excitement. A relationship, not sin. What was once behind the scenes—a secret closely guarded—is now in the headlines, a TV theme, a best seller, as common as the cold. Marriages are “open”; divorces are “creative.”

Like the church in Corinth, the church today faces a growing problem in handling the disturbing increase in sexual immorality among Christians.

Recall that Corinth was a sex-obsessed city. Hardly a Corinthian convert would have been left untouched, either directly or indirectly, by immorality. Sexual deviations were common in that city. As one Roman put it, “Mistresses we keep for the sake of pleasure, concubines for the daily care of the body, and wives to bear us legitimate children.” Corinth was the site of the Temple of Aphrodite, and as such was devoted to the worship of sex. Thus it was quite common for Christians to be tempted in this area. Since sexual immorality was a part of the lifestyle of many Corinthians before they became Christians, it was difficult for them to break these habits.

You can see how relevant this issue is in Silicon Valley. In this sobering passage we will find much to help us in our own struggles. Paul states the specific problem in the church in Corinth in verses 1-2.

## I. The problem stated (1:1-2)

It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles, that someone has his father's wife. And you have become arrogant, and have not mourned instead, in order that the one who has done this deed might be removed from your midst. (1 Cor 5:1-2 NASB)

The particular problem presented to Paul is stated in verse 1: “It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles, that someone has his father's wife.” The Greek says literally, “A man has his father's wife,” probably indicating this man had his stepmother either as a wife or as a concubine while his father was still alive. We don't know whether it means the offender had seduced his stepmother or that she was divorced from his father or that the father

had died leaving her a widow. What is clear was that it is an illicit union, a case of incest, and even pagans were appalled by it.

The Greek word for immorality is *porneia* (from which we get our word “pornography”) which has the literal meaning, “resorting to prostitutes.” In Corinth, the priestesses of the temple to Aphrodite were sacred prostitutes, and the practice of *porneia* was prevalent. Through consistent usage the word came to mean any sexual behavior which transgressed the Christian norm, i.e., all premarital, extramarital, and unnatural sexual intercourse. The word is used in the comprehensive sense, and it includes all violations of the seventh commandment.

As serious as this sexual sin is, what concerns Paul most here is the absolute lack of concern among the Christians at Corinth about the implications of what was going on among them. Indeed he seems, if anything, less shocked about the immorality itself than about the blase, arrogant attitude being displayed towards it: “And you have become arrogant, and have not mourned instead.”

Remember this arrogance was one of the besetting sins of the church at Corinth. In this passage, as we will see, Paul is rebuking not only this man's sin, but the Corinthians' sin as well. They were proud of their liberal tolerance of the matter, and their arrogance blinded them to their sin of failing to deal with this issue. Paul shows them, and us as well, that true love is tenacious, especially in the face of a scandal.

The proper attitude toward such issues, Paul reminds us, is neither tolerant acceptance nor self-righteous condemnation. These seem to be the responses of many Christians when such a case arises. The correct response, however, is one of sorrowful prayer. It is the attitude expressed in Galatians 6:1, where Paul tells us, “Brethren, even if a man is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; looking to yourselves, lest you too be tempted.”

Having stated the problem, and shown us the proper attitude we ought to have toward it, Paul now proceeds to show us the proper action we ought to take. Verses 3-8:

## II. The problem faced: The need for discipline (5:3-8)

For I, on my part, though absent in body am present in spirit, have already judged him who has so committed this, as though I were present. In the name of our Lord Jesus, when you are assembled, and I with you in spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus, I have decided to deliver such a one to Satan, for the destruction of his flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus. Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough? Clean out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, just as you are in fact unleavened. For Christ, our Passover, also has been sacrificed. Let us therefore celebrate the feast, not with old leaven, nor with

**the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth. (5:3-8)**

There are two major principles in this passage about church discipline. But before I share those, notice that the responsibility of discipline is given, not to a few leaders, but to the church. It is not the responsibility of a few elders to get together and decide among themselves what they think is best. Paul indicates that they already ought to know what to do. He says that he is speaking “in the name of the Lord Jesus,” and “by the power of the Lord Jesus.” In other words, we already have a divine and an apostolic word that deals directly with this area. Therefore, obey it!

In Matthew 18, the Lord Jesus tells us how to handle such situations:

**“If your brother sins against you [the older manuscripts say simply, “If your brother sins”] go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.**

**“I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.**

**“Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.” (Matt 18:15-20 NIV)**

In that passage Jesus gives us four steps to take:

Step #1. When I see my brother living in continual, flagrant sin—not something that merely offends my sensibilities—then I should go to him privately and talk to him about it, seeking to clarify if what I think is going on actually is. I should not talk about the issue with anyone else, nor should I ask for prayer about it. If he responds to my gentle confrontation, I don’t need to go any farther. But if he doesn’t hear me, then there is a second step.

Step #2. I should take one or two others along with me and talk to him about it again, after first clarifying whether he is in fact involved in wrong actions. These others then become witnesses to what exactly is said and not said. If he listens, that is the end of it.

This kind of thing happens all the time around here—and it needs to happen. Much immorality has been corrected by brothers and sisters speaking the truth in love to each other. That is the healthiest thing we can do for one another. One reason why the church fails here is that we don’t know each other well enough to be aware of what is going on. It is often an indictment of our lack of transparency.

Now if he does not respond to the small group, Jesus says there is a third step.

Step #3. It must be made public. We must share it with the believing community. Everyone in the community must share the responsibility of helping that person recover. And if he does not respond to the church, there is a fourth step.

Step #4. We must change our attitude toward him: we must treat him as an unbeliever. He has responded as though he were not a Christian at all, and so we must treat him as such. He has deceived

himself. He may not be a Christian. He does not know the basis for purity, and so we conclude he needs to be born again.

Those are the four steps. And, I might add, these are not to be taken in a week’s time. We give the person time, going to him or her individually and in groups, over and over again. These are actions which are not easily or hastily taken. Much patience and humility are required.

In the situation at Corinth it is clear that they could not start at Step #1 because the whole church knew about it and had by its tolerance participated in it. Therefore it had come to the final step.

The specific action of discipline is repeated in a number of different ways in this passage: 5:2: “in order that the one who has done this deed might be removed from your midst” 5:7: “cleanse out the old leaven”; 5:11: “do not associate with a so-called brother if he should be an immoral person”; 5:13: “remove the wicked man from among yourselves.”

These commands appear to be rather harsh, and it sounds as if we are to physically throw the man out of the church meeting. But I do not think that is what the apostle had in mind. We will get a better understanding when we see the two major points Paul is making in these verses:

#### **A. Discipline is essential for the benefit of the person**

The benefit of the discipline for the individual is best summarized in verse 5: “deliver such a one over to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.” Scripture teaches us that the world is Satan’s dominion. What we are doing is simply releasing this person back into Satan’s domain, which is the world. He has never really left it. The fact that he can persist in such blatant sin without any repentance demonstrates that he has never really left Satan’s world. And so we release him from the spiritual protection of the church, for the purpose of destroying his flesh.

Now we have already seen that when Paul uses that term flesh, he is referring not to our bodies, but to our sinful nature. Although some commentators have taken this phrase “destruction of the flesh” to include physical death, using Ananias and Sapphira as examples, I think what Paul is referring to is defeating a sinner’s fleshly desires by letting Satan push those passions to extremes, creating such an anguish in the sinner that his lust is destroyed. The goal is salvation and restoration, not punishment. We are lovingly correcting, not vindictively punishing. The action does mean physical rejection. In the Corinthian church, which met in homes where they often shared communion with their meals, it would mean that this individual would not share in that occasion. In our setting, however, an individual would be free to attend a church meeting. But almost invariably he would feel so alienated he would leave—and we would allow him to do so.

There is tremendous pressure in our day to not take such strong actions. Churches have been sued for doing so. But we must remember we are not dealing with a human organization that is voting on one of its members, but with the church of the living God, among whom the Lord Jesus is present as he said he would be to control the results, whatever happens. It is on his authority and power we act, not on our own.

In my 12 years on this staff I am aware of only two occasions when we had to take this action. In both situations after a number of years there was repentance and reconciliation. Let me share with you a let-

ter one of those individuals wrote which will help us see the benefit of such an action:

My fellow Christians,

Several years ago the congregation of Peninsula Bible Church took public action against me in accordance with Matthew 18:15-20. The charges against me were true. I cannot reverse history and relive the events that led up to my downfall. I have harmed many people and brought ruin to myself. Because I was an outspoken, prominent member of the Christian community, my sins have been all the more deplorable and horrendous. After I became a Christian some 18 years ago I failed to deal thoroughly with lust, covetousness, and immorality. In time I became self-deceived, proud and arrogant. Moreover, eventually God shouted upon the housetops that which I had tried desperately to keep hidden... Twice I went through the horror and hell of manic-depressive psychoses (as Nebuchadnezzar did) that I might learn that God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble. I am very fortunate to be alive. I came very close to suicide and should have died in ignominy and disgrace... I am in need of your forgiveness, for I have wronged you all. I earnestly desire your prayers for wholeness and complete deliverance... It is impossible for me to retrace my footsteps and right every wrong. However, I welcome the opportunity to meet and pray with any individuals who have something against me that needs resolution. I am looking and waiting for the further grace and mercy of God in this matter. What you have bound on earth has been bound in heaven, and I know your actions were done in love for my own good and that of the body of Christ.

Sincerely...

There is a second principle which is equally important in Paul's mind. Not only is discipline essential for the benefit of the person,

#### **B. Discipline is essential for the benefit of the church**

Paul is concerned for the health and salvation of the individual. He is also concerned for the health and salvation of the church. This is seen in verses 6-8.

Perhaps the apostle is writing these words in anticipation of the celebration of the feast of Passover. At Passover each year, the Jews recalled how God delivered them from bondage in Egypt. One feature of this celebration was the searching out and removing of all leaven. Leaven is normally used in the Bible to refer to something evil which affects everything it touches. This purging out of leaven was done prior to the Passover sacrifice being offered in the temple. Leaven is yeast, and even today Jews will go through their houses and look for any form of leavened bread that may be present before they celebrate the Passover.

Passover is a joyous celebration of the believing community; and Paul is drawing attention to this devastating condition among believers at Corinth in their tolerance of leaven in their midst. The Passover lamb (Jesus) has already been sacrificed; the celebration of the festival (which normally lasted a week for the Jews) has already begun, and this celebration should be a permanent characteristic of the redeemed community. But there is still leaven present—and a big piece at that.

Note that Paul is speaking about deliberate, repeated sin within the fellowship. One commentator describes it as “doing evil with delight and persistency.” We all commit sin; we all need cleansing. But we are also bound to be ruthless with anything that betrays our calling and mars our fellowship with Christ.

In his book *Healing the Wounded, The Costly Love of Church Discipline*, John White writes:

Unless someone in the church decides to go lovingly to the person involved in the scandal with the object of establishing the truth, effecting righteousness and seeking to bring about reconciliation, every single member in the church who is aware of the situation is sinning every moment—is in fact a participator in the sin of the “identified sinner” in one way or another. The church is sinning by avoiding corrective church discipline.

Paul is not expecting perfect holiness or absolute purity, but “sincerity and truth.” In those days, dishonest merchants would paint over cracks in pottery so as to hide questionable merchandise from unwary buyers. The Greek word for sincerity was used of allowing sunlight to shine through pots to see if there were any cracks in them. As Christians, we should allow the sun to test our motives as well as our behavior. We must stop wearing masks and pretending to be something we are not.

“Sincerity” means openness and honesty. It means walking in the light of God's presence and wanting, by his light, to expose areas of darkness so that we may come closer to one another as well as to him. In an atmosphere of openness, sincerity, truthfulness and integrity our sins and failures can be properly dealt with in the body of Christ; not in a spirit of judgment, but openly, courageously and consistently as we speak the truth to one another in love. This is the kind of transparency that makes the Christian community distinctive. That is why we meet together in Home Fellowships—so that we can be open and transparent with each other. We can allow those cracks to show so that we can help each other.

A powerful motivation for this kind of life is found in Paul's amazing statement, “you really are unleavened.” It clearly summarizes in Paul's mind the essential conviction about all Christians: “You are unleavened, purified from the evil which is yours by nature, so become what you are.” Look at what God in Christ has done for you, and now get on with becoming what he has made possible. The Corinthians were failing to see the implications of God's calling.

Because of what we have become, Christians are exhorted to “celebrate the feast.” Paul may have been thinking about the joy of Easter. If he was writing this at the time of the Passover, he was concerned that because of the sin in their midst the church would be prevented from experiencing the true joy of that season. As long as we cling to old habits and sins we cannot celebrate the joy of the resurrection. Celebration ought to be a continual mark of a healthy body. For the Christian, the Passover feast does not last a week, it lasts an entire lifetime! Chrysostom put it like this, “For the true Christian it is always Easter, always Pentecost, always Christmas.”

The world is looking for such a church that takes sin seriously and enjoys forgiveness fully; a church that, when it meets together, combines joyful celebration with an awesome sense of God's presence. When we as a body live with that kind of victory over temptations that destroy others, people will begin to see that there is purpose for this salvation which we profess.

But that will not happen if we refuse to have intimate, costly contact with the world. Thus Paul concludes this chapter with an important warning that corrects a previous misunderstanding.

### **III. A misunderstanding corrected: The limits of discipline (5:9-13)**

I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people; I did not at all mean with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters; for then

you would have to go out of the world. But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he should be an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler—not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Do you not judge those who are within the church? But those who are outside, God judges. “Remove the wicked man from among yourselves.” (5:9-13)

We see clearly in these verses how easy it is for Christians to opt out of the kind of contact we should have with unbelievers. Down through the centuries Christians have often chosen not to participate in God’s call to be fully involved in his pattern of influence, which is incarnation—fleshing out and modeling truth before a hurting world. The most revealing evidence of this avoidance is the way we fill up our schedule with Christian meetings rather than making ourselves available for friendships with unbelievers.

The apostle’s principle is clear: we are to have strict discipline within, complete freedom of association outside. Whenever we become arrogant, that principle reverses itself: we become very tolerant among ourselves and very critical and condemning toward others.

We must not avoid the world. We were sent into it! That is where we belong. Sure, the habits of non-believers may be offensive to us, but we need to have understanding. They do not have the truth and the resources to be any different. We should not judge or condemn people. We are to love them and reach out to them, to care about their needs, and through that friendship to lead them to the One who can meet the hunger of their hearts. We are not to judge the world; we are to judge the church.

Notice that as important as the sin of fornication is, Paul refuses to allow any priority list of sins to form in the Corinthians’ minds. In verses 10-11 he lists several sins which must be taken with the same seriousness when they occur persistently in the Christian community. Whether it is sex, money, possessions, substance abuse, violence, or the tongue, consistent transgression calls for discipline because we are called to be distinctive in our behavior.

Church discipline is essential both to the individual believer and to the church. I pray that we will grow in our ability to be open, honest and courageous with each other, that we will love one another enough so that we will speak the truth to one another in love. That is our challenge.

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Catalog No. 787

1 Corinthians 6:1-11

Ninth Message

Gary Vanderet

August 5, 1990

# RIGHTING WRONGS IN THE CHURCH

*SERIES: EXAMINING LIFE IN THE LOCAL CHURCH*

Our youngest son, Timothy, is now 21 months old. He has not been a difficult baby. He sleeps well, eats well, and has been fairly compliant. But our darling little boy has discovered his emerging self, and with that discovery comes the addition to his vocabulary of the much treasured word *mine*. It has become one of his favorite words. When he spots something he wants, he simply latches on to it with his viselike grip and yells his favorite word. Deprive him of what he wants and he can go into a rage that would be disastrous were he not so helpless. Yes, my son has been inflicted with “Adam-and-Eve” disease. When sin entered the scene in the garden of Eden, Scripture says that Adam and Eve’s eyes were opened and they knew they were naked. They became self-conscious for the first time. They had never known those feelings before. (We have never known anything else!) So began the campaign to look out for #1.

Obsession with rights doesn’t look so out of place in toddlers. Wise parents understand that bent and train accordingly. However, there is something amiss when it characterizes a church. Such was the situation in the church at Corinth. Whether it concerned marriage, business ethics, food laws, public worship, or exercising their spiritual gifts, there was a “freedom lobby” in Corinth ready to lay claim to their right to do as they choose.

This inevitably led to grudges and grievances which were harbored unendingly between fellow Christians. Resorting to the law-courts was then as now a protracted and expensive business, not calculated at all to improve relationships in the body of Christ. But once a group of Christians becomes obsessed with their rights instead of their responsibilities there will be trouble until they repent.

The Corinthians were proud, competitive, and assertive people. Corinth was a city with uncanny parallels to the Bay Area. In fact we could describe the atmosphere of the city of Corinth in three phrases: intellectually alert, materially prosperous, and morally corrupt. We can identify with those terms. These proud, sometimes wealthy, independent ex-pagans were having a difficult time learning how to live as Christians. It was in their lifestyle, not their theology, where they were confused. Where were the lines to be drawn? How much of one’s culture must be abandoned when one becomes a Christian? Paul’s answers are decisive and direct, and extremely relevant.

Thus, 1 Corinthians is a practical, issue-oriented letter which relates the truth of the gospel to the ethical issues of daily life. Having been immersed in this epistle for many months, I am more convinced than ever that it is indeed a tract for our times. Here the truth of the gospel confronts the intellectually heady, materially prosperous and morally decadent city of Corinth—and ours as well.

This practice of taking one another to court had probably become a regular habit in Corinth. One or two examples would hardly have aroused Paul’s ire so forcefully.

William Barclay wrote:

The Greeks were naturally and characteristically a litigious people. The law-courts were in fact one of their chief amusements and entertainments... In a Greek city every man was more or less a lawyer and spent a very great part of his time either deciding or listening to law cases. The Greeks were in fact famous, or notorious, for their love of going to law. Not unnaturally, certain of the Greeks had brought their litigious tendencies into the Christian church; and Paul was shocked.

In other words, this habit of taking others to court was no different from their giving in to the sexual laxity of the culture; the world was once again influencing the church instead of the church influencing the world.

This particular section of the letter deals with how to handle controversy in the church. In chapter 5 the issue was immorality in the church, and now in chapter 6 we look at how to handle situations where one brother is defrauding another in the congregation.

Verse 1:

**Does any one of you, when he has a case against his neighbor, dare to go to law before the unrighteous; and not before the saints? (1 Cor 6:1 NASB)**

“Does any one of you dare to go to law?” That word “dare” is right at the beginning of the sentence in the Greek text, accentuating Paul’s own sense of indignation. He says it is wrong for a Christian to sue another Christian. He is not saying that Christians ought never go to court; sometimes this is impossible to avoid. It may be necessary to settle a claim with a non-Christian in a court. But we ought not to get involved in the litigation process with a brother or sister. It is foolish and shameful.

Paul is not saying that we shouldn’t get involved in the law courts because they are unjust. He is simply saying that there is another way of dealing with the problem of internal affairs. Paul had a high view of the Roman legal system, and he often appealed to it. Once he himself appealed to Caesar, the highest possible court. At another point when he was about to be beaten unjustly, he appealed to Roman law. Thus it is not that Roman law was unjust, but simply that there is a better way to handle these problems. Secular law courts are not the place to settle disputes between Christians.

Using several rhetorical questions, Paul helps the Corinthians see their wrong attitude and reminds them of their responsibilities in this new kingdom. I will summarize Paul’s reasons in four exhortations.

Prohibiting lawsuits among believers: Four important reasons.

## I. Do not forget the destiny set before you

Verses 2-4:

**Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if the world is judged by you, are you not competent to constitute the smallest law courts? Do you not know that we shall judge**

**angels? How much more matters of this life? If then you have law courts dealing with matters of this life, do you appoint them as judges who are of no account in the church? (6:2-4)**

The reason that Christians should not to go before secular judges is that they themselves have the capacity to discern justly. We can make righteous judgments; we don't need to go before secular judges. Paul challenges the Christians at Corinth to remember the responsibilities that will come their way when the kingdom of God is fully established. There is a time coming that we will judge both the world and angels. In other words, we will have cosmic discernment. Jesus himself taught his disciples this truth. Peter felt the cost of discipleship after Jesus dealt rather firmly with the rich young ruler. He asked Jesus,

**"We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?"**

**Jesus said to them, "I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel." (Matt 19:27-28 NIV)**

Perhaps the apostle was reminded of a passage in Daniel which describes a particularly vivid dream. Daniel 7:9-27:

**"As I looked, thrones were set in place, and the Ancient of Days took his seat. His clothing was as white as snow; the hair of his head was white like wool. His throne was flaming with fire, and its wheels were all ablaze... Then the sovereignty, power and greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven will be handed over to the saints, the people of the Most High. His kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom, and all rulers will worship and obey him." (Dan 7:9, 27 NIV)**

The sheer grandeur of this perspective on the consummation of the kingdom of God, and the part to be played by saints like these Corinthians who were fighting each other, must have been distressing to Paul. We are being prepared to learn to rule righteously. One of the great purposes God has for us here on earth is the skill of correct judgment, of balancing truth and love.

We are to judge angels, says the apostle. Think of that! We don't know much about angels. Scripture says that they give their energies to the worship of heaven (Rev. 5:11-12), and the service of the saints (Heb. 1:14), but they have difficulty understanding the glories of salvation. Peter imagines them peering down from heaven, trying to understand the mysteries of what it means to be redeemed (1 Pet. 1:12). It is our task to communicate this divine wisdom to these angelic beings, and God is preparing a people who will be so capable of delving into the motives of all beings that we will participate with him in judging the angels that have fallen. What a destiny!

Do you see Paul's point? It is ridiculous that those who are being prepared for the difficult task of judging the world and judging angels can't seem to solve these minor problems. The analogy is easy to relate to. It is as if a Supreme Court justice comes home from work to find his children fighting. They can't solve an issue, and he goes next door to find someone who can mediate the situation because he is uncertain that he can deal with the problem; or a mathematician who works with great computers asking his junior high-age son for help in balancing the checkbook.

Knowing our destiny, seeing the end of the matter, it becomes humorous, maybe even blasphemous, to go to court over these trivial

matters. Do not forget your destiny: you are being prepared to judge the world.

## II. Do not Overlook the Resources Among You

Verses 5-6:

**I say this to your shame. Is it so, that there is not among you one wise man who will be able to decide between his brethren, but brother goes to law with brother, and that before unbelievers? (6:5-6)**

Here Paul gives the proper procedure for handling problems of this nature. When someone is being defrauded or cheated, or there is an issue that brothers or sister can't work through in the body, the way to handle the situation is to call in another brother, a wise man, a neutral third party who can arbitrate the matter. You don't need to drag all your dirty linen before the non-Christian world. Get two brothers together and appoint a wise man to arbitrate. Whenever relationships become severely strained it is important to bring in those gifted members of the body who can bring the wisdom of God into a situation.

The Scriptures tell us that we have everything we need in the church to express the love of Christ. Paul reminded the Corinthians that as a church they were "enriched with all speech and all knowledge." We can make subtle moral discriminations the world cannot make. We can perceive things the world cannot see. We can understand things the world cannot understand. We have already seen why this is true. It is not that Christians have some inherent capacity the world doesn't have. We are not more inherently just. Paul's point is that we have the mind of Christ. And that, according to chapter 4, is the Scriptures. God has revealed his perspective on life. He has taught us to focus on the right things and thus to perceive justly. Because we have the Scriptures and because we are aligned with him, we can make righteous judgements.

Human law by its very nature can only deal with relatively trivial and superficial matters. It is restricted to judging actions. There are among us people who are far more competent to settle these problems. I think this alternative ought to be used more often than it is. Elders ought to be called upon when disagreements can't be solved in the body.

Paul says that we have the sort of discernment that is necessary to decide wisely how to handle a problem between two brothers. That is not an arrogant statement. The apostle is not saying that we know something no one else knows. We have that discernment only because God has revealed truth to us, and that truth is available to anyone who will believe it. The problem is that people in the world will not believe it. If you believe, you will have the wisdom to make righteous decisions.

## III. Do not Betray the Calling Given You

Verses 7-8:

**Actually, then, it is already a defeat for you, that you have lawsuits with one another. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be defrauded? On the contrary, you yourselves wrong and defraud, and that your brethren. (6:7-8)**

Paul implies that they were betraying their calling as saints by the way they were treating one another. They had been called to be saints, called to share in Christ himself, called to know his wisdom and power—to shame the wise and the strong by the quality of their

community life—and here they were living defeated lives, behaving like unconverted pagans and giving in to such basic temptations as resentment and covetousness. They were winning lawsuits—but at each other's expense. Paul says that even if they win, they lose! Whatever the outcome of the legal decision, to go to court with a brother is to incur defeat!

So what are we to do if we cannot work it out and a brother insists that he is right in defrauding us? What do we do when the negotiations break down? Supposing we get them together, bring in a third party to share his wisdom and they are still unable to reconcile? There is hardness of heart. One man insists on his own way, and won't listen to counsel. What do we do?

There is a better way which represents our true calling. Those who have been defrauded or suffered some wrong are to accept it without bitterness. That was the clear teaching of Jesus in Matthew 5:38-40:

**“You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well.” (Matt 5:38-40 NIV)**

Even if you take the person to court and get your money or your piece of property back, you have lost because you have diminished yourself. Any time we disobey we lose, no matter what the apparent benefit. Perhaps even more importantly, we lose corporately, as a church, because we are displaying our own disobedience before the world. We ought to be entirely different from the world. If we fight and demand our rights and defraud and cheat one another, we are no different than anyone else. The world will look at us and, like Nietzsche, will declare, “When I see your redeemed life, I will be more inclined to believe in your Redeemer.” Even if you win you lose. Why not be defrauded? From God's perspective people are the most important thing in the universe. We must be willing to be cheated and wronged so as to seek the best for the other person.

Ray Stedman once shared a story concerning Dr. Harry Ironside that had a big influence on Dr. Ironside's life. His mother had taken him to a church meeting when he was eight and he remembered that everyone was discussing some kind of problem going on in the church. He said he didn't remember what it was about, but he did remember that one man stood up, shook his fist, and shouted, “I don't care what the rest of you do. I want my rights! That's all! I just want my rights!” An older man who was hard of hearing was sitting beside the boy. He cupped his hand behind his ear and asked, “Brother, what did you say?” The man repeated his statement a little less forcefully: “All I said was, ‘I want my rights!’” The old man spoke up, “Your rights, brother, is that what you want, your rights? Why, the Lord Jesus didn't come to get his rights. He came to get his wrongs, and he got them.”

We need to remember that we are called to demonstrate a different lifestyle before the world, one in which we are ready to surrender our personal rights for the cause of the gospel and the healing of others. There may come a time when you must accept a wrong done to you in your life without fighting back in order to heal another individual.

David was hunted and oppressed by Saul for many years. Twice during Saul's pursuit of him in the wilderness, David had in it his power to kill Saul. He was the king-elect. His friends told him, “Get him! Kill him! It is the Lord's will. He has brought about this moment.” But David could not do it. He knew that God would defend

him, and at the proper time exalt him. I mention this because most of our counselors, though well-intentioned like David's friends, will care more for your happiness than your obedience.

The difficult people in our lives are starving for genuine love, love that gives even when it hurts. May I ask you a personal and challenging question? Would you be willing to give up your rights so that others might be healed?

This principle demonstrates how radical are the demands of the gospel. I don't know about you, but when I became a Christian I was not aware of how demanding following Jesus was. The demands of Christ's Lordship are radical—prioritizing life from God's viewpoint and seeing the value of people.

#### IV. Do Not Deny the Power Within You

Verses 9-11:

**Or do you not know that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, shall inherit the kingdom of God. 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 Christ, and in the Spirit of our God. (6:9-11)**

Paul goes on to show how fundamentally different our life is because we have come to Christ.

It is a little difficult to see the connection between these verses and what has come before. The word translated “wrong” in v. 8 is from the same root as the word “unrighteous” in v. 9. It could be translated:

On the contrary you yourselves *act unrighteously* and defraud, and that your brothers. Or do you not know that those who *act unrighteously* will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Paul is saying that if I act unrighteously toward my brother, cheat him, wrong him, insist upon my rights, and not care how it affects him, then I may not be a Christian at all.

Now he is not talking about failing once or twice, or saying that if I do act this way, I will lose my salvation. He is saying that if this is a pattern of life, that I continually step over people to acquire what I want, then it is possible that I am deceiving myself and I may not be a believer. He is not saying that we cannot fall into these sins periodically as Christians, because we can and do. But you cannot go on justifying this kind of lifestyle. It is not Christian.

When you look at Paul's list of those who are excluded from the kingdom, it is very inclusive. It includes not only those who are dominated by immoral sexual lust, but those who are dominated by the lust for things as well—the greedy and covetous.

Let me say that when Paul refers to the “effeminate and homosexuals,” he is not talking about homosexual tendencies, but of behavior. These words refer to male prostitutes and homosexual offenders. Homosexuality was rampant in the Roman world. Fourteen of the first fifteen Roman Emperors practiced it.

That word *thieves* means “petty pilferers, sneak thieves.” The worst places of attack were the bath houses and the gymnasium. Thieves would steal the clothes of those who were exercising and bathing. It became so bad that this became a capital offense, punishable by death. Some things never change, do they? We are an acquisitive

society, and the need for protection of all kinds has made security big business.

And such were some of you...

Paul's point is that it is all in the past. We are different now. For all of their so-called knowledge, the Christians at Corinth had lost sight of the centrality of Jesus Christ, the controlling power of the Holy Spirit, and the life transforming experience of having been called and saved by God.

There are few more exciting and energizing statements in the New Testament than this phrase: And such were some of you.

When we recall the moral cesspool that Corinth was, we can appreciate the wonder and beauty of that statement. No power on earth could have produced such a transformation in this motley collection of believers. Every single individual rescued from that list of vices is a trophy of God's grace. Every Corinthian Christian is living evidence that God's answer to sophisticated Greek culture was not clever arguments but changed lives.

...but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified...

Something had happened. They were no longer caught up and bound by that way of life. All three verbs are in the past tense. They refer to something that had already happened.

We have been washed, we have been sanctified, we have been justified. The proof of Christianity lies in its power—power to take the dregs of humanity and make them into glorified beings; to take one who is lost in shame and make him a son of God. There are people in this room who are proof positive of the re-creating power of God. God taking lives and making them brand-new. That is the glory of Christianity.

We like to play Monopoly at our house. It's nice to feel the sense of power that comes with owning hotels and motels. It's nice to know when someone rolls a seven that they're going to have to pay you. But once the game is over, and the board is folded up, it's back to real life once again. I don't own any hotels. I don't own all those cars. I'm just a normal person. That is what life is like. The Lord lets us play with some money for awhile and then the time comes when we must fold the whole game up, then we will see what you are really worth. What is really important to you and me? The real test is what do we really value above everything else? And if it is people and investing in people's lives, then we will be willing to be defrauded. What is a human life worth—\$100, \$100,000, \$1,000,000? It is worth the life of the Lord Jesus. God is creating a people for his name's sake, a glorified people who will be able to demonstrate before a hurting world how humanity was designed to live. That is our calling as Christians.

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1 Corinthians 6:12-20

Tenth Message

Gary Vanderet

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# GLORIFYING GOD IN YOUR BODY

*SERIES: EXAMINING LIFE IN THE LOCAL CHURCH*

Having spent over 11 years of my ministry working with students, I have had numerous conversations, and opportunities to teach, about sex. It was a topic of great interest and concern to them. Perhaps this letter from a student reflects contemporary understanding about sex: "Why do people insist upon making sex such a big deal? Sex is something different in every relationship. Sometimes there is a lot of personal emotion involved, and that's great, but other times it's just fun and exciting. Even if you tell each other you're in love, you both know it's not so serious. Why do people draw up rules that make something complex out of something very simple?"

The Bible has a very different perspective on sex. In fact, it says that sex is a mystery. In other words, we will not understand it apart from revelation. Maybe you are surprised to learn that the Bible has a great deal to say about sex, but we must never forget that God is the author of sex. He created our bodies, and he is very gracious about sharing with us instructions for its intended purpose.

Ancient Corinth, much like the Bay Area, was given over to the worship of sex. The city was filled with shrines and temples, but dominating it was an almost 2000-ft high hill on which stood a large temple to Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love. The 1,000 priestesses of the temple, who were sacred prostitutes, came down into the city when evening fell and plied their trade in the streets. Corinth was absorbed with sex. In fact, in the ancient world they coined the verb "to Corinthianize," which means, "to practice fornication." They worshipped sex. Much of the social and religious life of the city revolved around sexual activity, therefore it was accepted and even highly regarded in that culture. In fact, Demonsthenes wrote, "We keep prostitutes for pleasure; we keep mistresses for the day-to-day needs of the body; we keep wives for the begetting of children and for faithful guardianship of our homes. So long as a man supports his wife and family there is no shame whatsoever in extra-marital affairs."

When Paul entered Corinth and began to preach the gospel, the truth of the Scriptures confronted this sexual laxity—but not without opposition. Some in the church claimed their right of sexual freedom, especially the right to engage in sexually-oriented religious activities. Some had even used Paul's teaching of their freedom in Christ to justify their actions. Thus Paul was forced to tackle head-on the confusion that existed in Corinth over the question of sexuality.

The apostle begins his discussion by quoting a contemporary saying in Corinth which some had used to defend their activity:

## I. Understanding spirituality: A proper view of freedom (6:12)

**All things are lawful for me, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be mastered by anything.**  
(1 Cor 6:12 NASB)

The NIV places the words "all things are lawful for me" between quotation marks to highlight and set them apart from the rest of the verse, recognizing that it is indeed a quotation. It had become a Corinthian password.

Let me give you a little background on Greek thought to help you understand their perspective. The Greeks had a very stoic attitude toward the body. They regarded it as a prisonhouse for the soul. It was the soul that mattered, they felt, not the body. One Greek proverb described the body as a tomb. So they trivialized the body and exalted the soul. The soul was eternal and would live forever, but the body was to be discarded at death. Because of this assumption, it was logical to develop one of two attitudes toward the body: either you battered it into total subjection and ruthlessly controlled all your desires (which led to the asceticism of the Middle Ages, when monks and others did extreme things to their bodies), or you let the body go and satisfy every one of its desires because it was of no significance anyway; all that mattered was the soul. Apparently this latter extreme was the direction the Corinthians had gone. They felt you could engage in any illicit sexual activity because what you did with your body didn't matter.

Remember also they had heard Paul's teaching that they were free from the law. Perhaps the apostle had even made this statement, "All things are lawful for me." However, they were now using that phrase to justify the fact that they could do anything they wanted with their bodies. They had put all this together and reasoned that all things were now lawful for them.

Notice that Paul doesn't disagree with that statement, because there is truth in it. Everything that God has made is good. Paul writes in 1 Tim. 4: "For everything created by God is good and nothing is to be rejected, if it is received with thanksgiving; for then it is sanctified (put to its intended use) by the word of God and prayer." Titus reminds us, that "To the pure all things are pure." God has given us all things richly to enjoy. Everything God has given us is good. There is nothing basically evil. Satan doesn't create evil. He can't create anything. He takes the good things that God creates and distorts and twists them. So there are certain things that are prohibited because they are destructive to us. That is because Satan has come along and perverted those things that are good and used them in wrong ways. You can see Paul's point: sex is lawful, it is good, it was given to us by God.

It is at this point that we can see the difference between legalism and genuine Christianity. The legalist looks at life and says that everything is wrong unless it we know it is right. However, the Bible says that everything is right unless we know it is wrong. If I say that everything is wrong unless I know that it is right, then I am afraid and always suspect of everything, wondering if I am going to do something wrong that I didn't know was wrong and God will be angry with me.

But truth must always be held in balance, thus Paul qualifies this with two other statements. First, he maintains that though “all things are lawful, all things are not profitable.” Because the message of the gospel is one of freedom it does not mean that everything is helpful or advisable. There are some things that when used in certain ways are destructive and hurtful to ourselves or others. Paul desires that everything he does have a positive result on his life and on the lives he touches day by day. That is a great principle to apply in the whole arena of interpersonal relationships, especially between sexes. Secondly, Paul says, “All things are lawful for me, but I will not be mastered by anything.” Barclay translates it this way, “All things are allowed me, but I will not allow anything to get control of me.”

Paul reminds us that freedom is not being able to do anything you want. To indulge your desires in unsuitable ways is to make yourself a slave of that desire. No, says Paul, I will put everything to its proper use. Sex is good and proper when it is enjoyed in its intended place. And, as we saw very clearly in Proverbs 5 a couple of weeks ago, the proper place for sex is in marriage where there is commitment together for life. Outside of that sex is destructive and hurtful. That is why God is against immorality. It was a wonderful day for me when I discovered that things are not evil because God calls them sin. God calls them sin because they really are evil. God didn't arbitrarily make a list of ten things that are immoral or illegal or fattening.

Before we can ever get a handle on understanding sexual immorality we need to first understand the wider problem of man's disobedience and what God is doing to restore his plan. Whenever I think of this truth I am reminded of the story Mel White shares about his brother, who as a 12-year-old was riding his bike down a beautiful park trail in Portland, Oregon. The path went past a scenic reservoir and through beautiful fields of flowers. But near the end of the trail, unknown to his brother, a construction crew had cut through the path to make a road. No warning signs had been posted and no barriers had been built. Suddenly, rounding the corner, the trail ended and dropped 40 feet to the road below. His brother hurtled into space and was killed. Evil works that way. You start down what looks like a beautiful mountain trail. Slowly, your speed increases until you lose control and hurtle into space. The beautiful trail is in reality a death trap. God loves us too much to leave the trails unmarked. And he marks those trails sin. That is why our attitude towards those living in sin is never to be one of arrogance, of looking down on them, but one of sorrow, compassion and concern for them because what they are doing is damaging to themselves.

Before giving his rich exposition on the body Paul deals with another contemporary saying in Corinth that was used by those who were attempting to justify their physical indulgences: “Food is for the stomach, and the stomach is for food.” They drew from that saying the idea that nature demands satisfaction. The body's desires were made to be satisfied, in other words. When you are hungry you eat. Nobody claims you are sinning when you satisfy that desire. God has equally given us sexual desires. And when I feel that urge I ought to merge. That is how they were reasoning. It is a common argument today.

But Paul's answer is a profound revelation of the difference between our physical and our sexual appetites. There is all the difference in the world between food which is digested by the stomach and passed out through the bowels, and sexual intercourse, which affects the entire personality and can't be dismissed flippantly as a purely physiological phenomenon. The apostle finishes that statement with his own judgement: “God will do away with both of them.”

The stage is now set for Paul to unfold his view of the body. This is in contrast with all the prevailing views held by pagan philosophers and followed by untaught Corinthian Christians. It might even challenge some of your own presuppositions.

## II. Understanding sexuality: A proper view of the body (6:13-20)

I would like to point out three significant statements Paul makes about the body. These are very powerful statements which lead to his conclusion in verse 20, “therefore, glorify God in your body.”

We need to remember that Paul is talking about our physical bodies—bodies which become tired and wear out, which sweat and bleed and vomit, and which grow out of shape. It is our bodies that are instruments for evil or good. It is our bodies that Paul urges us to present to God as a living sacrifice. Obedience and disobedience are expressed in our bodies or they are expressed nowhere. Obedience for the Christian is a body activity. God does not address us purely as minds or emotions or wills, but as people with bodies. His concern is not for abstract acts, like adultery in theory, or immorality in theory, but for the whole person who does these actions.

The first statement Paul makes is in verses 13-14:

### A. Our bodies have an eternal purpose in the Lord

**Food is for the stomach, and the stomach is for food; but God will do away with both of them. Yet the body is not for immorality, but for the Lord; and the Lord is for the body. Now God has not only raised the Lord, but will also raise us up through His power. (6:13-14)**

As we said earlier, there is a tremendous difference between the stomach and the body. One is transient, animal tissue, of no eternal significance; the other is who I am. There can be no analogy between the use of the stomach for digestion and the body for fornication. The body is intended to be used by God. God has a purpose for our bodies, a purpose that does not terminate with death. The Lord is for the body. He loves your body. I remember Dave Roper saying, “It doesn't matter to him whether it is tall, dark and handsome; or short, shot and shapeless.” God is for your body. He created it to be an instrument by which you can display his character in the world, to use your body as God intended: your mouth, your ears, your hands, and your sex organs as well.

That went cross-grain to what the Corinthians believed. They thought the gods didn't care about the body. Christianity is almost the only great religion which thoroughly approves of the body—which believes that matter is good, that God himself took on a human body.

Notice also that the purpose God has for our bodies is not thwarted by death: “God has not only raised the Lord, but will also raise us up through his power.” It is an eternal purpose.

Paul makes an important point in linking our bodies as an integral part of our indestructible personality. Notice when he says “God will raise us up,” he has in mind the raising of our bodies. Now it apparently will be made of different materials, but it will be recognizable. We will be able to recognize one another. We will never be disembodied spirits.

The body is not inconsequential. It is not a plaything. It is an instrument designed for an eternal purpose. Do not abuse it. It is not an instrument for self-gratification. Find out what God wants you to do with your body and do it!

This purpose is explained more fully in the remainder of the passage.

The second fact is found in verses 15-17:

#### **B. Our bodies have been united with and possessed by the Lord**

**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? May it never be! Or do you not know that the one who joins himself to a harlot is one body with her? For He says, "The two will become one flesh." But the one who joins himself to the Lord is one spirit with Him. (6:15-17)**

There are two wonderful mysteries revealed here that we would never have known apart from God revealing them. The first is the remarkable truth of our union with Christ.

The truth that the human body of Christians and the Lord himself are intertwined is described in the phrase in verse 15: "Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ?" That is not just symbolical truth, but a wonderful reality. Remember Jesus described it to his disciples this way, "I in you and you in Me." Our physical bodies are limbs of Christ. In fact, the measure of our union is described in the phrase: "the one who joins himself to the Lord is one spirit with Him." He has possessed us.

There is another mystery that is revealed here in this truth, and that is the nature of the sex act. Paul says that something goes on in the act of sex that creates a union far deeper than the merely passing pleasure of the moment. The two personalities become one, so merged that Paul uses the same phrases to describe the Christian's interaction with Christ as he used to describe a person's actions in joining himself to a prostitute.

Notice that Paul goes clear back to Genesis. He takes the word that was spoken to Adam and Eve in the garden, the foundational truth about marriage, and applies it to a passing relationship with a street prostitute. It is much more than your feelings will ever recognize. Even the most casual sexual relationship, done strictly on a cash basis, with no personal or emotional involvement is, according to Paul, the one-flesh joining of people. We would like to think that those two scenarios are not analogous, but they are. It is part of the mystery that God set forth in the garden. Men who have been involved in a number of sexual relationships will testify to this truth. There is an intimacy that can never be forgotten. It is the sharing of a mystery together. Sexual intercourse unites two people in such a way that they are never able to separate themselves completely.

Lewis Smedes in his book, *Sex for Christians*, writes, "No one can really do what the prostitute and her customer try; nobody can go to bed with someone and leave his soul parked outside."

The world will never tell you that truth. People will tell you that you can go from one affair to the next and it will have no effect on you, that you can just forget it. But the Scripture tells us that act so unites the two personalities that they can never be completely torn apart.

Now it is the revelation of those two mysteries that makes the apostle's point so powerful. If we are so inseparably linked to Christ that we are one spirit with him, if our bodily members are actually limbs of Christ, it is inconceivable (as well as immoral) to abuse that body to resort to sexual intercourse with prostitutes.

This is also the strongest reason why believers ought not to marry unbelievers. The physical limbs of a Christian are members of Christ; those of non-Christians are not. If a Christian therefore

chooses to have sexual intercourse with an unbeliever, he "becomes one body with her," according to the foundational truth expressed in the phrase, "the two shall become one flesh." But it is impossible for that one flesh relationship to be integrated with the "one spirit" relationship between that believer and his Lord. Such a believer is from that point on leading a disintegrated life.

Os Guinness has some comments on the implications of this truth:

This is the ideal that judges all the rest of Christian sexual ethics in the Scriptures. That is what is behind every prohibition in this area. Why is adultery wrong? Why are homosexual practices wrong? Why is pre-marital intercourse wrong? Simply because there is no true oneness and therefore there should be no one-flesh either. And that is precisely what Paul argues here. The point is not that some Corinthian Christians were sleeping with a prostitute. Paul could just as easily talked about the good looking housewife down the street, or the good looking athlete down the stairs. He says "he" because it was men in Corinth who tended to have double standards; and he says "prostitute" because in Corinth that was the particular problem. But the true problem was that there was intimacy without intention, and there was communion without commitment.

It should be positively affirmed that virginity is one of the most creative, releasing, purifying and beautiful gifts which can be brought to Christian marriage.

There is a third fact truth that is revealed:

#### **C. Our bodies have been redeemed by the Lord**

Verses 18-20:

**Flee immorality. Every other sin that a man commits is outside the body, but the immoral man sins against his own body. Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body. (6:18-20)**

In these verses Paul puts immorality in a different category from other sins. He says it is unique in its effect on the body. Many people have struggled with that verse because it appears that there are other sins that affect the body. Alcohol, drug abuse, even gluttony affect our bodies. But Paul says immorality is different from all these sins, and the reason he gives for that statement is found in verse 19: "Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God?"

Our bodies are not just physical shells of remarkable composition: they are "a temple of the Holy Spirit." Do you realize that truth? God himself, the awesome God of the universe lives in your body.

That truth has been a tremendous encouragement to me and has kept me from doing things I know would have been destructive. Let me point out to you also that the word Paul uses for temple is not the word that refers to the temple complex but to the Holy of Holies, the inner sanctuary. Our bodies are a sanctuary for God. Earlier Paul affirmed that the whole church of God at Corinth was God's temple, and he had stern warnings against anyone who might destroy that temple. Now he uses that same metaphor to remind individual Christians at Corinth that God has given to each the gift of his indwelling Holy Spirit, "whom you have from God."

That is what makes humanity so special. We have the capacity to hold God. And when God dwells in something, he turns it into a temple. But immorality defiles the temple. It offers it to another. It



brings the body of that person who is the temple into a wrong union, therefore it is idolatry. That is why Paul's command in this area is to flee immorality. Don't fool around with it. Don't play with it. There is too much to lose. Don't try to see how far you can go in this area. If you are reading a book and you come across a section that begins to arouse those desires, put the book down. If you are watching television and a certain scene begins to awaken those desires, change the channel or walk out of the room.

It is the unanimous advice of all of Scripture. Don't try to fight it. Don't try to deal with it. Get away from it. These are subtle, powerful forces. The widespread destruction that we see all around us is ample evidence to their subtle power. We need to deal harshly with ourselves in this area. Remember the man in Proverbs 5 who went after the harlot. He confessed at the end of his life: "I wish I listened to those who warned me. I have given my strength to strangers." He realized that he lost his manhood. His life had been drained away.

Paul's plea for purity is based on the cost of redeeming our bodies: "You are not your own. For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body." Before they met Christ and experienced his freedom, the Corinthians were slaves to themselves, to their self-centered desires, to self-indulgence and bodily passions. Then along came a Master with the resources to set them completely free. He paid the necessary ransom. Their bodies were no longer like chunks of flesh up for sale to the highest bidder in the slave market. They had been bought with a price and they belonged to a new Master. He now intended every physical faculty they had within them to express the glory of God. So far from despising their bodies, he was committed to working out from within the redemption of their bodies.

So we are urged to learn from the Spirit of God what it means to glorify God in our bodies; not to pander to them, make excuses for them, or be flippant about the many powerful temptations to abuse them.

Listen to the psalmist,

**For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be. (Ps 139:13-16 NIV)**

I am sure many of you here this morning wish you would had heard this truth earlier, or wish you had obeyed it. A message like this brings painful memories, and perhaps a great deal of guilt, to the surface. Your question is, "What do I do now?" If you want to see how the Lord looks at you, read the eighth chapter of John. The Pharisees had trapped a young woman in the act of adultery. They dragged her to the temple courtyard and deposited her at Jesus' feet. Imagine the shame, embarrassment and fear that filled her being. In that moment we see how God responds to our sexual failures. Jesus paused, and then he spoke to her accusers the words, "He who is without sin cast the first stone." And they all left, beginning with eldest, the Scripture tells us. They left because they all knew they were guilty of their own sexual lusts. And then the One who had the right to judge her refused to judge, but rather set her free with the words: "Go and sin no more." It was the promise of a new beginning.

That is God's word to you today. You no longer need to fail. Don't dwell on the past. The Lord has paid for that. Your past failures are no excuse for your present disobedience. It has been taken care of at the cross. He does not hold it against you. It need no longer paralyze you from being who you need to be today.

In your present struggle with immorality talk to the Lord who lives inside you. Let him be your powerful ally.

Let me close by sharing with you a prayer that I often pray when sexual lust begins to dance in my head. Maybe it can be yours today:

Lord, I am tempted now. Don't let me forget Your long-range dreams for my life. Don't let me trade them in for some short-term sexual thrill. Keep me safe Lord, from the evil working on me this moment. Protect me. Make me strong. Guide me. I love you, Lord. I am yours. I want your will more than anything. I will not throw that away.

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1 Corinthians 7:1-9

Eleventh Message

Gary Vanderet

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# CULTIVATING INTIMACY IN MARRIAGE

*SERIES: EXAMINING LIFE IN THE LOCAL CHURCH*

I confess that if we were not committed to expository preaching, I would not have selected the text we are going to look at this morning. My wife, Kathy, and I have been praying over this text all week, and I have asked her not to wave any handkerchiefs at me while I am speaking. We will be talking about romance and sexual intimacy in marriage. I am far from being an expert on this subject, but I trust that God will speak through me. A few years ago I came across a humorous little story which many of us here probably can relate to. It tells of a husband's reaction to his wife's colds during the first seven years of their marriage:

First year: "Sugar dumpling, I'm really worried about my baby girl. You've got a bad sniffle and there's no telling about these things with all the strep going around. I'm putting you in the hospital this afternoon for a general checkup and a good rest. I know the food's lousy, but I'll be bringing your meal in from Rozzini's. I've already got it all arranged with the floor superintendent."

Second year: "Listen, darling, I don't like the sound of that cough. I've called Doc Miller to rush over here. Now you go to bed like a good girl, just for Poppa."

Third year: "Maybe you had better lie down, honey. Nothing like a little rest when you feel lousy. I'll bring you something. Have we got any canned soup?"

Fourth year: "Now look, dear, be sensible. After you've fed the kids and got the dishes done and the floor finished, you better lie down."

Fifth year: "Why don't you take a couple of aspirin?"

Sixth year: "I wish you'd just gargle or something instead of sitting around barking like a seal all evening."

Seventh year: "For Pete's sake, stop sneezing! Are you trying to give me pneumonia?"

We have come to a passage in Paul's first Corinthian letter which deals forthrightly and explicitly with the subject of sex in marriage. Though we may be a bit squeamish about mentioning this topic in church, we must remember that God is the author of sex and we ought not be ashamed to discuss what he was not ashamed to create.

There is a shift in the structure of the letter at this point. In the first six chapters, Paul responded to four problems which he became aware of through the news he had received. Now beginning in chapter 7 through chapter 15, he answers a series of specific questions that had been raised in a letter the Corinthians had sent him.

Notice the opening words in the chapter: "Now concerning the things about which you wrote." He may have had the letter open in front of him as he dictated his reply. The phrase "Now concerning" will be a familiar formula that we will see throughout the following chapters to indicate the specific topics that he addresses: marriage and divorce (7:1); singleness (7:25); food offered to idols (8:1); spiri-

tual gifts (12:1); the collection for the church at Jerusalem (16:1); and Apollos (16:12).

In these chapters Paul weaves skillfully between the twin excesses of license and legalism. Remember we talked last week about the Greek view of the body. They trivialized the body and exalted the soul as the only thing that mattered. This error led people to adopt one of two attitudes—you either disciplined your body into subjection, leading to asceticism, or you let the body indulge itself in whatever it desired. As Dave Roper has said, there were two extremes in Corinth—the monks and the drunks. In response to the rampant immorality in Corinth there was a group who had concluded that the proper response was to refrain entirely from sexual activity in life. One belief of that former group is summed up in the phrase in v. 1: "it is not good for a man to touch a woman." This is probably an excerpt from the Corinthians' letter, and thus should be in quotes. They had reacted so strongly to the sexual license in the city that they had swung over completely to the other side, forbidding what God has given us richly to enjoy.

We might wonder how anyone could think such a thought. We need also to remember that the Corinthians lived in the midst of a society where sexual expressions were closely tied with pagan worship. The temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love, was a prominent part of Corinthian life, and the worship of Aphrodite was very popular. One came in contact with that deity by having sexual intercourse with one of the temple prostitutes. Thus, people who had grown up in that society had had a strong tie between their sexuality and pagan worship. It is not surprising then when some of these people became Christians they began to wonder whether or not something that they have been doing as a part of pagan worship could be done as a part of Christian living. Because of their past they had come to see sex as something dirty, therefore they questioned whether it was proper in a Christian marriage to have sex. This had put tremendous pressure on those who were married to dissolve their marriages, and on the engaged and widows not to marry at all. Paul deals with that pressure in this chapter.

Although our situation is not exactly the same, there are many couples today who have entered marriage with this dirty concept of sex. Perhaps you have been abused sexually. This has distorted your understanding, and because of that abuse closeness means more insecurity. I want to exhort you if that is true of you that there is hope and healing available. And although simply looking at this truth today will not bring instant change, I hope it might help bring a better perspective to your understanding of your sexuality.

Paul says that marriage is the gift and plan of God. Sex is the gift and plan of God. To reject both as evil is as much a deviation from the will of God as to indulge in sexual intercourse outside marriage.

First Corinthians 7:1-9:

Now concerning the things about which you wrote, it is good for a man not to touch a woman. But because of immoralities, let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband. Let the husband fulfill his duty to his wife, and likewise also the wife to her husband. The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; and likewise also the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does. Stop depriving one another, except by agreement for a time that you may devote yourselves to prayer, and come together again lest Satan tempt you because of your lack of self-control. But this I say by way of concession, not of command. Yet I wish that all men were even as I myself am. However, each man has his own gift from God, one in this manner, and another in that. But I say to the unmarried and to widows that it is good for them if they remain even as I. But if they do not have self-control, let them marry; for it is better to marry than to burn. (1 Cor 7:1-9 NASB)

It is unfortunate that the NIV has translated the phrase in v. 1: "It is good for a man not to marry," because this clouds the rest of the chapter. According to this view, the paragraph deals with Paul's basic position on marriage in response to the Corinthians' question of whether it is advisable to get married. The phrase translated in NASB "to touch a woman" is a euphemism for sexual intercourse. This can be demonstrated linguistically and historically. In fact, the idiom occurs nine times in Greek antiquity, ranging across six centuries and a variety of writers, and in every other instance, without ambiguity, it refers to having sexual intercourse. Thus, this statement is promoting an ascetic ideal, not merely celibacy. The phrase is not Paul's view but a quote from the letter that the Corinthians had sent.

If I could paraphrase what I think the Corinthians are saying, it would go something like this, "Paul, since you are not married, you are not even seeking marriage, and since you have prohibited us from any immorality, isn't better that one never have sexual intercourse at all? After all, in the new age which we have already entered, there isn't going to be marriage anyway. And besides, since the body is unimportant, if there are those who have to fulfill their physical needs, there are always the temple prostitutes."

Thus while many Corinthian Christians were saying that it was good for husbands not to share sexual intimacy with their wives, Paul disagrees and begins verse 2 with a contrast, *but*. Here, Paul is not commanding that people marry, but that those who are married should express sexual intimacy with one another. The Greeks used the word *have* to describe sexual intimacy. It is not an option; it is a command. I have translated v. 2 this way: "Each husband must have relations with his own wife, and each wife must have relations with her own husband."

In the remaining verses, Paul shares his reasoning for sexual intimacy in marriage. He makes three fundamental statements which challenge the contemporary view prevalent in Corinth. They might also challenge your own presuppositions. As I share these truths, would you each please consider how they apply to you personally. Do not think about anyone else—let there be no conviction by proxy. As you hear these, some of you may say to yourselves, "That is just what my mate needs to hear." Allow God to speak to you. Here is Paul's first principle concerning sex in marriage:

## I. Counsel to married couples: The importance of intimacy (7:1-7)

### A. Sexual intimacy in marriage is a gracious gift from God—for our pleasure

God's word treats sex as a gift that accompanies marriage. Paul tells us in verse 7 that some people receive the gift of marriage and sexual union while others receive the gift of singleness and celibacy. It is clear from a passage like this where married couples are urged, even commanded, to experience sex together frequently, not just once in awhile when a child is desired, that sex was given for more than the mere purpose of carrying on the human race. In light of Roman Catholic debates on the purpose of sexual intercourse in marriage it is interesting that Paul's discussion of marriage responsibilities has no hint of any procreative function being necessarily linked to intercourse. It serves another function in marriage—that of providing pleasure to one another. Without a doubt it is the highest form of ecstasy, and rates as the number one recreation in the world. God designed it that way. He gave us those parts of our body which were designed to be stimulated and aroused. He intended them to be so. But he intended sex to be protected and experienced only within the walls which marriage provides.

Perhaps you may have been exposed to a negative view of sex in the home in which you grew up. That still lingers with you, and that may be preventing you from experiencing the joy God intends you to have. In his book, *God, Sex, and Your Child*, John Nieder shares the following letter which although extreme, helps illustrate this point. A woman writes:

From the time I was a tiny child, my mother often warned me, "Never let anyone see your body—not anyone—under any circumstances." One day, when I was six years old and my brother was eight, my parents left us on the farm while they drove to a town some distance away to get some groceries. Toward the end of the two hours, my brother began to plead with me to let him see my body and he would let me see his. After resisting for a while, I finally gave into his urging. We stood about eight feet apart, as stiff as wooden soldiers. Then we dressed quickly in case our parents drove up. When my mother noticed I was very quiet and depressed, she questioned me, and I told her the whole story. My father beat my brother with a heavy leather belt, making great welts on his legs. I could hear him screaming from behind the barn. I thought my father would never stop lashing him. I felt so bad that I lay down on my bed and cried on my pillow. My mother came in to talk to me. She was very angry. But I believe she was telling me what she believed. She said that men and women who took their clothes off and forgot to be good were the worst kind of sinners in God's sight, and that this was the unpardonable sin that God would never forgive. She said that my brother and I had come close to committing this sin and that it might be a long time before God would forgive us and love us again. She told me that if a woman were married, it is still wrong unless they wanted to have a baby.

This dear woman now realizes that her parents had a grossly distorted, unbiblical view of marital love, but she still has feelings of guilt after experiencing intimacy with her husband.

How different is God's perspective! Listen to what Mike Mason writes in his wonderful book, *The Mystery of Marriage*:

What can equal the surprise of finding out that the one thing above all others which mankind has been most enterprising and proficient in dragging through the dirt turns out to be the most innocent thing in the world? Is there any activity at all which an adult man and woman may engage in together (apart from worship) that is actually more

childlike, more clean and pure, more natural and wholesome and unequivocally right than is the act of making love? For if worship is the deepest available form of communion with God (and especially that particular act of worship known as Communion), then surely sex is the deepest communion that is possible between human beings, and as such is something absolutely essential (in more than a biological way) to our survival.

There is a second principle that Paul reveals:

**B. Sexual intimacy in marriage is a gracious gift to your mate—for their fulfillment**

Look at verses 3-4:

**Let the husband fulfill his duty to his wife, and likewise also the wife to her husband. The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; and likewise also the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does.**

We have the wonderful responsibility before the Lord, as a gift, to fulfill the sexual needs and desires of our mates. Sex is not to be a selfish, self-centered satisfying of our own desires, but a gift that we freely offer to each other. Paul is not saying to husbands and wives, “Demand your sexual rights.” Nothing could be more destructive to happiness in marriage. The focus of these verses has nothing to do with insisting upon my rights in marriage. It has everything to do with relinquishing these rights to God in order to meet the needs of our mates.

In this way, sexual intimacy in marriage teaches us a very important principle about relationships in life. We have no real ability to fulfill ourselves sexually. We need another to do that. It reminds us that life is meant to be lived in serving others. Jesus put it this way, “If you try to save your life, you will lose it.” If you go through life blindly trying to discover and meet your own needs, instead of finding fulfillment you are going to find emptiness. That is not only good advice, it is a principle of life. The way to find fulfillment in life and to have your needs met is to meet another’s needs. That is what Paul means in verse 4: “The wife does not have authority over her own body, but the husband does; and likewise also the husband does not have authority over his own body, but the wife does.”

He is not saying here that we are slaves of one another. Nor is he referring to unhealthy marriages where perversion or sexual dominance are forced upon mates. He is declaring that the power to give fulfillment to your mate lies with you. He or she cannot fulfill themselves in this area. God made us to need someone else to fulfill us sexually.

Husband and wife belong to each other, and the question of sexual activity is a matter of sensitivity to the desires of one’s partner. In fact, in 7:4, where he speaks about rights, Paul is far from being a male chauvinist. He accords the wife the same rights to enjoy her husband’s body as he accords the husband. He doesn’t stress the importance of one partner at the expense of the other but puts them on the same level. Paul’s whole approach of equality and mutuality in the marriage relationship was completely revolutionary in his day. It remained so for many centuries, and continues to be so in every modern culture.

God has given us the ability to give the gift of love to another person, and it is the joy of that giving that creates the ecstasy of sexual love. Now to do this, to ensure your mate’s sexual fulfillment, you need to talk, to understand, to listen, to care about another’s needs. I have found in counseling that men are often clueless in this area. To him, sex may be a delightful intermission in the drama. To

her, it is inextricably woven into the whole. He is driven by physical needs accompanied by emotional needs, she is driven by emotional needs accompanied by physical needs. He may ponder “How often?” while she ponders “How?” When it comes to stimulation, a man is like microwave oven while a woman is like a crock pot! If men could remember just that, they will have come a long way towards understanding and meeting the desires of their wives.

Our bodies are for the purpose of our partners pleasure. Is your mate becoming more joyful, more free, more fulfilled in your sexual life together? Sexual intimacy in marriage is a gracious gift from you to your mate—for their fulfillment.

**C. Sexual intimacy in marriage is a safeguard from satanic attack—for your protection**

Look at verses 5-6:

**Stop depriving one another, except by agreement for a time that you may devote yourselves to prayer, and come together again lest Satan tempt you because of your lack of self control. But this I say by way of concession, not of command.**

The act of sexual intimacy is so important to a marriage that Paul will concede it should only be interrupted for important reasons—and even then only for brief periods. Even this, he adds, is a concession, not a command. Thus even such a good thing as temporary abstinence for prayer will not be raised to the level of a command, because Paul knew the difficulties that existed in the church at Corinth.

The word “deprive” has the idea of cheating or robbing. When husbands and wives refuse to share sexual expression, they are cheating their mates from fulfilling their creativity and robbing them of something owed them. Thus, planned deprivation is a form of thievery. Many reasons are given for withholding what is due our mates: tiredness, resentment, disinterest, boredom, etc. The apostle’s point here is that the devil knows our make-up, and he will take advantage of that deprivation in a marriage. In Corinth, wives were defrauding their husbands, thinking that sexual expression was not healthy in marriage, and husbands were resorting to temple prostitutes. Wherever this kind of teaching exists—that sex is dirty, that people should not marry, or that married couples should not express sexual intimacy—there will be sexual perversion, because the temptations will be too great.

It is so important to marriage that Paul says it takes precedence over everything except a brief retreat for prayer. And even then there are guidelines: It must be mutual (that word “agreement” is the word from which we get our English word, symphony.). This prevents the all too common habit of an over-spiritual partner who insists that anything but prayer and Bible reading is not pure enough for a Christ-centered marriage. It must be temporary (the word suggests a significant period in the timing of God); perhaps there is a particular need in your family, or the church, etc. Third, it is for the purpose of prayer, to spend time unhurriedly with God. But Paul says, “Be careful. Don’t continue it for very long, and by all means come together again so that Satan is not given an advantage over you.”

If there is no sexual expression within a marriage, Satan has a lot of people whom he can use to tempt us to go beyond self-control. It is interesting that the word immorality in verse 2 is plural. The sexual temptations that the devil can throw at a deprived mate come in many forms and opportunities.

This brings the apostle to a related matter. What about the sexual lives of people who once were married and no longer are? He speaks to this issue in verses 7-9.

## II. Counsel to the previously married: The importance of self-control (7:8-9)

**Yet I wish that all men were even as I myself am. However, each man has his own gift from God, one in this manner, and another in that. But I say to the unmarried and to widows that it is good for them if they remain even as I. But if they do not have self-control, let them marry; for it is better to marry than to burn.**

We don't know precisely Paul's marriage background. It is normally assumed that he never married, but this would have been extremely unusual for a Jewish rabbi. It is possible that his wife left upon his conversion and returned to her parental home, or that he was a widower.

Paul acknowledges here that both marriage and singleness are special gifts of God. He personally shares his own preference of singleness, but will not allow that preference to be held up as norm.

To those who have been married, Paul understands that your sexual lives have been fully awakened by marriage. You are used to having your sexual drives met, and now suddenly you are deprived of your mate and you no longer have a way of satisfying those desires. Many a widow has struggled with this problem.

Paul says, if it is possible, remain single. However, we might add that in Titus, Paul instructs the younger widows to remarry, saying that would be better for them. But if you are older and you have lost your mate, his advice is remain single. If the physical struggle is severe, however, then remarry. That is the meaning of v. 9: "it is better to marry than to burn." He is not referring to judgment, but to being consumed with passion. If that is the case, then there is nothing wrong with remarrying.

As we reflect on this passage we see that we are given tremendous insight into cultivating a fulfilling sexual relationship. It begins with what we learned last week, that our bodies belong to the Lord: "we are not our own, we have been bought with a price." Therefore what God wants us to do with our bodies must be our ultimate concern. It must begin there, because if my heart is not soft toward God, then I will never be able to cultivate the discipline it takes to overcome my selfishness. The essence of love is giving—the placing of another person's needs above my own. The sooner we stop thinking of sexuality merely in terms of our own pleasure, the closer we will be to experiencing the intimacy God intended in our marriages.

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Catalog No. 790

1 Corinthians 7:10-24

Twelfth Message

Gary Vanderet

August 26, 1990

# CULTIVATING COMMITMENT IN MARRIAGE

*SERIES: EXAMINING LIFE IN THE LOCAL CHURCH*

First Corinthians is a very practical book. We will see evidence of that once again today as the apostle Paul's words confront one of the most pressing social problems of our day, the breakup of marriages.

Listen to a powerful description of lost love. As I read it, ask yourself if there are any parallels to your own marriage:

Their wedding picture mocks them from the table, these two whose minds no longer touched each other. They lived with such a heavy barricade between them that neither a battering ram of words nor artilleries of touch could break it down. Somewhere between the oldest child's first tooth and the youngest daughter's graduation they had lost each other. Throughout the years, each slowly unraveled the tangled ball of string called self. And as they tugged at stubborn knots, each hid his searching from the other. Sometimes she cried at night and begged the whispering darkness to tell her who she was. He lay beside her unaware of her winter, for she warmed herself in self-pity. He climbed into a tomb called the office, wrapped his mind in a shroud of paper figures, and buried himself in customers. And slowly the wall between them rose, cemented by a wall of indifference. And one day, reaching out to touch each other, they found a barrier they could not penetrate. And recoiling from the coldness of the stone, each retreated from the stranger on the other side. For when love dies, it is not in a moment of angry battle; it lies panting and exhausted, expiring at the bottom of a carefully built wall that it could not penetrate.

What is God's answer to an unhappy marriage? The passage we will look at today will show us how God wants us deal with difficult relationships.

Last week we saw that there was a group of extremists who reacted to the sexual immorality in Corinth by advocating sexual abstinence, even within marriage. Their conviction was summed up in 7:1, "It is not good for a man to have sexual relations with a woman." As a result, many conclusions were being drawn. A certain group of women rejected their husbands sexually on that basis, even to the point of divorce. Paul is responding to that situation. Let me say that it is important to understand that these verses address a specific situation in Corinth—the apparent rejection of marriage on ascetic grounds. That is important for us to see as we seek to understand what Paul is saying to us.

Having said that, I realize there may be some couples listening to me who, having committed themselves "for better or worse," now feel they don't need marriage, that they made a mistake in getting married, or that they would be far more effective in serving the Lord without the responsibilities of marriage. In these verses, Paul gives a strong charge to those who see little hope for their marriage.

Let's read what the apostle says, in 7:10-16:

**But to the married I give instructions, not I, but the Lord, that the wife should not leave her husband (but if she does leave, let her remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not send his wife away. But to the rest I say, not the Lord, that if any brother has a wife who is an**

**unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, let him not send her away. And a woman who has an unbelieving husband, and he consents to live with her, let her not send her husband away. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband; for otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy. Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the brother or the sister is not under bondage in such cases, but God has called us to peace. 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? (1 Cor 7:10-16 NASB)**

The structure of these verses is easy to follow. Paul gives his instructions to married couples in verses 10-16; and he elaborates on the principle behind his instructions in verses 17-24.

## I. A word to the married: Stay as you are (7:10-16)

### A. Addressing Christian couples

Verses 10-11:

**But to the married I give instructions, not I, but the Lord, that the wife should not leave her husband (but if she does leave, let her remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to her husband), and that the husband should not send his wife away. (7:10-11)**

Addressing those who are married, Paul is presupposing they are believers. This becomes obvious when we see that he addresses believers who are married to unbelievers as "the rest" in verses 12-16. Thus Paul addresses Christian couples in verses 10-11; and in verses 12-15 he addresses believers who are married to unbelievers. Along with the imperatives in verse 2-5, the command in 10-11 is the only command in the chapter. While Paul is ambivalent about the remarriage of widows, there is no ambivalence as to whether married couples ought to dissolve their marriages. There the apostle begins with the fundamental position of Scripture on marriage, and that is that marriage is intended to be for life.

In the words, "I give instructions," Paul remembers that Jesus himself spoke to this question, thus he appeals to his authority. It is important to understand the phrase, "not I, but the Lord." Paul reverses the language in v. 12 and says, "I say, not the Lord."

Where Paul had actual sayings of Jesus, he quoted them. We need to remember that 1 Corinthians was written before any of the gospels, thus Paul would not necessarily have many of the sayings of Jesus. He quotes just a few of them. But there is no conflict between Paul's words and those of Jesus. His words are as authoritative as the words of Jesus because they both are the "word of the Lord." One is the direct word of Jesus which he spoke when he was here on earth; the other is the indirect word of the Lord which he spoke through his apostles.

Jesus spoke to this issue directly. We have his words recorded for us in the fifth and nineteenth chapters of Matthew and the tenth

chapter of Mark. The passage is very clear; there is no debate as to what these verses are saying. The commitment to marriage by a man and a woman is lifelong. It is underwritten by God himself and may not to be undermined by mere humans.

Paul was aware that certain Corinthian women had already left their husbands. His command to them is precisely what we find in the teachings of Jesus: that is, there must be no adultery. Remain unmarried or be reconciled to your husband. The marriage is not broken just because it has become impossible to live with. If the woman leaves for a time, or if it is a long continued problem, even if she gains a divorce, in God's sight the marriage is not broken.

The principle applies even in our world. Though I have not met many women who have left their husbands for ascetic reasons, I have counseled scores of women married to men who were destroying their families physically, sexually, or financially through their addictive and abusive behavior. In certain situations it is not only proper, but important for the wife to leave temporarily in order to bring her husband to his senses. But the purpose of the separation is not for remarriage. Therefore, while her mate lives and remains unmarried (or while his mate lives and remains unmarried because this would equally apply to husbands) she is not to remarry, for there is always the possibility that the grace of God can work to bring healing, restoration and reconciliation to that marriage.

In Matthew's gospel, there is one and only one basis given for divorce, and that is adultery, fornication (*porneia*). Paul does not refer to this here. We might ask why. Perhaps the rampant immorality and temple prostitution in Corinth would have introduced that factor into so many marriages in the church that the mere mention of it, without the opportunity for counsel face-to-face, might have destroyed many marriages that ought not be ended. Even infidelity, as destructive as it is in marriage, can be repented of and forgiven. There are marriages represented here this morning where couples have been on the verge of a divorce because of infidelity, but repentance and forgiveness has taken place, and with it reconciliation and healing. But if this is a continuing problem, and there is no repentance, Jesus recognized that that indeed ended a marriage.

Paul's advice to those contemplating divorce is simple: Don't! The Lord has expressly forbidden it, so don't even allow yourself the luxury of entertaining it as a possibility. If this is the command of the Lord, it does no good to even contemplate what is clearly beyond limits.

I would like to remind you of an important truth that we have already learned in this book: Our purpose in life is not happiness, but the development of character. We are to glorify God. We are not our own. We have been bought with a price. That concept will change your entire perspective of yourself, your mate, and your marriage. We enter marriage at a time in our lives when we know very little about love. God would have arranged it another way if the objective in life was happiness. But the purpose of life is to learn how to love. That is why God puts couples in a locked room, as he seeks to have us learn how to love in the security of the marriage commitment. Paul's counsel to married couples is, work out your differences. These verses pulsate with commitment: "Do not leave...be reconciled...do not send her away."

Next, Paul tackles a problem that must have been common in Corinth and in every place where the gospel was proclaimed with power—the problem of a newly converted Christian married to a non-Christian spouse.

## B. Addressing mixed marriages

Verses 12-16:

**But to the rest I say, not the Lord, that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, let him not send her away. And a woman who has an unbelieving husband, and he consents to live with her, let her not send her husband away. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband; for otherwise your children are unclean, but know they are holy. Yet if the unbelieving one leaves, let him leave; the brother or sister is not under bondage in such cases, but God has called us to peace. 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? (7:12-16)**

One partner's conversion can severely strain a relationship. The Christian partner has now discovered a totally new way of life. He or she is committed to new standards, new loyalties, new priorities, new desires. They are a new creation. The necessary adjustments are immense. Misunderstandings arise. At times, the Christian can feel like he is torn in two.

It is no less an adjustment for the unbeliever. Statistics show that it is usually the husband who most often finds himself now living with a "holy woman." One man who was married to a new believer indicated that he found two things most difficult about his wife's new faith: she was no longer the person he had originally fallen in love with and decided to marry; and there was another Man in the house to whom she was deferring her every decision and to whom she went for advice and instructions. The husband was no longer the boss in his own house. Jesus gave the orders and set the pace.

Paul was aware of those strains in many homes in Corinth. He also recognized that several external factors, including his own preference for the single life, put strong pressure on the believing partner to call it a day and to start a new life without the added burden of an unequal yoke. Perhaps the Christian partners were tending to look down on, and even write off their non-Christian spouses. In the Corinthian's mind this pagan partner contaminated the marriage.

Recognizing these realities, Paul stresses the need for these couples to work on their relationship, just as Christian couples need to work on theirs. He gives two reasons for his advice:

### 1. The present fact of your family's condition

The Corinthians felt that the unbelief of the one cancelled out the belief of the other. Paul insists on the exact opposite, saying that the belief of the one leads to a distinctive relationship between the unbelieving partner and the Lord. When one partner responds to God's call and is converted to Christ, the other becomes consecrated in a special way. That word "consecrated" is the perfect passive form of the word "sanctify," used in 6:11 to describe our position as believers. Though the relationship is not one of being saved, it is one that is specially marked out by God. Just as Laban's household was blessed because of Jacob, and Potiphar's because of Joseph, so non-Christian mates are blessed because of their Christian spouses. Remember Paul is addressing a group of extremists who have a distorted view of sex. He not only defends sexual relations in marriage, but he refers to the children in a marriage of Christians and non-Christians as "holy." The apostle poses the only other alternative to children not being regarded as holy is that they are unclean. That word describes not only a non-relationship with the Lord, but an actual state of uncleanness

which Paul does not regard to be an accurate description of children who are brought up in the Christian community. Calvin says of this passage: “The godliness of the one does more to ‘sanctify’ the marriage than the ungodly does to make it unclean.”

There is a second reason which the apostle gives for working at this relationship:

## 2. The future possibility of your family’s conversion

Whatever the struggles and difficulties that are inherent in such an unequal relationship, Paul holds out the real possibility that the miracle of conversion can bring that family into genuine oneness in Christ. The fact that this does happen, and not infrequently, is cause to endure even lengthy periods of indifference. He phrases the question in such a way that leaves the matter completely open: “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?” No one does know, but we are encouraged to press on in hope. Michael Green put it this way: “If one of you has been converted since marriage, then there is every reason to suppose that the good Lord is at work in your family. And you pray, and you try to live a consistent life, so that if your partner is not won by your word, they may be won without a word having been said, by the godliness of your life.”

And this happens. Listen to one woman’s testimony, which she shared in a letter to Charles Swindoll:

God has restored a marriage and rekindled a love that was virtually dead. God used your ministry to break, bend, and finally remold me to be the person God wanted me to be, so I would be ready when God began his work in my husband’s life. As I sat in the last row, I thought surely you were talking to me as you told of Jesus’ love and forgiveness and hope for the despairing. As my tears quietly fell, I found God’s loving forgiveness, and a real hope in his strength. I went home that day with my one-year-old son to a husband who worked constantly, drank heavily, and was emotionally hurting. But this time, Jesus came, too. You will never know the strength God gave me over the months that followed through your insightful messages to go on each day, some days with peace and others by sheer endurance. How many times I wanted to run away and start over, only to walk into a church and have you say, ‘When you are between a rock and a hard place, you stay, because God is going to let you grow if you let him.’ So I stayed, and let God begin his work of changing me. I stopped praying for God to fix my marriage and change my husband, and started to consciously submit to God’s will, asking him to change me. Through the pain he sheltered me in the shadow of his wings, and I sang for joy. He brought me out of the pit of destruction and set my feet upon the rock. God was at work. Two years ago, God removed my husband’s desire for alcohol, and he did it overnight.

This past summer I decided to get off the fence and I committed my whole life to Christ. I gave him all of those areas that I had absolutely, stubbornly held onto. I said, ‘God, whatever it takes to bring me closer to you, you do it. I’m going to stay in this marriage and let you work out your will in my life.’ Well, three months later, through God’s gracious timing and his circumstances, my husband accepted Jesus as his Savior. Talk about an answer to prayer! I am married to a new man, one who now loves God, and wants our family to live according to God’s will. You have said on occasion how God can rekindle a dead love, well, my husband and I are proof of God’s caring, his power and ability to change hearts and to bring life into a dead relationship. I love my husband more now than ever before. Our priorities as a family are straight, with God first. God is so faithful. He has restored the years that the locusts have eaten. He has dealt wondrously with us. Our eyes fill with tears of joy when our six-year-old son says, ‘Thank you, Jesus,

for coming into my daddy’s heart and making him nice to me and not so mean. I love my daddy.’ As a family we now anticipate growing in the Lord, participating in fellowship, and, as God wills, being an encouragement to others.

That is why we wait. There are, of course, no guarantees that this will happen. But the Christian partner should never take the initiative to end the marriage. However obstinate the unbelieving partner may be toward spiritual things, the believing partner upholds the sanctity of the marriage and its lifelong permanence.

Paul recognizes, however, that the continuation of such a marriage is not completely up to the believing partner. The unbelieving partner may feel that continuing the marriage is impossible for him; he can no longer tolerate his spouse’s Christianity. Paul’s counsel in such a situation is: let the unbeliever leave. Don’t try to fight it. The overriding principle in Paul’s mind, expressed in v. 15, is that “God has called us to peace.” The calling of God is of paramount importance to Paul, as we will see in the next paragraph.

The apostle reminds Christians who are experiencing stress and heartache at home that the essential nature of God’s calling to them is an invitation, indeed a summons, into a peace in which he wants them to dwell daily. And it is a peace that is not merely the absence of strife, but one that encompasses the healing and wholeness of all our relationships. Tragically, however, he realizes that there may be certain relationships where a Christian’s peace can never be realized. His counsel is that if an unbeliever takes the initiative and wants to leave, then do not weigh him or her down with restrictions that will prevent them from doing so. Let them leave, rather than continue chafing under an unequal yoke. That is the command.

Next, Paul shows the guiding principle behind the command.

## II. The guiding principle: Stay as one was when called

Verses 17-24:

Only, as the Lord has assigned to each one, as God has called each, in this manner let him walk. And thus I direct in all the churches. Was any man called already circumcised? Let him not become uncircumcised. Has anyone been called in uncircumcision? Let him not be circumcised. Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but what matters is the keeping of the commandments of God. Let each man remain in that condition in which he was called. Were you called while a slave? Do not worry about it; but if you are able to also become free, rather do that. For he who was called in the Lord while a slave, is the Lord’s freedman; likewise he who was called while free, is Christ’s slave. You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men. Brethren, let each man remain with God in that condition in which he was called. (7:17-24)

Paul now gives the general principle, repeated three times in these verses, upon which he has based his arguments: “let each man remain in that condition in which he was called.” Though it appears he is changing the subject, he is simply broadening his argument. But his concern is the same, that is: Christians need not change the social setting they were in when they came to Christ. These Corinthian Christians were seeking to make all kinds of changes. They felt that if they changed their marital status they would become more spiritual.

Paul is attempting to put their spirituality in a different perspective. We are to remain in whatever social setting we were in when we were converted because God’s call in Christ transcends those



settings and makes them irrelevant. The call to Christ has created such a change in one's essential relationship (with God), that one does not need to seek any change in other relationships. Conversion transforms all of them and gives them new meaning. Paul urges us to adopt an attitude of contentment with whatever lot God gives to us, even if this includes circumstances which cause friction and frustration.

To make his point the apostle illustrates from two other kinds of social settings. Circumcision and slavery represented the two most divisive phenomena in the world of the New Testament. Circumcision constituted the greatest religious barrier; and slavery the biggest social barrier. In each case, Paul is bold enough to assert that the salvation of God in Christ has rendered them null and void.

The apostle wants to encourage stability, and therefore he makes the same point three times: verse 17, "as the Lord has assigned to each one, as God has called each, in this manner let him walk"; verse 20, "Let each man remain in that condition in which he was called"; verse 24, "let each man remain with God in that condition in which he was called."

In this profound passage, Paul reminds the Corinthians (and us) that the key to making their present situation count is to let God change them daily, right where he had placed them. Your circumstances are no accident. God has placed you where you are. Circumcision does indeed present great barriers between Jews and Gentiles, but God can overcome these obstacles by working inside both Jewish and Gentile Christians. The gulf between slave and free is wide, but God can bridge that gulf by going to work inside both Christian slaves and Christian freemen. And, may I add, the differences between you and your spouse may be great, but God is able to meet you right where you are and fill you with love, joy and peace in the midst of the struggles.

If a starving man were asked to feed his hungry neighbor, he would understandably be less than eager to obey. If he could get some food, he would want to eat it himself. To give something away which you yourself desperately crave is a difficult assignment. I think that this is how many of us view what we are asked to do in marriage. When we read a passage such as this, we feel we are being asked to give up all our hopes for happiness in order to make our mates happy; to give up all our own desires for fulfillment so our mates can be spared the pain of divorce. Our immediate response is, no way!

But supposing we were to assure our starving friend that a lavish banquet had been prepared for him, and as a promise of the good things to come, he was given a generous appetizer of shrimp cocktail and a slice of a perfectly cooked prime rib. Imagine also that you assured him that there was plenty for everyone. As he looked across the fence at his emaciated neighbor, assume what struck him most was his neighbor's need, and that this awareness erased all his memories over their fights about borrowed tools and noisy parties.

Imagine a bit more. Supposing the one who gave the feast asked our friend to carry a slice of beef over to his neighbor and invite him to the meal. How would you respond in that situation? How do you think the neighbor would respond?

Viewed from God's perspective, Christian marriage is a lot like this parable. We were never meant to find our deepest needs being met by another person. We were meant to find them in Jesus Christ. All of our needs are completely met in him. The riches of heaven are ours, and to excite our faith he has given us a taste of what lies ahead. The problem is, many Christians have not tasted and seen that the Lord is good. Those who have know something of the joy and peace he can provide.

It is only as we discover that the answer to our deepest longings lies in Christ that we will be able to see past those longings and discern our mates' deep needs, and discover the deep desire to share with them the satisfaction we ourselves have found.

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Catalog No. 791

1 Corinthians 7:25-40

13th Message

Gary Vanderet

September 2, 1990

# THE JOY OF BEING “SINGLE” MINDED

*SERIES: EXAMINING LIFE IN THE LOCAL CHURCH*

It is difficult being a single person in the church. We have placed sex and marriage on a high pedestal. To never make love, to never share the deepest personal intimacies with another person seems to some to be synonymous with being undesirable, maybe even perverted. This image has made many singles miserable, and as a result we often respond to them in one of two ways. We either ignore them, regarding them as second-class citizens, or else we pity them, thinking they are miserable and incomplete. We want to “rescue” them out of them plight, so we become matchmakers. Howard Hendricks tells the story of a mother in his congregation who tried to force his attention on her daughter by assuring him that it was God’s will for them be married. She told him she was praying that God would open his eyes so he could see the light. Then, with great sincerity, Dr. Hendricks would say, “Ladies and gentlemen, have you ever thanked God for unanswered prayer?” Much poor humor prevails among singles, and a lot of it is just bravado.

The passage we will look at today from 1 Corinthians speaks to this issue of singleness. However, I trust that if you are married, you won’t tune out because the principles discussed will have relevance to your life. As married folk there are certainly things we can learn about how God views singleness. Just as many non-Christians idealize the ecstasy of sex, a lot of Christians idealize marriage. They want single people to experience the joy of a good marriage and, in their opinion, really begin living.

But this is a far cry from the New Testament’s view. The Bible never speaks of singleness as a second-class state. Ponder for a minute. In his humanity, Jesus Christ our Lord was never married. He never experienced physical intimacy with a woman, yet we would all agree that he was perfectly fulfilled.

Remember the Corinthians were rather confused about love, sex, and marriage. A group of extremists in Corinth reacted to sexual immorality by advocating sexual abstinence even within marriage. This put tremendous pressure on those who were married to dissolve their marriages, and on the engaged and widows not to marry at all. That is the issue that Paul is dealing with in this chapter. In verses 1-16 he addresses those who were married or were once married, and now in verses 25-40 he addresses those who have not been married. His counsel to both groups is, “Be content where you are.”

Last week, we learned an important insight about handling difficult circumstances: We must allow God to change us. This uncovers our tendency to believe the grass is always greener somewhere else. We tend to think that if we could just change our circumstances we would be better people. But Paul reminds us that circumstances have nothing to do with character. Those who are married think, “If only I was single, my life would be so much better.” They dream of being free. Singles, on the other hand, fantasize about the prince or princess who will someday come along. We think our adverse circumstances are hindering us from being all that we could be, but

from God’s perspective those very circumstances are actually helping become all we could be.

Some years ago, Norman Rockwell painted a magazine cover depicting a young woman sitting at a desk, looking at a rose bud in a vase and dreaming of a cottage, a husband, and children. The next two segments showed her marrying the young man and going off to the cottage. In the last segment she is washing dishes, her hair in disarray, children draped around her legs, her husband sitting in the next room reading the newspaper, and she is dreaming...of an office, a desk and a bud vase.

Paul is applying that general principle of remaining in the state in which they were called to the particular situation of women who were never married. That term “virgins” is probably narrower than simply an unmarried woman, and most likely is referring to an engaged woman. In light of the extremists who were advocating celibacy, their question to Paul was, “Should we cancel the wedding, and remain single?” Knowing Paul’s own preference for the single state, they were seeking a firm endorsement of his own preference. Thus Paul speaks to the issue of being single, and gives advice to those who are thinking of or planning on marriage.

I would like to point out four principles in this passage, and along with each one an exhortation that will help you apply that principle.

## I. Times of distress call for stability: Be content in your calling

Let’s read 1 Corinthians 7:25-28:

**Now concerning virgins I have no command of the Lord, but I give an opinion as one who by the mercy of the Lord is trustworthy. I think then that this is good in view of the present distress, that it is good for a man to remain as he is. Are you bound to a wife? Do not seek to be released. Are you released from a wife? Do not seek a wife. But if you should marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin should marry, she has not sinned. Yet such will have trouble in this life, and I am trying to spare you. (1 Cor 7:25-28 NASB)**

The Lord gave no particular command on this issue, but Paul says his opinion is one we can trust (which is the understatement of all time). Although it does not come with apostolic authority (he is careful about his choice of words, it is an opinion), his advice is: Be content where you are; maintain the status quo. The instruction he gives is based on what he calls “the present crisis.” It is difficult to determine exactly what he is referring to. Some people say he is referring to the return of the Lord, but that isn’t his usual terminology for that event. Rather than the imminency of the Lord’s return, I believe he is referring to the imminency of persecution.

Evidently, the Corinthians were experiencing a time of crisis. Nero had been emperor for a little over a year when the apostle wrote

this letter. Paul knew how evil this man was, and he could see the handwriting on the wall. In a few short years Nero would destroy Rome in a fire and blame it on the Christians. His degenerating sanity was already being demonstrated in his brutal treatment of a few Christians here and there. Paul could not know the details, but he could well imagine the destruction that Nero would cause. And he was right. In the next decade, a wave of persecution swept across the Roman Empire that almost devastated the church. The persecution was horrible. Nero slaughtered believers of all ages. One historian tells us:

They were punished with stripes and scourgings, drawings, tearings, stonings, plates of irons laid unto them burning hot, deep dungeons, racks, strangling in prisons, the teeth of wild beasts, gridirons, gibbets, and gallows, tossing upon the horns of bulls. Moreover, when they were thus killed, their bodies were laid in heaps, and dogs were left to keep them, that no man might come to bury them.

Paul himself had only recently been on the receiving end of persecution in Ephesus, from where he is writing this letter. It is out of his pastoral concern that he shares this advice to those who had written to him asking about the practical wisdom of entering a lifelong commitment of marriage. One man wrote, "The apostle writes to the Corinthians as he would to an army about to enter on a most unequal conflict in an enemy's country, and for a protracted time." Suffering alone is difficult enough, but watching a mate or child suffer can be unbearable. Think about the present situation in the Persian Gulf, and how much more difficult that is for those with families there.

When Hurricane Hugo hit on the East Coast last year, the official word to people living in that area was, "Stay where you are." The winds were over 100 miles an hour, and it was difficult if not impossible to move. Remain where you are. That is what Paul is saying. When the seas are raging, it is no time to change ships. In his mind this was no time for marriage.

"But," says Paul, "if you should marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin should marry, she has not sinned. Yet such will have trouble in this life, and I am trying to spare you."

During hard times, the pressure to maintain a family and keep everyone together is even more difficult and demanding. Remember Jesus' words uttered in reference to the destruction of Jerusalem: "How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers!" Times of distress call for stability. Be content in your calling.

There is a second principle here in this passage:

## II. Times of distress call for flexibility: Be focused on the proper priorities

Look at verses 29-31:

But this I say, brethren, the time has been shortened, so that from now on both those who have wives should be as though they had none; And those who weep as though they did not weep, and those who rejoice, as though they did not rejoice; and those who buy, as though they did not possess; and those who use the world, as though they did not make full use of it; for the form of this world is passing away. (7:29-31)

Paul says, literally, "the crisis has been contracted." The shortness of time that Paul speaks of in v. 29 is explained in v. 31: "the form of this world is passing away." We are not long for this world, and this

world is not going to last very long. Jesus has come and has inaugurated a new age. For the amount of time that is left, be conditioned by non-worldly priorities.

Michael Green sees the meaning of the phrase, "the time has been shortened," as being literally, "furled like a sail." Explaining this, he says: "God's time has been furled. The Lord has come in the mid-point of time, in the cross and the resurrection, and we live between that furled time and the second coming. We do not know how much wind is going to be opening that sail, but we do know that we are in furled-sail time."

Paul's concern here is not with the amount of time that is left, but with the radical new perspective the "foreshortened future" gives one with regard to the present age. We do not belong to this age. Those who have a definite future and can see it with clarity, live in the present with altered values as to what matters and what doesn't.

Paul is reminding us to make sure we are not only making a living, but making a life. He is not urging us to neglect our responsibilities but to keep things in their proper focus. Do not let maintaining a home be the major purpose of your existence. Do not give all your time and energy to enjoying this present life. There are higher demands and higher challenges to life than that. Marriage, as wonderful as it is, is only for this life. Therefore, it is not necessarily the only calling, or even the highest choice one can make.

Paul's statement, "the form of this world is passing away," reminds us of John's words:

**Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life are not from the Father but from the world. And the world is passing away, and also its lusts, but the one who does the will of God abides forever. (John 2:15-17)**

Paul is reminding us to examine what we are living for. There is more to life than a pleasant home and a good retirement plan.

I think the implication Paul makes is that it is easier to maintain this perspective as a single man or woman. In view of the shortness of our lifespan, and the brief period of time that we have to extend the kingdom of God, it is important that we not become too entangled with this world.

## III. A single life has fewer distractions: Use your freedom as an opportunity for service

Look at verses 32-35:

But I want you to be free from concern. One who is unmarried is concerned about the things of the Lord, how he may please the Lord; but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how he may please his wife, and his interests are divided. And the woman who is unmarried is concerned about the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and spirit; but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how she may please her husband. And this I say for your own benefit; not to put a restraint upon you, but to promote what is seemly, and to secure undistracted devotion to the Lord. (7:32-35)

Paul explains that being married takes a lot of time, and much of it is given over to fairly mundane tasks. Marriage is not the panacea for all of your problems. In fact, you will simply exchange one set of problems for another. In addition to the adjustments of two person-

alities with their differing lifestyles and moods choosing to become one, there are the practical stresses and strains of maintaining a home and family. There are appliances to fix, lawns to mow, and shopping and cooking to do. Raising children brings another set of stresses in life—training and disciplining, schooling, shopping for clothes, fixing bikes, carpooling kids all over town, etc. Add to that the pressure of finances. Despite what some may say, two people cannot live as cheaply as one. Kathy and I have just moved, and the financial decisions have been an unbelievable distraction to me.

This is not an indictment of marriage; it is simply a fact. Married men and women ought to spend the time needed to serve their families. In fact, it is tragic to see married leaders in the church neglecting the needs of their families and living as if they were single. Serving one another is what makes a marriage work. Paul is not demeaning these mundane tasks in marriage, but simply stating the obvious: those who are married have less time to devote to evangelism and discipleship. Had he been married, Paul could never have done what he did. As a single man he could travel extensively. He had no obligations back home. He could plant churches; he could fling his life away with abandon; it didn't matter.

If you are single, let me exhort you to view your singleness as an opportunity for service, not selfishness. You have a degree of freedom that no married person has. Do not use that freedom merely to serve your flesh. We are all tempted toward self-indulgence, but it is even more tempting for those who are single. There are fewer demands on your time and money. That is not always the case, especially if you are a single parent, but it is generally true, especially for those who have never been married. The temptation is to spend all your time and money on yourself: a better stereo system, the latest ski equipment, sail boats, hang gliders, a better car. These things are not sinful in themselves, but the temptation is to spend a great deal of time and money indulging yourself. Use your freedom to serve others. The gift of being single is a gift of freedom of service.

If you are blessed with the gift of being single, use your time redemptively. Take some of that discretionary time for Bible study and prayer. John Stott, the great English preacher, has greatly influenced the church with his speaking and writing gifts. Much of his single life has been used to deepen and enrich his knowledge of God. He takes a month off each year just to read and pray. I am told he spends 4-6 hours a day in Bible study and prayer. Those who are married, and especially those who have children, would find it almost impossible to do that. Use some of your free time to get to know God. Take a Discovery Seminar or get involved in a Bible study to help you grow.

Secondly, let me exhort you to use your freedom for service. Don't sit around and feel sorry for yourself. You have a high and holy calling. Maybe you have dreamed of being a mother, but God has not seen fit to grant you that desire. Start teaching a Sunday School class or a Backyard Bible Club. Begin to love children and invest your life in them. I think of Henrietta Mears, who served for many years on the staff of Hollywood Presbyterian Church. She chose not to be married, but to devote her energies to teaching the Scriptures. She taught the college class at that church for many years and scores, if not hundreds of men are in the ministry as a result of her service. Bill Bright, founder of Campus Crusade, and Richard Halverson, now Chaplain of the U.S. Senate, are products of her ministry. Dave Roper testified that she had an enormous effect on his life. Then there is Wetherall Johnson. Although she never married and she nev-

er gave physical birth to any children, she has produced thousands of spiritual children through the ministry of Bible Study Fellowship.

The way to find yourself is to lose yourself in service to Christ.

There is a final principle in this chapter:

#### IV. The gift of singleness is not necessarily permanent: You need not have the fear of finality

Let's read verses 36-40:

**But if any man thinks that he is acting unbecomingly toward his virgin daughter, if she should be of full age, and if it must be so, let him do what he wishes, he does not sin; let her marry. But he who stands firm in his heart, being under no constraint, but has authority over his own will, and has decided this in his own heart, to keep his own virgin daughter, he will do well. So then he who gives his own virgin daughter in marriage does well, and he who does not give her in marriage will do better. A wife is bound as long as her husband lives; but if her husband is dead, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord. But in my opinion she is happier if she remains as she is; and I think that I also have the Spirit of God. (7:36-40)**

Paul addresses these same singles and reminds them that God's call for them may change.

If you have an NIV translation, you will notice that it reads differently from the NASB, from which I read. It translates verse 36, "If anyone thinks he is acting improperly toward the virgin he is engaged to." The Greek text simply reads, "His virgin." Thus one can interpret that phrase to refer to a young woman's father (since marriages were arranged in the first century), or it can refer to the fiancé of the young woman. I think in this instance the NIV interpreters are right. Paul is answering the practical question that has stimulated his teaching. These words are addressed to a young man who is engaged and wants to marry. Apparently the extremists at Corinth were urging such couples to wait as long as possible, and longer, to get married. But Paul assures him that it is perfectly OK to marry.

Here we see that the gift of being single does not mean that you have no desire for love, sex, or marriage. It does not mean that you are a loner who has no urge to merge. It simply means that if those elements are not present in your life, you can still abound, you can "do all things through Christ who strengthens you." You need not have the "fear of finality." God's calling for you may change. If you are now married, you have the gift of marriage. If you are now single, you have the gift of being single.

It is sad to see some singles living as though they are in limbo, waiting for that major miracle called marriage so they can begin to live. Those who live like that usually are disappointed if and when that day arrives because they have not developed the very character needed to make marriage enjoyable, thus they remain lonely and frustrated.

Don't waste the calling which God has given you. This passage wonderfully sets forth the high and holy calling of singleness. Indeed this whole passage is a reminder to us of the importance of keeping our priorities in focus. We do not belong to this world, nor do we live for this passing age. We are citizens of another Kingdom. That is the joy of being "single" minded.







Catalog No. 792

1 Corinthians 8:1-13

14th Message

Gary Vanderet

September 9, 1990

# MOTIVATED BY LOVE

*SERIES: EXAMINING LIFE IN THE LOCAL CHURCH*

God has been doing some surgery in my life. I trust he is using these messages to impact others, but even if he chooses not to work through me, I know one major purpose of my preaching through this book has been for God to work in me. A number of years ago I came across a quote from Marian Jacobsen's book, *Saints and Snobs*, that has stayed with me in a special way. Her words relate well with what the Lord wants to say to us this morning from our studies in 1 Corinthians. Here is what she wrote:

If any group of Christians who claim to believe and practice all God has said in His book will face up to their personal responsibility within the family of Christ, and to the real needs of Christians around them, their church will impress its community with the shining goodness of God's love—to them *and* among them. Such a transformation probably would do more to attract others to Jesus Christ than any house-to-house canvass, evangelistic campaign or new church facility. People are hungry for acceptance, love and friends, and unless they find them in the church they may not stay there long enough to become personally related to Jesus Christ. People are not persuaded, they're attracted. We must be able to communicate far more by what we are than by what we say.

That last phrase has stuck with me, because much of my ministry has been based on the persuasion, not the attraction factor.

In the eighth chapter of 1 Corinthians we come to the second question the Corinthians had asked the apostle Paul in the letter they had written to him. It involved a very thorny issue in Corinth, as it did throughout the early church: "*concerning food sacrificed to idols.*" Although this is not immediately relevant today, we will see that the deeper issue is a common problem. It is this: How much should I let other people control my actions? Paul's answer gives a principle that applies to many similar situations we face today.

William Barclay helps us understand the issue the Corinthians faced. He writes:

Sacrifice to the gods was an integral part of ancient life. It might be one of two kinds, private or public. In *private* sacrifice the animal was divided into three parts. A token part was burned on the altar... the priests received their rightful portion...; the worshiper himself received the rest of the meat. With the meat he gave a banquet. Sometimes these feasts were in the house of the hosts; sometimes they were even in the temple of the god to whom the sacrifice was made... The problem which confronted the Christian was, "Could he take part in such a feast at all? Could he possibly take upon his lips meat that had been offered to an idol, to a heathen god?" If he could not, then he was going to cut himself off from almost all social occasions.

We need to remember also that first century people had a strong belief in demons and evil spirits. They felt demons were always seeking to gain entry into people's bodies. These spirits settled on the food as a man ate and so got inside him, they believed. One of the ways to avoid that was to dedicate the meat to some god, because

they believed evil spirits would not touch food which had been dedicated to a god.

For the most part the gentiles at Corinth who had become believers had attended such meals all their lives. It was the basic restaurant of antiquity, and every kind of social occasion was celebrated in this fashion. What had happened was that after their conversion, and after Paul departed from Corinth, some of the believers returned to the practice of attending these cultic meals. They seemed to have defended their position in their letter.

Their defense rested on the fact that they knew better. They knew about idols, and they knew there was nothing to them. How can you worship something that doesn't really exist? Their attendance at these temples was irrelevant since they were merely eating with their friends and not worshipping what did not exist. They had knowledge about food also, and they knew that food was irrelevant to God. And since what they ate was unimportant to God, where they ate it must be as well. And thirdly, in their arrogance they were beginning to doubt Paul's knowledge and authority. There was a question in many of their minds as to whether he had the proper apostolic authority to forbid them on this matter.

Paul takes three chapters to answer this issue. His first concern in the verses we will look at today is the ethical basis of their argument. Their problem was primarily in their attitude. How relevant that is to our world today! Of course, we don't struggle with meat sacrificed to idols, but we do struggle with similar issues that are relevant to our culture. Take drinking, for instance. Or dancing. We could discuss the merits of Christian schooling, public schooling or home schooling for children. We could talk about different styles of worship. We could make a list, and the list would be different in every culture. But, as we will see, the list is unimportant. What is crucial is the ethical basis on which we make decisions.

In these verses we will be faced with two different ways of dealing with ethical issues. We see those two ways explained in vv. 1-6.

## I. Examining a difficult issue: Two contrasting solutions

Now concerning things sacrificed to idols, we know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge makes arrogant, but loves edifies. If anyone supposes that he knows anything, he has not yet known as he ought to know; but if anyone loves God, he is known by Him. Therefore concerning the things sacrificed to idols, we know that there is no such thing as an idol in the world, and that there is no God but one. For even if there are so-called gods whether in heaven or on earth, as indeed there are many gods and many lords, yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things, and we exist for Him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and we exist through Him. (1 Cor 8:1-6 NASB)

Notice that following Paul's mention of the problem of eating meat sacrificed to idols what follows seems like a non sequitur. It doesn't seem to have anything to do with what he has just written; he doesn't talk about eating or food or idols at all. The real problem is much deeper than the surface issue. Thus Paul goes right to the heart of the matter. In verses 1-3 there is a contrast between two ways, two solutions to dealing with difficult issues: the way of love and the way of knowledge. I believe there are two points Paul is making in these verses.

#### A. The evidence of maturity is love, not knowledge

Both of these ways are described in v.2:

knowledge puffs up  
but  
love builds up

I would define the way of knowledge in this way: *Those who use their knowledge to benefit themselves.* This is contrasted with the way of love, which in this context would be: *Those who use their knowledge to benefit others.*

Paul reminds the Corinthians that their emphasis is totally wrong. The purpose of our faith is not knowledge, but love, says Paul. He begins by stating, "We are aware, along with yourselves, that we all possess knowledge." Knowledge was preeminent in Corinth. They were enthralled with human intellect and eloquence. The word of wisdom and the word of knowledge were preeminent gifts in Corinth. They are the first two items in the list of spiritual gifts in chapter 12; and speech and knowledge receive special billing in contrast to love in chapter 13. In their minds being spiritual meant having knowledge. It is probable that in the Corinthians' letter they had used the word "build up" with reference to knowledge. That was certainly their conviction—that it was knowledge that built up. Paul's words would have stung deeply. Not only does knowledge not build up, it puffs up.

Knowledge on its own, particularly the kind of knowledge paraded by those Corinthian experts, only puffs up, leaving its possessors like an inflated balloon. Knowledge is important; we all possess some, but on its own it is inflated and empty. A Christian needs to be filled with love because love builds up. Prick a balloon and it bursts; lean on a wall and it holds your weight. Knowledge used selfishly merely creates pride. It makes you feel superior. It doesn't make any difference which side you are on in the argument, on the side of freedom or on the side of restriction, knowledge tends to create pride. Those on the left look down their noses on whom they regard as uptight Christians, wondering when they are going to grow up into true freedom. Those on the right react the same way, looking down their noses, and wondering how others could possibly regard themselves as Christians and do the things they do. It doesn't matter which side you are on. Knowledge puffs up. It is love that edifies. The evidence of maturity is not knowledge, but love.

In verses 2-3 there is a second contrast drawn between the way of love and the way of knowledge. The principle is this:

#### B. True knowledge is found in one who has discovered how to love

There are a number of textual variants in these verses that have given rise to different translations and different interpretations of what is being said here. I have translated vv. 2-3 this way:

If anyone thinks he has arrived at knowledge,  
he does not yet know as he ought to know;

but  
if anyone loves,  
this one truly knows.

I don't think Paul is saying, as some translations render it, that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing (which is true). He is making the much stronger statement that if anyone thinks he has arrived, that he is in the know, that very fact is evidence that he doesn't have the real thing. Like the one who "thinks he is wise" in chapter 3, the one who thinks he has knowledge is self-deceived; true knowledge has eluded him. True knowledge is not found in the mere accumulation of data, nor even in correct theology. When that correct theology has helped me to live in love with those around me, then I really begin to understand what knowledge is all about. Further, it is at that point that I also begin to learn how much I don't know.

Paul begins this way because he basically has no argument with the Corinthians' theological premise. But he knows that what they are doing with their knowledge is wrong—and that is the more serious problem. So he begins by qualifying their understanding of knowledge itself. Our behavior as Christians is not based merely on our knowledge alone—that can lead to pride and the destruction of others—it is based on love, on the use of that knowledge to help and benefit others.

The tyranny of "knowledge" as the basis for Christian ethics has a long and unfortunate history in the church. When you finally have your theology together, it is tempting to use it as a club on others—and this happens from those on the theological right as well as those on the left.

This doesn't mean that knowledge is either irrelevant or unimportant. It is both relevant and important. Paul agrees with the Corinthians' understanding of the nature of God. In fact, in agreeing with them he makes one of the most powerful theological statements in the letter, in verse 6, in his emphasis of the uniqueness of the only God. The God whom Christians worship as Father and Son stands in singular contrast to all the others who are thought to be gods but are not. In fact, one could preach an entire sermon based on the theology of v. 6 alone, dealing with the activity of the Father and Son, etc. But I do not think Paul's concern is with philosophical theology, but with the practical implications to the situation at hand. In v. 6, instead of saying all things exist for him, he says we exist for Him. The point is that we exist for God's purposes. We have a relationship to him that ultimately must determine how we behave and relate to others. Knowledge is important, but it must always lead to love.

I am always leery of teachers whose enticement to follow them is the promise of leading you to "deeper insights" or "special revelation." Such appeals are invariably made to one's pride, not to becoming a more loving Christian. While it is true that insight leads to freedom, we must be careful not to allow knowledge to become a demand for freedom and the insisting on our rights. This is what was happening at Corinth. Biblically, knowledge is never an end in itself; it is only a means to a greater end, which is the building up of others. That is what Paul wrote to Timothy. "The goal of our instruction is love, from a pure heart and a good conscience, and a sincere faith."

All theology goes back to a basic watershed of two ways of thinking. First, there is the mind of Christ, which is revealed in Philipians 2. Christ was equal with God, but he regarded that equality as an opportunity to serve. He used his advantage to advantage others. He humbled and lowered himself in order that society might be rich and redeemed. By contrast, there is the mind of Satan. He was a cre-

ated being, but he was superior to other creatures in many ways. He was the most glorious and knowledgeable of all the angels, but he recognized his superiority and saw it as an opportunity to use his advantage to disadvantage others and to serve his own selfish desires.

Thus, we have two minds: the mind of Christ, which seeks to humble itself to serve others, and the mind of Satan, which exalts itself to serve its own interests and destroy others.

This raises a critical question which all of us must ask: Is my knowledge of all that is mine in Christ helping me to become more loving and genuinely caring for the needs of others, or is it making me more arrogant and selfish?

In verses 7-13, Paul spells out in detail the principle shared in 1-3, that love, not knowledge, is what builds up, therefore love is what knowledge is all about.

## II. Analyzing the solutions: The advantages of the way of love

However, not all men have this knowledge; but some, being accustomed to the idol until now, eat food as if it were sacrificed to an idol; and their conscience being weak is defiled. But food will not commend us to God; we are neither the worse if we do not eat, nor the better if we do eat. But take care lest this liberty of yours somehow becomes a stumbling block to the weak. For if someone sees you, who have knowledge, dining in an idol's temple, will not his conscience, if he is weak, be strengthened to eat things sacrificed to idols? For through your knowledge he who is weak is ruined, the brother for whose sake Christ died. And thus, by sinning against the brethren and wounding their conscience when it is weak, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again, that I might not cause my brother to stumble. (8:7-13)

There are three distinct advantages revealed in these verses of the way of love.

### A. Love frees me to see clearly

After returning to the question of food offered to idols, Paul points out that there are some Christians in Corinth who have not really grasped the truths he has just explained. The Corinthians' defense of their eating at temples was, "Everybody knows there is nothing to idols." We often base our action on the assumed idea that everyone understands. But that is not always the case. And Paul says that this certainly wasn't true in Corinth. Some people still think that the idols are real and can therefore contaminate the eater. Though they may tell themselves that the god is only an idol and that an idol has no reality, the fact is that their former way of life is woven into their consciousness and emotions in such a way that these past associations cannot be easily disregarded. For them to return to their former place of worship would mean once more to eat food as if it were truly being sacrificed to the god, just as it had been all their former years. It is love that allows me to see the situation clearly. You think you are building up the weak by giving him your so-called "knowledge," but in essence you are tearing him down and you can't even see it. Love allows us to see others clearly as well. It allows us to see our fellow Christian as the brother for whom Christ died, not just as a good friend in our church or someone in the Sunday school class. The real presence of Jesus in our brothers and sisters is easy to ignore, but Paul says that when we act in such a way that wounds our brother's weak conscience we are actually sinning against Christ.

We probably ought to state clearly at this point that the weaker brother in this discussion is the one who is hyper-sensitive on such issues; the over-legalistic, narrow-minded Christian who tends to cut out anything in his life that is doubtful, just in case it might harm his relationship with God. Paul admits that such a condition is a weakness—and it is obvious that the apostle would want such a weak person to grow. But what I would like you to see is that he does not attempt to persuade him to change his position here. In fact, he doesn't address him at all. His emphasis is directed at the strong man who has been freed by the truth. And his exhortation to this person is to voluntarily restrict his freedom. It is the strong man who must readjust to help the weak, not vice versa.

What do we do with weakness? Do we trample on it? Do we flaunt our strength and show off our freedom in the face of weakness? No. The Christian perspective on weakness is compassion. It is not to make people feel inferior and rejected, but to reach out and help.

There is a second advantage:

### B. Love frees me to evaluate accurately

The question that one is faced with in this section is, "Shall I indulge in what I feel free to do?" Paul says that the action is irrelevant. The important issue has nothing to do with food. It is not really important whether you eat the meat or not, whether you drink the wine or not (we could go on with the list). I am no better if I do or if I don't. The significant issue is my brother's or sister's spiritual life. If I am going to compare my momentary act of freedom and my brother's growth, there is no comparison. Because of that evaluation, it may be true that what we want to do is unimportant compared with the possible danger to another's life.

We need to state clearly that the issue here is not the offending of another, but the possibility of injuring someone spiritually. It is matter of someone's conscience being weak, not of someone's prejudices being irritated. There are many instances where people are offended by actions that have nothing to do with losing their faith or hindering their growth. That is not what Paul is talking about here. If that were the case, we could hardly do anything without offending someone. Jesus offended a lot of people. He offended the Pharisees. He offended the Sadducees. He offended politicians. He offended the Jews, and he offended the Gentiles. In fact he was a master at offending people.

Paul is referring to acting in such a way that another will be damaged by our behavior. He is talking about people who, if they emulated us, would be in danger of destroying their spiritual life.

Finally:

### C. Love frees me to sacrifice willingly

Paul's conclusion in v. 13 is this, "Therefore, if food causes my brother to stumble, I will never eat meat again, that I might not cause my brother to stumble." When it is a case of actually hurting another, I will gladly practice self-control.

For the Corinthians (and, I fear, for some of us as well), knowledge implies the right to act in "freedom." Thus freedom becomes the highest good because it truly helps and exalts the individual. Biblically speaking, however, the opposite is true. It is love that prevails. This implies the free giving up of one's rights for the sake of others, because life together, in community, is the aim of salvation. That is true Christian freedom.

What a dramatic change of lifestyle it must have been—from “playing the Corinthian” to “being a Christian”! It must have caused tremendous tension in terms of socializing and hospitality. The tendency of one with a weak conscience is to withdraw into the Christian community.

There was a crucial need then, as there is now in the church, for Christians to be properly taught on the things that really matter.

God desires to see our Christian consciences become much more robust. He wants the gospel to penetrate every moral cesspool in the Silicon Valley. If that is going to happen, we are going to have to be less, not more, concerned about doubtful things. We need to have stronger, not weaker consciences. But there are many Christians for whom such strength is a distant dream. And if they are going to grow stronger, we need to be patient, non-judgmental, sensitive, and absolutely committed to the building of the body as a whole. Remember, people are attracted more than they are persuaded.

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Catalog No. 793

1 Corinthians 9:1-27

15th Message

Gary Vanderet

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# THE RIGHT TO YIELD

*SERIES: EXAMINING LIFE IN THE LOCAL CHURCH*

Power has become a common word in our world. We have power wardrobes, power vocabularies, power lunches. Recently, I came across a list of “power table manners.” In fact, one person has developed a seminar to help you eat your way to the top! For \$6,000 you can take in the seminar, but for free this morning I will give some highlights:

- Never tuck your napkin into your collar.
- Never leave a lipstick mark on the rim of a glass.
- Never mash or stir your food.
- Never haggle over the bill.
- Never, ever, hand your plate to the waiter.
- Never read the menu like a Bible. You aren’t there to eat, but to do business.
- Never stoop down to retrieve dropped silver.

In fact, that last phrase, never stoop down, summarizes the ideology of those whose quest is for power. Never stoop down for anything. Never stoop to appear weak. Never stoop to help anyone who could never help you. Never stoop to any level that might loosen your grip on your rung of the ladder.

Harrison Ford summed it up well in this line from *Working Girl*: “One lost deal is all it takes to get canned these days. The line of buttons on my phone all have an inch of little pieces of tape piled on, the names of new guys over the names of old guys—good men who aren’t at the other end of the line anymore all because of one lost deal. I don’t want to get buried under a little piece of tape.”

Most of us can identify with that. We find ourselves either pushing or being pushed. We have confused a passion for excellence with a passion for power. And it is even sadder when the shoving takes place in the church. Although we have changed the titles, the power mentality has remained the same.

The Christians in Corinth would have been right at home with this power mentality. In fact, they had their own power theology. Their idea of an apostle was a man with authority, one who let everyone know that he was in authority. They lorded it over everyone. In their opinion, anyone who did not act in the same way could not possibly be intended to carry responsibility in the church. They saw Christian leadership in terms of being masters, not servants. They criticized Paul because he was not like that; he was too soft, too weak, too willing to deny himself his freedom in Christ for the sake of others.

In fact, a number of people in the church questioned Paul’s authority, especially his claim to be an apostle. In their mind if he really were an apostle, he would never allow himself to be so restricted.

Thus, Paul must do two things. He must first defend his apostleship, which he does in verses 1-14; and then he must explain that if he really does have those rights, why he doesn’t claim them? So in verses 15-27 he explains his freedom in Christ, especially how he has

deliberately and freely chosen to restrict his freedom for the benefit of others. This, he maintains, is a sign of strength, not weakness.

This is a lengthy passage to cover in one sitting. Though we will not unfold every detail, the principles we will discover from the mind of the apostle Paul form a wonderful model for effective ministry.

## I. An apostle’s rights: The support of a ministry (9:1-14)

**Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not my work in the Lord? If to others I am not an apostle, at least I am to you; for you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord. (1 Cor 9:1-2 NASB)**

Throughout these verses Paul is speaking about his rights as an apostle, not as a Christian. He unleashes a torrent of rhetorical questions designed to evoke a positive answer: Of course I am; of course I have; of course you are. Paul obviously fits the requirements for a true apostle: he had seen Jesus our Lord. His experience on the road to Damascus was more than a mere vision. He was commissioned by Jesus Christ to preach to the Gentiles. And the sheer existence of the church at Corinth is evidence of the fact of his apostleship. Are you not my work in the Lord? The Christians at Corinth owed to him their very existence as a church. They were the proof that he was an apostle. They were his seal, marked as belonging to him. It was his obedience to his apostolic commission that had brought him to Corinth in the first place. He was the first one to come all the way to them with the gospel. He had been through a lot of pressure in order to see that church established; and he gave of himself unselfishly for their welfare.

But he was still an enigma to them; they couldn’t figure him out. Though he claimed to be an apostle, he didn’t act like the authoritative teachers and leaders they knew. He didn’t claim his rights as an apostle. The fact that he takes the time and thought to give such a careful defense of his credentials as an apostle of Christ stresses his meekness.

What were those rights that Paul refused to claim? He lists them in vv. 3-6:

**My defense to those who examine me is this: Do we not have a right to eat and drink? Do we not have a right to take along a believing wife, even as the rest of the apostles, and the brothers of the Lord, and Cephas? Or do only Barnabas and I not have a right to refrain from working? (9:3-6)**

Paul lists three rights, which in essence are really only one. This is summed up in verse 6—that he has the right not to work at a trade to make ends meet; he has the right to be financially supported by them.

The apostle frequently gave up that right. We know from the Book of Acts that he often worked long hours at his trade of tentmaking when he was getting a local congregation off the ground. This was true in Ephesus, a sub-tropical city where not much happened be-

tween the hours of 11:00 a.m. and 3:00 p.m. During these dead hours Paul preached at the Hall of Tyrannus, in the middle of a full day of work. He was able to say after two full years of ministry: "I have not coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothing. You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions." He made the same claim in Thessalonica. In that city, where there was a plethora of eschatological parasites, idlers who sat around waiting for the return of Christ, it was important to the witness of the gospel that he model a pattern of hard work and financial independence. And we know that Paul also worked in Corinth, laboring with Priscilla and Aquila in their leather shop.

In the Corinthians' mind Paul worked, not because he was giving up those rights, but because he lacked them. Since he didn't accept their patronage, they decided he must not be a genuine apostle. In fact, Paul writes in 2 Cor. 12:13: "How were you inferior to the other churches, except that I was never a burden to you? Forgive me this wrong!"

There are two principles we can draw from these verses:

#### **A. A pastoral ministry is worthy of material support**

First, they set forth Paul's defense of a pastoral ministry being supported by a congregation. These days, many people think that men become preachers in order to make a living off others. They are parasites, in other words. Many people think that no one in the ministry really works. More than once I have been told that I have an easy life, that I work only one day a week. I am invisible six days a week and incomprehensible on the seventh! When Paul says he has a right not to work for a living, he does not mean that there is no work involved in a pastoral ministry. He is talking about having to work at a trade to earn a living. He says it is proper that we devote our energy to study, teaching and prayer.

In verses 7-14, Paul gives the basis for that right. The Corinthians needed some strong arguments to pry them free from their rights and their acquisitive attitude as Christians. He gives five solid reasons for the legitimacy of these rights: First, he says it is common practice.

**Who at any time serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard, and does not eat the fruit of it? Or who tends a flock and does not use the milk of the flock? (9:7)**

The three metaphors, the soldier, the farmer, and the shepherd, are commonly used in the Bible for the Christian ministry. No matter which perspective you take, common practice assumes that a person will receive his appropriate "perks." The soldier gets his equipment, without which he cannot fight; the fruit farmer won't go to the market to buy apples; the shepherd will have the meat from his flock on his table. What could be more fair, more normal, more proper? The analogy is clear: The apostle should be expected to be sustained from his "produce," from his "flock"—the church that owes its existence to him.

Not only is it common practice, but, second, it is a scriptural precept. Verses 8-10:

**I am not speaking these things according to human judgment, am I? Or does not the law also say these things? For it is written in the Law of Moses, "you shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing." God is not concerned about oxen, is he? Or is He speaking altogether for our sake? Yes, for our sake it was written, because the plowman ought to plow in hope, and the thresher to thresh in hope of sharing the crops. (9:8-10)**

Paul says the principle can be supported biblically, from Deut. 25:4: "you shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain." Why not? Because hard workers deserve to be rewarded for their labors. God didn't add that piece to the law in Deuteronomy merely because he cared for oxen (which he does). He was explaining a principle—it was for our sake. (By the way, this is beautiful lesson on how to interpret the Old Testament. Even these common rules and regulations about animal care were written down to instruct us about our relationships with one another.) Both the plowman and the thresher should expect to receive a share of the profits. It is not just the milk of human kindness, but the method of divine sharing.

Third, says Paul, it is intrinsically just.

**If we sowed spiritual things in you, is it too much that we should reap material things from you? If others share the right over you, do we not more? Nevertheless, we did not use this right, but we endure all things, that we may cause no hindrance to the gospel of Christ. (9:11-12)**

In essence, Paul is asking the Corinthians how much the gospel means to them. What does it mean to you to have been brought from darkness into light? What do all these "spiritual blessings" mean to you? Is there any gratitude in your heart for the "grace of God which was given to you in Christ Jesus"? One of the most instinctive habits in believers is the gift of hospitality and generosity. If we have been on the receiving end of spiritual blessing, we want to demonstrate our thankfulness to God in tangible ways.

Next, Paul refers to Jewish custom. Verse 13:

**Do you not know that those who perform sacred services eat the food of the temple, and those who attend regularly to the altar have their share with the altar? (9:13)**

The Corinthians need look no further than the Jewish temple to see the same principle in operation. Paul, however, probably had the temple in Jerusalem in mind. According to the Old Testament, the sacrifices were divided up among the Levites in order to care for them. They actually ate some of the meat and the meal offerings, and they used the wine and oil that was brought to the temple. It was all commanded by God.

Paul concludes his argument with the fact that this principle is Christ's command. Verse 14:

**So also the Lord directed those who proclaim the gospel to get their living from the gospel. (9:14)**

The principle is clear: a pastoral ministry is worthy of material support. Though there are pastors and ministries that have abused this principle through their own self-indulgence and laziness, this is how the Lord desires his kingdom to operate.

Having said that I want to share another principle:

#### **B. The demonstration of a ministry is the basis for support**

In Paul's case, as it should be in the case of anyone seeking support, the ministry came first, and then the support, not the other way around. The demonstration of having a ministry is always the basis for the raising of support. You never read of anyone in the New Testament trying to raise support to launch a ministry. We would solve a lot of problems in the church today if we would follow this principle.

After this impressive argument by the apostle in which he claims his rights, we come to the point of this chapter. He now goes on to make a completely contradictory case.

## II. An apostle's restraint: The privilege of ministry (9:15-27)

Though he had every right to be supported financially, Paul deliberately chose not to exercise that right. In verses 15-27 he shares an approach to ministry that is a timeless challenge to everyone called to share in the gospel. This challenges the power-hungry mentality of the Corinthians, and it will challenge us as well. The rest of the chapter falls into three sections. In each, Paul reveals an important principle about his own ministry. They are crucial reminders to us as well.

### A. Ministry is a stewardship—learn to be sacrificial

Verses 15-18:

**But I have used none of those things. And I am not writing these things that it may be done so in my case; for it would be better for me to die than to have any man make my boast an empty one. For if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast of, for I am under compulsion; for woe is me if I do not preach the gospel. For if I do this voluntarily, I have a reward; but if against my will, I have a stewardship entrusted to me. What then is my reward? That when I preach the gospel, I may offer the gospel without charge, so as not to make full use of my right in the gospel. (9:15-18)**

Paul is simply not concerned about rights. He has deliberately chosen to forgo every one of them. He had the inner freedom to do so. He says in v. 12: “we endure all things, that we may cause no hindrance to the gospel of Christ.” He was passionately gripped by Jesus Christ, and like his Master, he wanted to become a model of the gospel itself. The message of the gospel is the free grace of God. Paul wanted his life and ministry to reflect that truth.

Barrett puts it well: “The gospel, which turned upon the love and self-sacrifice of Jesus, could not be fitly presented by preachers who insisted on their rights, delighted in the exercise of authority, and made what profit they could out of the work of evangelism.”

The word “hinder” in v. 12 is graphic and somewhat unusual. It means literally “a cutting into,” and was used of breaking up a road to prevent an enemy’s advance. Paul had avoided doing anything which might prevent a clear road for the advance of the gospel. He would endure anything to prevent being irresponsible. The word “endure” is one of the eloquent verbs which Paul uses in chapter 13 to describe true love. We have only to read in these two letters the accounts of Paul’s sufferings to appreciate something of what it cost him personally to ensure that the gospel-road was free of obstacles. A man who is ready to endure anything for the gospel is not interested in claiming his rights. If he had any rights left in his heart, it was the right to offer the gospel free of charge. He did not enter this vocation for his own profit. He felt no particular pride in preaching the gospel. How could he be proud of something he was irresistibly compelled to do? He could take no credit for that.

It was at Corinth where Paul began to learn the wonderful paradox that weakness was strength, dying was living, poor was rich, and serving was ruling. He was overwhelmed with the privilege of being God’s ambassador, and he repudiated the idea that a man could do God any service or kindness and expect payment in return.

The first time I consciously experienced that truth I was at the receiving end of the life of a man who lived like that. A professor in seminary by grace picked me out and began to pour his life into mine. We began to meet regularly, even at early hours in the morning. He gave and gave and gave to me to teach me about ministry.

He married Kathy and me, and I remember how thrilled we were to be able to come up with an honorarium for him. I had never before been able to give him anything. At the wedding I quietly handed him an envelope with a check inside. During the reception later, he came up to me and put something in my pocket. Some time afterwards as we were leaving the reception, I searched my pocket and found the envelope I had given him. There was a note on the check saying, “It was my joy to be here today. Use this to take Kathy somewhere special.” What a model of real Christian ministry! Many of you here today are models of that kind of lifestyle. True ministry is a stewardship. We must learn to be sacrificial.

There is a second principle about ministry:

### B. Ministry is relationships—we must have adaptability

Verses 19-23:

**For though I am free of all men, I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win the more. And to the Jew I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews; to those who are under the law, as under the law, though not being myself under the law, that I might win those under the law; to those who are without law, as without law, though not being without the law of God, but under the law of Christ, that I might win those who are without law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, that I may by all means save some. And I do all things for the sake of the gospel, that I may become a fellow partaker of it. (9:19-23)**

These verses show us how Paul viewed his own position. He truly believed that happiness was found in giving rather than in receiving; and, like his Master, he was ready to give his life. Though he was completely free, he didn’t allow that freedom to become an excuse to indulge in his own personal whims. Why? Because, “I do all things for the sake of the gospel.” Every encounter, every personal habit must be evaluated in light of that, because the gospel dominated his whole life. He was living daily in light of eternity, ministering with integrity, and conducting his relationships with adaptability. In this passage he shares what it meant for him, a wealthy, educated, religious Jew, to make himself a slave of all. He sacrificed matters of racial identity, religious sensitivity and personal conscience. He had one goal in mind: that I might win the more.

That word “win” occurs five times in this paragraph. In verse 22 Paul clearly states what he means by it: that I may by all means save some. He knew that what was at stake in his ministry was not merely the success or failure of human persuasion, but a person’s eternal destiny. His fundamental philosophy was to discover the methods which combined the greatest integrity with the greatest impact. A closer look at his servant lifestyle shows that he was ready to give up the most unchangeable aspects of his Judaism if that would open a door for the gospel. He was concerned with the desires, the personalities, the bents and sensitivities of his hearers. As one commentator put it: “His Judaism was no longer of his very being, but a guise he could adopt or discard at will.”

There were occasions such as the circumcision of Timothy, and in discharging a Nazarite vow in the temple at Jerusalem, when he was ready to go through actions which in Christ were unnecessary. Then, by contrast, he refused to bow to the pressure of the Judaizers who wanted Titus to be circumcised. He identified with those under the law and those without law. He was ready to go back under the limitations of religious ceremony and ritual in the Jewish law, consisting of 613 written precepts in the Pentateuch, along with their oral



amplification. These were accepted by Jews as the divinely appointed way to life, but Paul had discovered them to be an instrument of death. In certain instances, however, he was willing to put himself under the law once more in order to avoid starting a relationship off on the wrong foot. Equally, he was prepared to ignore all religious obligations in order to win those who were beyond the shadow of religious establishment. Then, lest they misunderstand the implications of being outside the law, he adds that he was still under the law of Christ. And lastly, he adjusted to the conscientious scruples of those who didn't have the freedom to do some of the things he felt free to do: "To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak." He goes back to the issue at hand, which is the food offered to idols, and says that though he was a strong person with an informed and robust conscience he was prepared to curtail that freedom if required.

It is clear from this passage that it is God's desire for us to exercise the most imaginative and sensitive adaptability in our relationships with others, especially unbelievers. Paul did it for the sake of the gospel, that its power and reality might be experienced as far and wide as possible. I have become all things to all men. Paul was a spiritual chameleon. His versatility is a challenge to us to cross the culture gap that exists between the Christian sub-culture, with its spiritual lingo, and the pagan culture in which we live. The task of identification and incarnation into our world is one of the biggest tasks we face. Somehow we have to bridge that gap. I am not saying we must sacrifice our integrity, but we should use all creative means at our disposal so that the gospel can penetrate this valley. Ministry is all about relationships, thus we must learn to be adaptable and flexible. Are we clinging to rights and habits that are not wrong in themselves, but are preventing us from ministering to others? Let's do some personal examination to see if these things are preventing us bringing life to other people.

There is a third principle here.

### C. Ministry is a training ground—allow yourself to be disciplined

Verses 24-27:

**Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win. And everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; but I buffet my body and make it my slave, lest possibly after I have preached to others, I myself should be disqualified. (9:24-27)**

Paul is concerned with the flabby spiritual lives of many of the Corinthians. They wanted rewards without work. They were more concerned with pleasant surroundings than with proper training conditions. He has a metaphor they would understand. The Isthmian Games took place in Corinth every two years. The streets of the city would have been filled with athletes in training for these prestigious events. Paul says it is evident that every athlete exercises self-control because he has a goal; he wants a prize. If self-discipline is crucial to gain a crown made of pinewood, then surely the Christian race ought to be run with the same dedication.

When Paul speaks of fearing disqualification, he is not referring to losing his salvation. We saw in chapter 3 that those who are involved in ministry will have to face an extremely thorough examination from the Lord about the quality of their work. We will be tested "by fire" to a degree that will expose the materials used in our building. Those in Christ cannot lose their salvation, but they can find that their service for Christ has been empowered with their own resources and for their own glory. That is what Paul supremely feared.

These verses became very personal to me last night. We have had the flu in our house this past couple of weeks, and Kathy has been exhausted. I thought we at last had seen the end of it, and I told Kathy it would be good for her to take a couple of days to visit her parents, taking along our youngest son, Timothy, while I watched the two older boys. But last night Stephen had stomach convulsions the like of which I had never seen before. As he lay there, screaming in pain, my first thought was, "No, Lord, I've got to preach in the morning! I need my rest." And I was serious, because if my wife were at home, she would have taken care of things while I got my sleep. Hour after hour after hour I got to rub my eight-year-old's stomach while he was sick and in pain. As I did so I thought a lot about verse 27 and the danger I faced at that moment of thinking that my ministry simply involved preaching to others. Ministry takes place quietly, when no one is looking—in that Sunday School class, year after year, but no one has praised you. That is the training ground where we learn how to give, where we learn discipline. That is what power and authority is all about.

In verses 26-27, Paul warns the Corinthians, and us as well, not to live aimlessly, without purpose, indulging ourselves.

My friends, our objective in this life is to be useful and pleasing instruments of God to be used whenever and wherever he desires. That is what Paul is exhorting us to. When he awoke in the morning those were his first thoughts. That set his agenda for the day. He was ready to give up certain indulgences if they interfered with his objective of being what God wanted him to be. Is that your objective? Have you ever asked yourself, "Why am I here? Why was I born at this time of history, in this area?" God intends to use you. He made you for a purpose. He designed you with your unique abilities and talents that you might be useful and pleasing to him in your world as an instrument of his gospel.

That is our challenge. Let us reconsider what real ministry is, what real authority is. Maybe we will have to stoop down, maybe we will have to hand our plate to the waiter, as we learn to be sacrificial, flexible, and disciplined in our Christian lives.

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1 Corinthians 10:1-13

16th Message

Gary Vanderet

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# DEALING WITH OUR DISCONTENT

SERIES: EXAMINING LIFE IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

We are in the midst of discussing a complex problem which existed among believers in the first century, the problem of food offered to idols. The Corinthians were demanding their right to attend the cultic meals at the temple, and to eat whatever food they wanted whenever they wanted. They were very knowledgeable about their freedom in Christ, and they demanded their rights. Paul has already told them, in chapter 8, that though he agreed with their theology, all their knowledge had done was to make them arrogant and selfish. As we have already seen, the evidence of maturity is not knowledge, but love. Knowledge is a means to an end—the building up of others. In chapter 9 Paul illustrated that truth through his own experience. Though he was an apostle, and had rights of authority and power, he had yielded those rights so as to be a help to others.

Today in chapter 10 we come to a warning. Paul deals with the root cause of why we cling to our rights, why we are unable to say no to things we ought to refuse. The passage we will look at, verses 1-13, divides into two parts. First, Paul illustrates from the example of Israel (verses 1-11); and second, he gives an exhortation to help us apply the lesson (verses 12-13).

## I. A lesson to learn: The example of Israel (10:1-11)

### A. Their unique privileges (10:1-5)

**For I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea; and all ate the same spiritual food; and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was Christ. Nevertheless, with most of them God was not well-pleased; for they were laid low in the wilderness. (1 Cor 10:1-5 NASB)**

The Corinthians thought they were a privileged people and that those privileges allowed them to do whatever they wanted. Here, Paul takes them back to a really privileged people, the nation of Israel, and demonstrates what their privileges did for them. Notice the repetition of the word *all* throughout the account. When they came out of Egypt, all the Israelites enjoyed tremendous blessings from God. They all had certain advantages, from the youngest to the oldest among them. Paul lists four privileges they enjoyed:

#### 1. They enjoyed the presence of God

“...all passed under the cloud,” says Paul. The cloud was the pillar of smoke that represented the presence of God in their midst, something that was unique to the nation of Israel. The Jews later referred to this as the *Shekeenah*. We have anglicized that word, calling it the *Shekinah*. This is not a biblical term, but it is a word the Jews used that was based on the Hebrew word *shakan*, which means “to dwell.” The cloud covered them during the day and was a source of direction for them, and at night it became a pillar of fire, providing warmth

and light. It was a constant reminder that the Lord was always present in the midst of his people.

#### 2. They enjoyed the power of God

“...all passed through the sea,” says the apostle. This is a reference to the passing through the Red Sea. Remember when the Israelites left Egypt, the Pharaoh changed his mind about their freedom and pursued them. They found themselves caught between the Egyptian Army at their back and the Red Sea in front. It was in this impossible situation that God demonstrated his power. He divided the sea, and they walked through on dry ground; they were saved. The writers of the OT always look back to that event as an example of the power of God, his ability to provide for us in impossible situations. When you find yourself stripped of all resources and it looks like your life is ending, that is when God works in supernatural ways.

#### 3. They enjoyed being the people of God

Paul tells us in v. 2: “and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea.” Baptism means “to immerse.” It carries the idea of identifying with someone else. The cloud, and the parting of the sea in a unique way united the Israelites to Moses and to his leadership. In fact, we read in Exod 14:31: “And when the Israelites saw the great power the Lord displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared the Lord and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant.” No longer were they a crowd; they had become a community of people who believed God.

In the cloud and the sea therefore we have a picture of the presence and the power of God, and a group of people who shared that presence and power.

#### 4. They enjoyed the provision of God

Paul tells that they “all ate the same spiritual food.” He is referring to the manna which the Israelites ate. When he calls it “spiritual” food he is not contrasting it to physical. It certainly was real food, but it was supernaturally given; that is the point. Perhaps as many as a million people came out of Egypt, and God fed them supernaturally. They came out of their tents in the morning to discover a white substance spread all over the ground. They said, “*Mana’h*” (in Hebrew, “What is it?”), and that became its name. Manna is what they ate throughout their wilderness experience. From the time they left Egypt to the time they entered Canaan, God miraculously provided for them. They never went hungry.

Paul goes on: “and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was Christ.” This is a reference to the rock which Moses struck and water gushed forth. Paul says the rock followed them, which probably implies that God did this a number of times. He supernaturally provided for them. It was a wonderful reminder of how God can provide from the most unlikely source, even in a dry and thirsty wilderness. Paul says that this rock symbolizes Christ; he is the rock from which we drink.

The point of all this is that Israel had tremendous privileges. They enjoyed the presence and the power of God. They enjoyed in a unique way being the people of God; they enjoyed the provision of God. They had everything they needed.

However, Paul tells us in v. 5: “Nevertheless, with most of them God was not well-pleased; for they were laid low in the wilderness.” This last phrase is a graphic picture. It really should be translated “scattered.” The picture is one of corpses strewn all over the desert. It is a picture of judgment. Exodus and Numbers overwhelm us with the number of people who perished in the wilderness. According to Numbers there were 600,000 men alone, not counting women and children. I am sure the number was well over a million; it was probably closer to two million people. How many of those entered the land? Only two men, Caleb and Joshua. All the rest died in the wilderness. It is a picture of judgment.

Why wasn't God pleased? They had everything they needed, yet somehow they failed. In spite of their tremendous privileges, similar to the privileges the Corinthians enjoyed, they failed to obtain the prize. They were disqualified. They didn't run to win.

I am sure this truth would have hit home for the Corinthian believers who were confident of their own spirituality and maturity. Remember they didn't have much time for Paul as an apostle or teacher. Their attitude was another evidence of their presumptuous arrogance. These verses are a helpful reminder to us that along with our freedom come some inherent dangers. The privileges we enjoy as God's people do not make us immune from God's discipline.

I know of believers who, when they contemplate an action that is clearly out of bounds for Christians, justify that action in their mind with the thought that it doesn't matter; God will forgive them because they are Christians. That is the subtle lie that leads us into activities that displease our God and we find ourselves disqualified.

What was wrong with the actions of the Corinthians?

## B. Their basic problem (10:6-11)

**Now these things happened as examples for us, that we should not crave evil things, as they also craved. And do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written, “The people sat down to eat and drink, and stood up to play.” Nor let us act immorally, as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in one day. Nor let us try the Lord, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the serpents. Nor grumble, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer. Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come. (10:6-11)**

From the books of Exodus and Numbers Paul describes five well known incidents in Israel's history. I believe they are all driving home one single message. There are common elements in each of the examples: all of them involve eating or drinking. In each case the Jews wanted food and drink, and in each case they wanted more than God had provided. Though they had tremendous privileges—they had God's presence and his provision—it wasn't enough. They were not content with what he gave. Because of that each case involves judgment.

Paul begins with a summary statement in v. 6: “Now these things happened as examples for us.” These things actually happened; they aren't myths. But their significance goes beyond their mere occurrence in history; they are examples for us, “that we should not crave evil things, as they also craved.” This is the point Paul is making.

He is referring to an experience recorded in Numbers 11, when the Israelites had just left Mt. Sinai. It had taken them about a year to get from Egypt down to Mt. Sinai. They had received the law, built the tabernacle and got ready for the journey. Just a few days out of Sinai they began to complain. “We are sick of this manna,” they said. “We have baked it, we have fried it, we have boiled it. We are tired of it.” They demanded meat from Moses. Moses went before the Lord and said, “I can't handle them anymore Lord. What am I going to do?” The Lord told Moses that if it was meat they wanted, then it was meat they would get. God brought a flight of quail near the camp and when the Jews awoke, the ground was filled with quail. The people gathered hundreds of bushels of them. Then a plague struck the camp and thousands of them died.

The psalmist says that the Lord granted their request but sent leanness to their souls. The problem wasn't simply their desire for meat. I imagine that anyone who had eaten manna for a year would love to have a little meat. The problem lay in how they handled that desire. They allowed it to control them and they began to crave meat. Whenever we feel we must have what God has not provided, our desire becomes evil. Whenever we want more than God provides it is evil. We are always *tempted* to want more, but to give in to that temptation, to allow it to become a craving, is evil. The Israelites began to take their needs into their own hands because they would not trust God to provide for them. That kind of craving will always result in a disqualification, to use Paul's terminology in chapter 9. We won't lose our salvation, but we will forfeit the power of God in our life and ministry.

The second instance is given in v. 7: “And do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written, ‘The people sat down to eat and drink, and stood up to play.’”

The scene here is at the foot of Mt Sinai, while the law was being given to Moses. He was gone for forty days and forty nights, and after awhile the people became restless and perhaps a bit frightened. Their discontent drove them to doubt God's provision for their care. They demanded from Aaron another god who would take care of them. They had a feast, they became drunk, there was an orgy, and it eventually led to idolatry. It was because they refused to trust in God's provision.

Verse 8: “Nor let us act immorally, as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in one day.”

This is recorded in Numbers 25. This was the second generation. They had travelled from Kadesh-barneah, and were on the way into the land to conquer it. Then they ran into some Moabite women. Some of the Israelites objected to God's restraints, and couldn't resist the women's invitation to a feast. They joined them and fell into immorality. A terrible judgment came upon the camp. Again, it was because they wanted to eat and drink something God hadn't provided for them. They wanted something more.

Paul gives another example in v. 9: “Nor let us try the Lord, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the serpents.”

This refers to the story in Numbers 21 of how Israel complained to God and charged him with unfaithfulness. They said, “You brought us out here to die in the wilderness. There isn't enough food and drink, and we hate the food you have provided. It's all your fault that we are in such a mess.” Again, terrible judgment fell upon the people. Poisonous serpents came out and bit them and many died.

Finally, Paul writes in v. 10: “Nor grumble, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer.”

This refers to Numbers 16, where Korah, Dathan and Abiram began to grumble and criticize Moses’ authority. They said, “We are just as good as you, Moses. Who are you to tell us what to do!” They began to create unrest in the camp, and the ground opened up and swallowed the three men alive.

We can see the parallel that Paul is making to the Corinthians. They wanted to eat and drink what they wanted when they wanted, and they began to grumble and criticize the authority of Paul. But Paul says that their basic problem was they were not content with what God had given. What makes us unwilling to give up our rights is the attitude that we will never be satisfied until we get what we think we need. So we begin to fantasize and focus on those things we think we must have, and after awhile that fantasy turns into a craving. We feel we must have, for example, a new home, a better job, a happier marriage, a better body (all of which can be good desires), etc.

Paul tells us in v. 11 that these OT accounts are written for us. They are types, or pictures. I don’t know about you, but I can put myself right in those Israelites’ place. I am just like them. Much of my life has been characterized by wanting something more. God has been opening my eyes and helping me understand why I think I need to change my circumstances to be happy. This passage warns us to be careful. Discontent is a dangerous thing. It leads to idolatry, immorality, and a presumptuous spirit. Your fantasies just might get fulfilled and in reality become nightmares.

Now we need to underscore that there is nothing necessarily wrong with having desires for better things. And there is nothing wrong with praying for those things. Our heavenly Father longs to hear our requests and to give us what we need. But be careful to not allow that normal desire to become an evil craving, to think you must have what God has not provided. At that point you are tempted to take your needs into your own hands. You begin to question God’s care for you, and you are robbed of the contentment God wants you to have.

Paul concludes with an exhortation, in verses 12-13, to help us learn from this example.

## II. A warning to heed: An exhortation to the Church (10:12-13)

**Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall. No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, that you may be able to endure it. (10:12-13)**

Paul wants us to realize that we are not living in a beautiful world designed merely for our enjoyment. We are in a battle, and we are under attack. The sooner we realize that the better. We are running a race that must be won. We are fighting a battle with a ruthless enemy. His devices are clever, his strategies are subtle, and we can be easily deceived.

The Israelites had all the privileges one could ever expect, yet their privileged status did not protect them from the judgment they experienced. So the Corinthians, who thought they were above danger when it came to enjoying their freedom in Christ, especially in attending the cultic temple meals, ought to take heed. Maybe that is where you are this morning. Your discontent with certain things in your life has been simmering for a long time, and now it is boiling

over. You feel you have to have certain things in order to be fulfilled.

There are three wonderful truths set out in verse 13 to help us handle our own discontent:

### A. The pressures we experience are common

The word Paul uses for “test” in v. 13 is used in the New Testament to refer to the solicitation to do evil (hence the translation, “temptation”), or it can refer to a difficult circumstance which helps us grow (often translated often by the word “trial” or “test”). That is the difference between a test and a temptation. A *trial* is an experience which *God* brings into our life in order to *help us grow*. A *temptation* is a process which *Satan* brings into our life in order to *cause us to sin*. But the amazing thing is that any circumstance can either be a trial or a temptation, depending upon our response to it.

I appreciate the word my friend Dave Roper used to describe what Paul is saying. The word “pressure,” he says, better encompasses both of these ideas. All of us have difficult circumstances which cause us pressure. These pressures, says Paul, are common. And in this context, it is pressure to think that we need something more, pressure to fantasize about better circumstances, pressure to be discontent with our present situation. This is a common phenomenon. If we asked how many of us were experiencing that pressure at this very moment, most of us would raise our hands. One of the enemy’s strongest arguments when he is enticing us to evil is to get us to think that our situation is unique, thus God’s word doesn’t apply to us. We are tempted to say, “You don’t understand my situation. You don’t live with my mate. You haven’t met my boss.” Those pressures are commonplace. No one is exempt from them. You will never arrive at a spiritual plateau where you no longer are tempted by these pressures.

Whether you are a student, a doctor, a salesman, an engineer, a homemaker, or even a pastor, these pressures are all around us. There is no place you can go where they are not present.

There is a second truth revealed.

### B. The pressures we experience are controlled

Paul says, “God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able.” That is often hard to believe when we are in the midst of the pressure. I am sure some of you right now would respond, “Well, I am already beyond what I am able.” Notice that Paul doesn’t say God will not allow us to be tempted beyond what we think we are able. God often takes us beyond that point. In fact, he must if growth is to be accomplished. But the truth is that he knows us much better than we know ourselves. He knows what we can handle. Paul has just exhorted the Corinthians regarding the discipline of an athlete. If you have been involved in athletics, you know that one of the marks of a good coach is to get an athlete to do things he previously thought were beyond him. God must push us beyond what we think we can withstand by confronting us with more pressure than we think we can handle. But it is a controlled pressure, it will not be more than we can handle.

And lastly,

### C. The provision that is available is constant

“...but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, that you may be able to endure it.” When the pressure is active in the Christian’s life, there is a counteractive power available from God.

It is interesting that the word for “escape” is almost exactly the same word as “exodus,” a way out of the wilderness. When we are in the midst of the wilderness and we think we cannot take any more of the pressure, then we must remember that God is right there with us. He wants to turn our wilderness into a green pasture, to feed us with supernatural food. David wasn’t resting in a green pasture when he wrote Psalm 23. He was in a wilderness—a desert—and was being pursued by Saul. But there David found God’s life and fed upon it. That is our exhortation this morning—the presence, the provision and the power of God are available to us. I pray we will find it sufficient to meet all of our needs.

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1 Corinthians 10:14–11:1

17th Message

Gary Vanderet

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# THE DANGERS OF FREEDOM

*SERIES: EXAMINING LIFE IN THE LOCAL CHURCH*

I was reminded last week of a song, sung by the Kingston Trio, that was popular when I was growing up during the 1960's. It went like this:

They're rioting in Africa  
 They're starving in Spain.  
 There's hurricanes in Florida,  
     and Texas needs rain.  
 The whole world is festering,  
     with unhappy souls.  
 The French hate the Germans,  
     and the Germans hate the Poles.  
 The Italians hate the Yugoslavs,  
 The South Africans hate the Dutch,  
 And I don't like anybody very much.  
 But we can be grateful,  
     and thankful and proud,  
 For man is endowed with a mushroom-shaped cloud.  
 And we can be certain,  
     that some happy day,  
 Someone will set the spark off,  
 And we will all be blown away.  
 They're rioting in Africa  
     There's strife in Iran,  
 What nature doesn't do to us,  
 Will be done by our fellow man.

As I remembered that song, I thought about the powerful truth it communicated so clearly in its day. I think we would all agree that the world is in a mess. Times like these make people realize how needy we really are. But we must face an equally important truth, and that is that God is calling out a people for his name's sake to impact this hurting world. Christians are to have an impact upon our world. The problem we face is not a national problem, but a human one. It is the problem of sin. But Christians know that true peace can only be found at the foot of the cross.

Rather than the church having a positive impact on the world, however, the world frequently has a negative impact on the church. This was how the church in Corinth in the first century was operating — in conditions, I might add, very much like our own in the San Francisco Bay Area. The Corinthians, like many people in this area, were intellectually alert, materially prosperous, and morally decadent. These proud and sometimes wealthy, independent ex-pagans were having a difficult time learning how to live as Christians. It was in the area of lifestyle, not theology, that they were confused. Where were the lines to be drawn? How much of one's culture must be abandoned when one became a Christian? Paul's answers are decisive, direct, and relevant.

First Corinthians can be divided into two parts. In the first six chapters, Paul deals with four problems in the church that were reported to him. Then beginning in chapter 7, he answers questions

the Corinthian church asked him in a previous letter, one of which had to do with eating meat sacrificed to idols.

William Barclay helps us understand the issue the Corinthians faced:

Sacrifice to the gods was an integral part of ancient life. It might be of two kinds, private or public. In private sacrifice the animal was divided into three parts. A token part was burned on the altar... the priests received their rightful portion...; the worshiper himself received the rest of the meat. With the meat he gave a banquet. Sometimes these feasts were in the house of the hosts; sometimes they were even in the temple of the god to whom the sacrifice was made... The problem which confronted the Christian was, "Could he take part in such a feast at all? Could he possibly take upon his lips meat that had been offered to an idol, to a heathen god? If he could not, then he was going to cut himself off from almost all social occasions..."

The gentiles at Corinth who had become believers had attended such meals all their lives. These were held in what was the basic restaurant of antiquity. Every kind of occasion was celebrated in this fashion. Following their conversion, and after Paul's departure from Corinth, some of them returned to the practice of attending these cultic meals. They were insisting on their right to attend the cultic meals at the temple, to eat whatever food they wanted wherever they wanted. Paul takes three chapters to respond to this issue.

The Corinthians were quite knowledgeable about their freedom in Christ. They were demanding their rights, and they had made their demand known to the apostle. They knew better, they claimed. There was nothing to an idol. How can you worship something that doesn't really exist? they asked. Their attendance at these temples was irrelevant since they were merely eating with their friends, not worshipping what didn't even exist. They knew about food also. Food was irrelevant to God, they said, and if that was so, where they ate it must be irrelevant as well. Finally, in their arrogance they were beginning to doubt Paul's knowledge and authority. There was a question in many of their minds whether Paul had the proper apostolic authority to forbid them on this matter.

The apostle had already told them (in chapter 8) that though he agreed with their theology (that they were free in Christ), their knowledge had made them arrogant and selfish. But, said Paul, the evidence of maturity was not knowledge, but love. There may have been some believers with weak consciences, those who formerly were involved in idol worship, who felt that to eat meat sacrificed to idols would implicate them again in idol worship. Thus Paul exhorts the Corinthians that they should not encourage a weaker brother to violate his conscience by urging him to grow up and eat meat sacrificed to idols. Such knowledge and such an attitude would only damage others. Knowledge is a means to an end—the building up of others. In chapter 9, Paul illustrated that truth from his own experience. Though he was an apostle, and had tremendous rights of authority and power, he yielded those rights in order to be a help to others.

Chapter 10 is a warning about the inherent dangers of freedom. In the first half of the chapter, Paul deals with the primary source of why we cling to our rights, why we are unable to say no to things we ought to refuse. He points out that the danger is discontentedness, a feeling that we must have what we think we need order to be fulfilled.

Paul begins this passage with the word “therefore.” He is summing up what he had already said, in other words. Given all the arguments that he had made in chapters 8, 9, and 10, these are the conclusions that can be drawn. The passage is a wonderful summary of how we are to have a proper influence in the world—how to be in the world, but not of it.

The apostle’s argument revolves around two commands, found in verses 14 and 24: “Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry” (v. 14); and, “Let no one seek his own good, but that of his neighbor.” (v. 24). These two commands set out the two dangers inherent in our freedom in Christ: the danger of compromise, and the danger of legalism. Wise is the Christian, the man or woman, boy or girl who avoids both of these extremes.

## I. The danger of compromise—Flee idolatry

Verses 14–22:

Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry. I speak as to wise men; you judge what I say. Is not the cup of blessing which we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ? Is not the bread which we break a sharing in the body of Christ? Since there is one bread, we who are many are one body; for we all partake of the one bread. Look at the nation Israel; are not those who eat the sacrifices sharers in the altar? What do I mean then? That a thing sacrificed to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything. No, but I say that the things which the Gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons, and not to God; and I do not want you to become sharers in demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. Or do we provoke the Lord to jealousy? We are not stronger than He, are we? (1 Cor 10:14–22 NASB)

The command of verse 14 could actually be translated “keep on fleeing from idolatry.” The idea is that it is a repeated temptation, one that we face over and over again.

Corinth was a city filled with temples dedicated to idol worship. On a hill overlooking and dominating the city was the temple of Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love, with its 1000 priestesses who were prostitutes. Most of the people in the city who were not Christians were idolaters. They worshipped in these temples, and their worship involved immorality of every kind. Furthermore, there were restaurants connected to the temples. If we were to make an analogy to today, we might imagine a restaurant with a nightclub, a church and a house of prostitution all under one roof. This was where all the central figures of Corinth could be found, the movers and the shakers, the politicians, the athletes, the prominent in the world’s eyes. Those who didn’t attend these places were cut off from all the important social events of the city. But, Paul charged, if Christians attended and participated in these activities, they were involving themselves in idol worship.

We are inclined to think because we live in modern times this passage doesn’t apply to us. We don’t worship idols, we say; the only place we find idols today is in museums. But that isn’t true. There are idols all around us. Anything we worship is an idol. Anything to

which we attribute ultimate worth, or anything we do that gives us ultimate worth, is an idol. In fact our word “worship” is based on the Anglo-Saxon word “worth-ship,” meaning, to attribute worth to something. So anything that in our eyes is of ultimate importance or significance, anything that preoccupies us, anything we invest the bulk of our time and energy in can be an idol. An idol can be a piece of property or an investment that we are counting on downstream. Our business, our vocation, or our education can be an idol. A boyfriend or girlfriend, a mate, a house, a car, a rock group, anything can be an idol. An idol is anything that is of ultimate significance to us, anything we derive our sense of wholeness, joy, or satisfaction in life from. Idolatry is not something we merely do outwardly with our body. Idolatry occurs whenever anyone or anything becomes more important to us than the living God.

Today’s Super Bowl is an excellent example of an idol. There was a time in my life when the Super Bowl, and the festivities surrounding it, brought great satisfaction and fulfillment to me. In fact a San Francisco 49er loss, like the one last week, would have devastated me. It would taken me days to recover from such a thing because I was seeking to get much more from that game than it was designed to give. I still feel pangs of regret and emptiness when my team loses a game they shouldn’t have. When something begins to possess us to that degree, we are on the verge of idolatry. Of course, these things are not wrong in themselves. When your possessions begin to possess you (that’s the issue!) when they take the place of God in your life, then you are worshipping an idol.

Paul gives three reasons why the Corinthians may not attend these idol feasts. We will focus on these principles, and why idolatry is so dangerous.

### A. Idolatry chokes off our source of life

The apostle bases his argument on the institution of the Lord’s Supper. The central ceremony of Christian, Jewish, and pagan worship is more than mere words and actions. Those who take part in these ceremonies become actual partners. That word “sharing,” used three times in these verses, is the word *koinonia*, or fellowship. The worshippers share together in the spiritual reality behind all that happens.

Paul is contrasting the table of the Lord (in which Christians partake of the bread and the cup) and an idol’s table. In other words, there are two hosts—the Lord sits at one table, and an idol sits at another. The apostle is referring to the possibility of these Christians going to the temple and participating in these idol feasts. That, he says, is the table of an idol, in contrast to the table of the Lord.

The apostle’s point in using this analogy is this: what you eat is what you are. These tables actually symbolize a greater reality: what you take in is what you become. If you are sitting at an idol’s table and partaking of all the elements of that feast, then that is what you become—an idolater. But if you are sitting at the Lord’s table you are partaking of a greater reality: the eating and drinking of Christ. We must remember that that central act of our worship is not a religious ritual, but rather a picture of a relationship with the Lord of the universe. It is a symbol of the essence of Christianity: the risen Lord Jesus indwells us, and we eat and drink of his life. He is our resource for living. He is everything we need. He is our source of wisdom and strength. We don’t produce these things in ourselves. People sometimes say, “You are what you eat.” Paul says that if you eat and drink at the Lord’s table, then that is the character you will

increasingly display. But if you eat and drink at an idol's table, than that is the character you will display.

The symbolic imagery of eating and drinking is more widely used than we think. We speak of "devouring" a book, "drinking in" someone's talk, "swallowing" a story, or "chewing" over a matter. We say we can't "stomach" an idea, or even a person. Oftentimes while my mother was holding her grandson, I heard her say she could "eat" him!

There are only two tables, says Paul. You must choose the one you will sit at. You can't have it both ways. He doesn't say we should not partake of both. He says we can't! The two are incompatible. It is the same argument that Jesus made when he told his disciples, "You cannot serve God and mammon, because you will end up hating one and loving the other." You can't make an idol out of your job or your mate or your children or your hobbies or your car and have the life of Christ, because in worshipping that idol you cut yourself from the resources of Christ. We would like to have it both ways. We would like to have God's power for our program, but Paul tells us we can't. It is either one or the other.

### B. Idolatry is controlled by demonic activity

Verse 20 reveals a significant truth that we would not know apart from revelation. Paul tells us that behind what we think is a seemingly innocent activity is a demon. Look at verse 19-20: "What do I mean then? That a thing sacrificed to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything?" The apostle knows there is no reality to the idol. He knows the problem is not some piece of wood. In the OT, idols were made fun of. But that isn't the problem. He continues: "The things which the gentiles sacrifice, they sacrifice to demons, and not to God; and I do not want you to become sharers in demons." Paul learned this from Deuteronomy 32, where Moses told the people that idol worship was basically demon worship, because behind the idol was not a god, but a demon. We learn from this truth that demonic activity is behind these seemingly harmless things.

We ought never forget that the whole universe is armed for our destruction. In John 8, Jesus declared that the devil is a liar and a murderer. His goal is destruction, and his chief weapon is deception. He wants to destroy the quality of our lives, to reduce them to boredom and depression, to make us frustrated and irritable so that every little thing bothers us and we are hard to live with. This is what idols lead to. I know, because I've been there. This happens in our jobs, especially at times where much time and energy is needed on a certain project. The evil one deceives us into thinking that if we work harder on a certain project it will produce dividends, and we will feel satisfied and worthwhile. But this is a lie.

Behind all idolatry is an enemy. There are demons out to destroy you, and to ruin the quality of your life.

### C. Idolatry arouses the jealousy of God

Finally, in v. 22, Paul says, "Or do we provoke the Lord to jealousy? We are not stronger than He, are we?" In addition to becoming involved in demonic activity, when we are involved with idol worship we invoke God's wrath. God becomes jealous. Now jealousy is not always a bad thing. There is such a thing as legitimate jealousy. Throughout the OT when Israel was unfaithful, God got jealous, because Israel legitimately belonged to him. Such contact with demonic forces unleashes devastating forces of disintegration. We as Christians are not to play around with such destructive things. Our Lord is a jealous God. He puts up with no rivals, no comparisons, no

alternatives. When we are unfaithful to him, he will bring us back to him. He will not stand idly by and let us drift away into some idolatrous preoccupation with the world. He will strike at idol worship and destroy it. If your affections are deeply entwined with an idol, you are going to get hurt in the process. And in your hurt you might find yourself crying out to God and asking him why he is hurting you. But it is an act of love from a jealous God who will not allow you to drift into that kind of preoccupation.

Anything can be an idol. Keep on fleeing from idolatry.

Paul now changes his focus from the danger of compromise to the danger of legalism.

## II. The danger of legalism—Use your freedom to serve

Verses 23-II:1

**All things are lawful, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful, but not all things edify. Let no one seek his own good, but that of his neighbor. Eat anything that is sold in the meat market, without asking questions for conscience' sake; for the earth is the Lord's, and all it contains. If one of the unbelievers invites you, and you wish to go, eat anything that is set before you, without asking questions for conscience' sake. But if anyone should say to you, "This is meat sacrificed to idols," do not eat it, for the sake of the one who informed you, and for conscience' sake; I mean not your own conscience, but the other man's; for why is my freedom judged by another's conscience? If I partake with thankfulness, why am I slandered concerning that for which I give thanks? Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God; just as I also please all men in all things, not seeking my own profit, but the profit of the many, that they may be saved. Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ. (10:23–11:1)**

What a dramatic change of lifestyle must have come from "playing the Corinthian" to "being a Christian"! It must have caused great tension in terms of socializing and hospitality. And it would be easy for someone with a weak conscience to withdraw into the Christian community, to stay inside his holy huddle. Sometimes we feel we can protect ourselves by becoming involved only in Christian activities.

There was a crucial need then, as there is now in the church, for Christians to be properly taught on the things that really matter. If the church at Corinth was going to penetrate that licentious city, they needed to be less, not more concerned, about "doubtful things." It was God's desire that the life of faith extend into every dark alley and moral cesspool in Corinth. It still is today. Thus we must be equally careful concerning the danger of legalism.

This paragraph draws together the threads of the last three chapters, and it stresses two important principles. We have already talked about the first one.

### A. Christianity is a life of freedom

Christians are free! Very few things are prohibited to us. And the few things that are forbidden are those which would destroy us. There were thousands of trees in the Garden of Eden for Adam and Eve to enjoy; only one was prohibited to them. That is how it is with us. Unless I am forbidden by Scripture I am free to participate in whatever activity I please. Paul writes in 1 Tim. 4: "For everything created by God is good and nothing is to be rejected, if it is received with gratitude; for it is sanctified (put to its intended use) by means



of the word of God and prayer” (1 Tim 4:5). Titus reminds us that “To the pure, all things are pure” (Tit 1:15). God has given us all things richly to enjoy. Earlier in this series I spoke of the difference between legalism and genuine Christianity. The legalist looks at life and says that everything is wrong unless he knows that it is right. However, the Bible says everything is right unless I know it is wrong. If I say everything is wrong unless I know it is right, then I am always afraid of everything, always suspect of everything, wondering if I am going to do something wrong that I didn’t know was wrong and God will be angry with me.

Don’t try to run away from life. We are to live right in the midst of the world, not apart from it. We will never escape worldliness by trying to avoid every temptation. Temptations will pursue you wherever you go. Enjoy life! Don’t examine everything under a microscope to see whether it is going to be dangerous to you. Relax! God knows where you are. He placed you there and provided you with a world to enjoy. Concerning food touched by idolatrous practices, Paul is saying to the Corinthians, “When you go to the meat market (which often buys its food from the temple) stop asking all kinds of leading questions about its origins. When an unbeliever invites you over to dinner, enjoy it, without having a quiet session in the corner with your conscience.”

It is clear from this passage that separation to Christ does not mean separation from non-Christians. Our fellowship is to be with Christ, and our friendship freely given to non-Christians around us. Christians who refuse are only deceiving themselves. Paul says in v. 26 that if an unbeliever invites you to his home, then go. If you are an uptight, legalistic, self-righteous Christian, however, you don’t need to worry — you will never get an invitation to a non-Christian home. You will only get invited if you are an openhearted, friendly person who understands that people are struggling and in need, and you see past the outward veneer to the lonely hearts underneath.

Truth must always be held in balance, however, thus Paul qualifies this truth with another principle.

#### **B. Genuine freedom is a life of service**

There are certain things that may restrict our freedom, and one is our love for our brothers and sisters. Our freedom is intended to be used to serve them.

The question facing the Christian here is, “Shall I indulge in what I feel free to do?” The action, says Paul, is irrelevant. It has nothing to do with food. It is not really important whether you eat the meat or not, whether you drink the wine or not (we could go on with the list). I am no better if I do or if I don’t. The significant issue is my brother’s or sister’s spiritual life. If I am going to have to choose between my momentary act of freedom and my brother’s growth, there is no question as to what I must do.

The issue here is not the offending of another, but the possibility of injuring someone spiritually. It is matter of someone’s conscience being weak, not of someone’s prejudices being irritated. There are many instances where people are offended by certain actions that have nothing to do with losing their faith or hindering their growth. That is not what Paul is talking about here. If that were the case, we could scarcely do anything without offending someone. Jesus offended a lot of people. He offended the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the politicians. He offended both the Jews and the Gentiles.

Paul is speaking about acting in such a way that others will be damaged spiritually by emulating our behavior. If my actions cause this, then I will give up my freedom. My brother or sister is much more important than my freedom.

For the Corinthians, and I fear for some of us as well, knowledge implied rights to act in “freedom.” In this scenario, freedom becomes the highest good because it truly helps and exalts the individual. Biblically, however, the opposite is true. It is love that prevails. This implies the free giving up of one’s “rights” for the sake of others, because “life together” in community is the aim of salvation.

Paul ends this whole section with four verses of entirely positive guidelines for life in the Christian community, which is neither Jewish, nor Greek, but a third race, the church of God. This is true Christian freedom:

- 1) v. 31: Whatever you do, Do all to the glory of God—not to establish your own freedom.
- 2) vv. 32-33: Give no offense...try to please all men in all things—rather than demanding your rights.
- 3) v. 33: Seeking the profit of many—rather than your own benefit or fulfillment.
- 4) v. 33: Seek that many may be saved—rather than being preoccupied with your own salvation.
- 5) 11:1: Be imitators of Christ—not boosting in your own reputation.

This is true Christian freedom—being free from ourselves in order to glorify God. Both sections of this passage could be summed up in the words of Jesus when he told us, “Love God with all your heart and soul and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.” These words sum up what Paul is saying in this passage. Flee idolatry, flee self-righteousness, love God above all else, and love your neighbor as yourself. This is the essence of Christianity, and this is Paul’s word to us today.

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Catalog No. 796

1 Corinthians 11:17-34

18th Message

Gary Vanderet

February 3, 1991

# CORRECTING OUR ATTITUDES TOWARD THE LORD'S SUPPER

*SERIES: EXAMINING LIFE IN THE LOCAL CHURCH*

The war in the Persian Gulf has evoked for me memories of the 1960's. As a high school freshman in 1963, I remember watching on television as a quarter of a million people, three-quarters of whom were black, marched on Washington D.C. It was there that Martin Luther King, Jr. shared his dream of a multi-racial America. Here is part of what he said that day:

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice...and oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice. I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character... I have a dream that one day in Alabama, with its vicious racists...little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers... With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to work together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.

Martin Luther King's dream for our country is certainly God's plan for his church—that the love of God would be evident to the world in the unity of the church, as black and white, rich and poor, young and old, male and female, all worship together in genuine love.

Our thoughts today will center on impartiality and prejudice, for the passage we will examine from 1 Corinthians 11 is an attack on Christian snobbery. I have no axe to grind nor do I have anyone particular in mind. God wants to speak to each one of us, so I ask you to think of only one person—yourself. Each one of us struggles with partiality.

This was brought home to me a few years ago while I was watching a segment from the television show *60 Minutes*. Adolph Eichmann, one of the primary architects of the Holocaust, was the subject. Reporter Mike Wallace posed a central question at the program's outset: "How is it possible for a man to act as Eichmann did? Was he a monster? A madman? Or was he perhaps something even more terrifying. Was he normal?"

The answer came in an interview with Yeheil Dinur, a concentration camp survivor who testified against Eichmann at the Nuremberg trials. A film clip from the trials showed Dinur facing Eichmann for the first time since Eichmann had sent him to Auschwitz 18 years earlier. As Dinur looked at him he began to sob uncontrollably. Then he fainted, collapsing into a heap on the floor. Wallace asked Dinur what had happened. Had he been overcome by hatred or fear? Were the memories too horrid? No, none of those, Dinur explained. It was that he had suddenly realized that Eichmann was not some God-like authority in a military uniform when he sent thousands to their deaths; he was just an ordinary man. Then Dinur

said, "I was afraid about myself... I saw that I am capable of doing this. I am exactly like him."

Prejudice is not confined merely to racists who wear white hoods. Prejudice is buried deep within our beings. It is a problem of sin and evil.

In previous chapters we have seen that the apostle Paul prohibited the Corinthians from becoming involved in pagan worship. In chapters 11-14, he now turns to address three areas of abuse in their worship services. The first abuse is related to the issue of whether a woman should wear a head covering when she was praying or prophesying (11:2-16); the second speaks to the abuse of the poor at the Lord's table (11:17-34); and the third concerns the practice of speaking in tongues in the worship service (12-14). Normally we would take these three abuses in the order in which they appear in the text. Since the first abuse concerns the role of women in worship, however, and 250 of our women are away this weekend at the women's retreat, we will take that issue next week. Today we will focus on the second issue, which was a more serious disorder in the Corinthian's worship services, that of the chaos surrounding the communion table during their services.

## I. The situation at Corinth (11:17-22)

**But in giving this instruction, I do not praise you, because you come together not for the better but for the worse. For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that divisions exist among you; and in part, I believe it. For there must also be factions among you, in order that those who are approved may have become evident among you. Therefore when you meet together, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper, for in your eating each one takes his own supper first; and one is hungry and another is drunk. What! Do you not have houses in which to eat and drink? 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 will not praise you. (1 Cor 11:17-22 NASB)**

The early church's worship services, their "coming together," to use Paul's words, was a little different from our worship service in that they ate the Lord's Supper in the context of a community meal. The church often met in homes, similar to our home fellowships, and their gatherings frequently centered around a meal, a love feast called the *agapē*. The fact that communion was celebrated in the context of a meal is not at all surprising. The gods of the Ancient Near East were worshipped by eating a meal in their presence. The Jews ate special meals during religious festivals such as Passover. Jesus himself spoke of a banquet which Christians will partake of one day in the presence of God. He instituted the Lord's Supper in the context of that hope. He said, in effect, "I will not eat of this meal again until it is fulfilled in the end time. But you shall eat until that day." The Lord's Supper therefore is the "already" of that feast; it an-

ticipates the great meal in the final kingdom. Thus it is only natural that the anticipation of the feast should itself be a feast.

This *agapē* feast grew out of that atmosphere in the early church where no one counted anything as belonging to himself alone, but everyone freely shared with others the resources and riches that God had provided, so no one was left out. This resulted in a common meal which they shared together. We would call it a “potluck dinner.” (Ray Stedman used to refer to these as “multiple choice” dinners. He said he didn’t believe in luck, and he was very sensitive about the word pot!)

In Corinth, serious problems had arisen during these times. Paul has already dealt with the personality cults that grew up in the church around certain figureheads. But there was another problem among them that manifested itself in an obnoxious snobbishness demonstrated by the rich toward the not-so-rich. Their times of worship and fellowship were so negative as a result that some Christians went away in a spiritually worse state than when they arrived. There was a callous insensitivity, almost to the point of humiliation, to the physical needs of those who possessed very little. When the church came together, there was no sense of their being one family in the Lord. Each group kept to themselves. Some were carrying over to the love feast the distinctions that divided them economically and socially, splintering the church in the process. Paul is not trying to eliminate social distinctions (the wealthy would still have their own homes to eat private meals), but he will not allow them to introduce their social distinctions into the common meals which they shared as believers.

We can get a better picture of what was happening in Corinth. These meals were often held in the homes of the richer members in the church. We know from archaeology that the dining room (known as the *triclinium*), in such a home did not accommodate many guests (10 to 15 at the most), therefore the majority ate in the entry courtyard (the *atrium*) which sat about 30-50 guests. In a class-conscious society such as Roman Corinth it would have been natural for the host to invite his or her own class to eat in the *triclinium*, while the others ate in the *atrium*. Furthermore, it would appear from verse 21 that the rich ate their own sumptuous meals before the others arrived. Many in the church were slaves; they weren’t free to arrive on their own time, and the others were just not waiting for them. We are not quite sure what these private meals included, but it is clear that they were both quantitatively and qualitatively superior to those of the “have-nots.” The net result, says Paul, is that “one is hungry and another is drunk.”

I have heard messages on drunkenness preached from this passage, but I do not think that is Paul’s concern. What he is doing in this expression is taking words used of both parts of the meal, eating and drinking, and expressing them in their extremes. The one extreme is to receive nothing to eat, and the other is to be gorged on food and wine. In fact his main concern is not with the drunkenness of the one, but with the hunger of the other—especially in a context where some believers had more than enough to eat and drink. Thus it seems that the food that was brought was not shared in a common pool, but each enjoyed his own provisions. Such behavior merely emphasized the things that made these believers different. It destroyed the very unity which the meal was intended to proclaim. Paul admonishes the Corinthians that whatever they felt they were doing they were not partaking of the Lord’s Supper, even though they ate the bread and drank the wine. The Lord’s Table is an expres-

sion of our unity in the church. What the Corinthians were doing was a far cry from that.

In contrast, Paul goes on to remind them of what the Lord’s table was originally meant to be, and of things which he had already taught them.

## II. The significance of the meal (11:23-26)

For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus in the night in which He was betrayed took bread; and when He had given thanks, He broke it, and said, “This is My body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of Me.” In the same way He took the cup also, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.” For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes. (11:23-26)

Since the Corinthians were not keeping this tradition, Paul feels compelled to remind them of the meal’s significance by repeating the actual words used at its institution, saying that it was Jesus himself who told him what went on in the Upper Room on that dark betrayal night. From the book of Galatians we learn that it was Jesus who taught Paul about himself, and what it meant to live in Christ, and this was before the gospels were even written. Thus we have here the earliest description, coming from the lips of Jesus himself, of the initiation of the Lord’s table in the Upper Room.

What the apostle wants to pass on to us is the significance of this meal. The death of our Lord, and its implications on our relationship together as Christians, must dominate the proceedings. The Lord’s Supper is a continuation of the Last Supper that Jesus ate with his own disciples, the Passover meal at which he reinterpreted the bread and wine in terms of his own body and blood to be given over in his death on the cross. The head of any Jewish home would have performed such actions with bread and wine at any meal, and with special seriousness at the Passover. It is thus the words which gave the actions their unique significance, as well as the identity of the Person who uttered them. “He took bread... He gave thanks... He broke it... He said...” “This is my body which is for you.” Then he added the world-shaking command, “Do this in remembrance of Me.” Similarly with the cup, after supper, he said, “This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.”

Two simple, yet profound symbols: Bread, representing Christ’s body given for us, pointing to his death, whereby he gave himself freely for the sake of others; and wine, signifying his blood poured out in death, ratifying this New Covenant between God and his people. It was at this point that the Corinthians failed, not in the sense that they were not thinking properly about Christ, but by their abuse of one another they were negating the very point of that death—that Jesus was creating a new people for his name’s sake in which the old distinctions based on human fallenness were no longer relevant. It is to be eaten as a “memorial” of the salvation that he has effected through his death and resurrection.

The word Paul uses to describe what has happened is covenant. Through the shedding of the blood of Jesus, the paschal lamb, it is now possible for Jews and Greeks, rich and poor, men and women, educated and uneducated, to know the glorious freedom of forgiveness and to have a personal relationship with God. Those who enter this covenant relationship with the Lord enter at the same time into

a covenant relationship with one another, and the covenant community is thus established. That is exactly what the Corinthians were destroying by their behavior.

In verse 26 Paul tells them why he is repeating the Lord's words to them. It is not because they have forgotten the words, or because they have abandoned the Supper; it is because their version of the supper is untrue to the original intent.

The apostle then goes on to say how seriously God himself regards the Lord's table.

### III. The seriousness of the abuse (11:27-32)

**Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself, if he does not judge the body rightly. For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep. But if we judged ourselves rightly, we should not be judged. But when we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord in order that we may not be condemned along with the world. (11:27-32)**

This paragraph has an especially solemn ring about it. Paul insists that the Corinthians (and indeed all Christians) must stamp out worship that is unworthy. The privilege of sharing in the Lord's Supper demands a strict self-examination. To do it unworthily is to "be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord"—to place yourself, in other words, not in the company of those who are sharing in the benefits of his passion, but in the company of those who are responsible for his crucifixion.

How then should we approach this time of the Lord's Supper? What does it mean to "partake worthily"? What does it mean to "judge the body rightly"? This paragraph is often read independent of its context, before communion, thus it is often misunderstood. As a result many hold back from partaking because they do not feel worthy. Others presume to partake without exercising any self-examination. Paul's instructions therefore are very important. He says, verse 28, "But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup." It is clear from the context, which is critical to a correct interpretation, that this self-examination will be directed to ascertaining whether or not we are living and acting in love with our brothers and sisters. The Corinthians were partaking in an unworthy manner because they were selfish and indifferent toward the needs of others.

The danger comes from eating and drinking without "judging the body rightly." The context also helps us understand what it means by the words to "judge" or "discern" the body. The predominant meaning in this context is to give due weight to the church as the body of Christ. This table is not just like any other meal. It is a common table, with one loaf of bread and a common cup, and by partaking in it we are proclaiming that through the death of Christ we are one body—the body of Christ—not just any group of diverse individuals. We must discern, recognize as distinct, the one body of Christ of which we all are parts and in which we all are gifts to each other. To abuse others in the body because they are lesser than us economically, educationally or socially is to incur God's judgment.

The early church was largely made up of the poorer classes. Paul says in chapter 1 that were not many in the church who were politically powerful or descended from noble birth. The wonderful truth,

however, is that God didn't have to settle for the poor (which is a common misconception)—he chose them! They are the special objects of his love. He embraces them. How can I reject them? Every member of the body of Christ becomes a member as a result of God's sovereign, loving choice. He never asked me whom he should include in his body. He has chosen Democrats as well as Republicans, the tall, dark and handsome, as well as the short, shot and shapeless. How then can I exclude from my home and table, my friendship and love, anyone whom God has called into fellowship with him?

C. S. Lewis has a word for us in this regard:

It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and corruption such as you now meet, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or more of these destinations.

Paul's exhortation to us is not to try and reach some moral standard of perfection, but to do a little honest reflection. Even with the Spirit of God in our midst, there are failures and weaknesses. There are times of outright, and I know in my own case, deliberate evil. We must handle those sins honestly. Do not try to cover them up or persuade yourself that they aren't there. It is sin. Admit it. Call it what God calls it, and repent. Bring it to God and let him cleanse you. Remember David's words in Psalm 51: "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." That is what God wants to see in us. If your heart is heavy with bitterness or resentment, the answer is not to just pass by the elements. That's a cop-out. It is also a lie to think that God is only going to judge you if you eat. God is not interested in surface things. He reads our hearts—and he is looking for a heart that doesn't lie to itself, one that is honest about its failures and is willing to put away a wrong spirit. Paul tells us in Eph. 4, "Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice."

The apostle is clear about the seriousness of such sin among the Corinthians. He attributes sickness, weakness, and even death to their carnal view of the body of Christ as reflected in their fellowship. Now it is clear from Scripture that not all sickness is God's judgment in discipline. Oftentimes, however, this is God's way of getting our attention, slowing us down, and giving us time to reflect on how we are living.

Having argued theologically, on the basis of a proper understanding of the Lord's Supper, that we should judge the body rightly, Paul now concludes with a solution that is simple and direct.

### IV. The solution to the problem (11:33-34)

**So then, my brethren, when you come together to eat, wait for one another. If anyone is hungry, let him eat at home, so that you may not come together for judgment. And the remaining matters I shall arrange when I come. (11:33-34)**

When Paul tells the Corinthians to wait for one another, he has in mind much more than time. In fact in other places in the NT that same word is the word used for hospitality—"to welcome and receive one another." When you come together, make sure that there is acceptance and sensitivity to the needs of those present.

This is the central thing, says the apostle. There are other little things that he will set right when he comes, but those can wait. The important thing is that the Corinthians begin to act out of the central meaning of the Christian life. The old selfish life is ended; the

new life which thinks of others is begun. These are the truths that the bread and wine reflect.

I have expressed to our home fellowship leaders something that is equally true of our corporate worship on Sundays. We must view our times together not merely as meetings which we must attend, but as a family to whom we belong. We are primarily not an organization, but an organism, the body of Christ.

We cannot separate our relationship with God from our relationships with people. Some of us have a narrow view of love. Our circle of friendships is often limited; it consists of people just like us. We need to evaluate our attitudes. God wants us to be a channel of his love in our community. As we focus on the implications of the crucifixion and resurrection in our life, then his love will indeed flow without partiality.

Harold Myra's poem, "I Wish I'd Reached Her," describes the struggles of a lonely, unloved girl whom everybody rejected because of her looks. Even after she came to know the Lord she still dealt with desperate loneliness. Then she became pregnant. The narrator reacts:

I don't know about that summer.  
But one thing she needed besides her Bible and prayers:  
Christ to come alive in friends.  
Could I have touched her on the shoulder, laughed with her?  
Could the girls have been more like sisters than superior beings?  
Maybe she could have found a love that wouldn't have left her  
pregnant and alone.  
Maybe she could have been strong and chosen for herself,  
If she'd found more of you in some of us.

The narrator continues with similar incidents in which boys and girls have found themselves despised and rejected because they did not meet the standards for social success. Finally, the voice concludes:

How much have I grown, Lord, beyond seeing friendships  
as plus or minus status coupons?  
Surely I still don't act that way!  
But do I find more sophisticated ways to shun the misfit?  
Do I love the nobody, the social embarrassment?  
Lord, help me not to be molded by the world's ad campaign  
of luscious lovelies and wind-blown men on boats and horses.  
By your Spirit, help me to see beneath the skin and posture, style  
and hair.  
For I'm told you yourself, Jesus, were nothing for looks.  
But you sure are worth getting to know.

If you look around this morning you can see that all of us are very different. I have always appreciated the diversity of this body. It includes rich and poor, well educated and simple folk, men and women of different nationalities and races. I pray that will never change; that Martin Luther King's dream might well be a living reality. That indeed is the testimony of the Living God.

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Catalog No. 797

1 Corinthians 11:2-16

19th Message

Gary Vanderet

February 10, 1991

## WOMEN IN WORSHIP

*SERIES: EXAMINING LIFE IN THE LOCAL CHURCH*

Most of us have heard of Lisa Olson, the *Boston Herald* reporter who had a run-in with some members of the New England Patriots professional football team. When she walked into their locker room after they had lost a game, she said, she was merely doing what every other reporter present was doing—trying to get the best story she could, as fast as she could. The football players were naked, on their way to the showers. Ms. Olson, fully dressed and wielding a note pad and pen, claimed that several of the men made sexually threatening gestures and comments toward her. Journalists across the country picked up the story immediately and came to the defense of one of their own. They cried “Foul!” and demanded their rights. Female reporters, they said, deserved the same rights as male reporters. “Equal access” became the cry. Once again, the centuries-old issue of how men and women relate to one another was headline news.

Through the centuries the church also has struggled with this question. The place of women in the life and leadership of the Christian community, for instance, has been an especially troublesome subject. This extremely sensitive and contemporary problem is dealt with to some extent in the passage to which we come today in the apostle Paul’s first Corinthian letter.

As we saw last week, chapters 11–14 of this letter deal with three matters of abuse in the Corinthians’ worship services. The first concern related to women’s head coverings when women were praying or prophesying (11:2–16); the second related to the abuse of the poor at the Lord’s table (11:17–34); and the third to speaking in tongues in the worship services (12–14). Last week, because many of our women were away on their annual church retreat, we dealt with the second concern, so today we will take the first issue, the matter of the wearing of veils by women in the worship service. I need to say at the outset that this passage is very difficult to interpret, and the argument hard to follow, because Paul interweaves theological and cultural perspectives, and he uses some words both literally and metaphorically.

One of the problems in interpreting 1 Corinthians is that this is a letter; it is not a book. We don’t have all the communication, nor do we know all the information that the writer and the recipients held in common. On thing we do know is that the Corinthians had written a letter to Paul asking about practical matters concerning the application of New Testament principles, and some of those things had to do with cultural matters and customs. This appears to be the situation in this chapter. They had asked about the practice of wearing head coverings in the public meetings of the church.

In first century Greece, dress for men and women was apparently very similar, except for the woman’s head covering. This was not the equivalent of the Arab veil; it was a covering for her hair alone. The normal, everyday dress of all Greek women included this veil (called a *kalumma*). The only women who did not wear them were the high-class mistresses of influential Corinthians and the sacred prostitutes from the temple of Aphrodite. To further complicate the matter, slaves had their heads shaved, as did convicted adulteresses.

We must understand therefore that we are not talking about any special “dressing up” for attendance at church meetings. The men came without any head coverings and the women dressed with them, just as in everyday life.

It is important to understand the plight of women in the first century. Women were not highly prized in either the Hebrew or Greco-Roman cultures. They were under the authority of their fathers or husbands. They were oppressed, and were treated like second-class citizens. Women had no voting privileges. They could not testify in a court of law; they could not claim the right to an education. They were viewed, in a sense, as property. Likewise in the Hebrew world, women had no rights, and little education. They had to sit in the gallery in the synagogue. There was such a decline in their status that before Jesus came, the rabbis said, “It is better to burn the Torah than to teach it to women.” Many Jewish men prayed daily, “Blessed be God who has not made me a gentile, a slave, or a woman.”

The gospels, however, set out a completely different view of women. The gospel elevates women. Whenever it is preached and understood accurately, the gospel always changes the status of women. It grants them respect, honor, dignity and equality in the eyes of man. We must remember that in creation, male and female were created in the image of God and are joint heirs of the grace of life.

As the gospel took root in Corinth, however, and women began to enjoy their new-found respect and honor, some of them wondered, “Why should we wear these head coverings any longer? Let’s demonstrate our freedom by burning these head bands.” Particularly in the public meetings, where women had an exalted position of being able to pray and prophesy, they felt they should do away with these veils. Apparently in the excitement of worship, certain of them were tempted to throw back their head coverings and allow their hair (which they wore long) to fall loose. Naturally, this caused a great deal of commotion, and a certain amount of distraction among the men. Furthermore, their actions seemed to signify a denial of their submission to their husbands.

So with this as a backdrop, let us see what Paul has to say about this issue. He begins with a word of commendation. 1 Corinthians 11:2

**Now I praise you because you remember me in everything, and hold firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them to you. (1 Cor 11:2 NASB)**

After all the problem things we have learned about this church it is a pleasant surprise to see that Paul is commending them for something. These traditions of which he speaks were the fundamentals of the Christian faith that were passed on orally. Remember Paul spent 18 months in Corinth, teaching the church daily. Thus they were well taught, and they followed his teachings to a great extent. Yet it is clear from this letter that there was a contentious element in the church. Perhaps they were the same group of “spiritual women” re-

ferred to in chapter 7. They felt that the new age had arrived, and in their “overrealized eschatology” they were exhorting others to abstain from sex, even in marriage. Perhaps it was they who were making the issue of head coverings for women a bone of contention.

I have divided the passage into three sections. First, the apostle gives a divine pattern for the relationships (vv. 3-6); then the purpose for that pattern (vv. 7-10); and finally, a divine perspective (vv. 11-16).

We will begin by reading the entire passage.

**But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ. Every man who has something on his head while praying or prophesying, disgraces his head. But every woman who has her head uncovered while praying or prophesying, disgraces her head; for she is one and the same with her whose head is shaved. For if a woman does not cover her head, let her also have her hair cut off; but if it is disgraceful for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, let her cover her head. For a man ought not to have his head covered, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man. For man does not originate from woman, but woman from man; for indeed man was not created for the woman's sake, but woman for the man's sake. Therefore the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels. However, in the Lord, neither is woman independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as the woman originates from the man, so also the man has his birth through the woman; and all things originate from God. Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a woman to pray to God with head uncovered? Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him, but if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her? For her hair is given to her for a covering. But if one is inclined to be contentious, we have no other practice, nor have the churches of God. (11:2-16)**

## I. A Divine Pattern: The Creation of God (11:3-6)

Paul begins by establishing a foundational principle: There is a divinely ordained pattern for relationships in the Christian community. There is an order of things that is rooted in creation (v. 3). This is part of the apostolic tradition which he handed down to all the churches. He taught them concerning creation and the natural order of things.

Then in verses 4-6, Paul tells the Corinthians that the custom of wearing a headband signifying a woman's submission to her husband was appropriate in that culture, because to challenge that tradition was to challenge the basic principle in v. 3.

Notice that Paul's argument is rooted in creation (the established order that God originally made before the fall), not in redemption: “But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ.” He is not in conflict with himself when he says later in Galatians “there is neither male nor female in Christ.” In fact in verse 11, he states the same truth as he did in Galatians: “However, in the Lord, neither is woman independent of man, nor is man independent of woman.”

The apostle stresses the pattern of relationships which God has ordained for the Christian community. Let us examine verse 3. His point in this context is the middle one, “man is the head of the woman.” I want to examine the first and third examples initially,

because from them we can better understand what the middle example means.

The first one is, “Christ is the head of every man.” That is a declaration of Christ's right to lead the whole human race. Paul states it as a fact. He does not say he wishes Christ was the head of every man. He says that Christ is the head of every man. Christ is the sovereign Lord of the universe. We are given the option of bending the knee to him now, or later, for when we see him in his glory we shall all bend the knee. That is why Paul can say Christ is the head of every man—even those who reject his leadership.

The apostle begins with Christ because he wants to teach us about the nature of authority—what headship really looks like. This is where we often go astray in the church. When men begin to understand that God wants them to be the head of their homes, they tend to take their understanding of authority from the world and assume that is what headship means. However, if you look at the way Jesus leads his church, you will see that leadership is a position of serving, not ruling. It is a responsibility we exercise, not a position we hold. When James and John sought authority and position in the kingdom, the other disciples became indignant because they too wanted to be regarded as great. “The gentiles lord it over each other,” said Jesus, “but it shall not be so among you.” Jesus led quietly. He didn't bark out orders. He didn't demand that everyone salute when he walked by. He didn't demand that every one give him the respect he deserved as God. He could have, but instead he washed feet as a servant. He gave up his rights and privileges as God and took on the role of a servant. That is the nature of our headship as men. Our leadership is to be servant leadership. We motivate others to follow us out of our love and obedience. Our wives are not our servants. In fact, biblically we are their servants. That is how we work out our leadership.

Secondly, says Paul, “God is the head of Christ.” Here we have a manifestation of headship in history. Jesus, the Son of God, is equal to the Father in his deity, nevertheless he submits himself to the leadership of the Father. Everywhere Jesus went he said, “I always do the things which please my Father.” He voluntarily consented to take a lower place.

Even in the Trinity there is a created order. All creation has order. It is not just women who are to submit; everyone is accountable. And to resist the created order is to make life miserable. You can never violate God's natural created order without hurting yourself. Just as there are physical laws that you cannot violate without being hurt, so there are moral laws. We violate them to our own destruction.

Now it is from those two headships that we come to an understanding of the meaning of the central one: “Man is the head of the woman.” Paul is not saying that every man is the head of every woman. He is speaking of a one-man, one-woman, a husband-wife relationship. We exercise our headship the way Jesus exercised his. We must not stomp around demanding that everyone immediately obey the master's voice. We must not pout because we don't get our way. We are not free to do as we please, insisting that everyone follow our plans. We are subject to the Lord. When a man understands that he must be submissive to Jesus Christ, and that he must take his model for leadership from Christ himself, then he will understand the balance he must maintain as a leader.

We are told in Genesis that when man was created, he was given the responsibility to bring the earth under his control. He was to serve it, to care for it, to protect it, but not to exploit it. And God

made Eve to be his helpmate, i.e. she was someone just like him, someone to share in his responsibility. She was his colleague, not his slave. Her submission to “her man,” her husband, was voluntary, carried out because she believed that was God’s best for her life. In servant leadership and voluntary submission therefore we have two beautiful pictures of God’s pattern of relationships.

Now this fundamental pattern of relationships, according to Paul, was to be clearly reflected in public worship. Thus what people looked like and how they dressed was relevant. There were to be no distractions. Christians were to demonstrate what God had done in Christ—setting them free to serve and worship him. Christian women were to keep their heads covered because otherwise there would be a substantial degree of distraction. Covering her head was sign of a woman’s submission. This was true in the secular community. In Paul’s mind there was no reason to drop that convention inside the church. If she did, the woman was behaving like a slave or an adulteress. F. F. Bruce comments, “There is nothing frivolous about such an appeal to public conventions of seemliness. To be followers of the crucified Jesus was in itself unconventional enough, but needless breaches of convention were to be discouraged.”

Notice that the woman has an equal ministry in terms of prayer and prophecy. But Paul says that she ought to keep her head covered so there will be no distractions to their freedom to worship. According to his line of argument, if a Christian woman became so uninhibited in public worship that she dispensed with the outward symbol of her submission, then she ought to shave her head and thus all at once remove the distracting impact of her “crowning glory.” But that is not a Christian way to behave. Thus Paul exhorts her to practice self-control, especially when she feels so moved by the Spirit in prayer that she is tempted to throw all her inhibitions to the wind.

The force of Paul’s argument from creation in verse 3 is that God did not make one principle of divine action only to change it later.

The apostle now moves on to give the purpose for this divine pattern.

## II. A Divine Purpose: The Glory of God (11:7-10)

**For a man ought not to have his head covered, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man. For man does not originate from woman, but woman from man; for indeed man was not created for the woman’s sake, but woman for the man’s sake. Therefore the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels. (11:7-10)**

In the same way that Christian worship should reflect the divinely ordained pattern of relationships, so it should reflect the fact that we have been created to give glory to God (10:31). We were made in God’s image so that any creature observing us would see the likeness and nature of God. Man is the visible expression of the invisible God. “Glory” indicates weight or value. What the world needs to see is the character of God lived out in our lives in the world. That is why we were created: we are an instrument through whom God wants to display his character, so that when people look at us they see the worth of God. Therefore a man should not wear a veil because that glory is to be openly and publicly manifested. That is our true dignity.

Paul goes on to say that “the woman is the glory of man.” In other words, the woman is the highest expression of the man’s worth. He is not saying that women ought to do whatever men tell them and

then they will be his glory. He is saying that the woman is to reflect man’s highest hopes, ambitions and character. In terms of character women ought to be the most beautiful of creatures. When we honor women and treat them with dignity, not as second class citizens, but joint heirs, then that is what they will reflect. But when we abuse them and treat them as sexual objects, then that is what they will reflect. In general, in any society women glorify their men. Women live as they think their men want them to live. Now fortunately there are exceptions. There are women who have a higher goal in life—to please God, and to live in accordance with his expectations and view of them. But in general, women in any society glorify their men. I believe this is what Paul means when he says that “the woman is the glory of man.”

He goes on to further explain his point on the purpose of the woman’s creation: “For man does not originate from woman, but woman from man; for indeed man was not created for the woman’s sake, but woman for the man’s sake.” Woman was taken from man that she might fully share his nature. Men and women are not two different kinds of beings. They have differences, but they have the same basic nature. Woman was made to help man achieve the goals given him by God. In that sense she is indeed man’s better half. It is important to state that man was made in the image of God before the two sexes were separated. And they are both included when it says that man was made in the image of God. We read in Genesis 5:2, “He created them male and female and blessed them. And when they were created, he called them ‘man.’” The image of God is therefore to be seen only in the full complementary of male and female.

I must admit that I am not exactly sure what Paul is referring to when he exhorts women to have this authority on their head while they are ministering in the public worship service, “because of the angels.” The Scripture tells us in a number of passages that angels are observers of church order. They understand this order in the creation (in fact they were God’s agents in the work of creation); and they understand the principle of headship. Isaiah 6 indicates that the angels veil their faces when they worship before the throne of God. It may be the apostle’s point that the angels are concerned to preserve the worship of humans from any practice that would deny the distinctives which the sexes are to manifest.

We have already seen in this letter how important it is to balance truth, and so Paul breaks his argument on the distinctiveness of men and women by going on to talk about their equality.

## III. A Divine Perspective: The Nature of Humanity (11:11-16)

### A. Redemption teaches the equality of men and women (11:11-12)

**However, in the Lord, neither is woman independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as the woman originates from the man, so also the man has his birth through the woman; and all things originate from God. (11:11-12)**

The apostle has been arguing strongly that wives should submit to their husbands, and for that attitude to be demonstrated whenever God’s people gather to worship. Here he argues with just as much force that the two are one in Christ, totally bound up with each other, inseparable and inter-dependent. There is no inferiority involved. No matter what society has done to reduce women to lower status, nevertheless “in the Lord” the original intent of God is restored. Though distinct as sexes, they are equal as persons. Both man and woman owe their existence to God.

In verses 13-16, Paul gives us a second perspective.



**B. Nature itself teaches the uniqueness of men and women (11:13-16)**

**Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a woman to pray to God with head uncovered? Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him, but if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her? For her hair is given to her for a covering. But if one is inclined to be contentious, we have no other practice, nor have the churches of God. (11:13-16)**

Paul brings this somewhat complex discussion to a conclusion by arguing not from Scripture, but from nature and intuition. I would not argue like this, but Paul is an inspired apostle, and he can argue any way he wants! Precisely how culturally universal this actually is may be difficult to answer, but his major point is clear: God has made men and women different, so *vive la difference!*

Nature itself teaches us that a woman should have a covering. God has from the very beginning created women with beautiful hair, and the length of the hair is itself a covering. But length of hair is a relative thing, and sadly, this passage has been used to exclude men with long hair from worship services. But this is not a prohibition against long hair as such. When Paul wrote this letter, men wore their hair much longer than they do today. The apostle's point is that intuitively, as a general rule, women wear their hair longer than men.

There is no doubt that there are many cultural conventions when it comes to masculine and feminine roles, and jobs and rights which need to be revised or rejected. As Creator, however, God intends that men and women should have different, but complementary functions.

This principle will keep us from going overboard and being squeezed into the world's mode in their attempt to make us swallow an androgynous lifestyle. In the recent past there has been a blurring of all distinctions between the genders in professions—in fashion, in human interaction, etc. We see it glorified in pop culture, where Madonna and Michael Jackson play the gender-blending game for profit.

I exhort you teenagers to be careful. Madonna's "Blonde Ambition" tour bent every sexual stereotype in the book. Michael Jackson has remodeled his body and his voice, which has now become the model for modern music. Melodies have moved higher and higher until most men can't sing them. This movement toward unisex is more than bad taste; it is an assault on a basic truth of creation: that God created two distinct types of people—male and female, masculine and feminine—with different roles and abilities, for the propagation and nurturing of the race. When we destroy such distinctions and reject gender as anti-egalitarian, we are undermining God's created order—and we do it to our own destruction.

What is this passage saying to us? Surely it is not saying that women should wear hats in church. God wants men and women to dress normally and naturally in Christian worship. And a veil is no longer a symbol of a woman's submission to her husband. The issue is not what you wear on your head; it is, what is in your hearts? Man looks at the outward appearance, but God looks at the heart. The reality, not the symbol, is what counts.

One important role in ministry for a woman—it may even be the highest, is through the birth and rearing of her children. I am distressed by the denigration we hear today of the women's role in the home. Now I don't think it is wrong for a woman to work outside the home, nor do I believe it is wrong for a woman to pursue a career, but God wants both men and women to know that our families are our top priority. It is easy for a gifted, talented, highly educated woman to begin to think that there must be something more noble for her to do than change diapers. But what balances out those tasks that all of us would rather delegate is the unique place women occupy in the scheme of things as they mold and shape the character of their children. Don't let the world squeeze you into its mold by making you think that that is beneath you. There is no greater task than bringing a boy or girl into the world and training them to be godlike.

Men, understand your responsibility as the head of your home. Quit being so passive and learn how to be a servant leader. Stop leaving everything up to your wives. Care about your families as you care about your careers. Stop barking out orders and expecting everyone to jump when you speak. Begin to model quietly the truth you long for your family to know. Learn your wives' and children's needs and begin serving and praying for them.

Women, stop competing with your husbands. Learn to complement the men God has given to you. Learn to creatively give them your support and encouragement.

A number of years ago, Ray Stedman shared a quotation from the well known author Taylor Caldwell. It was taken from an interview where she was asked if a certain movie production she was working on would bring her satisfaction. Although I am not advocating everything she says, I think her reply was a powerful statement. Here is what she said:

There is no solid satisfaction in any career for a woman like myself. There is no home, no true freedom, no hope, no joy, no expectation for tomorrow, no contentment. I would rather cook a meal for a man and...feel myself in the protection of his arms than all the citations and awards and honors I have received worldwide, including the Ribbon of the Legion of Honor and my property and my bank accounts. They mean nothing to me. And I am only one among the millions of sad women like myself.

We need to take stock of our understanding of God's plan for us as men and women. Let us submit ourselves to that, so that the world may see the glory of God reflected in lives that honor and glorify him.

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1 Corinthians 12:1-11

20th Message

Gary Vanderet

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# SPIRITUAL GIFTS FOR A SPIRITUAL BODY

*SERIES: EXAMINING LIFE IN THE LOCAL CHURCH*

In our examination of the book of 1 Corinthians we are learning how the church should function. A visitor from another planet checking on churches across the United States probably would draw a number of faulty conclusions. One would be that the church operates solely to run meetings on Sunday mornings. Everything is aimed toward that, he would surmise; the leadership focuses on that, and when the Sunday service ends, everything starts over again.

But that is a far cry from God's plan for the church. The apostle Paul declares that the purpose of the church is make visible the invisible God, and to maintain righteousness in the world. Christians, said Jesus, are the salt of the earth. Salt is a preservative, and that is what the church is meant to be in the world—a preservative to prevent the spread of corruption. The church is the secret government of the universe. Though small in number it can have tremendous impact in the world if Christians act righteously. But the church is not very salty. It has lost its impact.

The church consists of those who have been truly born of the Spirit. It is a living body, growing and developing within the world, not apart from it, touching the hurt and death of the world with the life and love of God. Once when Jesus visited the synagogue, he called for the scroll of Isaiah and read from the 61st chapter, that marvelous passage which sets out the Servant's ministry of healing and reconciliation. After he had read it, he resumed his seat and said, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your presence." Now Jesus is still alive. He is still giving sight to the blind; he is still setting prisoners free; he is still giving hope and comfort, not through his own physical body, but through the bodies of men and women who are indwelt with his life.

In our studies in this 1 Corinthian letter we have come to chapters 12–14, where Paul now takes up the third and final concern, the abuse of the gift of tongues in the worship practices of the Corinthian church. In his listings of spiritual gifts in these chapters (12:8–10, 28, 29–30; 13:1–3; 14:6, 26), he is clearly preoccupied with tongues. He makes mention of the gift 14 times, and tongues is the only gift to appear in all six lists. Apparently the Corinthians felt they were spiritual if they spoke in tongues in public.

One of the common denominators of the problems in the Corinthian church was what some have called an "over-realized eschatology" (doctrines dealing with the last things: death, judgment, immortality). Christians live in a dynamic tension between an "already" view of what God has done, and a "not yet" view of what is still to come. The kingdom of God has already dawned, and the Messiah is reigning. Already the crucial victory has been won; already the final resurrection of the dead has begun in the resurrection of Jesus; already the Holy Spirit has been poured out on the church as the down payment of the promised inheritance. Nevertheless the kingdom has not yet come in its consummated fullness. Death still exercises formidable powers. Sin must be overcome. The powers of darkness war against believers with savage ferocity. The new heaven

and the new earth have not yet appeared. Maintaining this balance between the "already" and the "not yet" is crucial to the maturity of the church. If we think only in terms of what is still to come (a futurist eschatology), we not only play endless speculative games, but we also depreciate the climactic nature of the incarnation, the cross, and the resurrection—events that have already taken place. We look to the future so much that we live passively and neglect to serve God with enthusiastic gratitude for what he has already accomplished in the past.

On the other hand, if we think only in terms of what Christ has already accomplished (i.e. if we focus on a realized eschatology), we will fall into many of the areas that characterized the believers at Corinth. We may feel that as "children of the King" we have the right to unqualified blessings. Remember Paul's words to the Corinthians in chapter 4: "You are already filled, you have already become rich, you have become kings without us; and I would indeed that you had become kings so that we might also reign with you." His use of the word "already" indicates that Paul agreed that what the Corinthians believed was a valid part of the Christian message, but with this exception: it is not fully experienced in this life on earth. We have been filled, enriched, lifted to reign with Christ, but we shall not enter fully into that inheritance here and now.

One of the keys to understanding the situation in Corinth is given in 13:1, where tongues is associated with angels. The Corinthians seemed to consider themselves to be already like angels, and thus to be "truly spiritual." Speaking angelic dialects by the Spirit was evidence enough for them of their participation in the new spirituality. This is why they were so excited over this gift, and this is the concern that Paul addresses in chapters 12–14. Thus the apostle's emphasis in 12:1–11, the passage we will look at today, is on the variety of gifts given by the Spirit over against the Corinthians' preoccupation with one particular gift.

The issue in chapter 12 concerns what Paul calls "spirituals." In most translations the word gifts is added, in italics, indicating that the word is not found in the original letter. What Paul actually wrote was "now concerning 'spirituals'" (a plural adjective without any noun). The translators supplied the word "gifts" to help us understand what the apostle means. But I think in this case that's a mistake, because Paul's concern is not so much with spiritual gifts (which he will talk about in a moment), but with the way the Spirit of God works. If you read through the chapter, you will notice that the Holy Spirit is the main character. Paul's primary concern is with his ministry. And he wants us to know two things: 1) The Spirit of God leads us into a unity of the Spirit. There is a common criterion for determining what is spiritual and what is not (12:1–3). And 2) This unity is experienced through a variety of different expressions, what I have referred to as the beauty of diversity (12:4–11).

## I. The basis of a spiritual life: Our common experience (12:1-3)

Now concerning spiritual gifts brethren, I do not want you to be unaware. You know that when you were pagans, you were led astray to the dumb idols, however you were led. Therefore I make known to you, that no one speaking by the Spirit of God says, “Jesus is accursed”; and no one can say, “Jesus is Lord,” except by the Holy Spirit. (1 Cor 12:1-3 NASB)

Here Paul is contrasting the Corinthians’ former experience in their pagan religions with their present experience as Christians. “You were led astray,” says the apostle. They were being led in various directions. Now he doesn’t say who led them. Perhaps it was various philosophies or ideas, perhaps an evil spirit, but someone was leading them astray. Ultimately, however, every path led to a “dumb idol.” This description, which occurs frequently in the OT, refers to the unresponsiveness of idols. They are dumb, they don’t speak, they don’t encourage, they don’t help, they don’t give any counsel, wisdom, or encouragement; they merely stand there. At the end of every route was a blind alley, says Paul. What an apt description of the world without Jesus Christ!

Don’t ever forget what your life was like without Jesus Christ—trying this idea or that philosophy, seeking something to satisfy you. Even when you got what you wanted you found it wasn’t very satisfying. “Destination sickness” is what someone has called this condition. You had everything you ever wanted, but you wanted nothing you had. This is what causes some men at the age of 40 to change jobs or mates—because they are bored and unhappy.

Paul contrasts that kind of existence with life in Christ, saying that the function of the Spirit of God is to lead people to one purpose—to make Jesus Christ Lord. In the words, “no one speaking by the Spirit of God says, ‘Jesus is accursed,’ and no one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit,” he is not concerned about unity of confession; he is not concerned about what we say, but about what we do. The Spirit of God increasingly brings us under the lordship of Christ.

Bob Munger’s helpful booklet, *My Heart, Christ’s Home*, pictures the believer’s heart like a home in which the Lord Jesus has come to dwell. That is what it means to become a Christian—the Lord Jesus comes to live in us. But there are many rooms in a home, and closets, too, that contain things we don’t want others to see. When the Lord establishes residence in our life, however, he begins to go through all the rooms one by one to clean them out. He does not come as a guest. He wants complete ownership of the house. Our lives have many different aspects: our jobs, our recreational life, our hobbies, our family life, our relationship with our families, our thought life. The Lord wants to control all these areas, and he will patiently work with us on them because we have invited him to enter and take control.

This is our increasingly common experience as Christians. Christ is becoming Lord in more and more areas of our life. The result is unity in the body. If we are all under the Lordship of Christ, then we will be able resolve our conflicts and differences.

## II. The beauty of diversity: Our unique expression (12:4-11)

Next, Paul describes how that Lordship is worked out in the world. Christ has enabled the church to embody his presence in the

world in a variety of ways that always reflect his lordship. In verses 4-7 we see the nature of that diversity

### A. The nature of diversity (12:4-7)

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord. And there are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all persons. But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. (12:4-7)

Paul says Christians are different—but different is not bad. He is contrasting the variety of the gifts given with the unity of the Giver. Notice the repetition in these verses of the words “same Spirit...same Lord...same God,” with the triple usage of the phrase, “there are varieties.” Christians were not cut out with a cookie cutter, as it were. We were created by an infinitely wise and creative God.

Paul’s emphasis and logic are easy to follow. Diversity has its roots in God himself. Through his Spirit God has given diverse manifestations (gifts) to different people for the common good of the community. The triune God loves diversity, so much so, someone has remarked, that when he sends a snowstorm he makes each snowflake different. But mere humans make ice cubes! We need a fresh perspective. We need to think of the church as an orchestra, with each part making its own unique contribution to the symphonic harmony.

The Godhead works in concert. The Holy Spirit, who is himself the supreme gift of grace, gives gifts; the Lord Jesus places people in ministries; and God the Father empowers everyone.

Let us make some observations on these verses:

#### 1. Every Christian has a spiritual gift

The word “gift” comes from a root word that means “grace.” It is used as a modern Greek word for a birthday present. A spiritual gift is a graciously given gift of God, a capacity to serve the needs of others in the body of Christ. Paul is not talking about a natural talent, like athletic ability, or musical talent. It is a supernatural capacity to serve others in the body of Christ. We are not told when these gifts are given. We can assume they are imparted when the Spirit himself is imparted (at conversion), but we don’t know. Notice Paul says in verse 7, “To each one”; and in verse 11, “the Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills.” In other words, no one is left out when these gifts are given. Every Christian here today has been gifted by God. At Christmas we look forward to the gifts that are waiting for us under the tree, but God at infinite cost to himself has given supernatural gifts to every one of his children. And it amazes me that people live for years as Christians and never ask themselves what their gifts are. Using our gifts, however, is what brings joy, adventure and fulfillment to our Christian lives. Because you can’t preach or serve in some organized way in the church, do not feel you are not valuable in the body of Christ. Every Christian has a supernatural capacity to serve the body.

#### 2. There are a variety of ways to use your gifts

There is an infinite variety of ministries, says the apostle. The Spirit gives the gifts, and the Lord Jesus opens up opportunities to use them. These opportunities may come through a church program, but they may not. Although we might like to have someone in leadership call upon us to do something that may not happen. But the encouraging thing is, God will open a door for ministry for you. It may be in your neighborhood, or at work, with children, teenagers, or older people. There are infinitely diverse ways that the Spirit will inspire his servants to minister.

I hope we will never fall into thinking that the only way to operate a ministry is our way. Different organizations and different churches have different perspectives and uniquenesses that God uses. We are not in conflict with Valley Church or First Baptist Los Altos or Menlo Park Presbyterian Church. Each of those places has unique emphases that God is blessing. There is a place for Campus Crusade for Christ, with their emphasis on evangelism; for Intervarsity, with their emphasis on Bible study; and for Navigators, with their emphasis on discipleship. It is wrong to think that any single ministry can meet everyone's needs. We need to be careful about discrediting anyone's ministry (assuming it is biblical) simply because it is different. We need to learn from one another. I'm glad our pastoral staff are different from one another. We don't teach the same way, we don't always think alike on particular issues, but we need each other's perspective. That is why it is dangerous to follow one man exclusively, because no one believer has all the knowledge necessary to lead you to maturity. We need the variety of the gifts and ministries that Paul is describing here.

### 3. The purpose of our gifts is to benefit others

Notice Paul says we are given these manifestations of the Spirit "for the common good." They are not our possessions to do with as we please. They are not for showing off or comparing ourselves with others. On the contrary, they are for serving others. This is why Paul mentions love whenever he talks about spiritual gifts, because through the gifts God has given he supernaturally empowers us to love others. And we express our love in different ways. You may want to alleviate someone's pain, but I may want to exhort him to see God's perspective in the midst of pain. Both perspectives are right, and necessary.

### 4. The results of our gifts belong to God

C. S. Lewis once said, "You never can tell about God." And he was right. You never can tell what God is going to do next. On occasion I have spent time and energy on people whom I felt had significant gifts, and yet I have been shockingly disappointed by the results. It is because God is sovereign. He has the right to do what he pleases. It is our responsibility to be faithful and available, ready to impart what he has given to us, and dependent on the Spirit of God, and leave the results to God. He is the Lord who produces the results.

God wants every Christian to manifest his or her distinctive gifts in their local body. Because many don't, the rich variety of our Christian community is hidden, and our corporate life appears to outsiders as dull and conformist rather than rich and colorful.

Now Paul goes on to illustrate this rich diversity.

### B. An illustration of diversity (12:8-11)

**For to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, and to another the word of knowledge according to the same Spirit; to another faith by the same Spirit, and to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, and to another the effecting of miracles, and to another prophecy, and to another the distinguishing of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, and to another the interpretation of tongues. But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills. (12:8-11)**

The New Testament lists spiritual gifts in four different places. There are actually two lists in 1 Cor. 12, the second of which we will deal with next week. None of those lists are alike; they are all different. This leads me to conclude that Paul is not concerned here to give

an exhaustive list of gifts. This is merely representative of the diversity of the Spirit's manifestations, a sample of the kinds of things the Spirit of God can do. We can certainly see general categories of gifts, but there are combinations of gifts, with nuances and shades that are infinitely creative. Paul's concern here in 1 Cor. 12 is to offer a considerable list so that the Corinthians will stop being singular in their emphasis. This is not a systematic discussion of spiritual gifts, therefore. I am not sure Paul would recognize some of the arrangements and diagrams that some interpreters have brought to this text.

Let us look at each of the gifts briefly in an effort to gain some understanding of them. As the gift of tongues and prophecy are handled extensively in chapter 14, I will not talk about them here, since any comments I might make would be incomplete and possibly misleading.

### The word of wisdom and the word of knowledge

Paul refers to these two gifts together. It is not clear exactly how they differ. Wisdom deals with the practical matters of the Christian life. It is skill in living, the capacity to apply truth in specific ways to life. With the added emphasis of the word of wisdom and the word of knowledge, Paul appears to be referring to revelatory gifts. People endowed with these gifts perhaps enjoyed a special experience in which a message came to them that they shared with others. Remember the early church did not always sit as we do in rows, listening to one person expound the scriptures. The New Testament was still incomplete at this point. As a matter of fact, 1 Corinthians was one of the first NT books to be written. A number of people would have been involved in first century church services. A prophet would speak, and by revelation give a word of wisdom, while another person would reveal a word of knowledge, a fact about God that had not already been revealed. The revelatory nature of these gifts is no longer needed, however, because we now have a completed NT. We find in this book the wisdom and knowledge to live life, and all of us can grow in these things as we understand and obey what we read here.

Solomon certainly possessed the gift of wisdom. Once, when he faced a situation where two women laid claim to the same baby, his particular words which brought the wisdom of God to the crisis were these: "Divide the living child in two, and give half to one, and half to the other." The identity of the true mother immediately became apparent because she would not allow this.

The story of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5 illustrates how the Holy Spirit equipped Peter with a word of knowledge to deal with a circumstance which might never have been known, let alone dealt with, except by such a manifestation of the Spirit. The result of that gift being exercised was a renewed fear of the Lord in believers, and a number of unbelievers added to the church.

We don't need the revelatory nature of gifts in the Biblical sense of revelation anymore because we have a completed set of Scriptures which give us wisdom and knowledge. And we all have the ability to grow in wisdom and knowledge as we understand and obey God's truth. But we must also add that God is still in the business of communicating today. We ought to expect him to speak, sometimes in precise words, whatever he wants his church to know at any time.

### Faith

It is probably best to describe what this gift is not before we say what it is. Clearly, it is neither the saving faith by which every Christian is enabled to receive the salvation of God, nor is it the faithful-



ness which is the fruit of the Holy Spirit's work in our character. Nor is this referring to an optimist who thinks positively about everything. No, faith is not gullibility or optimism or easy-believism. Faith looks at God's character and stands firmly on God's promises. It can look past the immediacy of a situation to "Him who is invisible" and bring confidence that God will move in impossible situations.

The gallery of the heroes of faith in Hebrews 11 lends reality to this gift as it is displayed in the lives of men and women of God who through faith were assured of things they could neither see nor prove, and consequently pressed on with God through the most testing circumstances. There have always been examples of this kind of faith: George Mueller, Hudson Taylor, the Reformation martyrs, for example. And there are many in our own day who are not household names, people who display the same kind of faith and are a constant encouragement to us. This is why a regular reading diet of Christian biographies strengthens our growth in the Lord. I am privileged to know a woman who possesses this gift. She has been used by God to impart faith to others at crucial moments, such as decision-making times. There is an Eastern saying that well describes this gift: "Faith is the bird that knows the dawn, and sings while it is still dark."

### Gifts of healings

Both of those words are plural in the original. For this reason I don't think Paul is referring to a permanent "gift of healing" or a "healing ministry," but rather is suggesting that each occurrence is a gift in its own right. He is encouraging the Corinthians to expect to see many different ways in which God in his sheer grace brings healing of all kinds to different people, to relationships, even to circumstances. Jesus himself, the apostle Paul, and the members of the early church lived in regular expectation that God would heal people's physical bodies. That expectation came partly from the OT promises that in the Messianic age God would heal his people. According to Acts, such healings accompanied Paul's own ministry, and the apostle probably referred to them as one of the signs of an apostle (2 Cor 12:12). We ought to add that it was not and is not the Lord's will to bring physical healing in every situation. Physical healing is not ultimate wholeness. That comes through death for the believer (or through the return of Jesus in glory).

### The effecting of miracles

This gift refers to God's energy worked in powerful ways. Godet writes, "Paul has in view the power of working all sorts of miracles other than simple cures, corresponding to the wants of the different situations in which the servant of Christ may be placed: resurrections from the dead, the driving out of demons, judgments inflicted on unfaithful Christians, deliverances like that of Paul at Malta."

Here we encounter a gift that is truly beyond the ordinary. Jesus certainly possessed this gift. A similar ministry was carried by the apostles. In fact, Paul reminds the Corinthians in his second letter that the signs of an apostle "were performed among you in all patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works." We can deduce from that that the major (though not exclusive) function of this gift was to authenticate the spoken word at a fresh stage of revelation in God's kingdom. This gift was evident in abundance at the giving of the Law, during the establishment of the prophets, during the incarnation, and at the apostolic preaching of the gospel.

### The distinguishing of spirits

This gift seems to refer to an ability to recognize the source of any purported spiritual manifestation. From the Scriptures we can identify three sources: the Holy Spirit, the human spirit, and an evil spirit. It is the Spirit who provides the gift of discernment as to which of these three spiritual sources is in operation in a particular situation. The highly complex nature of the human personality, especially in a disturbed state, demonstrates the extremes to which the human spirit can be taken. This discernment also shows how important it is for pastors and psychiatrists to work together in such cases.

Let me add that it is easy for someone who has been used in this discerning ministry to fall into the habit of seeing evil spirits in any unusual circumstance or behavior. Our Lord has provided balance for us in his own incisive, authoritative and quiet assurance. He saw the reality of demonic forces where we might not and his own contemporaries often did not. But he also discerned between sickness caused by demons and sickness caused by physiological factors.

The apostle's purpose in giving this list is to briefly illustrate the rich variety of gifts which the Spirit of God makes available to the church. The Spirit never imitates or contradicts himself. Only God can sustain such diversity in unity.

I will close with a story that practically illustrates what we have been learning.

Once upon a time, the animals decided they should do something meaningful to meet the problems of the new world. So they organized a school. They adopted an activity curriculum of running, climbing, swimming, and flying. To make it easier to administer the curriculum, all the animals took all the subjects. The duck was excellent in swimming; in fact, better than his instructor. But he made only passing grades in flying, and was very poor in running. Since he was slow in running, he had to drop swimming and stay after school to practice running. This caused his web feet to be badly worn, so that he was only average in swimming. But average was quite acceptable, so nobody worried about that—except the duck. The rabbit started at the top of his class in running, but developed a nervous twitch in his leg muscles because of so much make-up work in swimming. The squirrel was excellent in climbing, but he encountered constant frustration in flying class because his teacher made him start from the ground up instead of from the tree top down. He developed charlie horses from over exertion, and so only got a "C" in climbing and a "D" in running. The eagle was a problem child and was severely disciplined for being a non-conformist. In climbing classes he beat all the others to the top of the tree, but insisted on using his own way to get there.

What is true of creatures in the forest is true of Christians in the family. God did not make us all the same. He never intended to. He planned and designed our differences and our unique capabilities. He placed each of us in his family and gave us spiritual gifts. When we operate in the realm of those gifts we will excel, the whole body will benefit, and we will experience true satisfaction. If God has made you a duck saint, you're a duck. Swim like mad, but don't get discouraged because you wobble when you run or flap instead of fly.

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1 Corinthians 12:12-31

21st Message

Gary Vanderet

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# THE SOURCE OF OUR SIGNIFICANCE

*SERIES: EXAMINING LIFE IN THE LOCAL CHURCH*

Christians need frequent reminders of the radical nature of the church because many unbelievers have misconceptions about it. Some see the church as a collection of colorless religious dullards who gather on Sundays and sit with blank stares on their faces, never entertaining a serious thought and never caring enough about people to bother getting their hands dirty. Some regard the church as a group of religious bureaucrats who are forever pronouncing judgments that no one pays any attention to. There is probably some justification for these charges. The lifelessness of the church is what prompted the philosopher Nietzsche to say, "If you want me to believe in your Redeemer, you'll have to look a lot more redeemed."

Even among believers there are false ideas about the church. For instance, the church is not a building, although we perpetuate that notion in many ways. On occasion I will say to my family, "I need to run down to the church." What I mean is, I need to go to the church building. We have a sign out front that says "Peninsula Bible Church South," as if this building were the church, but it is not. God does not live here. The church is made up of people. We are the church. Peninsula Bible Church South meets here. The New Testament does use the metaphor of a building when it refers to the church, but it is referring not to bricks and mortar, but flesh and bones. The church is a temple made up of living stones. We are the body of Christ.

Buildings and bodies are different metaphors, but what they both have in common is that they are places to live in. The glory of the church is that it is the building in which God lives and the body through which he works. The church in the world is the manifestation of the life of Christ, which is still being manifested in the world, no longer through his physical body, but through a corporate body, the church.

The book of Acts opens with the words of Luke, "In my former book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus began to do and teach." Acts is really not a book about the acts of Christians, but about the continuing acts of Jesus. It is an account of what Jesus continues to do and teach. While he was on earth he did these things through his own physical body, but ever since he has been doing them through the bodies of men and women who are indwelt by his life. That is the church—men and women possessed by Jesus Christ, and manifesting his life every day. So the church is the body of Christ. It is not like a body. We are the body of Christ. We are the visible expression of Christ. Thus, when Paul was persecuting the early Christians, he heard on the Damascus road this question, "Why are you persecuting Me?"

And this is our theme this morning in our study in the apostle Paul's first Corinthian letter—the church as the body of Christ.

## I. God's plan for the Body: Unity in diversity (12:12-13)

For even as the body is one and yet has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one

**body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. (1 Cor 12:12-13 NASB)**

Paul begins with a reminder that the body of Christ is very much like the human body: it consists of many different parts that work together and form one body. It is designed to work in a cooperative fashion, even when it is reluctant to do so. Yesterday was a long, tiring day for me. Kathy was attending a seminar, and I was taking care of our three boys. Normally that wouldn't have presented a problem, but two of them had basketball games. The first game was at 8:00 a.m., and the second one, which I coached, was at 4:00 p.m. In between, my eight-year-old had an outing to the beach. I had a wedding at 5:30 p.m., I preached here at 6:30, and then I returned to the wedding reception at 8:00. When my alarm rang this morning, many parts of my body protested. They didn't want to get up! But even though they were reluctant to function they didn't let me down; they didn't refuse and demand the right to more sleep. It is because the different parts of our bodies do not compete with one another. On the contrary, they cooperate with each other. Even when our bodies are hurt, the other parts immediately compensate and rush to their aid.

It is the same with the body of Christ, the church. Paul says, "For even as the body is one and yet has many members, ...so also is Christ." Notice he does not say what we would might expect, "so also is the church." That is because it is the church and Christ that make up the body of Christ. Our bodies are made up of two major sections, the head and the torso. The head is the control center; the members are all attached to it. Even our bodies are designed to teach us how the church is to function. It is essential that we understand that we are a part of Christ. We are the means by which Christ functions in the world. We all share the same life, and we are the means of expressing that life in this world. Whatever we are, we are by the power, presence and activity of our Lord. He is the one to whom all believers are joined. That is why one of Paul's favorite expressions to describe the church is those who are "in Christ." If they are different, it is because Christ is in them and they are in Christ. That is the important thing about the church, and why Paul speaks not about the church, but about Christ being the body to which we all belong.

How did we get into this body? How was this unity achieved? Paul tells us in verse 13: it was achieved when we were all baptized with one Spirit. He is referring to the OT prophecy of Joel, who said that a time was coming when God would pour out his Spirit on all flesh, not just the Jews. That is what John the Baptist meant when he said, "I baptize you with water, but one is coming who will baptize you with the Holy Spirit." When the Messiah came, he would pour out his Spirit on all flesh. And when the Day of Pentecost came, that is exactly what happened. Peter quoted Joel's prophecy and said that this is what was predicted. The time had come.

That is what places individual believers in the body of Christ. The Lord Jesus pours out his Spirit upon you, and the Spirit indwells

you, so that now you are a part of the life of God. Everyone shares the same life. Notice the word *all*. It is not a matter of maturity. Remember this letter was addressed to a group of people who were badly divided into various cliques, and who were characterized by carnality and every kind of sin. Yet Paul says, “by one Spirit you are all baptized into one body.” That is what makes us one body, and that occurs whenever someone becomes a Christian. When you allow the Lord Jesus Christ to become Lord of your life and invite him to live inside you, you are baptized with the Holy Spirit. It is not something that occurs after your salvation, or something that happens later in your spiritual life because of some spiritual experience or other. It is not a second blessing. Maybe you have been asked the question, “Have you received the baptism of the Holy Spirit?” If you belong to Christ, your answer should be, yes.

We don’t need something more from God to grow spiritually. We have everything we need. What we must do is lay hold of what we have: the Spirit of God resident within us, and his power available to us to be who we need to be in every situation, to cope with every demand in our life. It is not just the “super” spiritual Christians who have special resources and abilities. Everyone who belongs to Jesus Christ shares the life of God and is empowered by the Spirit of God.

## II. The illustration of God’s plan: Looking at the human body (12:14-26)

In verses 14-26, Paul elaborates on this theme of unity in diversity in the human body. He deals with two separate tendencies within the body of Christ. First, the common problem of Christians who feel inferior and insignificant because they have less prominent gifts. The apostle encourages such in verses 14-19.

### A. The diversity of the Body: Solving the problem of insignificance (12:14-19)

**For the body is not one member, but many. If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I am not a part of the body,” it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I am not a part of the body,” it is not for this reason any the less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired. And if they were all one member, where would the body be? (12:14-19)**

Here Paul deals with the problem of insignificance, the feeling that we don’t really matter. I would venture to guess that the majority of us struggle with this. We say, “I like this church, but I don’t think there is anything for me to do. I don’t have the kinds of abilities that are needed.”

Paul uses the human body to make his point. Imagine if your foot said, “I can’t do the things that the hand does. It is so flexible. It is hooked on to the arm, and it gets used all the time. If I could just wiggle my toes the way the hand wiggles its fingers, I would be useful. I really don’t belong in this body.” That would be ridiculous, wouldn’t it? That is the apostle’s point. God’s body is not one big eye or one big foot.

I was tempted to copy something my friend Ron Ritchie once did to illustrate this point. I thought about having a couple dedicate their baby this morning, but instead of a baby I was going to hold

a football, painted like a big eye, wrapped in a baby blanket. Now I don’t see any gigantic eyes or gigantic feet among you today. That would be grotesque, wouldn’t it? But it is just as grotesque when one or a few spiritual gifts are lifted up in a church and thought of as the only important gifts. There are no insignificant members in the body of Christ. Many of us struggle with this because we regard ministry to be what happens only on Sunday. So we think, “I can’t get up in front of people and lead like so-and-so, so I guess there is nothing for me to do.” When we think like that we are basically saying that the church is an eye.

But, as we learned last week, every Christian has a spiritual gift, everyone has a supernatural capacity to serve others in the body. There are many different needs both in this body and in your world. The work of the church is to heal the brokenhearted, to give deliverance to the captives, to preach the good news to the poor and despairing, to encourage and strengthen people. We are to deliver people from the guilt and loneliness and misery of sin. All of that doesn’t happen on Sunday. We come here to help get equipped for ministry. Only a few gifts function on Sunday, but the majority of ministry takes place during the week—in your home, where you work (which is your major platform of ministry), etc. We need a fresh understanding of the nature of the church. The work of the church is not going to meetings. It is the excitement of Jesus Christ living inside you, ready to walk with you daily through the hurt of this world, ready to touch people with his love, to bring healing and sight and life to the destruction we encounter all around us.

There are many needs in our midst—unemployment, financial needs, deteriorating marriages, etc. One of the great deceptions that has infiltrated the church is the idea that unless you have a degree in counseling, you can’t help anyone. Now some believers have special training and background that I value, and I frequently refer people to them, but it is wrong to think that you need special training to help others. God has given you words of truth to encourage those who are struggling. Some of you have a quiet ministry of prayer for people in this congregation, for example. This is a wonderful ministry. There are numerous ways that we can encourage others around us.

There is an important place of service for you in the body of Christ. Don’t worry about knowing exactly what your gift is before you begin to minister. Become involved in the needs of people whom God has placed in your life. Start loving them and caring about their needs and God will take care of getting you in the right place.

In the next verses Paul addresses an opposite but equally destructive problem.

### B. The unity of the Body: Solving the problem of independence (12:20-26)

**But now there are many members, but one body. And the eye cannot say to the hand, “I have no need of you”; or again the head to the feet, “I have no need of you.” On the contrary, it is much truer that the members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary, and those members of the body, which we deem less honorable, on these we bestow more abundant honor, and our unseemly members come to have more abundant seemliness, whereas our seemly members have no need of it. But God has so composed the body, giving more abundant honor to that member which lacked, that there should be no division in the body, but that the members should have the same care for one another. And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with**

**it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it. (12:20-26)**

This is the problem of an independent spirit. Paul is referring, not to those who think they are inferior, but to those who imagine they are superior. Some believers feel they don't need others in the body, that they can function on their own. Corinth was a richly-gifted church, with strong and dynamic teaching. There were gifts of prophecy and tongues. Gifts of healings were taking place. Some delivered people from demonic oppression. There was nothing dull about church life in Corinth. The trouble was that those with the more showy gifts became smug. They looked down on less obviously gifted believers. They set themselves up as first class Christians and treated the other members of the church as coach class. Whenever this kind of an attitude is present, there is jealousy and competition. This is what James says: "Wherever jealousy and selfish ambition exists, there is every kind of evil."

Paul reminds us here that not only do all the members have a part to play, but God delights to give special honor to the less showy parts. In the same way that we pay particular attention to the less presentable parts of our physical bodies, we should give care to those brothers and sisters whose gifts are not so prominent. Those who feel they are dispensable should be shown how valuable and indispensable they really are.

The apostle's point is that if those with less spectacular gifts are slighted, the whole church is impoverished. When he says, "if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it," he is not exhorting us to Christian sympathy. His point is far more penetrating than that. He wants the more arrogant members of the body to realize that if any member, however ordinary or average their service, is inhibited from making that contribution, "then the whole body suffers." If, on the other hand, one member is honored by being allowed to make that contribution, then the whole body is honored. The knowledge that the whole church loses if any member is not allowed to contribute was as surprising and shocking to the Corinthians as it is to us.

When we come to understand what the church is, as God sees it, then we will begin to have the kind of care we need to have for one another. We will stop thinking that teaching is the only important gift, or that one particular doctrine needs to be continually emphasized, and we will realize that God has made the whole body to function in a wonderfully coordinated way.

The human body is the most beautifully balanced and delicately articulated of instruments. All the computers in the world put together could not do what a single human body can do when it is functioning properly. Just watch a graceful figure skater, a slalom skier, a concert pianist. In the same way, there is nothing more beautiful and balanced than the church of Jesus Christ, his body. Spiritually, it is the most marvelous organism in the universe. Even the angels look into how we function. God has put it together, therefore we ought to care for each other.

In the final paragraph, Paul no longer writes with metaphors, but applies this truth to the church.

### **III. The reality of God's plan: The Church—Christ's Body (12:27-31)**

**Now you are Christ's body, and individually members of it. And God has appointed in the church, first apostles, second proph-**

**ets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, various kinds of tongues. All are not apostles, are they? All are not prophets, are they? All are not teachers, are they? All are not workers of miracles, are they? All do not have gifts of healings, do they? All do not speak with tongues, do they? All do not interpret, do they? But earnestly desire the greater gifts.**

**And I show you a still more excellent way. (12:27-31)**

We are members of Christ's body, and if we are to be effective in ministry we must learn to value what he values, to appreciate our diversity, and work with his methods and his people.

Paul is still stressing the diversity of the body, and exhorting us to remember that it was God who made it that way. And God has appointed various individuals with their gifts. Apostles were appointed to plant churches and write Scripture. Prophets received direct revelation from God and gave that revelation to the people of God. These two gifts were essential to the foundation of the church, but when the Scriptures were completed, these gifts were no longer necessary (unless we redefine the gifts).

Teachers, says Paul, make the Scripture clear. Miracles (a gift we talked about last week) were performed by people who did supernatural things to authenticate their spoken word. There were gifts of healings which we talked about last week, and gifts of helps, those who came to the practical help of people in need. Notice that Paul puts that gift in the same breath with the more prominent gifts.

There were administrations. That word literally means "pilots." It was used of the helmsman of a ship, who was responsible to steer the vessel and keep it on course. This is a gift of leadership. Then once more Paul refers to tongues, which we will deal with when we come to chapter 14.

Paul is making the point that not everyone is an apostle, not all are teachers, not all have gifts of healings, not all speak in tongues. There is a diversity of ministries, gifts and results, and all of this has been designed for one purpose: that the church might grow to a maturity where they will reflect what they were made to be—a unified, loving body of people who act as one body.

Paul exhorts the Corinthians, "earnestly desire the greater gifts." That was the problem at Corinth. They loved their teachers. They were impressed with their education and their intelligence. And they loved the showy gifts, especially the gift of tongues. But because of that imbalance of the dramatic over the ordinary, the whole church suffered because everyone was not able to contribute. There was jealousy and selfish ambition among them.

"And I show you a still more excellent way," says Paul, concluding this chapter. What makes a church impressive is not its leadership. It is love that impresses the world. The way to demonstrate the power of the Spirit in the world is not through the powerful exhibition of these more prominent gifts. It is not through impressive programs, as important as they are. The way to demonstrate the power of the Spirit is to love: bringing meals to each other when we are in need, mowing lawns, giving financial assistance, counseling and encouraging each other—those are the things that count. All the gifts of the Spirit are to no avail if they don't help us learn to love each other in tangible ways.

And the proof of this kind of love will be found in the extent to which we realize that we are all members of one body. Christians belong to each other. We share a common life. Let us demonstrate

this to the world by giving of ourselves in acts of service and love,  
caring for one another.

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