

God's Message to Us in First Corinthians

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Introduction

In our sermon series in which we are going through all the books of the Bible in an overview fashion, we have come to Paul's first epistle to the Corinthians.

- As I mentioned to you when we came to Romans, an epistle is a letter, and there are quite a few of them in the New Testament—twenty-one of the twenty-seven books in the New Testament are actually epistles.
- First Corinthians is called First Corinthians because we have two letters to the Corinthians in the New Testament.
 - It appears that Paul wrote other letters to them as well, but the Lord did not give them to us as part of the canon of scripture.
 - It is important to know that the books we have in our Bible were brought together by the Lord, working through men, to give us all that we need to know for faith and obedience.
 - Those who wrote these books were guided in such a way that what they wrote is without error and is what the Lord wanted us to know from Him.
 - They are not of the private interpretation of the men that wrote them, but the Holy Spirit carried these men along so that what they wrote, though an expression of their own words, is the very word of God.
 - We do not benefit from the scriptures as we should until we recognise that they are the very word of God.
 - And not only do we need to know that, but also that they are useful for us—to give us doctrine (things to believe), to convict us of our sin, to correct us, and to train us in living for God.

I told you that when Paul wrote to the Romans, he had not yet visited them.

- It is quite different with the Corinthians—Paul had spent a year and a half with them.
 - So he is not giving them a summary of the basic tenants of the faith like he did with the Romans. He would have done that when he was with them.
 - In their case, he is writing because he has received a report about problems in the church and was also asked questions related to some of these problems.
 - The church was started by Paul in 50 AD and he wrote this epistle in about 55 AD from what we can tell, so the church was a the five year mark.
 - Church planters will tell you that the five year mark is notoriously a time when problems start to emerge in a church.
- First Corinthians is useful for us, first because it reminds us that churches will have problems, even if they were planted by apostles who spent a year and a half with them,
 - And it shows us how to deal with the kind of problems that come up in churches.

If you look at the opening of this letter (1:1-9), you can see that Paul affirms that they are real Christians with lots of spiritual gifts and a true hope in the coming of Christ...

- but this does not prevent them from having real problems in their walk.

- In this letter, we are going to see that they still had way too much of their former pagan ways of thinking.
 - It is very easy for us to be unduly influenced by an ungodly cultural background because some of the ungodly ways of thinking and living are so familiar to us and so automatic—we don't even hardly notice them the way we do when we move from one culture to another.
 - A culture that, say, has a strong sense of honour and of people keeping their place in the pecking order can be scandalised by a culture where people are lazy and unaccountable to each other, and vice versa.
 - As we read First Corinthians, we will see that we have many of the same problems today that Paul addresses here—and we will also see some problems that we don't typically have. (When was the last time someone got drunk at the Lord's Table?)
 - But there are valuable lessons for us about pursuing our calling from God rather than falling to the ungodly ways of our society.

Let's take a look at how Paul addresses their problems and learn from it.

I. The first problem Paul addresses is the problem of sectarianism (1:10 – 4:21).

A. There was a problem of one-upmanship.

1. They had created factions within the presbytery and each faction was claiming to be better than the other.
 - Look at verses 10-13: **Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and *that* there be no divisions among you, but *that* you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.** ¹¹ For it has been declared to me concerning you, my brethren, by those of Chloe's *household*, that there are contentions among you. ¹² Now I say this, that each of you says, "I am of Paul," or "I am of Apollos," or "I am of Cephas," or "I am of Christ." ¹³ Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?
2. There is something peculiar about these divisions.
 - They were not fuelled by their leaders. It was not Paul and Apollos and Cephas (or Peter) and Christ who were pitted against one another.
 - We know Paul as the man who had superior theology, Peter had been with Jesus and may have appealed to the Jews at Corinth, and Apollos was a very polished speaker who would have gained the respect of the upper class, and then others were saying, "We don't listen to these men, we follow Christ."
 - Each felt that they were superior in some way.
 - But Paul and Peter were Christ's apostles, and Apollos was a faithful preacher that Paul had sent to minister among the Corinthians.
 - And these teachers were all quite unified and happy with each other... it was the congregation that had formed these parties.
 - This was not a situation where someone was creating division by teaching false doctrine.
 - This was a situation where the teachers were unified.

3. This exposes how prone people are to look for ways to be superior to others.
 - This was especially a problem in Greek culture where a person's status and rank was considered very important. Honour was a big deal with them.
 - They especially took pride in their wisdom—so Paul addresses that as each party claimed to have wisdom that the others lacked.
- B. Paul sets them straight about the source of true wisdom.
1. He reminds them that the Greek philosophers that their culture prized so highly did not find God through all their wisdom and philosophising.
 - In fact, by their wisdom, they concluded that the cross was foolishness—the very idea that God should become flesh was absurd—and that He should then rise from the dead with an immortal body—that was even more ridiculous.
 - Man's quest was not to obtain an immortal body, but to be freed of his body and become more purely spiritual.
 - How wrong they were!
 - In this way, Paul reminds the Corinthians that worldly wisdom is not something to take pride in.
 - It does not lead to a knowledge of saving truth.
 - In 1:20-21, Paul says: **Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? 21 For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe.**
 2. What we need is wisdom from above...
 - We need God's revelation that comes to us through the Holy Spirit.
 - Only then can we understand what we are before God—creatures that were made by Him and for Him—creatures who rebelled and need Christ to save us from our sin.
 - **“The natural man,”** Paul says in 1 Cor 2:14, **“does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them because they are spiritually discerned.”**
 - God's Spirit has to show them to us and open our hearts to them.
- C. So instead of asking who is the best speaker or the best theologian or whatever it might be, we should be thanking God for revealing His word to us and our teachers.
1. Paul stresses that he and the other ministers that the Corinthians were pitting against each other were but ministers of God's revelation.
 - As ministers of Christ, He had graciously given them that task to preach to His people so that they can know what God has said.
 - Look at 3:5-7: **Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers through whom you believed, as the Lord gave to each one? 6 I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. 7 So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase.**
 - Teachers and pastors do not invent the truth, they are simply appointed to deliver it faithfully to the church.

- In 1 Cor 4:1-2 he says: **“Let a man so consider us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. ² Moreover it is required in stewards that one be found faithful.”**
 - A steward distributes not his own things, but the things of his master.
 - In this case, the things of the master are God’s words.
2. In chapter 4, Paul goes on to explain that the net effect in pitting him against his ministry companions has been to bring not honour but dishonour to them...
 - In making their comparisons, they despise one minister and demean him in their effort to promote their man.
 - In 4:6, he says: **Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively transferred to myself and Apollos for your sakes, that you may learn in us not to think beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up on behalf of one against the other.**
 - And then he explains how they have actually shown disrespect to them. For example, not appreciating him as their father in the faith and refusing to listen to him or respect him.
 - He warns them that he will come to set them straight if they do not repent of this folly.
 3. The bottom line is that they needed to start giving thanks for those who brought the word to them instead of in pride raising up rival parties around them.
 - This is carnal—this is the way of the old man and not of the spiritual man—this is good old pagan pride poisoning the church... and it still does today.

TRANS> With chapter 5, Paul moves on to another subject.

II. In chapters 5-9, he confronts the Corinthians in different areas where their old pagan morality (or rather immorality) continues to influence them.

- A. In chapter 5, pagan morality is seen in their toleration of sexual immorality in their churches.
 1. The Corinthian society was notorious for its sexual corruption.
 - It was a port city, and there were many prostitutes for those who visited, including hundreds of temple prostitutes where sex was part of the worship of their pagan gods.
 - Yet, Paul accuses the church of going even beyond what was acceptable at Corinth by tolerating a member who had been sleeping with his father’s wife.
 2. Paul insists that the man be removed from the membership of the church at once!
 - He warns that they are puffed up to have left this man as a member in good standing.
 - In 5:6-8, he warns them that if they do not deal with this, it will bring ruin to the whole church: **Your glorying is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? ⁷ Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump, since you truly are unleavened. For indeed Christ, our Passover, was sacrificed for us. ⁸ Therefore let us keep the feast, not with old leaven, nor with the leaven of malice and wickedness, but with the unleavened *bread* of sincerity and truth.**

3. That is as true for churches today as it was then!
 - Too often, we in our pride, act like we know better than God—that such things do not need to be dealt with—we can handle them.
- B. In 6:1-11, Paul confronts pagan morality that is seen in taking each other to court.
1. This is no way for Christian's to behave.
 - They ought to settle things within the church—they have their church courts that can adjudicate...
 - But better still, they ought to let their petty disputes go—to take a loss for the sake of Christ rather than demanding the last penny from their brother.
 2. Paul warns them that those who are cheating their own brothers show that they are not genuine disciples of Jesus Christ.
 - As Christians, if they are Christians, they were washed from these things when they came to Jesus Christ.
 - Listen to the solemn warning in 6:8-11: **No, you yourselves do wrong and cheat, and you do these things to your brethren! 9 Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, 10 nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. 11 And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God.**
- C. Then in the rest of chapter 6 and on into chapter 7, Paul talks about sexual immorality and marriage.
1. In their pagan culture, prostitution was just a normal part of life.
 - But Paul tells them that this is entirely unacceptable for a Christian because the Christian is joined to Christ.
 - That means that if a man has sex with a prostitute, he drags Christ into the perverted union.
 - Paul reminds them that they have been purchased by Christ and are not their own—they belong to God.
 - As he said before, those who do this show that they are not real Christians and will not inherit the kingdom of God.
 2. He goes on to explain in chapter 7 that it is good for a man not to touch a woman, but that, to avoid sexual immorality, (vs 2) **let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband. 3 Let the husband render to his wife the affection due her, and likewise also the wife to her husband.**
 - He stresses that neither the husband nor the wife should deprive the other of sexual relations... their bodies belong to each other.
 - Paul says that, because of the present distress—rising persecution perhaps?—it is easier not to marry...
 - but that even so it is better to marry than to burn with passion...
 - sexual purity is of extreme importance for a believer... it is not optional.

- From the urgency with which Paul speaks of this, it is clear that neither we nor the Corinthians take this matter nearly as seriously as we ought.
 - Fornication is a mark of separation from God, a mark of rebellion against God that shows that a person is not subject to God.
 - Now that Christ has come, this sin is more reprehensible than ever because it involves dragging Him into the perverted relationship.
 - The Corinthians needed to get it straight—if a Christian was to have sexual relations, the only place was in marriage. PERIOD!
 - To do anything else is to betray Christ.
3. Our society has not gone to the depth of perversion that there was at Corinth...
- But we certainly are headed in that direction.
 - And this is an area where those who name the name of Christ are called to stand out from the crowd.
 - We are not to embrace the ways of our society, but to be loyal to Christ.
 - We show that we do not respect God when we take His wonderful sacred ordinance (sex) and use it in a different way than He has appointed.
 - We show that we do not acknowledge Him as our God and gracious Creator who has given us good things—much less as our Redeemer who has purchased us out of sin with His own blood.

D. In chapter 8-10, Paul confronts the problem of idolatry.

1. A little background is important here.
- Corinth was not only famous for sexual immorality, it was also famous for its religion.
 - The temple of Aphrodite, the goddess of love had been situated there, and she still had 1000 temple prostitutes, and there was the temple of Poseidon, the god of the sea and maker of earthquakes, as well as the temple of Apollo, Hermes, Venus-Fortuna, Isis, and a temple dedicated to all the gods, and the sanctuary of Demeter.
 - Part of the very culture of Corinth included the great feast days where drunkenness, fornication, wild ceremonies, frenzied dancing, and of course sacrifices to idols were all part of the festivities.
 - There was so much of this that went on that the leftover meat that was shared with the priests was sold in the meat markets at a discount.
2. Paul's greatest concern in chapters 8-10 is that the Corinthian believers have nothing to do with this pagan worship (just as in 6 & 7 it was that they have nothing to do with fornication).
- Try to understand the pressure that was upon some of them.
 - They had grown up gathering with their families for the feasts—it was a holiday—there were traditions and gatherings.
 - When you became a believer, there was a lot of pressure on you to participate in these feasts, but it was not acceptable for a believer.

- Paul sums it up very nicely in 1 Cor 10:21 where he says: **“You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the Lord’s table and of the table of demons.”**
- You cannot have communion with idols and with Jesus—it needs to be one or the other, it cannot be both.
 - Paul explains that it is not that the idol itself is anything, but that in worshipping the idols, the Gentiles worship demons.
 - It is not acceptable for Christians and will destroy them just as this sort of thing destroyed Israel in the OT when they tried to serve idols along with God.
 - In chapter 10 verse 7, Paul says of the OT people of God, **And do not become idolaters as were some of them. As it is written, “The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play.” Nor let us commit sexual immorality, as some of them did, and in one day twenty-three thousand fell...**
- As I say, Paul’s great concern was that they not participate in the idol feasts that had been so much a part of their lives at Corinth.
- 3. And so related to this concern, he writes to them at length about eating the meat that was sacrificed to idols—the leftovers from these feasts.
 - a. He talks about this in chapter 8 and then again at the end of chapter 10.
 - And basically he says that there is nothing wrong with eating this meat as far as it goes (not at the worship feast, but the leftovers),
 - however, there is something very wrong with eating it if a weak brother who is tempted to participate in these feasts is made to stumble when you eat this meat...he has associations with eating it.
 - Set aside your liberty if it harms your brother—preserving him from idolatry is more important than eating.
 - b. We need to learn the importance of this today.
 - Don’t ever tempt another believer to do something that violates their conscience—their relationship with God is so important.
 - In chapter 9, Paul talks of how he set aside his right as an apostle to receive financial support from those he ministered to.
 - He received gifts from other churches, but he did not receive support from the churches he was ministering to.
 - He insists that ministers ought to be supported, but he was not so as to remove every occasion for anyone to speak against his preaching.
 - He wanted everyone to know that he was in it for Christ
 - There is much that is instructive for us here, but the main point is that we should set aside our liberty rather than make our brother stumble.
 - We must care deeply for each other’s souls.

TRANS> So you see some of the ways that pagan morality (or immorality as it actually was) can cling to us as believers.

- We must stay away from fornication, from selfish lawsuits, and from idolatry.
- And now Paul turns to worship.

III. He warns us about bringing pagan worship into Christian worship.

A. God's principle of worship has always been that He tells us what to do in worship.

1. It is not for us to decide how we will worship Him, but it is for Him to tell us how He will be worshipped.

- This principle is expressly stated in Deuteronomy 12:32: **Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it.**

- He tells them this after warning them in the previous two verses (Dt 12:30-31): **“take heed to yourself that you are not ensnared to follow them, after they are destroyed from before you, and that you do not inquire after their gods, saying, ‘How did these nations serve their gods? I also will do likewise.’³¹ You shall not worship the LORD your God in that way; for every abomination to the LORD which He hates they have done to their gods; for they burn even their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods.”**

2. The root of idolatry is approaching God in worship in our own way.

- The most serious perversion is to try to come to God in worship on the basis of our own merit rather than on the basis of Christ our redeemer.

- What things people will do to gain God's favour instead of coming to Christ!

- We see things in history like sacrificing children, cutting oneself, offering up human hearts that are still beating to God, and things like fornication as fertility rites.

3. God's people have always had the problem of bringing things in from pagan worship... prayers to the dead, priests instead of preachers, ceremonies of various kinds that God did not appoint for us, bowing to images, feast days that God did not appoint—the list goes on.

B. At Corinth, we see this problem of bringing in pagan worship and doctrine to Christian worship.

1. In chapter 11:17-34, Paul rebukes the Corinthians church for gorging themselves and getting drunk at what was supposed to be the Lord's Table.

- They were used to their pagan feasts where drunkenness was part of the worship, and some of them were actually getting drunk at the Lord's Table.

- In 11:20-22, he says: **Therefore when you come together in one place, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper.²¹ For in eating, each one takes his own supper ahead of others; and one is hungry and another is drunk.²² What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and shame those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you in this? I do not praise you.**

- He then instructs them about the proper way to come to the Lord's Table.

- It is not a feast where you gorge yourself.

- The purpose is to remember Christ who was sacrificed for the remission of our sins—we are to examine ourselves and to discern His body...

- We are coming to have fellowship with Him in His sacrifice for us so that we might be nourished by it to live for God.

- It is not about feeding our belly, but our soul.

- This is not a pagan feast, but a holy sacrament representing Christ.

2. Then in chapter 12-14, Paul speaks of the infiltration of pagan spirituality concerning spiritual gifts.
 - a. He lays out the principle in the first three verses: 12:1-2: **Now concerning spiritual gifts, brethren, I do not want you to be ignorant: ² You know that you were Gentiles, carried away to these dumb idols, however you were led.**
 - In their pagan worship, the spirits of the gods took control of you and carried you away to dumb idols however you are led.
 - There are accounts of worshippers getting worked up into a frenzy—breaking out in laughter, thrashing on the floor, hooting like an animal, eating animals that were to be sacrificed while the animals were still alive!
 - In Christian worship, the Holy Spirit does not take us over, but He works in us so that we receive the truth, so that we have self-control rather than flying out of control.
 - He enables us to believe and to do the will of God... He does not take us over, but He enables us serve God and to worship Him.
 - b. Paul stresses, starting in 12:4, that there are diversities of gifts, but only one Spirit.
 - He stresses this all the way through chapter 12 and also in chapter 14, taking issue with them for speaking in tongues when there was no one who could understand the language...
 - When the Holy Spirit enabled someone to speak in tongues, it was in the language of someone present who could understand and to whom it would be a powerful sign—a miracle.
 - But pagan tongues are in languages that no one present can understand.
 - And Paul takes issue with them having more than one prophet speak at the same time—as if the Spirit came on two of them at the same time in the same assembly!
 - There are not different spirits competing to speak in Christian prophecy, but one Spirit, and He is not going to interrupt Himself!
 - And women are not to prophecy in the church at all—they were at Corinth.
 - They were bringing pagan spiritually into their assembly and Paul tells them that this must stop.
 - c. Paul also challenges them with the fact that Christian worship is not about making a show. It is about edification.
 - With pagan worship, the focus is on you—I prophesied, I spoke in tongues, I was taken over by the spirit and barked like a dog... look at me.
 - But the focus of true spiritual gifts is to minister to my Christian brother.
 - In chapter 13, Paul stresses that the most important evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit is love.
 - Pagan spirituality is about showing off—Christian spiritually is about loving each other as Christ loved the church.
 - It is laying down our lives for each other the way Christ laid His life down for us.

3. And pagan spirituality had also affected doctrine at Corinth in that there were some who were denying the resurrection!
 - a. In pagan spirituality, the notion of resurrection is absurd!
 - In Greek philosophy, it was thought that the body was the prison house of the soul.
 - They did not want the body to be raised up in immortality—they wanted to shed the body and become a pure spirit.
 - The whole idea of Christ becoming flesh and then rising up with immortality was considered foolish—
 - As we saw in chapter 1, by their wisdom, they did not come to know God.
 - b. Some of the Corinthians, under this influence, were starting to say that there was no resurrection.
 - Paul tells them that if that is so then there is no salvation for anyone.
 - In the beginning of the chapter he declares how he had declared to them that Christ was crucified for our sins, buried, and then rose again according to the scriptures... and how people saw Him alive.
 - In verse 12, he says: **“Now if Christ is preached that He has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? ¹³ But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ is not risen. ¹⁴ And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty. ¹⁵ Yes, and we are found false witnesses of God, because we have testified of God that He raised up Christ, whom He did not raise up—if in fact the dead do not rise. ¹⁶ For if the dead do not rise, then Christ is not risen. ¹⁷ And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins! ¹⁸ Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. ¹⁹ If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable. ²⁰ But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep.”**
 - c. The great contrast here is that in pagan spirituality, you lose your identity and become something different.
 - In true spirituality, you are always you, but you are restored in holiness and immortality.

Conclusion: Chapter 16 wraps up the book with instructions about the collection of the offering for the poor at Jerusalem, some discussion of Paul’s plans to visit them, and a few greetings and a benediction.

- My brothers and sisters, do not let the world influence your doctrine.
 - We have God’s word, and we are to declare the truth to our culture.
 - The world by wisdom does not come to know God—we know Him by revelation through the Holy Spirit of God.
 - Inasmuch as we blend pagan wisdom, pagan morality, and pagan worship with what God has given us, we pervert the truth and lose the truth.
 - Do not try to look wise on the world’s terms, speak into their lives by the truth of God—that is the way of salvation and the way of true wisdom.