

A Study of First Corinthians

Week One

1 Corinthians 1:1-31

Day One

1:1 Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes, 2 To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ — their Lord and ours: 3 Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 4 I always thank God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus.

v. 1 – Paul was called to be an apostle, literally one “sent forth,” by the will of God. You can’t go to school to be an apostle or pastor for that matter, but school can help you be a better whatever it is that God has called you to be. It all starts with God’s call, however, and Paul knew that he was called. How can you know that you are called to do something? Without faith, it’s not possible. You must trust that God is able to clarify His will for your life.

Sosthenes is probably the same brother mentioned in Acts:

Then they all turned on Sosthenes the synagogue ruler and beat him in front of the court. But Gallio showed no concern whatever (Acts 18:17).

v. 2 – Paul did not limit the scope of his letter to only the Corinthian church, but to all those everywhere who called on the name of Jesus. Paul was an apostle to the whole church, not just to those churches with whom he worked or planted. Notice, however, that the focus for Paul wasn’t his ministry, but Jesus. In these firsts four verses, he mentioned Jesus five times! I know I have pointed this out repeatedly in these studies, but I can’t help but be impressed with this fact.

Paul and apostles did everything to lift up and exalt the Lord Jesus Christ. When I saw this, I was so convicted, realizing that I had preached whole messages in my life that seldom if ever referred to or mentioned Jesus. I now make a conscious effort to relate what I teach to Jesus, and to at least mention His name as often as possible, keeping people’s attention focused on Him. **Do you exalt the name of Jesus every chance you get? Do you relate what you do and teach to Him? How can do that more effectively?**

v. 3 – Paul wished the Church the best things that he could think of – grace and peace in Jesus. Those things are God’s gifts and Paul prayed that the people in the church would have those things. This is all the more interesting because Paul was writing this letter to correct and rebuke the church. His greeting shows, however, that he wasn’t bitter or angry; he had their best interests at heart and wished them grace and peace.

v. 4 – Not only wasn't Paul bitter, but he was also thankful for the Corinthians. He gave thanks for them, even though they were causing him problems. Why? Because God had chosen to give them His grace. There was no "you're more trouble than you're worth" attitude on Paul's part. He thanked God for what He had done with the Corinthians.

Day Two

5 For in him you have been enriched in every way — in all your speaking and in all your knowledge— 6 because our testimony about Christ was confirmed in you. 7 Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. 8 He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. 9 God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful.

vs. 5&6 – God had proved His love for the Corinthians by confirming Paul's work, undoubtedly through miracles. Then the Spirit proved the legitimacy of the work by enriching the ongoing work—speaking and knowledge—with supernatural power. So Paul acknowledged the fact that Corinth did indeed have a church, in spite of their problems and shortcomings.

I emphasize this because Paul could have had an "attitude" toward this church as we learn of their serious moral and spiritual shortcomings as the letter progresses. Yet Paul established their spiritual pedigree. The work of Jesus took hold in their lives and continued as Paul wrote the letter.

v. 7 – That is quite a statement, especially in light of things to be revealed later in the letter. They lacked no spiritual gift. God did not withdraw His presence or His gifts when they encountered problems and made mistakes. It is also an amazing statement that they lacked no spiritual gift, even though they had no spiritual history prior to salvation. God had empowered them to function in the power of the Holy Spirit from the time they responded to God. They did not "grow" into their capabilities or spiritual capacity. They received that capacity when they turned to the Lord and established a body of believers.

I am not saying that holiness isn't critical, but holiness isn't a criteria for receiving or using spiritual gifts. And spiritual gifts are effective even when the one with the gift is off course! That is hard to understand and not how I would handle things. That, however, is how God handles things.

As far as the gospel is concerned, they are enemies on your account; but as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs, for God's gifts and his call are irrevocable (Rom 11:28-29).

The only person who can prevent a gift from functioning is you, the one who has the gift. Are you using your gifts, or are you self conscious and holding back their effectiveness because you aren't worthy or as holy as you would like? Your gifts

aren't yours; they are His for the benefit of others. That is why they function in every season of your life, under any and all conditions.

vs. 8&9 – What a promise! What comfort! Paul stated that God would preserve them and keep them (and us) faithful until the end. Why? Because He is faithful to us and to the work of His Son, Jesus. God is powerful enough to keep me strong and to preserve me from destruction or waywardness. I must do my part in obedience, but I can trust that God will do His part. Thank you, Jesus! I am in good hands and I don't have to worry that I will encounter something that will be my undoing. I can put my trust in Him and He will bring me home, not because of who I am but because of who He is. Hallelujah!

Day Three

10 I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought. 11 My brothers, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. 12 What I mean is this: One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas"; still another, "I follow Christ." 13 Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul? 14 I am thankful that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, 15 so no one can say that you were baptized into my name.

v. 10 – All right, we are 10 verses into Paul's first letter and already he mentioned Jesus' name nine times. Nine times in ten verses! Is there any question as to the focus or objective of Paul's ministry? It was to lift up the name of Jesus and direct all attention, glory and adoration to Him. I only say this because 21st century ministry can all too often focus on the personality of the servant and not the One being served.

In this verse, Paul introduced one of the first problems in this early church and that was division. There was di-vision—more than one vision and that vision was connected to the identity of the believers. Paul wanted them to be totally united, and that unity could only come from being united around not one doctrine but one person—Jesus. Let's move on and see more specifically what Paul meant.

v. 11 – Paul let it be known that Chloe's household reported to him that quarrels existed among the Corinthian believers. He goes on to explain.

v. 12 – Paul identified four groups or factions among the believers. One identified with Paul, one with Apollos, another Cephas and then one final group with Jesus. This was totally unacceptable to Paul, the man who mentioned Jesus nine times in his introduction. It was all about Jesus and that was the only source of unity that was acceptable to Paul. He had no interest in having a following, but his life was invested in securing a "following" for Jesus.

There was a time in my life when I was part of a movement who identified the church by which pastor each person was "under." This was the man we "related to" as our spiritual

covering and authority. What a mistake that was! What an error on my part! I am a follower of Jesus, and I had no right as a pastor to claim any sheep as my own. They were not my followers, they belonged to Jesus. As I review that time in my life, I can see how limited the people were. I could not be a “covering” for anyone. What can I protect anyone from? What spiritual protection can I provide? Yes, I can teach, counsel, exhort or rebuke. But I can only do this as a representative or agent of Jesus. He empowers me, He directs me and He bestows wisdom. Whatever I can do, I do because of Him and when I do it, I need to direct the person’s attention back to Jesus. Period.

Lord, forgive me for what I did and how I assumed authority and position that wasn’t mine to assume. May I never do that again, and may I always direct people to You, just as Paul did. Amen.

v. 13 – Paul was quick to distance himself from anyone who identified himself or herself as a follower of Paul. He did not want that distinction or title. At the same time, I don’t think it necessary to deflect every compliment that comes your way, saying, “It’s not me, it’s the Lord.” It’s one thing to hijack loyalty that only belongs to God, but quite another to acknowledge that God has given you a gift to do something. I don’t want to ever “take authority” over another believer, but at the same time, I don’t want to deny that I am a good administrator by God’s grace. **Does that distinction make sense to you?** I am no one special because I have gifts from God, yet those gifts allow me to function in some measure of effectiveness.

vs. 14&15 – Paul was careful to baptize very few so that no one could say that he baptized them as his followers. I don’t know who did the baptizing and I’m not sure that Paul had anticipated this problem and that was why he did not baptize. It is obvious that he was grateful that he had not baptized many, so that Jesus could be the focus of the believers. May you and I be so careful as to not draw the disciples after ourselves.

Day Four

16(Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I don't remember if I baptized anyone else.) 17 For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel — not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. 18 For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. 19 For it is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate."

vs. 16&17 – Paul was clear concerning his purpose. He came to preach the gospel and not to baptize. Paul was a focused man! He did not baptize but rather concentrated on preaching the gospel. When I first began teaching on purpose, I used this verse as an example of someone who knew what God sent them to do and avoided any and all distractions. In my modern thinking, I would not think that baptizing someone was a distraction that could lead to a problem. Paul, on the other hand, saw baptism as something that would take away from his core strength of preaching. I want that kind of focus.

What are you doing today that is good but could be considered a distraction for you? Are you willing to let it go? What is it that you do that is the main thing for you? How can you keep your main thing the main thing as you invest time and energy in your service to God?

v. 18 – Paul did not go the Gentile world to preach in the power of wise words, as the Greek philosophers and traveling teachers did. He did not want to distract from the power of the cross to do its work in the lives and hearts of people. I heard someone teach once that the way you win someone is what you must keep doing to keep them. If you win someone to your church because of your choir, then you must maintain that choir to keep them. Paul knew that if he won someone to Christ with clever words, he would have to keep using that technique to keep them. So instead he relied on the power of Christ’s cross to win and maintain followers of Jesus. Paul was a wise man.

The cross was the dividing issue between believers and unbelievers. To the latter the cross was foolishness; to the former it is the power of God. Paul was adamant concerning the centrality of Jesus and His atoning work on the cross and would not tolerate anything casting a shadow on Him or His work. **Are you just as adamant?**

v. 19 – Paul quoted Isaiah 29:14 in this verse:

Therefore once more I will astound these people with wonder upon wonder; the wisdom of the wise will perish, the intelligence of the intelligent will vanish” (Isaiah 29:14).

From Paul’s vantage point, he then understood that Isaiah was referring to the cross of Christ, which would cause so-called wisdom to be rendered futile and so-called intelligence to be made irrelevant. This concept is always a concern for me, for I read many leadership books by secular authors. I regularly pray that God will help me filter out the truth that sounds wise but isn’t and will allow me to recognize truth from Him that I can share with others, even if I find it in a secular source.

The only way I know to do that is to search the Scriptures, not trying to justify what I see by twisting verses or reading into them what isn’t there. Instead I want the Word to shed light on what I am reading so that I can see it from God’s perspective. **Does this make sense? Do you do the same where truth, wisdom and the Bible are concerned?**

Day Five

20 Where is the wise man? Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? 21 For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. 22 Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom, 23 but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, 24 but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

v. 20 – God has indeed made the wisdom of this world foolish. There is no wise man who could do what God did or produce what God produced—freedom for man from the sting of death and the effects of sin. The natural mind could *never* conceive of God taking on human flesh, living among men, dying on the cross and being raised to life again. No human mind could develop a plan like God developed and unfolded in Christ. And no theologian can explain it, only help his or her fellow believers thank God for His great gift of salvation through Christ.

This doesn't mean that Christians should be anti-intelligence. We should always be looking for new insight into God, His work and His world. But this intelligence should always have the sign of the cross and be submitted to God's word and the historic understanding of the Church concerning Christ and His work.

v. 21 – The wisdom of the world cannot recognize God, for that wisdom exalts man and his efforts. No system or thinking can ever exalt man and be able to see God. So God chose something that was repugnant to worldly wisdom, death and resurrection, so that anyone who comes to Him must repudiate the world's ways and embrace God's. As stated earlier, however, this should not make us hesitant to learn, study and use the minds that God has given us. God wants us to think, but wants our thinking efforts to be directed by His Spirit. Furthermore, He wants our thinking to be about Him, not contrary to Him.

I have four degrees from my university studies. Those degrees have contributed to my effectiveness for God, but they have not made one iota of difference in my standing with Him, nor do they render me more worthy before Him. And certainly my learning had nothing to do with my salvation. Any intellectual efforts must be submitted to the Lordship of Jesus and be under His rule. Does this make sense? Do you see that we must not repudiate our brain when we serve God, but certainly submit it to His authority? God didn't tell us to get rid of our minds, just to renew them.

vs. 22&23 – Jews desired miraculous signs and confirmations and Greeks valued a well-ordered and rational philosophy. So what did God provide them? A death on the cross that was heinous to Jews and repugnant to Greeks. What's more, then God raised Jesus from the dead. There is absolutely *no way* that man can come to God through anything but faith.

v. 24 – Yet for those of us who have come to Christ, we see the beauty and wisdom of the sacrifice on the cross. It is the central act of our existence, for we know that God did for us what we could not do for ourselves. What's more, His motive was love for us while we were yet sinners. Jesus is our all in all. He is the power by which we come to God and the wisdom by which we understand God. There is no philosophical or religious system that can replace Jesus in our lives. **Is this the reality of your life? If not, then I urge you to come to God through the saving work of Jesus Christ. He is indeed the only way to God and said so Himself during His earthly ministry. I believe Him, do you?**

Day Six

25 For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength. 26 Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. 27 But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong.

v. 25 – Amen. God’s ways are superior to man’s ways. God is not foolish or weak, but if He were, He would still be stronger and superior to anything that man could produce on his own. I have put my trust in God and have asked Him to deliver me from my own ways.

v. 26 – This was Paul’s advice to the Corinthians. It doesn’t mean that God doesn’t touch or save those who are wise or influential by human standards. In the cast of Corinth, however, it seems that God saved the poorest and least influential members of Corinthian society. By doing so, no one could accuse The Way of being something that was a fad among the rich and famous. Why?

v. 27 – God chose to work with the people in Corinth. They were not strong or influential people, so God chose them to confound those who had confidence in their abilities and natural capacities. Otherwise the focus would have been on those people who were “haves” at the expense of the “have nots.”

I think it is an easy thing to favor the rich, influential or smart people in any situation. Even James warned against bias in evangelism and church matters:

Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? But you have insulted the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong? If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right. But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers (James 2:5-10).

Are you showing favoritism? Do you make room for the poor and less glamorous people in your life, work and ministry? Do you treat the poor, or even those of different skin color, with respect and equanimity? This is a major issue, for James went on to point out that if you do indeed show favoritism, you are guilty of breaking the Law.

We should follow God’s example as evidenced by Jesus and described by Paul and devote our attention to those who aren’t attractive to the society at large. Historically, this has been a group that has responded to the gospel in large numbers.

When the men came to Jesus, they said, "John the Baptist sent us to you to ask, 'Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?'" At that very time Jesus cured many who had diseases, sicknesses and evil spirits, and gave sight to many who were blind. So he replied to the messengers, "Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and **the good news is preached to the poor** (Luke 7:20-23 emphasis added).

Day Seven

28 He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things — and the things that are not — to nullify the things that are, 29 so that no one may boast before him. 30 It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God — that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. 31 Therefore, as it is written: "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord."

vs. 28&29 – Paul again stated why God chose to work as He had in Corinth. He did not want any man taking the credit for what God had done by His sovereign grace. All day I have been singing a song that a friend of mine wrote that used some verses from Jeremiah as the words:

This is what the LORD says: "Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight," declares the LORD (Jeremiah 9:23-24).

While I know these verses, it is still all too easy to boast in my own efforts and be proud of what I can do. I must regularly remind myself of the truth that John wrote:

Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world — the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does — comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever (1 John 2:15-17).

This boasting doesn't only apply to worldly things like achievements and possessions. It can also apply to religious accomplishments. To counteract this tendency that we all have, God did His saving work in such a way that no one could boast in what they had done, for they had not done anything. It was all God's doing.

vs. 30&31 – Wisdom for the believer isn't a matter of knowledge or doctrine. Wisdom for us is a person, namely Jesus. When you read Proverbs, you see wisdom talking like it is a person, which it is. And that person is Jesus, directing His people by means of His word:

Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, "This is the way; walk in it" (Isaiah 30:21).

That is a great description of wisdom—it is Jesus talking to you, guiding your every step. The only requirement I can see is that you listen. Are you listening to God? Do you believe that He can give you wisdom for your daily life and walk, for business, family and ministry? Are you boasting in God or about your ability to get God to do what you want? Are you the center of your world, receiving all the attention, or is God the center?