



Explore the Bible®

PERSONAL STUDY GUIDE



1,2 Corinthians

Spring 2018 > CSB

Clint Pressley, General Editor

LifeWay | Adults



JESUS

Jesus changes lives. And everyone needs the opportunity to hear the life-changing message of the gospel of Christ.

That conviction led Paul to Corinth, a city famous for its immorality and religious pluralism. He was Christ's ambassador bringing a life-changing message from God to the Corinthians: "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, and see, the new has come!" (2 Cor. 5:17).

The same gospel message Paul introduced in Corinth is good news for us too. Christ was with God the Father before the world was created. He became human and lived among humanity as Jesus of Nazareth. He came to show us what God the Father is like. He lived a sinless life, showing us how to live; and He died upon a cross to pay for our sins. God raised Him from the dead.

Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6). He is waiting for you now.

- **Admit** to God that you are a sinner. Repent, turning away from your sin.
- **By faith receive** Jesus Christ as God's Son and accept Jesus' gift of forgiveness from sin. He took the penalty for your sin by dying on the cross.
- **Confess** your faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

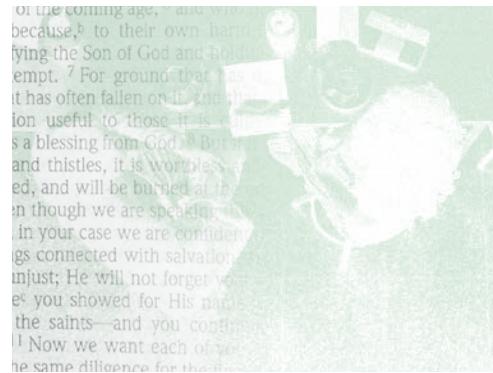
You may pray a prayer similar to this as you call on God to save you: "Dear God, I know that You love me. I confess my sin and need of salvation. I turn away from my sin and place my faith in Jesus as my Savior and Lord. In Jesus' name I pray, amen."

After you have received Jesus Christ into your life, tell a pastor or another Christian about your decision. Show others your faith in Christ by asking for baptism by immersion in your local church as a public expression of your faith.

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*Evangelistic Emphasis



» MEET THE WRITER

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A WORD FROM THE GENERAL EDITOR



The church has never been perfect. Only the Lord of the church is perfect, a truth that is abundantly clear in 1 and 2 Corinthians. Here we find the gospel in all its glory and life with all its complexities. The Book of Ecclesiastes says, “there is nothing new under the sun,” and Paul’s letters to the church at Corinth prove the truism. Paul wrote to a people who loved Christ but struggled with division of all kinds, manifold rebellion, and downright immorality.

When you read and study these two books, you are reminded that although Jesus is Lord of the church, there is no perfect church.

Even still, in these two books we learn the centrality of the cross, the meaning of marriage, the danger of lust, and how a church should be structured. We learn the importance of spiritual gifts, the value of diversity, and the joy of taking the Lord’s Supper.

Paul’s letters to the church ground us in the gospel of Christ and fill us with resurrection hope. And this hope does not disappoint. This hope gives us strength for endurance so that in our struggle, we do not lose heart.

These two books serve as a banquet table of gospel truth, served up for the strength and health of God’s people. At this critical hour, an intense and thorough study of these two books is sure to bring nourishment to the famished soul and strength to any gospel-centered church.

As you study 1 and 2 Corinthians, may the Spirit of God use the Word of God to anchor your confidence and hope in the Son of God.

Clint Pressley

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WORD WISE

Terms listed here are identified in the Bible commentary with a dot (•).

Achaia [uh KAY yuh]—Roman province in the southern half of ancient Greece; major cities included Athens and Corinth, the administrative center

Apollos [uh PAHL uhs]—Alexandrian Jew, characterized in Acts 18:24 as eloquent and mighty in the Scriptures; instructed by Priscilla and Aquila (18:26); ministered in Corinth after Paul left there, building on what Paul started (18:27-28; 1 Cor. 3:6)

Asia—Roman province in western Asia Minor; the capital of Asia was Ephesus, where Paul stayed and taught for two years, making an impact throughout the province of Asia (Acts 19:10)

Cephas [SEE fuhs]—Aramaic name for the apostle Peter, given to him by Jesus (John 1:42); means “rock”

Crispus [KRISS puhs]—leader of the synagogue in Corinth (Acts 18:8); one of the few individuals Paul baptized there (1 Cor. 1:14); personal name meaning “curly”

Firstfruits—the first part of a harvest, offered as a sacrifice to God; in the New Testament, Christ’s resurrection is the firstfruits of those to follow in the end time (1 Cor. 15:20,23)

Gaius [GAY yuhs]—Paul’s host in Corinth (Rom. 16:23), one of the individuals Paul baptized there (1 Cor. 1:14); personal name meaning “I am glad, rejoice”

Glory—the weighty importance and majesty accompanying God’s presence; the verb means “to give weight to, to honor,” such honor is the recognition of the nature of the honored person and not something someone bestows on another

Gospel—the message of God’s saving activity through the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ

Grace—the undeserved acceptance and love of God; the Greek word *charis* can also carry the meaning of “benefit” (2 Cor. 1:15)

Macedonians [mass uh DOH nih uhns]—the people of Macedonia, a province located north of Achaia, where Corinth was located; key Macedonian cities included Philippi and Thessalonica; the gospel came to Macedonia through the preaching of Paul (Acts 16:9-10)

Stephanas [STEF uh nuhs]—one of Paul’s first converts in Achaia; one of the few individuals Paul baptized in Corinth (1 Cor. 1:16); leader in the Corinthian church (1 Cor. 16:15-16); personal name meaning “crown”

BIBLE READING PLAN

MARCH

- 1. 1 Corinthians 1:1-9
- 2. 1 Corinthians 1:10-17
- 3. 1 Corinthians 1:18-25
- 4. 1 Corinthians 1:26-31
- 5. 1 Corinthians 2:1-8
- 6. 1 Corinthians 2:9-16
- 7. 1 Corinthians 3:1-9
- 8. 1 Corinthians 3:10-17
- 9. 1 Corinthians 3:18-23
- 10. 1 Corinthians 4:1-5
- 11. 1 Corinthians 4:6-13
- 12. 1 Corinthians 4:14-21
- 13. 1 Corinthians 5:1-8
- 14. 1 Corinthians 5:9-13
- 15. 1 Corinthians 6:1-11
- 16. 1 Corinthians 6:12-20
- 17. 1 Corinthians 7:1-7
- 18. 1 Corinthians 7:8-16
- 19. 1 Corinthians 7:17-24
- 20. 1 Corinthians 7:25-31
- 21. 1 Corinthians 7:32-40
- 22. 1 Corinthians 8:1-6
- 23. 1 Corinthians 8:7-13
- 24. 1 Corinthians 9:1-7
- 25. 1 Corinthians 9:8-18
- 26. 1 Corinthians 9:19-27
- 27. 1 Corinthians 10:1-13
- 28. 1 Corinthians 10:14-22
- 29. 1 Corinthians 10:23-33
- 30. 1 Corinthians 11:1-6
- 31. 1 Corinthians 11:7-16

APRIL

- 1. 1 Corinthians 12:1-11
- 2. 1 Corinthians 12:12-17
- 3. 1 Corinthians 12:18-26
- 4. 1 Corinthians 12:27-31
- 5. 1 Corinthians 13:1-13
- 6. 1 Corinthians 14:1-5
- 7. 1 Corinthians 14:6-12
- 8. 1 Corinthians 14:13-19
- 9. 1 Corinthians 14:20-25
- 10. 1 Corinthians 14:26-32
- 11. 1 Corinthians 14:33-40
- 12. 1 Corinthians 15:1-11
- 13. 1 Corinthians 15:12-19
- 14. 1 Corinthians 15:20-28
- 15. 1 Corinthians 15:29-34
- 16. 1 Corinthians 15:35-49
- 17. 1 Corinthians 15:50-58
- 18. 1 Corinthians 16:1-4
- 19. 1 Corinthians 16:5-12
- 20. 1 Corinthians 16:13-24
- 21. 2 Corinthians 1:1-7
- 22. 2 Corinthians 1:8-11
- 23. 2 Corinthians 1:12-22
- 24. 2 Corinthians 1:23-2:4
- 25. 2 Corinthians 2:5-11
- 26. 2 Corinthians 2:12-17
- 27. 2 Corinthians 3:1-6
- 28. 2 Corinthians 3:7-11
- 29. 2 Corinthians 3:12-18
- 30. 2 Corinthians 4:1-6

MAY

- 1. 2 Corinthians 4:7-18
- 2. 2 Corinthians 5:1-5
- 3. 2 Corinthians 5:6-10
- 4. 2 Corinthians 5:11-15
- 5. 2 Corinthians 5:16-19
- 6. 2 Corinthians 5:20-6:2
- 7. 2 Corinthians 6:3-13
- 8. 2 Corinthians 6:14-18
- 9. 2 Corinthians 7:1-4
- 10. 2 Corinthians 7:5-9
- 11. 2 Corinthians 7:10-16
- 12. 2 Corinthians 8:1-6
- 13. 2 Corinthians 8:7-15
- 14. 2 Corinthians 8:16-24
- 15. 2 Corinthians 9:1-9
- 16. 2 Corinthians 9:10-15
- 17. 2 Corinthians 10:1-6
- 18. 2 Corinthians 10:7-11
- 19. 2 Corinthians 10:12-18
- 20. 2 Corinthians 11:1-4
- 21. 2 Corinthians 11:5-11
- 22. 2 Corinthians 11:12-15
- 23. 2 Corinthians 11:16-23
- 24. 2 Corinthians 11:24-33
- 25. 2 Corinthians 12:1-5
- 26. 2 Corinthians 12:6-10
- 27. 2 Corinthians 12:11-13
- 28. 2 Corinthians 12:14-18
- 29. 2 Corinthians 12:19-21
- 30. 2 Corinthians 13:1-4
- 31. 2 Corinthians 13:5-13



INTRODUCTION TO 1,2 CORINTHIANS

Passionate. Powerful. Purposeful. These three terms are good, comprehensive descriptors of the letters to the Corinthian church. Both letters contain passionate responses to doctrinal and practical matters that needed attention. Each section, chapter, and verse are purposeful by design, addressing those issues with sound theology, keen insight, and gospel-centeredness. Without a doubt, the Corinthian correspondence reveals a powerful presentation of gospel truths and applications, written ably in argument and clarity.

»» WRITER

The apostle Paul is identified as the writer of both letters in their opening verses. Sosthenes is included in the greeting of 1 Corinthians (1 Cor. 1:1), and Timothy, who likely assisted Paul in the transcribing of the letters, is mentioned in the greeting of 2 Corinthians (2 Cor. 1:1).

»» DESTINATION

Acts 18 recalls the founding of the Corinthian church during Paul's third missionary journey. He spent eighteen months establishing the church before heading on to his next opportunity. Corinth was one of the largest cities in Greece during Paul's day—demonstrating a savvy missiological strategy on Paul's part. The city's location in the region of Achaia made it a crossroads for both land and sea trade, bringing considerable wealth to its citizenship. Corinth was also well-known for its immorality and religious pluralism.

»» KEY THEMES

- Key Themes in 1 Corinthians—Christian unity, sexual morality, women's roles, spiritual gifts, and the resurrection.
- Key Themes in 2 Corinthians—Paul's apostolic authority, the new covenant, the intermediate state (believers between the death of the body and the resurrection), sacrificial giving, and condemnation of false teachers.

OUTLINE OF 1,2 CORINTHIANS

1 CORINTHIANS

I. Greetings and Thanksgiving (1:1-9)

II. Problems in the Church (1:10–6:20)

- A. Disunity (1:10–4:21)
- B. Immorality Tolerated (5:1–6:20)

III. Answers to Questions from the Corinthians (7:1–14:40)

- A. Questions About Marriage (7:1-40)
- B. Limitations of Christian Liberty (8:1–11:1)
- C. Practices in Public Worship (11:2-16)
- D. Behavior at the Lord's Supper (11:17-34)
- E. Exercise of Spiritual Gifts (12:1–14:40)

IV. The Resurrection of the Body (15:1-58)

V. Conclusion (16:1-24)

2 CORINTHIANS

I. Special Greetings (1:1-11)

II. Paul's Ministry (1:12–7:16)

- A. Paul's Itinerary (1:12–2:13)
- B. Paul's Message (2:14–5:10)
- C. Paul's Purpose (5:11–7:16)

III. A Collection for Needy Christians (8:1–9:15)

IV. The Case Against False Apostles (10:1–13:10)

V. Final Greetings (13:11-13)





UNITED IN CHRIST

All believers share the same salvation and thus should be unified through that confession.

1 CORINTHIANS 1:10-25

A clear purpose keeps some organizations and clubs viable. The organization's purpose unifies people with different backgrounds and opinions. But purpose alone will not keep an organization together; the purpose must be worthy and compelling. A purpose that is bigger than the individual or the needs of the group will more likely unify and sustain a group than a purpose that is reactionary or self-focused.

Have you been part of a club or organization that was driven by its purpose? How did that purpose help them deal with differences within the group?

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

1 CORINTHIANS 1:1–4:21

The church is a group of people from many different walks of life, backgrounds, and interests that finds its unity in the gospel. At times, divisions occur in the church over many different things—some significant and some trite. Sometimes we let our preferences get in the way of our mission, and believers are unnecessarily divided. In this week’s lesson, Paul addressed divisions in the Corinthian church and called the congregation to be united.

Paul began this letter with a greeting and a prayerful thanksgiving to God for the church at Corinth. Paul’s terms “grace” and “peace” (1:3) are foundational truths that will guide his whole approach to his readers in this letter.

Although the church at Corinth had significant problems, Paul was thankful that the grace of God was given to them in Christ Jesus (1:4), and that God called them into fellowship with His Son (1:9). They had been sanctified in Christ and called as saints (1:2), having been enriched in Him in every way (1:5). These truths were important for the Corinthian believers to remember, especially as Paul’s stern correction was soon to follow. Paul didn’t begin his letter by exposing his readers’ laundry list of sins, but rather pointed them back to their true identity in Christ.

Paul also mentioned peace. With all of their divisions and problems, Paul desired for them the kind of peace and wholeness that the gospel provides. Whatever their circumstances or the difficulties between them, God had called them to live in peace.

Early in this letter, however, Paul raised the issue of problems in the church at Corinth. These problems—mostly moral and relational, but some theological—he will address in this letter. He had a fatherly love for this church, which drove him to confront the problems present among her members (4:14-15). In the first four chapters of 1 Corinthians, Paul focused his attention on the disunity that was tearing the church apart.

As you read 1 Corinthians 1:10-25, look for words and phrases that identify the importance of unity in the church.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

CALL FOR UNITY (1 COR. 1:10)

¹⁰ Now I urge you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree in what you say, that there be no divisions among you, and that you be united with the same understanding and the same conviction.

VERSE 10

After his introductory comments, Paul jumped right into the serious issue of *divisions* in the church. He made a point to let the Corinthians know that this was a family discussion. After all, he was writing to *brothers and sisters and sisters* in the Lord.

Paul urged them *in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ*. Appealing to Jesus was an important move here by Paul. There is no higher authority than our Lord, who Himself prayed that His followers would live in unity with one another (John 17:20-23).

Areas of Potential Division in 1 Corinthians

- *Leaders (1:12–4:21)*
- *Tolerating immorality in the church (5:1-13)*
- *Going to secular court against fellow believers (6:1-11)*
- *Marriage (7:1-40)*
- *Meat offered to idols (chaps. 8–10)*
- *Conduct of women in the church (11:1-16)*
- *The Lord's Supper (11:17-34)*
- *Spiritual gifts (chaps. 12–14)*
- *Jesus' resurrection (chap. 15)*

Paul called the church to unity in three specific ways. First, they should *agree* in what they *say*. There is unity through a common confession of the gospel. That confession is Jesus Christ and Him crucified (2:2). As Paul did in Romans and Ephesians, he laid a doctrinal foundation upon which an ethical life might be built. Paul was calling the believers to doctrinal and theological unity.

Second, there should be *no divisions* among them. Paul was calling them to relational unity based on their identity in

Jesus Christ. This is the core of Paul's message in chapters 1–4. The Corinthian believers were to be united together in Christ, not divided into factions that separated them from one another.

Third, they should have *the same understanding and the same conviction*. Paul was calling them to missional unity, reminding them that there is no room for disagreement about the nature of the gospel or the mission to be ambassadors of God's reconciling work in Christ (2 Cor. 5:16-21). If the Corinthian believers were divided among themselves, the mission and the fruitfulness of the church was in perilous danger, indeed.

What factors could potentially threaten unity in a church? What steps might be taken to ensure that a local church remains unified?

KEY DOCTRINE: *The Church*

A New Testament church of the Lord Jesus Christ is an autonomous local congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel.

CONTEMPT FOR DIVISIONS (1 COR. 1:11-16)

¹¹ For it has been reported to me about you, my brothers and sisters, by members of Chloe's people, that there is rivalry among you. ¹² What I am saying is this: One of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ." ¹³ Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in Paul's name? ¹⁴ I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, ¹⁵ so that no one can say you were baptized in my name. ¹⁶ I did, in fact, baptize the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I don't recall if I baptized anyone else.

VERSES 11-12

Someone informed Paul about a *rivalry* that threatened the church. It was *reported* to Paul by *members of Chloe's people*. This report was no



idle gossip, but rather a sincere recognition of the danger of division running rampant among members.

The nature of the rivalry in the Corinthian church is both sad and understandable. It is sad because it was happening at all. But it is understandable because of the personalities at the heart of it. Some were claiming to *belong to Paul*, some *to Apollos*, some *to Cephas*, and some (of the more “spiritual” folks!) *to Christ*. These men were important leaders connected to the church in Corinth in some way. They each played an influential part in the growth of the believers in Corinth.

First, Paul founded the church in Corinth (see Acts 18:8). Second, Apollos played an instrumental role in the growth of the church (Acts 18:24-27). Third, Cephas was important to some in the Corinthian church. Cephas, also known as Peter, was one of the Twelve and close to Jesus. Cephas, James, and John were “recognized as pillars” in the church in Jerusalem (Gal. 2:9). Peter was known to be an apostle to the Jews (Gal. 2:7-8), which is likely the reason some in the Corinthian church followed him and claimed to belong to his camp.

Ironically, some also claimed to belong to Christ. The truth is, all of the Corinthian believers belonged to Him. It could be that those who made this claim did so out of genuine theological accuracy, rising above the fray of lesser allegiances and divisions. Or, it could be that they wanted to appear super-spiritual to those who chose to align with Paul, Apollos, or Peter. “Hey, you belong to Apollos? Oh yeah? Well, I belong to Christ. So take that!”

Where do you see this kind of division in the church today? How does rivalry get in the way of God's work?

VERSES 13-16

Paul's contempt for this rivalry and division is clear in these verses. He asked a series of rhetorical questions to make his point: ***Is Christ divided?*** No, He is the head, we are His body, and we are one in Him (12:12-30). ***Was Paul crucified for you?*** No. We preach Christ crucified (1:23; 2:2). ***Or were you baptized in Paul's name?*** No, we were baptized into Christ in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19).

Paul was thankful he baptized only a handful of people in Corinth. He recalled baptizing only •*Crispus and •Gaius* and *the household of •Stephanas*. What a relief for Paul! Even though he laid a foundation as a skilled builder for the Corinthian church (3:10), he was not interested in building his own little kingdom. He was an apostle of Christ Jesus, interested in preaching Christ only and Christ sufficient—that Christ’s kingdom might grow and flourish.

Some people today take pride in the fact that they were baptized by a well-known pastor, or converted under the ministry of a famous evangelist, or follow the teaching of a respected theologian or leader. More disturbing is the reality that some leaders boast in numbers of people they’ve baptized or ministries they’ve grown. Paul’s verdict? He said the Corinthians should think of him and Apollos as servants of Christ and managers of the mysteries of God (4:1). Nothing more, nothing less. We ought to think of leaders we respect in this way too.

Paul showed contempt for people claiming to belong to him but later urged the church in Corinth to imitate him (4:16). What is the difference?

THE CROSS THAT DIVIDES (1 COR. 1:17-25)

¹⁷ For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel — not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ will not be emptied of its effect. ¹⁸ For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but it is the power of God to us who are being saved. ¹⁹ For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and I will set aside the intelligence of the intelligent. ²⁰ Where is the one who is wise? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the debater of this age? Hasn’t God made the world’s wisdom foolish?

²¹ For since, in God’s wisdom, the world did not know God through wisdom, God was pleased to save those who believe through the foolishness of what is preached. ²² For the Jews ask for signs and the Greeks seek wisdom, ²³ but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles. ²⁴ Yet to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God, ²⁵ because God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength.



VERSE 17

Paul's contempt for the Corinthian rivalry comes out in the statement, *Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the •gospel*. What could Paul possibly mean by this? Surely he was not invalidating the necessity of baptism. Let's hear him within the context of these verses. He just made the argument that people weren't baptized in his name and how thankful he was that his Corinthian ministry wasn't built upon that metric. He argued against the factions in the church that bore his name and the names of others in favor of unity in Christ. So why did he seem to take a pot-shot at baptism here?

Paul would have known Jesus' Great Commission in Matthew 28:19, commanding His followers to make disciples and to baptize them. Paul obeyed that command. In his other letters, the apostle was clear that believers are united with Christ's death and resurrection through baptism. They are baptized into Jesus' death and raised to "walk in newness of life" (Rom. 6:3-5). Believers are "buried with him in baptism" (Col. 2:12). Paul wasn't here contradicting what he said elsewhere about baptism. What he was saying here is that his calling and mission were not to gather people to himself and his own ministry; instead, Christ had called him to preach the gospel. Again, Paul was downplaying himself that Christ might be exalted.

VERSES 18-23

For Paul, *the word of the cross* of Christ was a rallying point and unifier for the church. There should be no disagreement, disunity, or division about that among God's people. But the cross does divide; it divides *those who are perishing* from those *who are being saved*. The cross divides those who depend on *the world's wisdom* from those who believe through *the foolishness of what is preached* about Christ. The same message of the cross that is the unifying call for believers is also a divisive message for those who seek human wisdom and wonders as the highest end.

In the Corinthian culture and context, Paul was contending with two objections to the message of the gospel. First, *Jews* asked for *signs*. For the Jews, the cross was a bad sign, identified with a curse and not a blessing (Deut. 21:23; Gal. 3:13). For this reason, the cross is a stumbling block to the Jews; it is a divisive claim on God's behalf. A basic reading of the Old Testament shows that Jews have received signs and wonders from God through their entire

history as His people. God's power was manifest in various ways for the Jews, but now, Paul said, ***Christ is the power of God.***

Second, ***Greeks*** sought ***wisdom***. Much of Paul's flow of thought in these verses compared ***human wisdom*** with ***the wisdom of God***. Quoting Isaiah 29:14, Paul noted that God will ***destroy the wisdom of the wise*** because ***the world did not know God through wisdom***. God's wisdom in putting forth His Son, crucified on a cross as the means of salvation, may appear as foolishness to some, but God is ***pleased to save those who believe*** through this message. The truth is, ***Christ is the wisdom of God.***

So ***we preach Christ crucified***, Paul said. This claim, at its heart, is divisive to the world; but ***to those who are called*** it is God's wisdom and power. Ironically, Paul concluded, ***God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's strength is stronger than human strength.*** Perhaps Isaiah was still in the back of Paul's mind, recalling how God's thoughts are not our thoughts and His ways higher than ours (Isa. 55:8-9).

The cross divides because the world seeks its own way, but the only way to God is through His crucified Son. Truly, God has chosen what is foolish and weak and insignificant in the eyes of the world (1:27-28) to glorify Himself through His Son. Why? So that no one may boast in His presence (1:29).

How is the cross of Christ divisive in our world today? How is it a stumbling block and foolishness for people today?

BIBLE SKILL: *Memorize a verse and apply it to a real life situation.*

Memorize 1 Corinthians 1:23 in your preferred Bible translation. Then write the verse in your own words. Finally, write a couple of sentences stating how the verse can help you to remember that every person you meet in the coming days needs the gospel.



IN MY CONTEXT

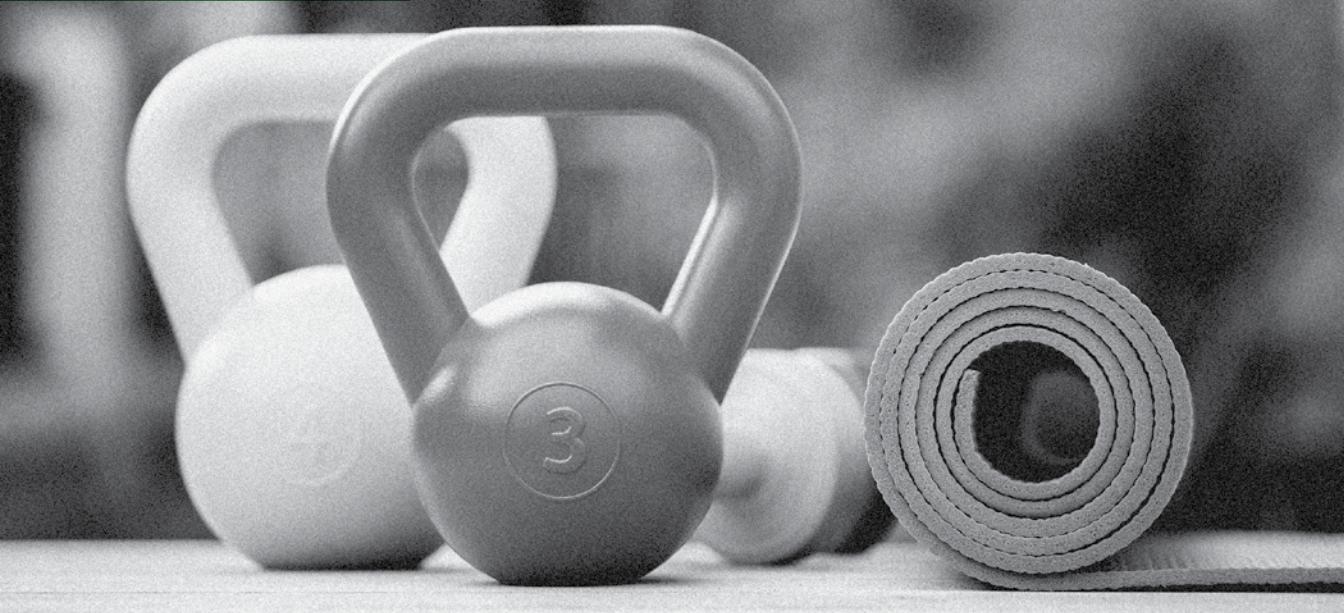
- Believers are to be unified by their confession of Christ.
- Basing allegiances on human personalities leads to prideful boasting and divisions in the church.
- The only dividing line believers should recognize is the division between those who are saved and those who are not.

Consider the relationships you have with other believers, noting those with different backgrounds. How have those relationships strengthened your spiritual life? Thank God for friendships based on a shared Savior.

As a group, determine practical ways you can hold each other accountable to preserve unity and to help each other resist the temptation of forming divisive factions around popular leaders or personalities.

What walls have you built between yourself and other people? Which of those walls get in the way of your building relationships with other believers? What actions do you need to take to begin to remove these walls?

Prayer Needs



GLORIFYING GOD

Believers honor God through holy living.

1 CORINTHIANS 6:12-20

Some people hate their bodies. They see themselves as ugly or fat or too short or too tall or whatever. Some people are proud of their bodies. They work out and are fit. Most of us are probably somewhere in the middle, we neither love our bodies nor loathe them. As long as we are in this life, we are tied to our bodies. We can bring dishonor to our bodies through such things as gluttony or sexual immorality, or we can use our bodies as instruments for good. How we use our bodies matters.

To what degree do you think it matters how a person uses his or her body? Explain. How would you describe the connection between your body and your spiritual life?

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

1 CORINTHIANS 5:1–6:20

It's easy to embrace the notion, "What I do with my own body is up to me. It's nobody else's business." In the first century, some of the Corinthian Christians thought similarly. They had come out of lifestyles of physical indulgence, whether in eating or drinking or sexual expression. They supposed that now, as followers of Jesus, everything was still permitted. In this week's lesson we will consider how Paul helped these immature believers come to a better understanding of how their bodies were to be used. No doubt they were surprised to learn that they did not have the right to do with their bodies whatever they wanted. Indeed, their physical bodies did not even belong to them.

After Paul addressed the issue of division in the Corinthian church (1:10–4:21), he turned his focus to another report that reached his ears: sexual immorality in the church. It was the kind of sexual immorality that was not even tolerated among the Gentiles (5:1). A man was sleeping with his stepmother. This notorious case of sexual immorality needed to be confronted.

In 6:1-11, Paul dealt with the problem of lawsuits among believers. Paul had reminded the Corinthian believers that they had every right to judge and evaluate each other since they were members of one another in the body of Christ (5:12). Couldn't issues be resolved amongst themselves? Did they really need to go before worldly people to arbitrate matters between believers? For Paul, this was a shameful thing (6:5) and he redirected them toward humility and selflessness (6:7). In 6:9-11, Paul resumed his exhortation concerning sexual immorality, which set up his comments in this week's Scripture passage (6:12-20).

The verses of this week's lesson fall within Paul's larger discussion of Christian liberty and freedom in chapters 5–11. It seems like individual believers in the Corinthian church were only concerned about themselves and their own pleasures or status. Whether the topic was sexual immorality, marriage, food, or the Lord's Supper, Paul exhorted them to honor the Lord through holy living and to honor one another selflessly as members of the body of Christ.

Read 1 Corinthians 6:12-20 in your Bible. Look for actions Paul characterized as dishonoring to God and the gospel.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

FOCUSED ON CHRIST'S LORDSHIP (1 COR. 6:12-14)

¹²“Everything is permissible for me,” but not everything is beneficial. “Everything is permissible for me,” but I will not be mastered by anything. ¹³“Food is for the stomach and the stomach for food,” and God will do away with both of them. However, the body is not for sexual immorality but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. ¹⁴God raised up the Lord and will also raise us up by his power.

VERSE 12

Paul opened this section of his letter with a quotation, “*Everything is permissible for me*,” which he used twice in this verse and twice again in 10:23. Biblical scholars are divided on whether or not Paul was referring to something he himself said, or if this phrase was a slogan from the broader Corinthian culture. Either way, the Corinthian believers had misapplied this phrase, using it to pursue ungodly actions and selfish ends.

Freedom in Christ was a key theological theme for Paul (see also Gal. 5:1). Freedom in Christ is never a license to sin. That’s a misunderstanding of grace and of the gospel. Paul said to the Christians in Rome, “Should we continue in sin so that grace may multiply? Absolutely not! How can we who died to sin still live in it?” (Rom. 6:1-2).

Paul added a couple qualifiers to the idea of permissibility and freedom for believers. First, he claimed that *not everything is beneficial*. You might be free to pursue some things as a Christian and not sin; however, that doesn’t mean you should. Paul applied that concept to whether the Corinthian believers should eat food sacrificed to idols (see 8:1-13). They were free to eat if their consciences were clear about it, but it would not be beneficial (in fact, it would be damaging) to eat if a fellow Christian stumbled



because of it. In that case, Paul said he'd never again eat meat and that he'd prefer his brother in Christ over his own freedom (8:13).

Second, Paul would ***not be mastered by anything***. Nothing else was to control the Corinthian believers or master them—only Jesus. Sadly, many of Paul's readers were being mastered by their selfish desires, especially concerning food and sex. If Christ is Lord, then He has authority to tell us how we are to handle our desires for food and sex.

What other areas beyond food and sex might master a Christian's life if left unchecked or unchallenged?

If Christ is Lord, then He has authority to tell us how we are to handle our desires for food and sex.

VERSE 13

Paul quoted another slogan, "***Food is for the stomach and the stomach for food***," likely dealing with a distorted view of the body held by some Corinthian believers. This slogan probably did arise from the broader culture, and some had adopted it in the church. Paul's simple exhortation was that ***God will do away with both of them***.

Again, Paul corrected their faulty understanding of the body. They thought, "If the body is going to be destroyed, then what does it matter?" Paul said it really does matter because ***the body is not for sexual immorality but for the Lord***. Jesus is Lord even over the body, so don't live like your stomach is god or sexual pleasure is god.

VERSE 14

Paul's primary theological justification for claiming that the body matters was rooted in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The fact that God raised Jesus is of paramount importance for the believer. If Jesus has not been raised, then there are bigger problems than what we think about food and sex (1 Cor. 15:1-58). Yet, it does matter how we view food and sex.

Believers are not to think they'll be disembodied entities floating around on clouds for all eternity. Rather, just as Jesus was resurrected bodily, we too await the redemption of our bodies

in a glorious resurrection to come (1 Cor. 15; 1 Thess. 4:13-18). The bottom line is that the body matters, and what you do with it matters, because Jesus is Lord.

What is the relationship between freedom and responsibility? What might be said to believers who think they are free to do as they please?

BIBLE SKILL: *Dig deeper into the background and usage of key words and phrases.*

The term translated “sexual immorality” (1 Cor. 6:13) is from the Greek term *porneia* (from which our English term “pornography” is derived). Read selected passages from the list below and make notes on how this term is used in the New Testament: Matthew 5:32; 15:19; 19:9; Mark 7:21; John 8:41; Acts 15:20,29; 21:25; Romans 1:29; 1 Corinthians 5:1; 6:13,18; 7:2; 2 Corinthians 12:21; Galatians 5:19; Ephesians 5:3; Colossians 3:5; 1 Thessalonians 4:3.

JOINED WITH CHRIST (1 COR. 6:15-17)

¹⁵ Don't you know that your bodies are a part of Christ's body? So should I take a part of Christ's body and make it part of a prostitute? Absolutely not! ¹⁶ Don't you know that anyone joined to a prostitute is one body with her? For Scripture says, The two will become one flesh. ¹⁷ But anyone joined to the Lord is one spirit with him.

VERSE 15

When we are saved, a vital union is formed between us and the Lord. Jesus promised this oneness, describing the relationship analogously as a vine and branches, showing the organic and vital union between the two (John 15). He also said that He and



the Father would come and make their home in us through the Holy Spirit and emphasized how He is in us and we are in Him (John 14:20).

Once again, Paul offered a justification for why it matters how a believer handles his or her body sexually. It matters because we belong to Christ; it matters because we are vitally a part of Christ's body, the church. As members of the church, there is accountability to one another for how we behave, which is why Paul commanded stern discipline for the notorious sexual immorality in 5:1-13. In this current verse, Paul's outrage toward taking a part of Christ's body and making it a part of a prostitute is clear. Should something like this be allowed? Should it be "permissible"? ***Absolutely not!***

Why might a person bristle at the thought of accountability with another person? How does being held accountable by others help a person use his or her freedom for good?

VERSE 16

Some Corinthian believers apparently had no problem with using a temple prostitute. But again, sex is no mere bodily function without significance or consequence. In fact, Paul said ***anyone joined to a prostitute is one body with her***. Why would one who is joined with Christ as part of His body be joined to a prostitute and become one with her body? Such a thing is unthinkable!

Quoting Genesis 2:24, Paul reminded them that in a sexual union, the two become ***one flesh***. The sexual union is reserved for marriage alone, between one man and one woman. Using temple prostitutes for sexual gratification may have been common in the culture, but for the Corinthian believers, it was off-limits because they had been joined with Christ.

How should being united with Christ impact how a person views what he or she does with his or her body?

VERSE 17

One might think Paul would say that anyone joined to the Lord is one “body” with him. Paul made the claim that our bodies are a part of Christ’s body (6:15), true enough. But here, he stated an altogether greater reality: when we are joined to the Lord we are *one spirit with him*. This reality is more remarkable than bodily union. We are joined to Christ spiritually and, consequently, our bodies are important because they contain something of extraordinary significance. Paul was not downplaying the body. Rather, he was about to talk about the Holy Spirit and how there is a spiritual reality of immense importance tied to our bodies. In this way, truly, believers are one with Christ.

KEY DOCTRINE: *The Family*

The family is God’s unique gift to reveal the union between Christ and His church and to provide for the man and the woman in marriage the framework for intimate companionship, the channel of sexual expression according to biblical standards, and the means for procreation of the human race.

BOUGHT WITH A PRICE (1 COR. 6:18-20)

¹⁸ Flee sexual immorality! Every other sin a person commits is outside the body, but the person who is sexually immoral sins against his own body. ¹⁹ Don’t you know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, ²⁰ for you were bought at a price. So glorify God with your body.

VERSE 18

Paul minced no words: *Flee sexual immorality!* There should be no hint of sexual immorality among those in the church (see Eph. 5:3). Run if you have to, literally, like Joseph did when Potiphar’s wife made sexual advances toward him (Gen. 39).

Every other sin a person commits is outside the body is a difficult phrase to understand. What does *the body* refer to here? Is it the physical body or the body of Christ? Paul added that *the person who is sexually immoral sins against his own body*, raising additional issues.

Perhaps Paul was saying that sexual sin is unique and damaging in a way that other sins are not. Certainly, the consequences for an



individual are lasting in ways that are unique compared to other sins (unplanned pregnancies, diseases, etc.). But in context, Paul was likely saying that the bodily union of sexual immorality is incongruent with union to Christ (6:15). To sin sexually is to defile the temple of the Holy Spirit.

VERSE 19

Why does a sexually immoral person sin against his own body? Because the believer's **body is a temple of the Holy Spirit**. There's an extreme irony here. Some Corinthian believers were going to the pagan temple to unite with prostitutes, when they themselves were temples of the Holy Spirit because they were united with Christ.

Earlier, Paul referred to the entire church as God's temple (see 1 Cor. 3:16). Here, the reference is singular, referring to individuals indwelt by the Spirit. Paul identified this Holy Spirit as One **who is in you, whom you have from God**. Believers have the abiding Spirit within them.

The bottom line is, **you are not your own**. Paul had been driving at this the whole time. The body is for the Lord, and the Lord for the body (6:13). Should you join yourself, sexually, to a prostitute? Absolutely not! (6:15) Why? Because you are joined to Christ and you are not your own. Jesus calls the shots. He commands our obedience. He deserves total devotion because of who He is and what He has done for us. We cannot and must not forget to whom we belong. Our bodies belong to Jesus and they are designed to be the place of His presence, on display for all to see.

VERSE 20

You were bought at a price, and what a price that was! We were redeemed "with the precious blood of Christ" (1 Pet. 1:19). If we have been purchased by Him, then we belong to Him. If we belong to Him, then He can tell us what to do with what He owns—our bodies. **So glorify God with your body**. Consider your body as a living sacrifice to God, holy to Him (see Rom. 12:1). We were made for this. We were bought for this.

How does what Paul wrote in 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8 compare to what he wrote to the Corinthian believers?

IN MY CONTEXT

- Believers can live holy lives by focusing on Christ's Lordship and not temporal things.
- Believers can have a deep relationship with the Father through faith in Christ.
- Believers can bring glory to God by how they care for and use their bodies.

Examine your focus in life. Are you more focused on Christ or on temporal things? What evidence would you point to in support of your answer? What needs to change and how?

Discuss as a group ways of holding one another accountable for using your body to honor God. How can the group hold one another accountable without judging, condoning, or ignoring?

Ask God to reveal to you areas of your life where you are misusing your body. Confess them to God and repent. What steps do you need to take to make sure you honor Christ in all areas of your life?

Prayer Needs





KEEPING COMMITMENTS

Believers honor God by keeping their vows related to marriage and purity.

1 CORINTHIANS 7:1-13

Marriage is hard. Both husband and wife must commit to each other. The relationship must be fostered and guarded. The lack of biblical standards in society adds to the challenge. It seems that much more attention is given to redefining marriage than to upholding God's design for His creation, cluttering the conversation and commitment needed to make biblical marriage work.

What are the main challenges people face today regarding marriage? How important is it for them to think of marriage as a lifetime commitment?

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

1 CORINTHIANS 7:1-40

Paul was not yet finished dealing with sexual immorality and related issues. His discussion in this chapter flows from what he wrote and argued in chapters 5–6, but the immediate connection is to the final section of chapter 6 (vv. 12-20), where he dealt with the relationship between sexual immorality and the body.

Paul was taking the opportunity to offer a response to the matters they asked him about (7:1). Having dealt with the negative aspects of sexual immorality, Paul now provided constructive, positive advice to help the Corinthian believers know how to glorify God with their bodies (6:20), whether they were married, single, or widowed. Likely, they asked Paul some specifics related to sex in general, marriage, singleness and more. This chapter addresses those areas.

One of the main principles Paul conveyed to the Corinthian believers in this chapter is that each person is to remain in the situation in which he or she was called (7:24). This principle is repeated three times in verses 17-24 and directs the entire discussion of the chapter. Perhaps some Corinthian believers assumed that Paul's teaching on being a new creation in Christ, in which the old has passed away and the new has come (2 Cor. 5:17), meant that even marital relations were to cease and change. Maybe this was a part of the matters they asked about. Regardless, Paul's counsel was for them to stay in the situation they were in when God called them to salvation.

Read 1 Corinthians 7:1-13 in your Bible. Identify phrases that give a reason or rationale for Paul's directives. How do these reasons emphasize living a holy life?

EXPLORE THE TEXT

MARRIAGE AND INTIMACY (1 COR. 7:1-7)

¹Now in response to the matters you wrote about: "It is good for a man not to use a woman for sex."² But because sexual immorality

is so common, each man should have sexual relations with his own wife, and each woman should have sexual relations with her own husband. ³ A husband should fulfill his marital duty to his wife, and likewise a wife to her husband. ⁴ A wife does not have the right over her own body, but her husband does. In the same way, a husband does not have the right over his own body, but his wife does. ⁵ Do not deprive one another — except when you agree for a time, to devote yourselves to prayer. Then come together again; otherwise, Satan may tempt you because of your lack of self-control. ⁶ I say this as a concession, not as a command. ⁷ I wish that all people were as I am. But each has his own gift from God, one person has this gift, another has that.

VERSE 1

Responding to some issues the Corinthian believers wrote about, Paul's reply was: ***"It is good for a man not to use a woman for sex."*** This statement is challenging on a couple of levels. It is unclear whether or not this was Paul's own view or if he was quoting something they said when they wrote him. On this difficulty, biblical scholars are divided. Either way, the quotation allowed Paul to teach the Corinthians more about a proper understanding of sex and relationships, which he was willing to do.

Another challenging aspect for this statement is its meaning. A comparison of Bible translations shows the difficulty. Does it mean "not to touch a woman," which is the literal Greek here (although all recognize this is a euphemism for sexual relations)? Does it mean "not to marry" or "not to have sexual relations with a woman" at all? The statement points back to Paul's earlier discussion of a man sleeping with his stepmother (1 Cor. 5:1) and of having sex with a prostitute (1 Cor. 6:15-16), but also points ahead to how sex is to function within the marital duties between a husband and wife (7:2-4). Perhaps Paul was simply saying that sex is more than just pleasure, so don't view another person as merely a sex object to use selfishly.

Discuss why Paul claimed it is good not to "use" someone for sex. What implications does this have regarding pornography?

VERSE 2

The reality Paul had to confront was that **sexual immorality** was **so common** in the culture of Corinth and, sadly, in the church. Paul said there was an appropriate way to handle this problem: **each man should have sexual relations with his own wife, and each woman ... with her own husband**. This answer should not surprise his readers (nor us), since this teaching is grounded in God's design at creation. God established the institution of marriage between a husband and wife (Gen. 1–2).

No doubt Paul was aware of the catastrophic nature of sexual sin, illustrated far too often in the people and events of the Old Testament. His correction was to return to God's design established in the early pages of Genesis. God's design is for sexual relations to flourish privately and pleasurably between a husband and a wife alone.

KEY DOCTRINE: *Family*

Marriage is God's unique gift to reveal the union between Christ and His church and to provide for the man and the woman in marriage the framework for intimate companionship, the channel of sexual expression according to biblical standards, and the means for procreation of the human race.

VERSES 3-4

A clear implication arising from God's design is that husbands and wives have a **marital duty** to fulfill for each other. The language Paul used here is one of debt and repayment, showing that sexual fulfillment in marriage is not dependent upon how one "feels" toward the other but rather upon the nature of the relationship itself—a covenant agreement with obligations for each party.

Strikingly, Paul's instruction calls for mutuality and equality with respect to this obligation. By ancient standards, women had lesser rights and different obligations than did men. But Paul's exhortation was revolutionary. In fact, he confronted this cultural disposition by calling first for the husband to **fulfill his marital duty to his wife** then the **wife to her husband**.

Speaking of rights, Paul addressed that issue in verse 4, although it may not have been how the Corinthian believers



would have expected. He said that a *wife does not have the right over her own body*, nor does *the husband ... have the right over his own body*. Paul wasn't establishing a kind of carnal authority that encourages exploitation or self-centeredness in the relationship, especially sexually. Rather, he was extending the meaning of the "one flesh" relationship beyond mere obligation to actually belonging to one another. Just as our bodies are a part of Christ's body (1 Cor. 6:15), so also in marriage our bodies are part of each other. We belong to Christ, joined spiritually with Him, but we also belong to our spouse, joined bodily with him or her. So, the rights now belong to the spouse when it comes to sexual relations and sexual fulfillment.

How does this teaching of duty and rights in marriage contrast with contemporary views about marital relationships? What corrections need to be made for a healthy view of sex within marriage? What are some implications to be avoided?

Biblical Purposes of Marriage

| | |
|------------------------|--|
| <i>God's glory</i> | <i>1 Corinthians 10:31; Ephesians 5:21-33</i> |
| <i>Companionship</i> | <i>Genesis 2:18</i> |
| <i>Procreation</i> | <i>Genesis 1:28; Psalm 127:3-5</i> |
| <i>Sexual intimacy</i> | <i>Genesis 1:27-28; 2:24-25; Proverbs 5:15-19; 1 Corinthians 7:2,5</i> |

VERSES 5-7

Because there is a marital duty to fulfill, and because each spouse's body belongs to the other by rights, Paul said, ***Do not deprive one another***. It's one thing to make a case for sex being reserved for married couples only. It is another thing altogether for married couples to fulfill their marital duties to each other—consistently and happily—to help each other have self-control and walk in holiness.

Sadly, some use sex wrongly in marriage, forgetting the "duty" and "rights" discussion. Instead, withholding sex from each other becomes a weapon. But it should not be this way. Paul said if

we deprive one another we actually put our spouse in danger of temptation by Satan because of lack of self-control. Each person is responsible for how he or she handles that temptation, but the point is that we are stronger—under better control of ourselves—if we are satisfied sexually by our spouse.

Paul told the Corinthian believers there are only two reasons to refrain from providing sexual fulfillment to their spouse: when you *agree for a time* and *to devote yourselves to prayer*. Sometimes there needs to be intense or intentional spiritual focus, and regular marital duties will have to wait. Paul admitted that this advice was given *as a concession, not as a command*.

Finally, Paul concluded this section and set up the next one by wishing that all of his readers were like him. He wished they were single, as he was. His reasons for praising singleness will be discussed in the next section, but here he did not devalue marriage; after all, he's taken so much time building up its importance. Yes, there are tensions and temptations and trials that marriage brings to individuals, but a spouse is truly a gift from the Lord.

How can married couples view their status as a gift? How can singles view their status as a gift? What ways can each group of believers encourage one another in their respective status?

BIBLE SKILL: *Use other Scripture to help understand a Bible passage.*

1 Corinthians 7 is far from the complete biblical teaching on marriage. Read Genesis 2:18-25 and Matthew 19:1-6 regarding the normality and permanence of marriage. Read Matthew 5:32; 19:7-11; and 1 Corinthians 7:10-16 regarding divorce (and the possibility of remarriage). Summarize the biblical teaching regarding God's intention for marriage. Summarize in your own words the biblical teaching regarding divorce and remarriage.



MARRIAGE AND SINGLENESS (1 COR. 7:8-9)

⁸ I say to the unmarried and to widows: It is good for them if they remain as I am. ⁹ But if they do not have self-control, they should marry, since it is better to marry than to burn with desire.

VERSE 8

Paul continued the thought he started in verse 7 concerning his wish that all were unmarried like him. He specifically turned his focus *to the unmarried and to widows*. Again, Paul's larger principle about remaining in the situation they were in when God called them comes to light here. Paul said, *It is good for them if they remain as I am*. It is appropriate and beneficial to stay single and not seek marriage.

Later in this chapter, Paul stated that singleness allows believers to be without concerns common to married life in order to be devoted to the Lord without distraction (vv. 32-35). Since the time is limited (v. 29) and the work is massive, it is better for the kingdom if they remain single and serve the Lord unhindered. This point is critical to Paul's argument in the rest of the chapter. But in this verse, he was satisfied to say only, *It is good for them if they remain as I am*.

VERSE 9

Paul knew that singleness has challenges of its own. Undoubtedly, loneliness and the lack of companionship are significant issues for many unmarried people. Paul's concern for singles in the Corinthian church, living in culture where sexual immorality was common, was that they lack *self-control* and *burn with desire*. If this is the case, by all means, Paul said, *they should marry*. Only in the embrace of one's husband or wife is it appropriate to find sexual satisfaction. It is better to marry and be holy in God's sight rather than sin through sexual immorality (see 1 Thess. 4:3-5).

Assess your agreement with the following: "Believers are to be content regardless of marital status." How does this statement summarize Paul's point? What is the relationship between what Paul was teaching and God's expectation of His people living in a God-honoring way?

MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE (1 COR. 7:10-13)

¹⁰ To the married I give this command — not I, but the Lord — a wife is not to leave her husband. ¹¹ But if she does leave, she must remain unmarried or be reconciled to her husband — and a husband is not to divorce his wife. ¹² But I (not the Lord) say to the rest: If any brother has an unbelieving wife and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. ¹³ Also, if any woman has an unbelieving husband and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce her husband.

VERSES 10-11

Paul addressed the married again. This time, his instruction came with the *command ... a wife is not to leave her husband*. Neither was the *husband to divorce his wife*. For those who are married, Paul's counsel was for them to stay that way. This command comes not from Paul *but the Lord*. The Lord has spoken on the matter of divorce (Mark 10:1-12; Matt. 19:1-12). Paul restated the Lord's teaching here.

VERSES 12-13

Paul made it clear that the following counsel was from him, *not the Lord*. The apostle was not saying his words lack authority, or were merely his own opinion, but rather that the Lord Himself never taught specifically about marriage and divorce concerning an unbelieving spouse.

To the Corinthian believer who is married to an unbeliever, *he must not divorce her*. The same applies for a believing woman: *she must not divorce her husband*. If the unbelieving spouse is willing to live with his or her believing spouse, then there are no grounds for separation. Perhaps by remaining together the believing spouse might actually win the unbelieving spouse to the Lord (see v. 16).

If, however, the unbelieving spouse leaves, a brother or sister is not bound in such cases. Why? Because "God has called you to live in peace" (v. 15). If the unbelieving is not peaceable and wants to leave, so be it.

How does this passage help us understand how to relate to people who were friends prior to our accepting Christ? What does this passage teach us about the mutual commitment of a marriage?



IN MY CONTEXT

- God created marriage and commanded that sex was to remain within the context of marriage.
- Believers are to be content regardless of marital status.
- Believers are to guard and uphold the sanctity of marriage between a man and a woman.

Regardless of your marital status, what are you doing to make sure your sexual expression honors God and His design for creation? How can you help others understand God's expectations?

What are you doing to make sure your identity continues to be found in Christ and not simply in your earthly relationships?

Discuss ways your Bible study group can uphold the sanctity of marriage between a man and woman. What actions can be taken to support those who are married, married but struggling, single, and single-again?

Prayer Needs



INFLUENCING FOR CHRIST

Believers represent God by using their influence to bring others to Him.

1 CORINTHIANS 9:19-27; 10:31-33; 11:1

Each day we encounter people who try to influence us. Some do so on purpose while others do it simply by being who they are. Every person we encounter may be influenced by us as well. We never know the impact of our life's influence on someone else, nor what that influence will yield beyond our reach.

What living person has had the most positive influence in your life? Has anyone had a negative influence? Who have you had the most influence on, for better or worse?

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

1 CORINTHIANS 8:1–11:1

Our Scripture passage this week brings into clearer focus the stewardship of influence. How we live before others really does matter. Paul's concern for the Corinthians was that they underestimated their influence in bringing others to Christ. Rather than living in self-focused ways, Paul challenged his readers (and us) to run the race in the right way, with the right goals in mind. Let's consider how to adorn—and not hinder—the gospel of Christ with our lives.

Paul's letter to the Corinthian believers addressed a few matters they asked about in a letter to him (1 Cor. 7:1). He already tackled divisions in the church (chaps. 1–4), issues regarding sexual immorality (chaps. 5–6), and marriage and singleness (chap. 7). In chapters 8–10, Paul focused his attention on another question posed to him by the Corinthian church: Was it appropriate for believers to eat food sacrificed to idols?

The issue was deeper than just eating food. It was an issue of understanding the nature of Christian liberty and the priority of love over selfish gain. The brothers or sisters for whom Christ died are much more important than the freedom to eat food sacrificed to idols (8:11).

The stewardship of influence was important to Paul. One's influence on a brother or sister in Christ to either help them or harm them is worthy of deep consideration and application. One's influence on unbelievers for the sake of the gospel must not be underestimated either. In chapter 9, Paul specifically expanded on this idea. Finally, Paul used ancient Israel as a negative example for what falling into idolatry can produce (10:1–12). Today's lesson will consider how believers represent the Lord by using their influence to bring others to him.

Read 1 Corinthians 9:19–27; and 10:31–11:1 in your Bible. Look for actions Paul was calling on the Corinthians to imitate. How might these actions point others to Christ?

EXPLORE THE TEXT

WALKING IN THEIR SHOES (1 COR. 9:19-23)

¹⁹ Although I am free from all and not anyone's slave, I have made myself a slave to everyone, in order to win more people. ²⁰ To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win Jews; to those under the law, like one under the law — though I myself am not under the law — to win those under the law. ²¹ To those who are without the law, like one without the law — though I am not without God's law but under the law of Christ — to win those without the law. ²² To the weak I became weak, in order to win the weak. I have become all things to all people, so that I may by every possible means save some. ²³ Now I do all this because of the gospel, so that I may share in the blessings.

VERSE 19

Some believers in Corinth were using their freedom in Christ as an opportunity to please themselves rather than to serve others in love. Using himself as an example, Paul said, *Although I am free ... I have made myself a slave to everyone.* He could have demanded his rights as an apostle and expected the Corinthians to serve him, but he didn't (see vv. 3-15). Why not? Because his reward was in preaching the gospel, offering it free of charge, not as a good exchanged for compensation (vv. 17-18). Paul's approach was explicitly Christlike (see Mark 10:45; Phil. 2:5-8). For Paul, demanding his rights was counter-gospel and would actually hinder the gospel of Christ (v. 12). So he laid down his rights, even though he was free, and took up the mantle of Christ as a servant.

The reason Paul made himself the slave of all was *to win more people*. The original language simply says "in order to gain more." He didn't mean personal gain for his benefit; he meant gaining people. The verses to follow make this point clear. Paul's gain was more people being saved.

What might making yourself a servant to all in order to win more people look like in today's culture? What roadblocks get in the way of people being more intentional in reaching others?



KEY DOCTRINE: *Evangelism and Missions*

It is the duty of every child of God to seek constantly to win the lost to Christ by verbal witness undergirded by a Christian lifestyle, and by other methods in harmony with the gospel of Christ.

VERSES 20-23

Several groups are identified as part of Paul's missionary strategy. He intentionally approached *Jews* first. The gospel, after all, is the power of God for salvation "first to the Jew" (Rom. 1:16). It is surprising that Paul said *I became like a Jew*. Paul was a Jew and his résumé always included this important aspect (2 Cor. 11:22; Phil. 3:4-6). His goal was to win Jews for the sake of the gospel, although he himself no longer viewed his ethnicity as advantageous with respect to God (Phil. 3:7-9). Even so, he could relate to the Jews and connect them to the gospel.

It is unclear whether or not *those under the law* were distinct from the Jews just mentioned. Paul's conversion to Christ meant breaking from his religious past, especially from trying to keep the law as a means of salvation. Yet, he was *like one under the law ... to win those under the law*. Paul accommodated to Jewish practices—including circumcision at times (Acts 16:1-3)—as a means to open doors for evangelism among Jews. Paul made clear that *I myself am not under the law*, nor are any who belong to Christ. They are now under grace (Rom. 6:14-15).

To those ... without the law, Paul was *like one without the law*. He was not advocating lawless living. He clarified that he was under *the law of Christ*. His point was that he related to Gentiles to win those without the law. After all, Paul's calling from Christ was to take the gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 9:15). Paul "had been entrusted with the gospel for the uncircumcised" (Gal. 2:7), and his goal was to win as many as possible for Christ.

Lastly, Paul sought *to win the weak*. The overall context of 1 Corinthians 8:1-11:1 suggests that *the weak* were believers in danger of having their consciences defiled by those exercising their freedom in Christ to eat meat sacrificed to idols. His description of groups in 1 Corinthians 10:32 is a strong support for

this view. The gospel determines our conduct toward believers and unbelievers alike. Paul’s conclusion was: *I have become all things to all people, so that I may by every possible means save some.*

Paul was thinking strategically about the mission—more believers, more partnerships in the gospel, more support, and thus, the gospel to more people. He desired to *share in the blessings* that flow from people trusting Christ and obeying the gospel, which is why he himself was a slave to all.

How can a believer contextualize the gospel without compromising the gospel? What principles can be found in this passage for establishing a proper line?

Athletic Metaphors in the New Testament

| | |
|---|--|
| <i>Run with purpose, run to win the prize.</i> | <i>1 Corinthians 9:24; Galatians 2:2; Philippians 2:16</i> |
| <i>Winning requires discipline, self-control.</i> | <i>1 Corinthians 9:25-27</i> |
| <i>Compete according to God’s rules.</i> | <i>2 Timothy 2:5</i> |
| <i>Run with perseverance.</i> | <i>Hebrews 12:1; Galatians 5:7; 2 Timothy 4:7</i> |

RUNNING IN THE RACE (1 COR. 9:24-27)

²⁴ Don’t you know that the runners in a stadium all race, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way to win the prize. ²⁵ Now everyone who competes exercises self-control in everything. They do it to receive a perishable crown, but we an imperishable crown. ²⁶ So I do not run like one who runs aimlessly or box like one beating the air. ²⁷ Instead, I discipline my body and bring it under strict control, so that after preaching to others, I myself will not be disqualified.

VERSES 24-25

Running and racing were among Paul’s favorite metaphors. He used athletic metaphors in most of his letters (1 Cor. 15:32; Phil. 2:16; 3:13-14; 1 Thess. 2:2; 1 Tim. 1:18; 4:7; 2 Tim. 2:5; 4:7). His use of



runners in a stadium was savvy, indeed, since Corinth hosted the Isthmian Games, similar to the famous Olympic games in Greece.

Paul's main point was this: ***Run in such a way to win the prize.*** Although in other contexts Paul focused on the prize itself (see Phil. 3:12-14), here his emphasis was on how to run the race. Of course, one doesn't just show up to an Olympic event and expect to compete and win without significant training and personal sacrifice. No, ***everyone who competes exercises self-control in everything.*** It takes effort and discipline. Paul is making an important point: Live a self-controlled Christian life, at maximum effort, in order to be an influential witness for Christ among all people.

We do this because of the gospel. Runners in the games seek ***a perishable crown.*** The prize for their achievement in the Isthmian Games was a pine wreath. Imagine, all that training and effort for a crown of twigs and leaves! No doubt fame, acclaim, and hero status were added to their victory. But we run our race for Christ, to win ***an imperishable crown.*** There is much more to gain, so run to receive "the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give [us] on that day" we finish our race (2 Tim. 4:8).

BIBLE SKILL: *Use multiple Scripture passages to understand a major doctrine.*

The term translated "crown" (*stephanos*) in the original language of 9:25, referred to a victor's crown rather than a king's crown (*diadema*). Review 1 Thessalonians 2:19; 2 Timothy 4:8; James 1:12; 1 Peter 5:4; and Revelation 2:10 for other passages in which believers' rewards are described as a *stephanos*. How can you relate these passages to this week's lesson?

VERSES 26-27

Paul underscored his argument by insisting that self-control and discipline are what make the difference. When we run, it's not ***aimlessly*** like someone who has no understanding of what it takes to reach the finish line. Likewise, we don't ***box like one beating the air***; rather, we have a target and an objective. We know the prize

that lies before us, but it will take directed effort and self-control to reach it.

Paul himself wanted to share in the blessings of the gospel and its influence on those who were lost. That's why, as his entire argument has made clear, he was willing to **discipline** his own body and **bring it under strict control**. It takes discipline and self-control to limit one's freedoms for the sake of others.

After preaching to others, Paul did not want to be **disqualified**. He didn't mean that he'd be kicked out of the race, as if to mean he'd lose his salvation. Rather, he meant exactly what he had been saying all along: he wanted to run in such a way to win others, to win the race, to win the prize—and that's why he kept himself under control, so he didn't lose out on the blessings of those things.

How does living a disciplined lifestyle reflect God's character? What methods might a person use to stay focused on pleasing God?

FOLLOWING OUR LEADER (1 COR. 10:31-33; 11:1)

³¹ So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God. ³² Give no offense to Jews or Greeks or the church of God, ³³ just as I also try to please everyone in everything, not seeking my own benefit, but the benefit of many, so that they may be saved. ^{11:1} Imitate me, as I also imitate Christ.

After demonstrating Israel's failure to control their desires and idolatrous ways (10:1-22), Paul concluded his extended argument on Christian liberty. What he began in 6:12 he completed in 10:23. His summary conclusion? No one is to seek his own good, but the good of the other person (10:24). In these remaining verses, Paul issued three commands by way of application.

VERSE 31

Paul's first command was to **do everything for the glory of God**. Our actions and desires should not be to please ourselves; instead, everything we do is ultimately for the purpose of bringing glory to God. After all, we were created for God's glory (Isa. 43:7). Paul's command is both specific and exhaustive. He said **whether you eat**



or *drink*, referring to his overall discussion about food sacrificed to idols, eat and drink for God's glory. But he also said that *whatever you do*, do it for God's glory. We cannot limit this discussion to food and drink because all of life is meant to bring God glory. Live by this gospel-centered, God-honoring, decision-making ethic: *do everything for the glory of God*.

What are some practical ways of living out this passage? How can a person honor God in all things with humility?

VERSES 32-33

Paul's second command was to *give no offense*. Once again, he summarized his larger argument about preferring others before ourselves. Do we have freedom? Absolutely. Paul said, "why is my freedom judged by another person's conscience?" (10:29) Even so, he concluded, *I also try to please everyone in everything*. If my freedom causes offense to someone else, then I shouldn't exercise that freedom. Following Paul's example, we should not seek our own benefit, *but the benefit of many*. People's eternal destinies are more valuable than any personal pleasure we receive from exercising our freedoms. That was Paul's goal, *that they may be saved*. Our goal should be the same.

CHAPTER 11; VERSE 1

Paul's last command was to *imitate me*. He was exhorting his readers and us to follow him and his example of glorifying God. Paul was not thinking of himself more highly than he ought. Rather, his command to imitate him pointed to a greater reality: *as I also imitate Christ*. Paul's example is faithful and worthy of imitation since he himself was imitating Christ.

What would be the ramifications of placing yourself in a position to be an example for all to see? Why might people shy away from being looked at as an example to follow?

IN MY CONTEXT

- Believers are to do all they can to seek to win others to Christ without compromising the gospel.
- Believers are to live their lives with discipline, striving to receive commendation from the Father.
- Believers are to live as Christian examples of what it means to follow Christ.

As a group, discuss areas of Christian liberty that might influence fellow believers and also unbelievers. What principles from this passage does your group need to incorporate and how?

Where has God given you influence over others? How can you make a greater investment in that stewardship of influence?

List a few people who have had an influence on your spiritual life. What qualities influenced you the most? What specific ways did their actions affect you? What do you need to do to have a greater influence on others for the sake of the gospel?

Prayer Needs





ASSURANCE OF THE RESURRECTION

Believers find assurance for this life and the life to come through the resurrected Lord.

JOHN 20:3-9; 1 CORINTHIANS 15:20-28

Life in the twenty-first century has proven to be anything but secure. Extremist attacks, escalating violence, and racial tensions have put many of us on edge. Many perceive life today to be more advanced than any time in history, yet we also seem to be more determined to find ways of using those advances in destructive ways.

Do you feel safer or less safe than you did ten years ago? Explain. How is a person's sense of security related to what one is willing to trust for that security?

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

JOHN 19–20; 1 CORINTHIANS 15:1-58

In some ways, life in the first century was like our own. Various groups in society did not trust one another. The Roman army was often brutal. Justice was meted out by corrupt rulers. Life was not safe and secure for first-century Christians. There was not much that anyone could really be certain of. In other words, human nature has been remarkably consistent when it comes to exploiting others.

Paul was well aware that life is unfair and that little, if anything, in this life is guaranteed. That's why he placed all his confidence in the resurrection of Jesus. In the resurrection, he found a sure foundation for this life and for the life to come. He expressed this hope in terms of the future resurrection of those who have believed in Jesus. In particular, he wanted believers in Corinth to understand the crucial connection between Jesus' resurrection and the coming resurrection of all those united with the Lord Jesus.

John's narrative of the resurrection is one of four Gospel accounts of the same event (Matt 28:1-10; Mark 16:1-8; Luke 24:1-12). The four Gospel writers have much in common, yet there are some interesting differences between these narratives, as they include or leave out details from the others and emphasize certain things differently for their respective readers. Thankfully, the Lord provided multiple accounts of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus to strengthen the witness of the gospel. The empty tomb and the resurrected Jesus is the foundation upon which our faith is built.

Arguably the most important defense of the resurrection in the New Testament, 1 Corinthians 15 reminds believers of the truth of the resurrection of Jesus and its benefits for those who belong to Christ. The resurrection of Jesus grounds our faith, undergirds our mission, and establishes our hope in the life to come.

Read John 20:3-9 in your Bible. Notice the reactions of the disciples as they entered the tomb. What do their reactions reveal to us about the nature of salvation through faith in Jesus?



EXPLORE THE TEXT

BELIEVING IN THE RESURRECTION (JOHN 20:3-9)

³ At that, Peter and the other disciple went out, heading for the tomb. ⁴ The two were running together, but the other disciple outran Peter and got to the tomb first. ⁵ Stooping down, he saw the linen cloths lying there, but he did not go in. ⁶ Then, following him, Simon Peter also came. He entered the tomb and saw the linen cloths lying there. ⁷ The wrapping that had been on his head was not lying with the linen cloths but was folded up in a separate place by itself. ⁸ The other disciple, who had reached the tomb first, then also went in, saw, and believed. ⁹ For they did not yet understand the Scripture that he must rise from the dead.

VERSES 3-4

Jumping right into the narrative, we read that John (*the other disciple*) and *Peter* were *heading for the tomb* of Jesus. In fact, they *were running together* to get there as quickly as possible, with John outpacing Peter in the footrace.

The news they had received from Mary was startling and troubling, and it could not be overlooked: “They’ve taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we don’t know where they’ve put him!” (John 20:2). After the Sabbath was over, Mary and a few other women had gone to anoint Jesus’ body with spices, only to discover that the stone had been removed from the tomb. At first, the women thought someone helpfully moved the stone so that they could anoint Jesus’ body (Mark 16:3-4). But realizing the tomb was empty, Mary was distraught over the thought that someone had stolen Jesus’ body, and she had to inform the disciples immediately.

The other Gospels record the appearance of angels who instructed Mary and the other women specifically about what had happened, that Jesus had risen just as He said He would (Matt. 28:5-7; Mark 16:6-7; Luke 24:5-8). Yet, the delivery of this information to the disciples “seemed like nonsense to them” (Luke 24:11); they did not believe it, except for Peter and John.

VERSES 5-7

Mary's news apparently jarred John and Peter so much that they went immediately to check things out for themselves. John took a quick peek in the tomb but did not go in. Perhaps he was overcome with emotion and was trying to make sense of what he briefly saw. But Peter, trailing John a little in the footrace, went right in when he got there.

The *linen cloths* are prominent in this narrative. Peter and John saw them lying there, seemingly where Jesus' body would've been lying. There was something unique and unusual, however. *The wrapping that had been on his head ... was folded up in a separate place by itself.* Perhaps John's point by making much of the burial cloths was to show that if grave robbers or enemies of Jesus had taken His body, they would have taken everything or discarded the cloths into a heap on the floor. They wouldn't have taken time to fold them.

How do the details included by John give credence to his account of Jesus' resurrection? Which detail carries the greatest weight or significance for you?

VERSES 8-9

John followed Peter into the tomb, *saw, and believed.* But what did John believe? Some might argue that John simply believed Mary's report that someone took Jesus' body. After all, the tomb was empty. But since the cloths were there, John likely concluded something different. Based on John's use of "believe" elsewhere in this chapter and in his Gospel as a whole, it is more likely that he believed Jesus had actually risen. Perhaps in that moment the words of Jesus shot through his heart like a lightning bolt: "I am the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25). What John saw—and what he didn't see—caused him to believe.

What is interesting is John's clarification in verse 9. Even though John believed, he said they *did not yet understand the Scripture that he must rise from the dead.* Certainly, Peter, John and the other disciples heard Jesus foretell His crucifixion and resurrection, as the Gospels make clear. But as for understanding the Scripture, this would come later as Jesus opened their eyes to



understand what had been written about Him and fulfilled in Him (Luke 24:25-27,44-48).

Later, Paul would make a case that Jesus died, was buried, and raised on the third day “*according to the Scriptures*” (1 Cor. 15:3-4). The disciples didn’t fabricate a resurrection scene to match some veiled messianic prophecy in the Old Testament. Rather, the resurrection happened and they believed, only later to understand the Scripture that He must rise from the dead.

What is the connection between seeing and believing? How can a person believe in Jesus without fully understanding?

BIBLE SKILL: *Use a concordance and/or Bible dictionary (either print or on the Internet) to learn more about a feature of Israel’s religious life.*

Use a concordance to find references to “firstfruits” in Scripture. What were the circumstances and regulations for offering firstfruits in the Old Testament? Identify how the New Testament writers took the Old Testament usage and adapted it to apply to believers.

MADE ALIVE THROUGH THE RESURRECTION (1 COR. 15:20-22)

²⁰ But as it is, Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. ²¹ For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead also comes through a man. ²² For just as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all will be made alive.

VERSE 20

The resurrection of Jesus Christ has massive implications. But the implications flow from the truth and reality of what happened:

Christ has been raised from the dead. If Christ has not been raised from the dead, our faith and preaching are in vain (v. 14), we are still in our sins (v. 17), and there is no hope for those who have already died in faith (vv. 18-19). How could Paul be so certain of Jesus' resurrection? He was certain because the Scriptures said it would happen, and he himself saw the risen Jesus, along with many other eyewitnesses.

One major implication of Jesus' resurrection is that those who belong to Jesus will also one day be resurrected to life. Jesus' resurrection guarantees ours. Paul referred to Jesus' resurrection as ***the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep***. Paul's use of the term *firstfruits* is instructive, recalling the firstborn child, animal, or first harvest of a crop that would be considered holy and belonging to the Lord. The firstfruits, as a foretaste of more to come, were offered to God in thanksgiving for His graciousness in providing them. Jesus' resurrection was the pattern of things to come, a foretaste for those who belong to Christ.

VERSES 21-22

All who are ***in Adam*** (by nature) die physically and spiritually, because death came through him. The sad consequences of Adam and Eve's sin against God affected not only them but us as well. Through Adam's sin came judgment and condemnation (see Rom. 5:16). The good news is that all who are ***in Christ*** (by faith) ***will be made alive*** in Him—referring to a future resurrection.

Notice that both verses 21 and 22 begin with ***for***, showing a vital connection with what precedes them. Paul's flow of thought is that those who "have fallen asleep" (died), experience the consequential reality of what happened through Adam as a result of his sin. But thanks to Jesus Christ, death is not the end of the story for those who have faith. We will be made alive in Christ, who is Himself "the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25). So now, having been justified in Christ by faith, we wait for the redemption of our bodies (Rom 8:23-25).

What do these verses reveal about the results of Jesus' resurrection? How do the results identified by Paul give hope? Hope for what?



FUTURE FOUND IN THE RESURRECTION (1 COR. 15:23-28)

²³ But each in his own order: Christ, the firstfruits; afterward, at his coming, those who belong to Christ. ²⁴ Then comes the end, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father, when he abolishes all rule and all authority and power. ²⁵ For he must reign until he puts all his enemies under his feet. ²⁶ The last enemy to be abolished is death. ²⁷ For God has put everything under his feet. Now when it says “everything” is put under him, it is obvious that he who puts everything under him is the exception. ²⁸ When everything is subject to Christ, then the Son himself will also be subject to the one who subjected everything to him, so that God may be all in all.

VERSE 23

There is an orderliness to the benefits of the resurrection: *each in his own order*. Jesus’ resurrection qualifies Him as *the firstfruits*. Again, He is the pattern and the reason for our future resurrection. Then *at his coming, those who belong to Christ* will be made alive and experience a resurrection of their own in Him. What inexpressible joy is to be gained in our future resurrection!

Jesus said He would come again for His followers after preparing a place for us (John 14:1-6). Every generation of Christians has prayed and longed for the return of Christ in their time. At His coming, those who belong to Christ will receive the same powerful, glorious resurrection that Jesus did (Rom. 6:5; 1 Thess. 4:14).

“Then comes the end” ought to be triumphant words of great encouragement to us!

VERSES 24-28

Paul reminded the Corinthian believers not only of participation in a future bodily resurrection but also participation in the eternal reign of God’s kingdom in Christ. *Then comes the end* ought to be triumphant words of great encouragement to us! When Christ returns, the culmination of God’s redemptive plan will be brought with Him. Several profound activities occur as the result of Christ’s victorious resurrection and triumphant return.

First, Jesus will hand over *the kingdom to God the Father*. Jesus taught us to pray that God’s kingdom would come “on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10). The *kingdom* is the rule and reign of God

over all things and all people. Currently, there are still enemies who oppose and disrupt this kingly reign of God. When Jesus returns, all things will finally be restored as they were originally designed to be before the wreckage of Adam's sin.

Second, Jesus will put ***all his enemies under his feet***. As it stands, ***the last enemy to be abolished is death***. The truth is, death has been defeated but has not yet been abolished and subjected to Christ (Heb. 2:8). Humanity still languishes under the shadow of death and is "held in slavery ... by the fear of death" (Heb. 2:15). That's why we need the reminder of these truths from Paul.

Finally, Christ Himself will ***be subject to the one who subjected everything to him***. God sent His Son to restore what Adam wrecked, which Jesus did. Because Jesus is the true and better Adam, Paul cited Psalm 8:6 as a reminder that ***God has put everything under his feet***. Of course, it is obvious that He who puts everything under Christ is the exception. The Father is still the Father! In the final analysis, the work of Christ accomplished through His death and resurrection is for the glory of the Father. When Paul said that Christ will ***be subject to the Father***, he was not in any way implying that the Son is inferior to the Father. The Persons of the Trinity are equal in essence and glory. The subordination Paul spoke about was one of role or function.

When all is said and done—death is finally abolished and the kingdom is handed over to the Father—all things will be put in their rightful place and order. God's authority over all things will be eternally exercised. There will no longer be an enemy—death or the devil—rising to challenge Him.

How does the promised return of Christ give strength when facing challenges in this life? How can you demonstrate the hope you have in Christ?

KEY DOCTRINE: *The Kingdom*

The full consummation of the Kingdom awaits the return of Jesus Christ and the end of this age.



IN MY CONTEXT

- Salvation comes through believing in the resurrected Christ.
- Believers find true life through faith in the resurrected Christ.
- Believers can live with the assurance of the resurrection and eternal reign of Christ.

As a group, discuss how the church can bear witness to the resurrection of Jesus throughout the year, beyond the emphasis of Easter. How can your group lead the way?

Reflect on the time when you first placed your trust in Jesus. (If you have not done so, review the information on the inside front cover to find out more about how you can do this.) With whom can you share about your salvation this week?

List some benefits of the resurrection in the believer's life. Which of those benefits do you most need in your life right now? Thank God for providing that benefit through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Prayer Needs



REMEMBERING THE SACRIFICE

Believers are to approach remembrances of Jesus' death with reverence and unity.

1 CORINTHIANS 11:17-29

Memorials are often created following major events, such as the USS *Arizona* Memorial in Pearl Harbor. These are solemn places that cause us to reflect on life and our purposes on this earth. There are also happier kinds of memorials, such as the birthplace of a president or a war hero's statue in a city park. Perhaps you have a personal memory that you've memorialized so that you and others won't forget.

What memorial places are special to you? What makes that place special or significant?

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

1 CORINTHIANS 11:2-34

Scripture notes numerous examples of memorial places or events. The Israelites gathered twelve stones from the Jordan River to set up a permanent marker of their miraculous crossing into the promised land. The annual Passover meal was a way to remember the Lord's deliverance of His people from Egypt. Jesus used the occasion of eating the Passover with His disciples to establish a new memorial, the Lord's Supper. In this week's study, we'll look at what Paul taught the believers in Corinth concerning the right way—and the wrong way—to remember Jesus' death through the Lord's Supper.

Paul continued giving practical instruction concerning church matters in chapters 11–14, especially in relation to corporate worship. Some unhelpful things were taking place during worship in the Corinthian church that were destructive and harmful. In chapter 11, Paul offered instruction for head coverings and the Lord's Supper.

Chapters 12 and 14 focus on unity and diversity in the church, specifically in the use of spiritual gifts. As in other areas, the Corinthian believers were not handling this aspect of church life appropriately, causing Paul to pen one of the most beautiful chapters in all of the New Testament, which highlighted the superiority of love (chap. 13).

This week's study focuses on the observance of the Lord's Supper. Unfortunately, the Corinthian believers were missing the mark in their practice of observing the Lord's Supper. Paul chided and instructed them in order to help them avoid judgment for sinning against one another and against Christ. As they approached the Lord's table, they were to do so with worship, with remembrance, and with examination.

Read 1 Corinthians 11:17-29 in your Bible. What changes did Paul call on the Corinthians to make in their observance of the Lord's Supper?

EXPLORE THE TEXT

WITH WORSHIP (1 COR. 11:17-22)

¹⁷ Now in giving this instruction I do not praise you, since you come together not for the better but for the worse. ¹⁸ For to begin with, I hear that when you come together as a church there are divisions among you, and in part I believe it. ¹⁹ Indeed, it is necessary that there be factions among you, so that those who are approved may be recognized among you. ²⁰ When you come together, then, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper. ²¹ For at the meal, each one eats his own supper. So one person is hungry while another gets drunk! ²² Don't you have homes in which to eat and drink? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What should I say to you? Should I praise you? I do not praise you in this matter!

VERSES 17-19

In giving this instruction concerning observance of the Lord's Supper, Paul did not have any *praise* to give the Corinthians as he did in verse 1. In that instance (regarding head coverings), they had followed his teachings. Apparently, the Corinthian believers had not been following Paul's teachings when it came to the Lord's Supper.

Paul said when they came together it was *not for the better but for the worse*. When they gathered as a church there were *divisions* among them. It's difficult to know if Paul equated the divisions here with those he mentioned earlier (1 Cor. 1:10–4:21). Possibly, what Paul claimed to have heard may be a recollection back to the report from Chloe's people (1 Cor. 1:11).

Verse 19 is, on the surface, a difficult verse to reconcile with what Paul had been saying up to this point. In the opening chapters of his letter, Paul rebuked the church over divisions. In verses 17-18 he chastised them for the divisions among them. So why would Paul now say *it is necessary that there be factions among* them? Perhaps Paul's remark was an admission of God's providence. Maybe the Lord was allowing factions and divisions to exist *so that those who are approved* or genuine *may be recognized*. In other words, the true spiritual quality of individuals becomes evident in the midst of controversy; it becomes clear who is seeking their



own benefit and who is seeking the benefit of others (1 Cor. 10:33). These factions presented a problem that needed addressing in the church, but nothing is wasted in God's economy.

VERSES 20-22

Paul stated the problem: ***When you come together, then, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper.*** The intention of the church, of course, was to observe the Lord's Supper as they met together—and Paul had every expectation they would follow his instructions. But instead, at the meal, each one ate ***his own supper*** without regard to other believers.

Unlike the observance of many churches today, where the Lord's Supper is part of a corporate worship service, the Corinthian believers included the Lord's Supper as part of a meal they would eat together. This pattern comes from the Gospels, where Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper as they were eating (see Matt. 26:26; Mark 14:22). But the meal devolved into a self-focused free-for-all.

Sadly, some brothers and sisters were gorging themselves on food and drink, while others didn't have much to enjoy. Paul was astounded that ***one person is hungry while another gets drunk!*** Believers are to be conscientious about others in the church so that they do not discriminate against the poor (even unintentionally). Selfishly, some Corinthian believers were eating to please themselves but missing the greater purposes of the meal. In fact, their actions actually served to humiliate those who had nothing.

Paul was exasperated by this nonsense: ***What should I say to you? Should I praise you?*** No, there was no praise to be given to them, only rebuke. The Corinthian believers had forgotten that the Lord's Supper is for corporate worship, not merely to fill one's belly. In fact, Paul asked, ***Don't you have homes in which to eat and drink?*** Yes, they did—and “if anyone is hungry, he should eat at home” (1 Cor. 11:34). Come to the Lord's Supper to worship, and to “welcome one another” (v. 33) as those for whom Jesus died, Paul reminded them. Otherwise, they despised the church of God by their self-centered elitism toward others.

What are some ways a religious observance can become misguided? What factors contribute to the observance becoming misguided? What can be done to keep the focus of a religious practice on God and His purposes?

KEY DOCTRINE: *Lord's Supper*

The Lord's Supper is a symbolic act of obedience whereby members of the church, through partaking of the bread and the fruit of the vine, memorialize the death of the Redeemer and anticipate His second coming.

WITH REMEMBRANCE (1 COR. 11:23-26)

²³ For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: On the night when he was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took bread, ²⁴ and when he had given thanks, broke it, and said, "This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." ²⁵ In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, and said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." ²⁶ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

VERSES 23-24

Paul's instruction was rooted in what he *received from the Lord*. It's possible this information came through direct revelation (see 2 Cor. 12:1-4; Gal. 1:12), but likely was tied to the original source of the tradition received from the disciples. For example, Paul's language matches most closely to the narrative in Luke 22:17-20. Regardless, Paul had *received* it and then *passed on* the instruction to the Corinthian believers. But apparently they were not following it.

Paul reminded them of the historical and theological content of the Lord's Supper and why it matters. He recalled *the night when the night Jesus was betrayed* as the historical moment when Jesus gave this instruction to His disciples. On that night, *Jesus took bread* and *broke it*. The bread signified His body. He broke the bread to signify the crucifixion of His body that would soon follow.

There is no small theological debate over what *"This is my body"* means. Some, like Roman Catholics, have taken this to mean that the bread and the cup actually become the body and blood of Jesus (called transubstantiation). Others believe that the literal body and blood of Jesus are "in, with, and under" the elements, but do not become them (called consubstantiation). Most others argue



that Jesus is present symbolically in the elements—which seems to be indicated by Jesus’ emphasis on remembrance. Of course, mere symbolism doesn’t account for the deep, spiritual realities of our participation in the body and blood of Jesus (1 Cor. 10:16). The Lord’s Supper is a rich, nourishing commemoration of the sacrifice that Jesus made on our behalf. We are to give thanks for the bread, and in obedience do it in remembrance of Jesus and His sacrifice for us.

How did Paul’s use of the plural “you” in these verses confront the selfish individualism of the Corinthians that Paul was addressing?

VERSES 25-26

Paul also noted that Jesus ***took the cup***, which the Lord identified as ***the new covenant in my blood***. The old covenant, based on law, served the purpose for which God designed it—as a shadow pointing to the true substance in Christ—but it was empty. God promised a new covenant for His people (Jer. 31:31-34), and it came in Jesus’ blood.

Like the bread, when we take the cup we are to do it ***in remembrance of*** Jesus’ death for us. Jesus gave no prescription for the frequency with which we are to observe the Lord’s Supper, just ***as often as you drink it***. When the church comes together corporately to observe the Lord’s Supper, we are to commemorate and celebrate the broken body and spilled blood of Jesus for us.

Finally, when we ***eat this bread and drink the cup***, we are proclaiming the Lord’s death. It is a corporate affirmation and declaration of Jesus’ all-sufficient sacrifice for our sins. The bread and the cup become a visual representation—a tangible expression—of the gospel.

How can the Lord’s Supper be a means of sharing the gospel with others? How does observing the Lord’s Supper give a believer confidence in his or her salvation?

BIBLE SKILL: *Read, reflect on, and react emotionally to a Bible text.*

Read 1 Corinthians 11:26-27 aloud several times. Each time, emphasize different words. For example, in one reading emphasize “bread” and “cup” each time they appear. Then read the text again, emphasizing all the action words. Take note of your thoughts. How do these verses move you emotionally? What feelings were evoked by the different words and phrases as you emphasized them?

WITH EXAMINATION (1 COR. 11:27-29)

²⁷ So then, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sin against the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸ Let a person examine himself; in this way let him eat the bread and drink from the cup. ²⁹ For whoever eats and drinks without recognizing the body, eats and drinks judgment on himself.

VERSES 27-29

Paul’s disappointment in the Corinthians’ actions toward one another issued into a call for self-examination. ***Let a person examine himself*** to see whether he is approaching the Lord’s Supper in an ***unworthy manner***. What did Paul mean by *unworthy manner*? The immediate context provides understanding. Given the divisions and factions, as well as the self-focused approach to the meal, it’s likely that taking the Lord’s Supper without recognizing the body of believers is what he had in mind. A key statement is found in verse 33, “when you come together to eat, welcome one another.”

Individualism, divisions, and factions—these are harmful to the gospel because unity, love, and service to one another should be the hallmarks of Jesus’ new covenant community. Overlooking others and considering only one’s own benefit reflects an unworthy



manner of approaching the Lord's Supper. Those who act this way are ***guilty of sin against the body and blood of the Lord***. To profane the Lord's Supper is to misunderstand and devalue its meaning by overlooking those who participate in it. Why? Because His body was for the body—the church! Paul already said that to sin against one's brother or sister is to sin against Christ who died for them (1 Cor. 8:12). Divisiveness and apathy within the church are incompatible with the sacrificial nature of Jesus' death.

How might a person approach the Lord's Supper in "an unworthy manner"? What might one do to properly prepare to observe the Lord's Supper?

Divisiveness and apathy within the church are incompatible with the sacrificial nature of Jesus' death.

So ***let a person examine himself***, Paul said, to make sure one is not profaning the sacrifice by privileging himself above the whole body. Don't take the Lord's Supper lightly, but rather ***in this way ... eat the bread and drink from the cup***. Too often this verse is understood simply to be self-introspection, but the context is dealing with communal and fellowship issues in the congregation. Is there a broader application for self-examination for sin before taking the Lord's Supper? Certainly, we must not approach the table in a way that leaves sin unchecked, thereby ignoring the purpose of Christ's atonement to deal with sin.

Paul finished his thought by stating the reason for self-examination: so that no one ***eats and drinks judgment on himself***. An unexamined life, especially in the ways the Corinthian believers were observing the Lord's Supper, brings judgment upon itself. Sadly, some in the Corinthian church passed judgment on others by ignoring them and preferring themselves above them. The Lord executed His judgment on those who despised the church (1 Cor. 11:22) by their selfish actions. As startling as it may sound, Paul said, "This is why many are sick and ill among you, and many have fallen asleep" (v. 30). If the Lord considers this issue serious enough to levy this kind of judgment against errant believers, we ought to consider its importance also and examine ourselves.

IN MY CONTEXT

- Believers are to approach the observance of the Lord's Supper with worshipful reverence.
- Believers can proclaim their faith in Christ through the proper observance of the Lord's Supper.
- Believers are to be invited to humbly participate in the observance of the Lord's Supper.

What actions do you need to personally take to safeguard against abusing or ignoring the observance of Lord's Supper? How can you encourage others to focus on the significance of the Lord's Supper?

As a group, list different ways that the Lord's Supper can be taken in a worship setting. Discuss as a group ways group members can encourage one another to participate in the Lord's Supper in a proper way.

Take a few minutes to pray and ask the Lord to reveal any way in which you may have been minimizing the significance of the Lord's Supper. Confess it to Him, and commit yourself to obey His correction the next time you observe the Lord's Supper.

Prayer Needs





SERVING GOD'S PEOPLE

Believers receive special gifts from God for service to Him and His people.

1 CORINTHIANS 12:4-12,21-26

Think about someone who is athletically gifted. Now consider a gifted musician. How did those individuals get that way? If we focus on the hours of practice they endure, we might be led to think practice is what sets them apart. If we focus on the natural abilities required, we might be led to excuse ourselves from even trying to reach those same achievements.

What factors would you point to when thinking about people who are high achievers in their field? What factor do you think plays the biggest role? Explain.

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

1 CORINTHIANS 12:1-31

God gives spiritual gifts to His people. These gifts are parallel to natural talents in many ways. Spiritual gifts, however, are received by individuals not when they are born biologically; rather, they are given to us when we are born again. Further, just as natural talents must be recognized and developed through practice before they are very beneficial, so it is with our spiritual gifts. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul told the Corinthian Christians that each of them had received a special gift, or gifts, from God. These gifts were meant for service.

“Now concerning spiritual gifts,” Paul wrote in verse 1, signaling a new subject he wanted to address. The Corinthian believers were seeking guidance on a variety of issues, including marital relations and singleness (7:1,25), food sacrificed to idols (8:1), divisiveness around the Lord’s Supper (11:17-20), spiritual gifts (12:1), the resurrection (15:1), and collecting money to support other believers in need (16:1).

Paul’s discussion of spiritual gifts stretches from 12:1 through 14:40. He wanted them to know that they did not lack any spiritual gift. He also wanted them to understand the proper application of spiritual gifts in the church—the “better way” (12:31)—which is love.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:4-12,21-26 in your Bible. Notice the different ways Paul compared the church to the human body. How does this comparison help make Paul’s point?

EXPLORE THE TEXT

DIVERSE (1 COR. 12:4-6)

⁴ Now there are different gifts, but the same Spirit. ⁵ There are different ministries, but the same Lord. ⁶ And there are different activities, but the same God produces each gift in each person.



VERSES 4-6

A major point for Paul in chapter 12 is that the body of Christ is a unified body with diverse members. Although his extended treatment of this idea comes in the last half of the chapter, his instruction in verses 4-6 initiates the discussion. Paul provided a rich theological foundation to strengthen his argument.

The Corinthians' spiritual unity was grounded in their common confession that "Jesus is Lord" (12:3). Yet their diversity was expressed through *different gifts ... different ministries ... and different activities*. The Spirit gives diverse gifts, and those gifts manifest themselves through various ministries in the church and through a broad range of activities that equip and edify God's people.

In the body of Christ, not all have the same gifts but all do have *the same Spirit ... the same Lord and the same God*. Paul's notion of unity in diversity reflects a deeper theological reality: the triune God Himself.

Paul didn't attempt to offer a robust treatment of God's triune being in these verses, but he did reveal it and affirm it as essential for the Corinthian believers' understanding of their own spiritual identity. Just as the Father, Son, and Spirit are one in essence, so also believers are one in Christ. Just as the Father, Son, and Spirit are distinct, complementary persons with unique roles in the Godhead, so also believers are diverse, complementary parts with a variety of roles in the one body of Christ.

Paul later said that the Holy Spirit "is active in all these, distributing to each person as he wills" (12:11). For this reason, we refer to these gifts as spiritual gifts. Paul was not talking about natural talents or abilities shared by both believer and non-believer. Rather, he was referring to supernatural endowments upon believers by the Spirit.

Paul was clear that these diverse spiritual gifts are produced in and distributed to believers as God sees fit. The spiritual reality behind diverse spiritual gifts in the church is this: "God has arranged each one of the parts of the body just as he wanted" (12:18).

Why is it important for each believer to realize that God has uniquely gifted him or her? What are the dangers of wanting to be gifted in a different way?

KEY DOCTRINE: *Holy Spirit*

The Holy Spirit cultivates Christian character, comforts believers, and bestows the spiritual gifts by which they serve God through His church.

SPECIFIC (1 COR. 12:7-10)

⁷ A manifestation of the Spirit is given to each person for the common good: ⁸ to one is given a message of wisdom through the Spirit, to another, a message of knowledge by the same Spirit, ⁹ to another, faith by the same Spirit, to another, gifts of healing by the one Spirit, ¹⁰ to another, the performing of miracles, to another, prophecy, to another, distinguishing between spirits, to another, different kinds of tongues, to another, interpretation of tongues.

VERSE 7

The specific gifts Paul identified in these verses represent a *manifestation of the Spirit that is given to each person for the common good*. For this reason, Paul warned the Corinthians about thinking they were more important than others in the church because of their particular gift or ministry in the church (12:15-24). Two chapters later Paul exhorted them “to excel in building up the church” (14:12) rather than building up themselves. Although the Spirit gives individual gifts to each person in the church, the purpose is the growth and edification of the whole.

Identify ways in which a person might use a spiritual gift to benefit himself or herself rather than the church. How can believers guard against those tendencies?

VERSES 8-10

Paul’s listing of specific gifts in these verses is not intended to be exhaustive. He included five additional gifts in verses 28-29. To the Romans, he left out most of the gifts mentioned to the Corinthians



and added three other gifts (Rom. 12:6-8). In Ephesians 4:11 Paul included yet another gift not mentioned to either the Romans or the Corinthians.

Paul mentioned first *a message of wisdom* and *a message of knowledge*. Since they are listed separately, the assumption is that these must reflect a different subject matter, such as wisdom representing a practical message and knowledge representing a doctrinal message. Certainly there is some shade of difference, but probably some overlap as well.

Next, Paul mentioned the gift of *faith*. He didn't mean saving faith, which would apply to all believers. The gift of faith is likely a special, Spirit-wrought trust in God to bring about something specific or some certain outcome needed by the church or for which the church is praying and seeking.

Paul added the *gifts of healing* and *the performing of miracles*. Note the use of the plurals here, suggesting there were various and different gifts of healing. *Miracles* is literally "the working of powers." Presumably, the working of miracles includes healing, which itself is a miracle, but miracles here contain more than healing. These miracles would be no less than the signs and wonders in the Old Testament and the Gospels. How do miracles serve the church? Perhaps to support her mission, as confirming signs of the gospel and of salvation.

Prophecy is next in the list. This is not predicting the future, but rather the proclamation of something that God has brought to mind for the edification of the church. There is much debate on the exact nature of this gift. Whatever prophecy is, it neither contradicts nor adds to God's revelation in Scripture.

Jesus indicated that there would be some who would prophesy and work miracles in his name, although they didn't belong to Him (Matt. 7:22-23). There will always be a need in the church for discernment and *distinguishing between spirits*. Not all who claim to be speaking or doing something for Christ are actually guided by the Spirit. Not all who claim to speak for Christ actually do. The church must be ever vigilant against deception and false teaching by looking to the Scripture.

Lastly, Paul mentioned *different kinds of tongues* and the *interpretation of tongues*. When the Spirit came at Pentecost, the believers gathered there spoke in different tongues, and what they spoke was recognizable as known languages (Acts 2:3-8). Although speaking in tongues shows up in the Book of Acts and

in 1 Corinthians, the rest of the New Testament is silent about this gift (except a mention of “new tongues” in Mark 16:17) and its presence in the churches (including the church in Rome, where Paul left it out when addressing spiritual gifts).

Paul mentioned tongues here but didn’t discuss it. He would do so in chapter 14, where he argued that prophecy supersedes tongues in the life of the church, but that tongues were not to be forbidden if there is an orderliness to them and if an interpreter is present. If there is no one to offer interpretation, the one desiring to speak in tongues is to “keep silent in the church” (1 Cor. 14:28), and at the most, two or three would be allowed to speak in tongues (v. 27)—as opposed to the congregation speaking all at once.

How does knowing that it is the Holy Spirit who gives the gifts create confidence in a believer to exercise his or her gift? How is receiving a spiritual gift part of a believer’s stewardship?

INTENTIONAL (1 COR. 12:11-12,21-26)

¹¹ One and the same Spirit is active in all these, distributing to each person as he wills. ¹² For just as the body is one and has many parts, and all the parts of that body, though many, are one body — so also is Christ. ²¹ The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” Or again, the head can’t say to the feet, “I don’t need you!” ²² On the contrary, those parts of the body that are weaker are indispensable. ²³ And those parts of the body that we consider less honorable, we clothe these with greater honor, and our unrespectable parts are treated with greater respect, ²⁴ which our respectable parts do not need. Instead, God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the less honorable, ²⁵ so that there would be no division in the body, but that the members would have the same concern for each other. ²⁶ So if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it.

VERSES 11-12

The purpose of spiritual gifts is not to build up individuals, but to benefit the church. Each gift is important and intentional for



the functioning of the body. No one can boast about gifts because they are produced by the Spirit. We might desire certain gifts over others, but the Spirit distributes His gifts to each person *as he wills*.

Paul used the analogy of the human body to describe the unity and diversity of the body of Christ. A single *body* has *many parts* to it. Yet all the parts of that body, though many, comprise only *one body*. The church is not filled with cookie-cutter believers. The beauty of the church, like the beauty of the human body, is found in its incredible diversity.

Other than a body, how would you illustrate what Paul was teaching in this passage? What would you emphasize and why?

The purpose of spiritual gifts is not to build up individuals, but to benefit the church.

VERSES 21-26

Paul painted a picture of the importance of each believer and his or her role by comparing it to a foot or an ear revolting because it was not a hand or an eye (12:13-20).

Paul's main concern in these verses was for the Corinthian believers to understand that they needed one another, including the weaker and less honorable members of the body. Perhaps the treatment of the poor during the Lord's Supper was still on Paul's mind (11:17-34). Paul laid out his case with four key claims.

First, the members of the body need each other. Neither the eye nor the head can say "*I don't need you!*" to the hand or the foot. Higher profile members need the lesser, just as the lesser profile members need the higher.

Second, the *weaker are indispensable*. The so-called weaker parts are vital to the whole. Remember, "God has chosen what is weak in the world to shame the strong" (1 Cor. 1:27)—this is God's economy and God's design, especially regarding those who make up His church.

Third, the *less honorable* members are to be given *greater honor* and *treated with greater respect*. We are not to treat people as the world does, showing favoritism (see Jas. 2:1-9). Rather, we bestow

respect and honor especially upon the parts that lack those things. Why? ***So that there would be no division in the body.*** Someone once said, “The ground is level at the foot of the cross.” Each member of the body of Christ should see others in this light.

Fourth, if something affects one member, all the members are affected as well. Paul wanted the members of the church to have the same concern for each other, regardless of worldly status. If they do, then ***if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it.*** No doubt, the entire body feels pain when the finger gets a paper cut or the little toe is crunched on the chair, or the head has a headache—the whole body suffers.

Likewise, ***if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it.*** Much of what Paul was dealing with among the Corinthians was pride and selfishness expressed in divisions (chaps. 1–4), sexual immorality (chaps. 5–7), abuses of Christian liberty (chaps. 8–10), or matters of corporate worship (chaps. 11–14). The bottom line is, each member is important and each is to care for the other, since all make up “the body of Christ, and individual members of it” (12:27).

How does the variety of gifts in a church give greater value to the giftedness of an individual? Why might a person devalue the role or gift God has given him? How can a person protect himself from devaluing his giftedness?

BIBLE SKILL: *Identify the imagery in a passage and discover what it communicates.*

Observe the words and phrases in 1 Corinthians 12:12-26 that describe a human body and its various parts. What does each word communicate to you about the nature of the church as the body of Christ and the role of individual believers? How is the imagery of the body like (or unlike) a local Christian congregation?



IN MY CONTEXT

- All believers are gifted to fulfill a God-initiated role in the ministry of the church.
- Believers receive specific gifts given at the Holy Spirit's discretion.
- Believers add value to the church when they use their God-given spiritual gifts in kingdom work.

As a group, discuss how a believer comes to know or understand that he or she has a particular spiritual gift. How can the Bible study group help members discover and exercise those gifts?

Seek to identify the spiritual gift(s) God has given you. (You can find a spiritual gifts inventory in the downloads under the resources tab at Blog.LifeWay.com/ExploreTheBible.) How are you using your gift to build up your local church? What actions do you need to take to be more effective?

Take time to reflect on how God has used you to make a difference in His church. Thank Him for the opportunities and ask Him to help you be more sensitive to being used by Him in the future.

Prayer Needs



UNDERSTANDING LOVE

Believers are to be motivated by love when serving others.

1 CORINTHIANS 13:1-13

Love is one of the most common themes found in music, literature, and film. Arguably, there is an angle of love in nearly every story, whether it is the desire for love, the loss of love, or complicated love. Love is a common human experience. We love family and friends, and we search for that true love with whom we can share our lives.

What song, movie, or book comes to your mind when you think about the topic of love? What line or scene stands out? How is love portrayed in that song or story?

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

1 CORINTHIANS 13:1–14:40; 16:1-24

First Corinthians 13 is one of the most famous chapters in the Bible, and rightly so. Love is central to the message of the gospel itself (John 3:16). Indeed, the Bible’s simplest description of God’s character is love (see 1 John 4:8). Love is foundational to Christian identity, Christian theology, and Christian living.

Unfortunately, this chapter is often read and understood in isolation from its context. No doubt, there is a unique quality to Paul’s content that stands on its own (for example, reading it in a wedding ceremony). But Paul’s overarching discussion in chapters 12–14 is about spiritual gifts, ministries, and activities in the life and worship of the church. Some gifts, coupled with divisions and self-centered behavior, caused problems in the Corinthian church.

Paul intentionally inserted this digression about love to clarify and establish “an even better way” (1 Cor. 12:31) for the Corinthians to act. He wanted them to “desire spiritual gifts,” especially prophecy (1 Cor. 14:1); but spiritual gifts are not ultimate, love is. If the church is not being built up, then spiritual gifts are not being used appropriately. Simply put, “everything is to be done for building up” (1 Cor. 14:26). How can this happen without love?

Paul concluded his letter by striking on the note of love once again. In a simple but profound summary statement, he declared, “do everything in love” (1 Cor. 16:14). Although his letter is saturated with commands, rebukes, and exhortations, Paul wanted the Corinthians to know of his deep affection for them as the final word: “My love be with all of you in Christ Jesus” (1 Cor. 16:24).

Read 1 Corinthians 13 in your Bible. Underline the different adjectives used to describe love. How does each adjective give a different nuance to Paul’s description of love?

EXPLORE THE TEXT

NECESSITY OF LOVE (1 COR. 13:1-3)

¹ If I speak human or angelic tongues but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ² If I have the gift of prophecy and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith so that I can move mountains but do not have love, I am nothing. ³ And if I give away all my possessions, and if I give over my body in order to boast but do not have love, I gain nothing.

VERSE 1

The “better way” (1 Cor. 12:31) that Paul wanted to show the Corinthians was the way of love. Apparently, the Corinthian church put an overemphasis on the gift and practice of speaking in tongues, given the amount of attention and clarification Paul devoted to the issue in chapters 12–14. Speaking in *human or angelic tongues* is an empty pursuit if one does *not have love*.

The predominant word for love in the New Testament is *agape*, which Paul used here. *Agape* never refers to romantic or sexual love; the word *eros* is used for that in the New Testament. Neither does *agape* indicate mere sentimental feelings about someone or something. Further, it does not identify the kind of brotherly love of friendship or camaraderie; the word *philia* is used for that. Instead, *agape* is best defined by what Paul wrote in this very chapter. It is a self-sacrificial, willful action that has another person’s best outcome in view. It is a self-giving, joyful desire to put someone else’s welfare before one’s own.

Paul’s opening point is clear and simple. Without love the gift and the gift-bearer become nothing more than empty, meaningless noise. Love is necessary and indispensable for the body to function as God designed it.

VERSES 2-3

Even the “greater gifts” (1 Cor. 12:31), like *prophecy* and *knowledge*, are worthless without love. The entire next chapter lifts up the gift of prophecy and the important role it has for building up the church. Yet anyone who has the gift of prophecy but doesn’t have love is *nothing*. No matter how much good comes from prophecy, it is intrinsically valueless unless it operates with love.



Paul said the same thing about understanding *all mysteries and all knowledge*. Perhaps since Paul was framing this in the first person, the point might be more exact to say that the person who acquires such knowledge is nothing without love. Either way, the necessity of love is central.

What would it look like for spiritual gifts to function without love?

Jesus taught in the Gospels that “if you have faith and do not doubt” and demand that a mountain be cast into the sea, “it will be done” (Matt. 21:21). What an amazing statement! Surely Paul had this kind of faith in mind when he referred to the spiritual gift of faith earlier (1 Cor. 12:9). Yet such an incredible spiritual gift of faith that can *move mountains* amounts to *nothing* without love. Faith is not unimportant, but it pales in comparison with the selfless, others-focused love that Paul prized above all else.

Love is also more important than any personal sacrifice we might offer, even for the benefit for others. Even if *I give away all my possessions*, Paul said, *I gain nothing* of lasting significance if love is left out. Sharing one’s possessions with those in need is a clear signal of gospel life operating in us (see Mark 10:17-31; Acts 2:45; 4:32; Jas. 2:15-16; 1 John 3:17). However, the motivating principle for giving away one’s possessions might be pride rather than love.

Paul added, *if I give over my body in order to boast but do not have love, I gain nothing*. In themselves, spiritual gifts and spiritual activities attest nothing spiritual about you if love is absent. After all, love is the first and primary aspect of the multi-faceted fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23). Even the ultimate physical sacrifice of martyrdom falls short of praise in Paul’s estimation if that person lacks love.

Why do you think Paul tackled these issues before describing what love is? What modern day priorities or activities do we elevate that Paul might have declared to be “nothing” without love?

NATURE OF LOVE (1 COR. 13:4-7)

⁴ Love is patient, love is kind. Love does not envy, is not boastful, is not arrogant, ⁵ is not rude, is not self-seeking, is not irritable, and does not keep a record of wrongs. ⁶ Love finds no joy in unrighteousness but rejoices in the truth. ⁷ It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

VERSES 4-5

Love is not so much defined in these verses as it is described. The emphasis is practical and behavioral rather than ideological. The first two qualities describing love as *patient* and *kind* form a complementary pair. Patience here is not so much the willingness to wait as it is the endurance of offense without retaliation. Kindness is the active complement of love, relationally speaking, when it comes to offense. Rather than repay evil for evil, love repays offense with kindness (see Col. 3:12-13).

Next, Paul issued a series of negated qualities that emphasize what love is not. *Love does not envy* and it *is not boastful*. Love is not jealous to have something belonging to another, including status or spiritual gifts in the church. Neither does love brag. Again, this would include boasting about status or spiritual gifts.

Love *is not arrogant*. Paul rebuked the Corinthians several times about their arrogance (4:6,18; 5:2; 8:1). Love never exalts itself above others; instead, it builds others up. Love *is not rude*. It does not behave improperly toward others.

A foundational aspect of love is that it *is not self-seeking*. Consider the issue of Christian liberty that Paul discussed earlier in his letter (8:1–11:1). Paul’s summary there magnified this key concept of love: “No one is to seek his own good, but the good of the other person” (1 Cor. 10:24; see also 10:31).

Likewise, love *is not irritable*. It is not easily angered or provoked, ready to erupt. Love does not demand its own rights, nor is it touchy and defensive—attributes that reflect the kind of arrogance and self-seeking temperament of those who lack love.

Love *does not keep a record of wrongs*. Literally, it “does not calculate the bad” and hold it against a person. Love doesn’t keep a ledger of offenses for later reference. Just as the Lord does not count our sins against us once we are in Christ (see 2 Cor. 5:19), so also we should forgive and forget the offenses of others (see Matt. 18:21-22).



VERSES 6-7

When Paul claimed that love *finds no joy in unrighteousness*, he meant that those who belong to God take no satisfaction in sin. There is to be no association with professing Christians whose lives display a sinful lifestyle (1 Cor. 5:11), and there is certainly to be no rejoicing over sin. Instead, love sees sin for what it is, and seeks the remedy to overcome it.

Immediately, Paul offered a positive counterpart to this negative statement. He said, love *rejoices in the truth*. Instead of taking joy in unrighteousness, love takes joy in what is morally right and doctrinally sound. Bad behavior often follows bad beliefs. But love finds satisfaction in what is true, and in what follows—righteousness.

Finally, Paul summed up his description of love with a punchy series declaring what is always true about it: *love bears ... believes ... hopes ... endures all things*. There is a protecting, trusting, optimistic, persevering character to love rather than the selfish, critical, envious, and unrighteous character that was being displayed in the Corinthian church. Paul issued this summary description as a call to amend their ways and reflect the kind of love that Christ called his disciples to show (John 13:34-35).

***How is the description of love given by Paul seen in God's character?
How does substituting the word "love" with "God" give you a better understanding of the relationship between the love defined by Paul and the character to God?***

BIBLE SKILL: *Create a compare/contrast chart to study a passage.*

Review 1 Corinthians 13 and create a chart. In one column, list words and phrases that are not characteristic of love. In a second column, list words and phrases that are characteristic of love. What insights do you gain by comparing the two lists? Are any opposites included? What action gives you the greatest trouble? Which action do you find the most significant?

PERMANENCE OF LOVE (1 COR. 13:8-13)

⁸ Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. ⁹ For we know in part, and we prophesy in part, ¹⁰ but when the perfect comes, the partial will come to an end. ¹¹ When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put aside childish things. ¹² For now we see only a reflection as in a mirror, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I will know fully, as I am fully known. ¹³ Now these three remain: faith, hope, and love — but the greatest of these is love.

VERSE 8

There is a natural connection in this verse to what precedes it, since Paul just said that love “endures all things” (v. 7). He used these remaining verses to again contrast spiritual gifts and love. Love is superior to spiritual gifts because of its lasting, permanent nature. *Love never ends. But as for prophecies and tongues and knowledge*, Paul asserted that they will *cease* and *come to an end*. Paul’s prized gift of prophecy and the Corinthians’ preferred gifts of tongues and knowledge are not the only spiritual gifts that will cease. These are representative of the full range of gifts that Paul was talking about in chapters 12–14. The gifts are temporary; love is permanent.

VERSES 9-12

Paul’s argument in these verses centers on the immature, imperfect nature of what we now possess in spiritual gifts compared with the mature, perfect nature of love. At the moment, we *know in part, and we prophesy in part*. The point is not that knowledge itself passes away, but rather the spiritual gift of knowledge. The same for prophecies; the content doesn’t end but rather the individual prophesyings motivated by the gift itself. Since what we have now is partial, the implication is that what we will have later is full and complete.

The return of Christ will bring an end to the partial and usher in the perfect.

Paul said *when the perfect comes, the partial will come to an end*. Of course, there is much debate over the interpretation of what Paul meant by “the perfect.” Perhaps a clue from the beginning of his letter



might help in some way. Paul said in 1:7, “you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ.” The return of Christ is the revelation expected by Paul. The return of Christ will bring an end to *the partial* and usher in the *perfect*.

Paul employed two illustrations to further make his point. First, he compared the partial character of spiritual gifts to the process of physical maturation. A child is not expected to remain a child forever, but to grow into adulthood. ***When I became a man, I put aside childish things.*** *Childish* isn’t meant to carry a negative connotation here, but one of incompleteness. When the perfect comes, maturity comes with it.

Second, Paul compared the partial nature of spiritual gifts to a ***reflection as in a mirror***. The reflection is imperfect and only represents the full reality of what it projects. When the perfect comes, Paul anticipated seeing ***face to face***. These illustrations are intended to clarify that the gifts are temporary, pointing to something greater, and also that love is permanent and remains forever.

VERSE 13

These three remain: faith, hope, and love. Faith remains because we will always trust and rely on the Lord. Hope remains because we will always hold to the promises God has made. Love is superior to everything else, even faith and hope, because love is an all-encompassing virtue. In fact, Paul’s argument all along has been that love is foundational to everything in life and in the church.

What is the relationship between faith, hope, and love? Can a person have faith, hope, and love apart from a relationship with Jesus? Explain.

KEY DOCTRINE: *Kingdom*

The full consummation of the Kingdom awaits the return of Jesus Christ and the end of this age.

IN MY CONTEXT

- Believers who use their gifts in love will make the greatest impact.
- Believers should be characterized by actions that demonstrate godly love for others.
- Believers should base their lives on things that have an eternal duration, with love being one such thing.

Read 1 Corinthians 13:4-7 and replace the word "love" with your name. What actions do you need to take to make what you just read true?

As a group, identify actions the group needs to take to better demonstrate the kind of love described in this passage. List one thing you can do to help your group better demonstrate this kind of love.

Examine your motives for serving in the church. Do your motives align with the teachings of Paul in 1 Corinthians 13? What adjustments do you need to make to your motives for serving?

Prayer Needs



ENJOYING GOD'S COMFORT

Believers find comfort in knowing that others benefit from and God is honored through their trials.

2 CORINTHIANS 1:3-14

Consider the different ways we use the phrase “comfort zone.” It can refer to a mental state in which people feel familiar with and in control of their circumstances. There’s also a negative sense for “comfort zone.” We may be urged to get out of our comfort zone—take risks, attempt things we’ve never done before.

What kinds of situations would you consider to be in your “comfort zone”? What things have you recently attempted that were “outside your comfort zone”? What are the advantages of staying in your comfort zone and of going outside your comfort zone?

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

2 CORINTHIANS 1:1–2:13

Paul lived outside his comfort zone as a traveling church planter. He was called by God to take the gospel where it had never been proclaimed. Helped by God's Spirit, he gladly faced unbelievable risks. As we'll see in this week's study, he had recently been so overwhelmed that he thought he would die (2 Cor. 1:8).

Paul, however, was not beyond needing comfort in the midst of these trials. He knew that comfort can come both from God and from others. He began Second Corinthians by praising God for the comfort He had given him. Further, Paul explained to the believers that divine comfort extended both from him to them and from them to him. Christians can find comfort in knowing that others benefit from their trials and that God is honored through such trials.

The opening chapters of this letter reveal quite a bit about the relationship between Paul and the Corinthian church, as well as some issues that had been going on since he wrote 1 Corinthians. The reminder that he was an apostle of Christ Jesus by God's will (1:1) serves as an important prelude to a larger defense of his apostleship in this letter.

False apostles had made inroads into the church at Corinth and cast doubts on Paul's authority because of his continual suffering and hardships. These false apostles became the target of Paul's rebuke. His sufferings for Christ did not invalidate his status as an apostle. On the contrary, Paul indicated that all believers can expect affliction (1:7). Enjoying God's comfort is the larger theme of the first chapter that flows from Paul's suffering and affliction.

Paul's travel schedule (2 Cor. 1:15–2:3,12-13) is not incidental but necessary to understand the context for the letter as a whole. After Paul founded the church, problems arose quickly, which he wrote about in a letter we do not have (see 1 Cor. 5:9). While in Ephesus, he heard about additional problems in the church and wrote 1 Corinthians to deal with them as well as other issues the Corinthians asked him to address. Apparently, the false apostles arrived during this time and caused more problems for Paul. In response, Paul left Ephesus for a brief visit to Corinth that didn't go well, so he wrote a severe letter rebuking the church (see 2 Cor. 2:4; 7:8-9), which also we do not have. Paul postponed his plans for another visit, although still had it in view (see 2 Cor. 12:14; 13:1).



Read 2 Corinthians 1:3-14 in your Bible. Highlight each occurrence of the word "comfort." From whom and to whom did comfort flow? What did Paul say was the purpose of the comfort he received from God?

KEY DOCTRINE: *God the Father*

God as Father reigns with providential care over His universe, His creatures, and the flow of the stream of human history according to the purposes of His grace.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

COMFORTED (2 COR. 1:3-7)

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort. ⁴ He comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any kind of affliction, through the comfort we ourselves receive from God. ⁵ For just as the sufferings of Christ overflow to us, so also through Christ our comfort overflows. ⁶ If we are afflicted, it is for your comfort and salvation. If we are comforted, it is for your comfort, which produces in you patient endurance of the same sufferings that we suffer. ⁷ And our hope for you is firm, because we know that as you share in the sufferings, so you will also share in the comfort.

VERSES 3-4

Paul began with praise to *the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ*. He referred to the Lord as *Father* twice in verse 3. God the Father is kind and compassionate toward His children. He provides for them and protects them, yet He does not withhold suffering and sorrow. Suffering, of course, has a purpose, not the least of which is to demonstrate the greatness of God's character toward us.

Paul also described God as the ***Father of mercies***. He is merciful and compassionate by His very nature (Ex. 34:6-7). Paul told the Ephesians, God is “rich in mercy” (Eph. 2:4). In addition, He is ***the God of all comfort***. This affirmation grounds Paul’s claim that God ***comforts us in all our affliction***. Surely, Paul saw his share of affliction, but in every case he found comfort from the Lord.

There is a purpose behind the comfort we receive from God. Not only does God’s comfort give us reason to praise Him, it is also ***so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any kind of affliction***. Nothing is wasted in God’s economy. Paul wanted the Corinthians to know that the suffering he had undergone for the gospel had provided an opportunity for God to comfort him. As a result, he was *able to comfort* them.

VERSES 5-7

Paul noted that ***the sufferings of Christ overflow to us***. Just as Jesus was reviled and rejected, so also His followers will be. We should not be amazed that the world hates us since it hated Jesus too. But ***also through Christ our comfort overflows***.

Both affliction and comfort in Paul’s life would be useful for the Corinthians’ comfort for two reasons. First, it was for their ***salvation***. Paul didn’t mean his sufferings were the grounds for their salvation, since only Jesus died for sins. Rather, Paul’s afflictions occurred because he preached the gospel by which they were saved. If Paul had tried to avoid persecution and suffering for spreading the gospel, many Gentiles (including the Corinthians) would not have heard and received salvation.

Paul’s Afflictions (2 Cor. 11:24-27)

- *thirty-nine lashes (on five occasions)*
- *beatings with rods (three times)*
- *stoning*
- *shipwrecked (three times)*
- *various other dangers, including robbers*
- *toil and hardship*
- *sleepless nights*
- *hunger and thirst*
- *cold and without clothing*



Second, Paul's comfort became their *comfort* and would produce in them *patient endurance*. Paul knew that "all who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (2 Tim. 3:12). Yet, the Corinthians could rejoice in their afflictions because affliction produces endurance, which produces character, which produces hope (Rom. 5:3-5). Paul was confident they would endure *the same sufferings* he suffered as they lived for Christ. He was certain they would also *share in the comfort* God provides.

How might the sufferings of a believer be used by God to impact the lives of others? How does a person's attitude when facing suffering influence others? To what examples can you point to illustrate your response?

BIBLE SKILL: *Use a Bible atlas and Bible dictionary (print version or on the Internet) to learn about places mentioned in Scripture.*

Find the locations of Corinth and Ephesus, and the provinces of Asia and Macedonia in a Bible atlas. (Tip: check the atlas index or search on the Internet.) Then use a Bible dictionary to learn more about these places during the time of Paul. How do these places enter into an understanding of the background of 2 Corinthians? What motivated Paul to continue to plant churches in these areas knowing the difficulty he would face?

TESTED (2 COR. 1:8-11)

⁸ We don't want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, of our affliction that took place in Asia. We were completely overwhelmed — beyond our strength — so that we even despaired of life itself. ⁹ Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death, so that we would not trust in ourselves but in God who raises the dead. ¹⁰ He has delivered us from such a terrible death, and he will deliver us. We have put our hope in him that he will deliver us again ¹¹ while you join in helping us by your prayers.

Then many will give thanks on our behalf for the gift that came to us through the prayers of many.

VERSES 8-9

Paul could speak of the comfort he received from the Lord because he had been tested in the fires of affliction. He didn't want the Corinthians to be *unaware* of the *affliction that took place in •Asia*. Paul gave no specifics on what happened to him. It is possible that the riot in Ephesus stirred up by Demetrius the silversmith was on Paul's mind (Acts 19:21-41), or maybe a combination of beatings, imprisonments, and other life-threatening dangers (2 Cor. 11:23-27).

Although Paul didn't mention the specifics, he did describe the severity of his afflictions. He and his companions *were completely overwhelmed*. In fact, Paul *despaired of life itself*. The word for *despaired* literally means "out of passageway." He considered his sufferings so bad that there was no exit, no way out from them.

Paul realized the immense spiritual value of afflictions, even the prospect of death for the gospel's sake. The purpose behind his afflictions was *that we would not trust in ourselves but in God who raises the dead*. God's grace is sufficient to lead us into greater trust in Him through times of testing (see 2 Cor. 12:9-10).

God's grace is sufficient to lead us into greater trust in Him through times of testing.

VERSES 10-11

God *delivered* Paul *from such a terrible death*. God spared his life and increased Paul's trust and confidence in Him. In fact, the apostle believed that as he continued the mission of the gospel, God would deliver him again. He knew that God would deliver him through any trial or test or circumstance until the time for him to enter God's heavenly kingdom (see 2 Tim. 4:18).

Not only did God increase Paul's trust in Him, he also increased his hope. As a result, Paul said, *we have put our hope in him that he will deliver us again*. Paul told the Romans, "Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you believe so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit" (Rom. 15:13). The focus of Paul's hope was not deliverance, but God Himself, in whom he had learned to trust.



Why is hope such a powerful thing? How is the hope described by Paul different from wishful thinking?

There's another facet of Paul's hope and confidence during times of affliction, and that was the awareness that God's people were praying for him. He counted on the Corinthians to join in helping him endure by offering prayers on his behalf. He asked the Ephesians to pray that God would give him boldness to preach the gospel (Eph. 6:19-20). He said confidently to the Philippians that his own deliverance would come through their prayers for him (Phil. 1:19).

As those intercessory prayers were answered, and Paul saw deliverance in times of testing and affliction, many would *give thanks* on Paul's behalf *for the gift that came ... through the prayers of many*. Indeed, there is great cause for rejoicing and thanksgiving when God answers prayer. But Paul was not soliciting prayers for his own selfish reasons, rather for the benefit of others as God's grace reached more people for His glory (2 Cor. 4:15). Paul's desire was for God to be honored, which would lead the Corinthian believers to give thanks to Him.

ACCEPTED (2 COR. 1:12-14)

¹² **Indeed, this is our boast: The testimony of our conscience is that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially toward you, with godly sincerity and purity, not by human wisdom but by God's grace.** ¹³ **For we are writing nothing to you other than what you can read and also understand. I hope you will understand completely —** ¹⁴ **just as you have partially understood us — that we are your reason for pride, just as you also are ours in the day of our Lord Jesus.**

VERSES 12-14

Paul began his letter by identifying himself as “an apostle of Christ Jesus by God's will” (2 Cor. 1:1). Because of the negative influence of false apostles in the Corinthian church, Paul wanted his readers to accept him as one who had proven himself among them. He wasn't interested in their validation of his apostleship, but rather their acceptance of him as a source of pride and joy in bringing them the gospel.

Paul declared, ***this is our boast*** because his conscience testified to the truth of how he had proven himself among the Corinthians. His conduct in the world and toward them was proven by ***godly sincerity and purity***. Paul had lived his life above reproach, regardless of the slander the false apostles had lobbed at his character. His life and actions reflected holy motives, and his conduct was sincere—it held up to careful inspection.

Of course, Paul wasn't boasting in himself or his own human wisdom to defend his actions. Rather, he admitted that anything good and praiseworthy was because of ***God's •grace***.

Paul's integrity was at stake, it seems. And perhaps, the love he had for the Corinthians was being questioned as well (see 2 Cor. 2:4; 1 Cor. 16:24). He marveled that even though he had poured himself into this church and loved them as a father in the faith, they still only partially understood him and his ministry among them. Their relationship had seen its share of ups and downs, but reconciliation was evident (see 2 Cor. 7).

Paul concluded this section by telling the Corinthians: ***we are your reason for pride***. They should reject the disparaging remarks of the false apostles and recall the sincerity and purity of Paul's ministry among them. Even more, they should have defended Paul and boasted about the work of God through him in Corinth and beyond.

The Corinthians were a source of pride for Paul, too. He would boast about them and the gospel fruit among them ***in the day of our Lord Jesus***. Paul said something similar to the Thessalonian church: "For who is our hope or joy or crown of boasting in the presence of our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? Indeed you are our glory and joy!" (1 Thess. 2:19-20). The Philippian church was also Paul's "joy and crown" (Phil. 4:1). Like the Thessalonians and the Philippians, the Corinthian church was a cause for boasting and pride in Paul's heart—they were the crowing achievements of his gospel ministry.

What is the relationship between a person's integrity and our willingness to recognize or accept their role in kingdom work? What would be a greater source of pride—being a person of integrity or being recognized by others for the work you do? Explain.



IN MY CONTEXT

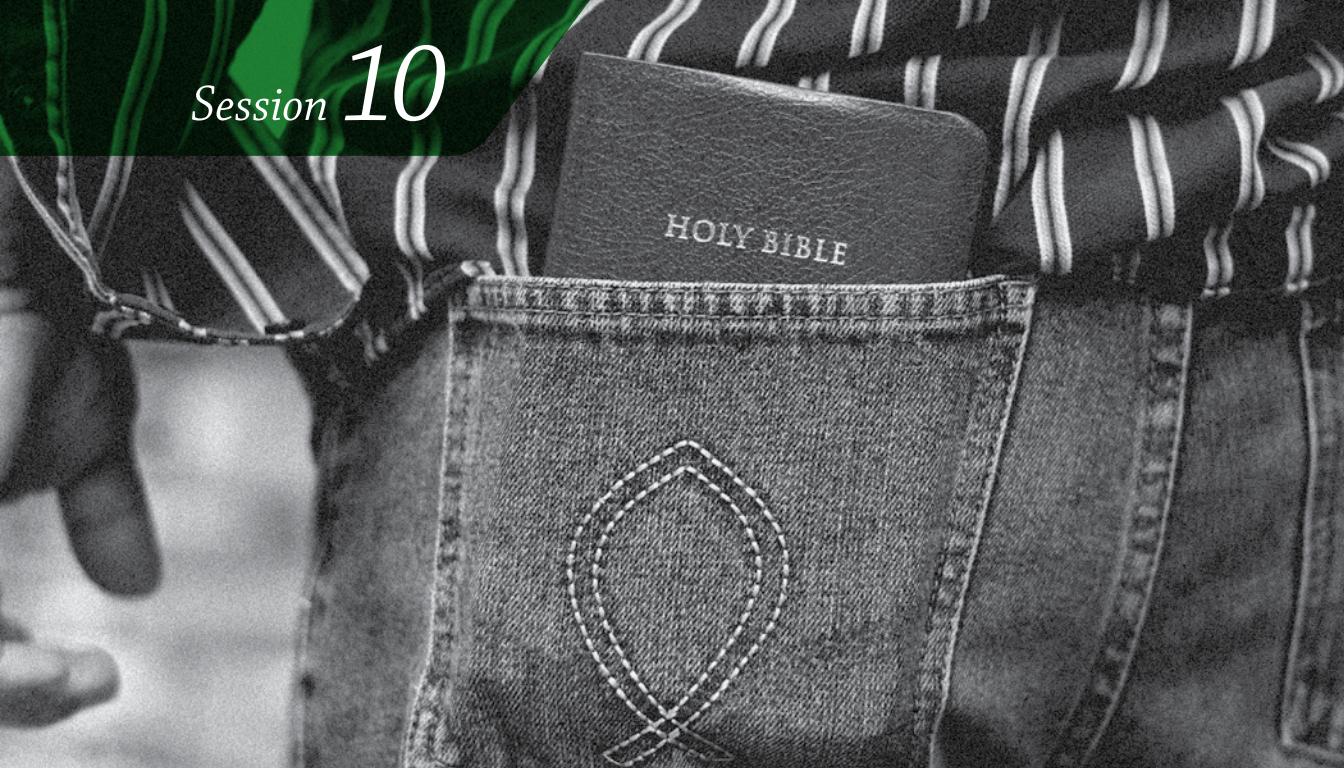
- Believers can be comforted when facing sufferings because God is present and using those experiences to impact others.
- Believers can celebrate a testing of their faith, knowing that God will strengthen them and demonstrate His power.
- Believers can recognize the work of God in and through others, accepting them as co-laborers.

Discuss with your group ways God is encouraging your group members through someone who is suffering and the way they are facing that suffering. What can your group do to be encouragers to others?

How is God testing your faith? What are you learning about Him and yourself through that test? Who can encourage you through your difficulty?

With whom can you share insights you gained from this lesson? How can you share those insights in an encouraging way?

Prayer Needs



DISPLAYING THE GOSPEL

Believers can face life with confidence, knowing that the power of the gospel will be revealed.

2 CORINTHIANS 4:5-18

LifeWay Research surveyed Americans about their perceptions regarding religious liberty. Sixty percent of those surveyed agreed with the statement, “Religious liberty is on the decline in America.” Almost two-thirds (63%) agreed with the statement, “American Christians face growing intolerance.” Religious liberty has become an increasingly contentious issue in American culture.

Do you agree or disagree that religious liberty is declining? Explain your answer. What actions should be taken in places where Christianity is actively persecuted or suppressed?

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

2 CORINTHIANS 2:14–5:10

Christianity was not tolerated as a legal religion anywhere in the Roman Empire of the first century. Thus, when Paul and other apostles wrote to encourage believers who faced persecution, he was dealing with a much more challenging cultural situation than any of us has faced.

Paul began his letter by reminding the Corinthians of the afflictions he had endured for the sake of the gospel (2 Cor. 1:3-11). Such afflictions, he said, actually benefited the Corinthians and brought them comfort and encouragement in their troubles. Paul's purpose was broader in scope, however. He was defending his apostleship and authority against some people who were criticizing him on account of his persistent sufferings (chaps. 10–11).

Although false teachers were fleecing the Corinthian believers financially through deceitful means (11:5-15), Paul reminded them how he labored among them “free of charge” (11:7) so that it wouldn't appear as if he was marketing “the word of God for profit” (2:17). He had no need to seek a commendation from them, to prove himself to them again, since they themselves were his “letters of recommendation” (3:1). His apostolic ministry was adequate because God had made him competent as a minister of the new covenant in Christ (3:5-6).

In this week's Scripture passage, Paul was still dealing with these two interconnected issues: his sufferings and the question of his apostolic ministry. Indeed, he would commend himself and his co-laborers “to everyone's conscience by an open display of the truth” (2 Cor. 4:2). Paul's main agenda in these verses was to call the Corinthians to join him in displaying the gospel in their proclamation, their lives, and their focus for the glory of God in Christ.

Read 2 Corinthians 4:5-18 in your Bible. Look for words or phrases that indicate Paul's priorities in his life. How do these priorities impact how he approached life?

EXPLORE THE TEXT

PROCLAIM (2 COR. 4:5-6)

⁵ For we are not proclaiming ourselves but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus's sake. ⁶ For God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of God's glory in the face of Jesus Christ.

VERSE 5

Although Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy (2 Cor. 1:19) were worthy of commendation for their ministry to the Corinthians, Paul insisted, *we are not proclaiming ourselves*. It seems the false apostles were boasting about themselves, and at the same time preaching "another Jesus" (11:4). Paul and his colleagues had no need to proclaim themselves; they proclaimed *Jesus Christ as Lord*. In his previous letter, Paul declared to know nothing among them "except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2) because there was no other foundation upon which to build than Jesus himself (1 Cor. 3:11).

Yet Paul did promote himself and his co-workers in the ministry as *servants for Jesus's sake*. In other letters, Paul defined himself first as a servant of Christ before establishing his apostleship (see Rom. 1:1; Phil. 1:1; Titus 1:1). As a servant of Christ, he was not concerned about himself but about His master and His master's business.

Paul could not allow the Corinthians to miss this point. He wrote to them earlier, "A person should think of us in this way: as servants of Christ and managers of the mysteries of God" (1 Cor. 4:1). In fact, when addressing issues of division in the Corinthian church, Paul asked: "What then is Apollos? What is Paul?" His answer was clear and simple: "They are servants through whom you believed" (1 Cor. 3:5).

VERSE 6

Paul paraphrased Genesis 1:3, noting that *God who said, "Let light shine out of darkness,"* has done something additional in us through the gospel. Paul was making a connection between creation and re-creation. Just as darkness covered the surface of the earth and God's light overcame it, so also the darkness of sin



covers our lives but God's light overcomes it. Paul declared that through Jesus, the light of the world, God *has shone in our hearts*.

What is God's illuminating work in our hearts? It is bringing *the light of the knowledge of God's glory in the face of Jesus Christ*. Paul's amazing statement here is tethered to a larger discussion in context, and draws on something he said earlier about the old covenant ministry of Moses. Notice in 2 Corinthians 3:7-13 that the Israelites were unable to look at Moses when he came down from Mount Sinai because God's glory was on his face (see Ex. 34:29-35). They had to keep his face veiled.

In contrast, Paul said that God's glory wasn't merely on Jesus' face, but it was *in his face*! Moses reflected God's glory; Jesus is God's glory! The writer of Hebrews says, "The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact expression of his nature" (Heb 1:3). Jesus is "the image of God" (2 Cor. 4:4). Moses' face was veiled, but Jesus' face is shining brightly to overcome the darkness of our hearts. Paul declared that he didn't proclaim Moses, since the old covenant that came through him still veils the hearts of those who claim him. Paul didn't proclaim himself either, or anyone else for that matter. Christ alone is the One to proclaim.

What are the implications and consequences for proclaiming someone or something other than salvation in Christ alone?

BIBLE SKILL: *Observe when and for what purpose a New Testament passage included Old Testament quotations.*

Paul quoted Genesis 1:3 in 2 Corinthians 4:6 and Psalm 116:10 in 2 Corinthians 4:13. Read the entire Old Testament chapter for each quotation. How does the context of the verse quoted help you better understand why Paul quoted that passage? What factors are the same or similar? How do the quoted passages help you better understand Jesus and the gospel?

LIVE (2 COR. 4:7-15)

7 Now we have this treasure in clay jars, so that this extraordinary power may be from God and not from us. **8** We are afflicted in every way but not crushed; we are perplexed but not in despair; **9** we are persecuted but not abandoned; we are struck down but not destroyed. **10** We always carry the death of Jesus in our body, so that the life of Jesus may also be displayed in our body. **11** For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus's sake, so that Jesus's life may also be displayed in our mortal flesh. **12** So then, death is at work in us, but life in you. **13** And since we have the same spirit of faith in keeping with what is written, I believed, therefore I spoke, we also believe, and therefore speak. **14** For we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will also raise us with Jesus and present us with you. **15** Indeed, everything is for your benefit so that, as grace extends through more and more people, it may cause thanksgiving to increase to the glory of God.

VERSE 7

Paul's afflictions for the gospel provided an opportunity for his opponents to cast doubt on the power of God in his life and ministry. But Paul boasted in his weaknesses and sufferings as markers for the power of God to be shown more clearly in his life. The "gospel of the glory of Christ" (2 Cor. 4:4) is a treasure we have in clay jars. The treasure is valuable and costly; the jars are weak and common. It is the weakness of the vessel, Paul argued, that allows this extraordinary power to be shown as *from God and not from us*.

VERSES 8-14

Paul asserted that he was *afflicted in every way but not crushed ... perplexed but not in despair ... persecuted but not abandoned ... struck down but not destroyed*. He was weak, but God's power was demonstrated in each of these aspects to preserve and sustain him. In every situation, God's strength and grace are sufficient. Paul may have been knocked down, so to speak, but he wasn't knocked out. Difficulties were present on all sides, but there was no defeat because God's extraordinary power was at work.

The Christian life is marked by suffering and sometimes by the threat of death. We ought to expect this because Jesus told His followers they would experience it (see Matt. 10:16-24).



Paul didn't dwell on death but instead magnified life. Jesus' death is present in our body *so that the life of Jesus may also be displayed in our body*. Even though *death is at work in us*, we know that death is not ultimate because of Jesus' resurrection. Paul's confident hope was that the One who raised the Lord Jesus will also raise us.

The key to living confidently and faithfully as followers of Christ in situations that appear to destroy us is this: "your life is hidden with Christ in God" (Col. 3:3). We live confidently because we do not "trust in ourselves but in God who raises the dead" (2 Cor. 1:9).

VERSE 15

All of this—whether life, suffering, or death—was for the benefit of others. As the gospel spread through Paul's missionary journeys, his expectation was that grace would extend *through more and more people*. He was willing to endure these things not only for the benefit of the Corinthians, but for the salvation of the lost wherever the Lord sent him.

This kind of living would *cause thanksgiving to increase to the glory of God*. As the gospel advanced and afflictions increased, Paul concluded that God's power displayed in his weaknesses would lead to increased gratitude. God is glorified through faithful and grateful dependence on Him and His power.

How would Paul define a win for himself? For other believers? How should believers understand success in this life?

KEY DOCTRINE: *God's Purpose of Grace*

Those whom God has accepted in Christ, and sanctified by His Spirit, will never fall away from the state of grace, but shall persevere to the end.

FOCUS (2 COR. 4:16-18)

16 Therefore we do not give up. Even though our outer person is being destroyed, our inner person is being renewed day by day.

17 For our momentary light affliction is producing for us an absolutely incomparable eternal weight of glory. 18 So we do not focus on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

VERSE 16

When difficulties and afflictions arise, it's easy to lose heart. Paul called his readers to focus on higher truths and greater realities based on the grace and mercy of the Lord. **Therefore**, he said, **we do not give up**. If Jesus' life and death—His glory—is the treasure we carry in the clay jars of our lives, then we have so much more to live for. If God is able to raise the dead (and He is), then we find confidence to carry on. This is the second time Paul said we do not give up. In 2 Corinthians 4:1, he appealed to God's mercy and the stewardship of his ministry as other reasons why he didn't quit on the gospel.

Even though **our outer person is being destroyed**, there is more to life than our physical bodies. Our body is temporary, an "earthly tent" that is wearing out (5:1). But our inner person **is being renewed day by day**. Let this be our focus! God has shone in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of His glory in Jesus Christ (4:6), and that glory is transforming us into the image of Christ.

How does the inner person get renewed daily? How does that daily renewal fuel and motivate the believer?

VERSES 17-18

Paul reminded the Corinthians about the purpose and result of suffering. Nothing is wasted in God's economy; nothing is accidental in God's careful plans for us. **For our momentary light affliction is producing** something amazing and important. Paul minimized affliction when compared to what God has in store for us in glory. Interestingly, he referred to them as *light afflictions*, even though he felt at times like he'd received the sentence of death and was completely overwhelmed beyond his strength to handle them (1:8-9).



God is producing something far better than we can understand in the moment of suffering. Paul asserted that God is producing *an absolutely incomparable eternal weight of glory*. What is this amazing weight of glory? Again, context supplies some clues.

God is producing something far better than we can understand in the moment of suffering.

The gospel we have received is not veiled, but its full glory is on display. Jesus Christ, the image of God and the glory of God, is shining brightly in our hearts overcoming sin and death. “We all, with unveiled faces, are looking as in a mirror at the glory of the Lord and are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory” (2 Cor. 3:18). We are poised to share in God’s glory if we are prepared to share in His sufferings (Rom. 8:17).

What image was Paul talking about that we are being transformed into? In his previous letter, he exclaimed that “just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven,” Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 15:9). First John 3:2 states that when Jesus appears “we will be like him because we will see him as he is.”

Our focus is not on temporary things. Rather, our sights are fixed on eternal realities.

This is the *incomparable eternal weight of glory*—that we be conformed into the image of Jesus. Paul said to the Romans, “We know that all things work together for the good of those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. For those he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son” (Rom 8:28-29). God’s purpose for us, and the glory that awaits us, is that we will be like Jesus.

In the final analysis, Paul said *we do not focus on what is seen, but on what is unseen*. Our focus is not on temporary things. Rather, our sights are fixed on eternal realities. For now, it is enough for us to “walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Cor. 5:7).

How does the glory reserved for us in the future serve as motivation in the now to be faithful and courageous in suffering?

IN MY CONTEXT

- Believers are to exclusively proclaim Jesus.
- All people can live victoriously through faith in the resurrected Jesus.
- Believers are to focus on things with eternal consequences.

What actions do you need to take to safeguard against proclaiming anyone other than Jesus? Discuss with the group ways you can hold each other accountable for making Jesus the focus of our message.

Evaluate your level of dependence upon Jesus when facing difficulties. What actions do you need to take to improve that dependence? What attitudes toward difficulties need to be adjusted based on this study?

Ask God to increase your focus on eternal things rather than temporary things. Pray for His Spirit to remove specific areas in your life that distract you and hinder you. Record what He reveals to you.

Prayer Needs





BECOMING NEW

Believers faithfully represent Christ by living as new creations reconciled to Him.

2 CORINTHIANS 5:16-21; 6:1-2

Humans are relational by nature. Some of the greatest joys in life are found in healthy relationships. On the other hand, a broken or lost relationship can send us into depression or desperation. The closer the relationship, the greater the hurt if broken.

Can any broken relationship be fixed? Explain. How does the restoring of a once broken relationship change the people who were once at odds with each other?

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

2 CORINTHIANS 5:11–7:16

God created us to relate to one another, but He also created us to relate to Him. Our greatest need is to be reconciled to God. Sin has created a barrier that must be dealt with if we are to come into a right relationship with Him. Sin also creates barriers between people, and barriers must be removed if two sides are to come into agreement. In this week’s Scripture passage, we’ll see that Paul thought deeply about reconciliation and insisted that genuine reconciliation comes only through a right relationship with Jesus. Further, as you study this passage, keep in mind that churches that reconcile fractured relationships will be more effective in proclaiming the gospel message.

Understanding affliction in the Christian life has been a key theme from Paul in this letter to the Corinthians. One of the reasons why believers “do not give up” (2 Cor. 4:16) is because we trust that our momentary afflictions will produce an “absolutely incomparable eternal weight of glory” (4:17) in heaven. Christians can expect the temporary “earthly tent” of their bodies to be replaced with “an eternal dwelling in the heavens, not made with hands” (5:1).

This truth, of course, leads us to desire to be “away from the body and at home with the Lord”—but until that happens, “we make it our aim to be pleasing to him” (5:8-9). Why? Because, as Paul stated, “we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ to be repaid” for the things we’ve “done in the body, whether good or evil” (5:10).

Because judgment is approaching, Paul insisted that “we try to persuade people” (5:11). Not only on account of judgment, but also because “the love of Christ compels us” (5:14), our aim should be to convince people to live as those who have been reconciled by God. If Jesus died for all, then “those who live should no longer live for themselves, but for the one who died for them and was raised” (5:15).

Living for Christ means living a life of holy separation from the world (6:14-18). If we are to be held accountable for the things we’ve done in our body, both good and evil, then “let us cleanse ourselves from every impurity of flesh and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God” (7:1). Yet none of this is possible unless we’ve become new creations, having been reconciled to God through Christ’s sacrifice.



Read 2 Corinthians 5:16–6:2 in your Bible. Identify words or phrases used by Paul to describe the results of salvation. How do the words or phrases work together in Paul’s description?

EXPLORE THE TEXT

REBORN (2 COR. 5:16-17)

¹⁶ From now on, then, we do not know anyone from a worldly perspective. Even if we have known Christ from a worldly perspective, yet now we no longer know him in this way.

¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, and see, the new has come!

VERSE 16

From now on, then, compelled by the love of Christ, Paul encouraged the Corinthians to see people through a spiritual lens, not *from a worldly perspective*. Paul’s desire was to see grace extend “through more and more people” (2 Cor. 4:15), which would not happen if those same people were thought of according to worldly standards.

Sadly, the Corinthian church had been infiltrated by false teachers who prioritized external things and took “pride in outward appearance rather than in the heart” (5:12). The body was not unimportant to Paul. He proclaimed the resurrection of an incorruptible, immortal, image-bearing body in the likeness of Jesus (1 Cor. 15:50-55). Perhaps this rejection of seeing others from a worldly perspective was Paul’s response to the accusations that his sufferings cast doubt on his authoritative status among the Corinthians.

The same goes for knowing Christ, said Paul. *We have known Christ from a worldly perspective*, he claimed, *yet we no longer know him in this way*. Paul formerly viewed Jesus according to the flesh. He considered Jesus just a man, a teacher who claimed to be the Messiah, yet a rebel against Judaism, worthy of condemnation. After Jesus met Paul on the road to Damascus and changed his

life, Paul knew Him differently—as the Son of God, Messiah, and risen Lord. Spiritual rebirth transforms a worldly perspective about Jesus and about others.

VERSE 17

Everything and everyone must be viewed through the gospel of Jesus Christ. For those who are saved, who are *in Christ*, everything has changed. Paul referred here to being united with Christ—a theological reality central to his understanding of salvation. Being saved, or born again, means that believers are now *in Christ*. At the same time, Christ is said to be in us (see Gal. 2:20). Union with Christ involves both aspects, revealing a complementary relationship between our being in Christ and Him dwelling in us.

What are the benefits of being united with Christ? How does being united with Christ change how a person lives daily?

Anyone who trusts Jesus Christ for salvation is a *new creation*. Again, what is external isn't important compared to this reality. Paul said to the Galatians, “For both circumcision and uncircumcision mean nothing; what matters instead is a new creation” (Gal. 6:15).

Because of the regenerating work of God in saving us and giving us new birth, *the old has passed away*. Paul told the Romans, “For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin may no longer be enslaved to sin” (Rom. 6:6). The old self that we used to be—with the old desires, inclinations, pursuits, and goals—has been transformed and replaced by *the new that has come* in Christ. We now have new desires, goals, and purposes because of the gospel. Born again by the Spirit, having trusted in Christ, we have put off the old and put on the new.

What actions and characteristics point to a person being made new as a result of faith in Jesus?



KEY DOCTRINE: *Salvation*

Regeneration, or the new birth, is a work of God's grace whereby believers become new creatures in Christ Jesus.

RECONCILED (2 COR. 5:18-21)

¹⁸ Everything is from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.

¹⁹ That is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and he has committed the message of reconciliation to us. ²⁰ Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us. We plead on Christ's behalf: "Be reconciled to God." ²¹ He made the one who did not know sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

VERSES 18-19

Paul provided a reminder of God's initiation in our redemption, saying simply, ***Everything is from God***. This truth applies to what Paul has said, and will say, on both sides of this statement. From the death of Jesus and its saving benefits, to the regenerating and sanctifying work of the Spirit, to reconciliation, to the judgment seat of Christ—God is the One who began the good work in believers and will bring it to completion in Christ (see Phil 1:6).

It is God ***who has reconciled us to himself through Christ***. The clear testimony of Scripture is that our sin has created a barrier between us and God (see Isa. 59:2). Reconciliation is the restoration of a relationship that has been broken or severed; it is the reunion of parties separated by the consequences of sin or wrongdoing. Paul's emphasis was that God reconciled sinners to Himself through Christ. We have been brought near to God by the blood of Christ; the cross is where reconciliation and peace have been won and achieved (see Eph. 2:13-16). All of this is from God—He initiated it, He achieved it, He applied it to our lives.

The Corinthians needed to know and appreciate that God's reconciling work was not isolated to them alone, but that ***God was***

reconciling the world to himself. John said it this way: “He himself is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours, but also for those of the whole world” (1 John 2:2). God’s work through Jesus was not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him (John 3:17).

How does being reconciled to God serve as motivation for serving Him? What does God’s initiating this reconciliation reveal about God’s love for humans? How should the love God demonstrates motivate us to serve Him?

VERSES 20-21

As amazing as our reconciliation with God is, Paul added more: **God is making his appeal through us.** It is the proclamation of the gospel that God uses to save others. How will people be saved unless they hear the gospel for themselves (Rom. 10:14)? God “has committed the message of reconciliation to us” (2 Cor. 5:19), and **we are ambassadors for Christ.** Believers are messengers for and representatives of the One who sent them.

It is the proclaiming of the gospel that God uses to save others.

It is incredible to think that “we are God’s coworkers” (1 Cor. 3:9). He assigned us the responsibilities to plant and water, but He gives the growth. So **we plead on Christ’s behalf: “Be reconciled to God.”** Even though pleading is commanded, reconciliation is still from God. He alone can forgive our sins and restore us to Himself. But in light of receiving that reconciliation, we are commanded to take action on His behalf.

We plead on Christ’s behalf because only the life and death of Christ qualifies us for reconciliation with God. Jesus did not know sin; He lived a righteous life in full obedience to God the Father. Yet God made Him **to be sin for us.** Our sins and punishment were laid upon Him, even though He didn’t deserve it.

If we are in Christ, God doesn’t count our trespasses against us because Jesus became sin on our behalf. In Christ, we **become the righteousness of God.** Paul appealed again to our union with Christ.



We have been reconciled to God and entrusted with the message of reconciliation as ambassadors for Christ.

How does being reconciled to God qualify a person to be an ambassador for the reconciliation available to others? What responsibilities does an ambassador carry and how do those responsibilities inform believers of God's expectations for them?

BIBLE SKILL: *Notice repeated words or phrases in a Bible passage.*

Biblical writers sometimes used repetition of key words to emphasize a theme or message. Paul used word repetition in this session's passage. Identify the term (verb and noun) he used five times in 2 Corinthians 5:18-21. Think about what this repetition helps communicate in the overall passage. Look also at the other times the apostle used forms of this term in his letters (Rom. 5:10-11; 11:15; Eph. 2:16; Col. 1:20-22). What significance does this repeated term have for believers today?

READY (2 COR. 6:1-2)

¹ Working together with him, we also appeal to you, "Don't receive the grace of God in vain." ² For he says: At an acceptable time I listened to you, and in the day of salvation I helped you. See, now is the acceptable time; now is the day of salvation!

VERSES 1-2

Paul directed the Corinthians to recognize the urgency of one's response to the gospel message of reconciliation with God.

People must be ready to act on God's offer while the opportunity is available to them.

In verse 2, Paul applied the words of Isaiah 49:8 to his own time. In the original setting, the Lord was speaking of a time of restoration after the captivity of Israel. That time would be called *the day of salvation*. To Isaiah's first hearers, these words offered the hope of restoration after a time of judgment. The Lord promised in Isaiah 49:8 "to restore the land, to make them possess the desolate inheritances." This ultimately would come to pass through the Messiah. Paul believed that this time of salvation had arrived with the coming of Jesus Christ. No longer was this an unfulfilled promise; it had arrived now. There could be no delay in responding to the good news.

The urgent message of reconciliation was pressed upon the Corinthians with the words, *we also appeal to you*. Jesus' reconciling work on the cross was indeed for the world, but the Corinthians must receive it for themselves. Paul's appeal was that the Corinthians would not *receive the grace of God in vain*. Hearing about but doing nothing with the saving work of Jesus Christ would be a tragic omission.

The emphasis is on the present moment of opportunity: *now is the acceptable time; now is the day of salvation!* Paul's urgency echoes Joshua's call to choose today whom you will serve, worship, and obey—will it be the Lord, or will it be other things? (See Josh. 24:14-15.) The message of reconciliation with God is too important to overlook or push off for another time. The Corinthians, and all who hear this gracious gospel message, should be ready so as to not receive the grace of God in vain.

What are some reasons people may give for waiting to accept the gospel? What can a believer do to emphasize to others the urgency for accepting Christ?



IN MY CONTEXT

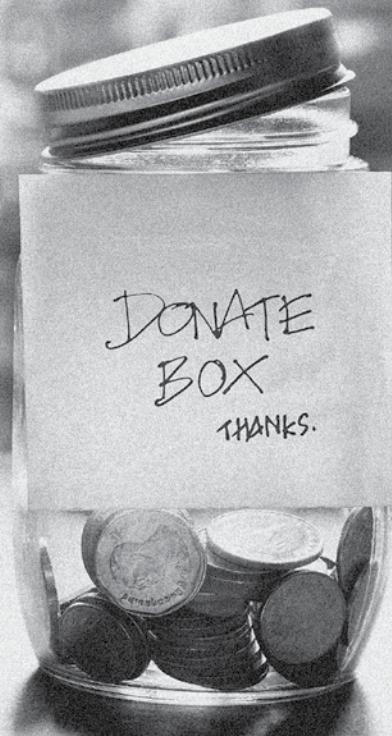
- Only through faith in Christ can a person be made new and move away from what he or she once was.
- Only through faith in Christ can a person be reconciled to God.
- All people must act on God’s offer while the opportunity is available to them.

Take time to evaluate your life, looking for “old” things you still struggle to put off. Ask God to help you live in light of the new life He offers through His Son.

As a group, discuss how people seek to become reconciled with God on their own terms. What actions can your group take to help others know that reconciliation with God only comes through faith in Jesus?

Pray that God help you see people as others in need of the gospel. Ask Him to help you see them through a spiritual lens with the urgency of the gospel. With whom do you need to make an urgent effort to share Jesus?

Prayer Needs



GIVING FAITHFULLY

Believers show trust in God by using their resources to meet the needs of others.

2 CORINTHIANS 9:1-15

The man wore everyday clothes with no designer names attached. Nothing about him indicated he was wealthy. He seemed to be just like any other customer sitting in the café. After eating his meal, he thanked the waitress and left her a tip that was larger than his bill. Another person at the table commented about his tip. The man reminded the person that one doesn't need to be rich to be generous, but that one simply must be generous to be generous.

Why might a person question someone being generous? What motivates people to be generous toward others?

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

2 CORINTHIANS 8:1–9:15

God uses money to expose the condition of our hearts. Jesus made statements like, “where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matt. 6:21) and “you cannot serve both God and money” (Matt. 6:24). Paul said, “the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil” (1 Tim. 6:10). Christians should view money through a different lens. Rather than being greedy and grabbing all we can get, we should be generous and give to others in need.

To understand this week’s Bible passage, it is important to recall the historical background. The Jerusalem church faced significant challenges, including heavy financial burdens for ministry among the poor. The believers in the Jerusalem church did their part to share and support each other financially (Acts 2:44-45), yet more was needed. A famine hit Judea that added to the need, and churches sent gifts to the Jerusalem believers by way of Barnabas and Saul (Acts 11:30).

When Paul first met James, Peter, and John in Jerusalem, they asked him to “remember the poor.” Paul “made every effort to do” so (Gal. 2:10). Wherever he went, he levied his apostolic influence to raise money in support of the needy saints in Jerusalem. Why? Because Gentile believers were indebted to the Jerusalem church, the epicenter from which the gospel spread into the world. Paul said to the Romans, “For if the Gentiles have shared in their spiritual benefits, then they are obligated to minister to them in material needs” (Rom. 15:27).

In 1 Corinthians, Paul encouraged the Corinthian believers to take up a collection for the believers in Jerusalem (1 Cor. 16:1). He wanted this to be ready when he came (1 Cor. 16:2). Apparently, however, tensions between the Corinthians and Paul, as well as the negative influence of the false teachers, hindered the collection and halted giving. So Paul reengaged the issue, bragging on the Macedonian churches for their generosity and calling the Corinthians to recommit themselves to giving to this need (2 Cor. 8:1-15).

Read 2 Corinthians 9:1-15 in your Bible. Identify in the passage reasons for believers to meet the needs of others. How do the reasons you discovered relate to each other?

EXPLORE THE TEXT

CONFIDENCE EXPRESSED (2 COR. 9:1-5)

¹ Now concerning the ministry to the saints, it is unnecessary for me to write to you. ² For I know your eagerness, and I boast about you to the Macedonians: “Achaia has been ready since last year,” and your zeal has stirred up most of them. ³ But I am sending the brothers so that our boasting about you in this matter would not prove empty, and so that you would be ready just as I said. ⁴ Otherwise, if any Macedonians come with me and find you unprepared, we, not to mention you, would be put to shame in that situation. ⁵ Therefore I considered it necessary to urge the brothers to go on ahead to you and arrange in advance the generous gift you promised, so that it will be ready as a gift and not as an extortion.

VERSES 1-2

Paul expressed his confidence about the Corinthians’ participation in the ministry to the saints when he said, *it is unnecessary for me to write to you*. His belief was that the Corinthians would step up in their promised support for the believers in Jerusalem. In fact, Paul commented about their *eagerness* to complete the collection.

He had been boasting about their readiness *to the •Macedonians*, and the Corinthians’ *zeal* had *stirred up* the Macedonians to get involved as well. According to Romans 15:26, Macedonia and Achaia (where Corinth was located) were faithful to collect money for those in Jerusalem.

VERSES 3-5

Paul wanted to certify whether the Corinthians would have the collection ready when he came to pick it up. Huge ministry needs were at stake, and people were counting on it since Paul had been boasting about the strong commitment from the Corinthians. If, in fact, they were not prepared, both Paul and the Corinthians would be *put to shame*.

To ensure all was as it should be, Paul said he was sending *the brothers* so that his boasting about them *would not prove empty*. These brothers included Titus and two other unnamed brothers,



but known by the Corinthians, who had proven themselves faithful (2 Cor. 8:16-24). Paul was urging the brothers to go on ahead and make sure that *the generous gift* they *promised* would be ready.

Paul was concerned that if the gift was not ready when he arrived, and he held them to their pledge, their giving would no longer be offered as a gift but would feel like an *extortion* because of the pressure. However, these verses reveal the confidence Paul had in the Corinthians to make good on their promise to give, even as he took precautions to ensure that they planned accordingly.

Why is it important for leaders to hold believers accountable for meeting the needs of others?

KEY DOCTRINE: *Stewardship*

Christians should contribute of their means cheerfully, regularly, systematically, proportionately, and liberally for the advancement of the Redeemer's cause on earth.

BENEFITS FOUND (2 COR. 9:6-11)

⁶ The point is this: The person who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the person who sows generously will also reap generously. ⁷ Each person should do as he has decided in his heart — not reluctantly or out of compulsion, since God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸ And God is able to make every grace overflow to you, so that in every way, always having everything you need, you may excel in every good work. ⁹ As it is written: He distributed freely; he gave to the poor; his righteousness endures forever. ¹⁰ Now the one who provides seed for the sower and bread for food will also provide and multiply your seed and increase the harvest of your righteousness. ¹¹ You will be enriched in every way for all generosity, which produces thanksgiving to God through us.

VERSES 6-7

Paul's driving point was, if you give little, you gain little. The principle he applied is that if a person *sows sparingly*, he or she *will also reap sparingly*. Conversely, if they *sow generously*, they *will also reap generously*. This principle is not a "health and wealth" proposition but rather a biblical truth flowing from the generous nature of God. We are to give unselfishly, but it is right for us to be reminded that giving is in our own best interest.

Paul's motivation was not the receiving or reaping but rather the blessed act of giving itself. Paul appealed elsewhere to Jesus' teaching on this subject, "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35). Giving demonstrates the genuineness of love (2 Cor. 8:8,24). In fact, it was love that motivated God to give His Son (John 3:16).

Giving should be proportionate to one's means, yet sacrificial (2 Cor. 8:12). Paul also noted that giving is to be voluntary: *Each person should do as he has decided in his heart*. Otherwise, that person's giving would be reluctant and offered *out of compulsion*. Compulsion is the response to pressured extortion, which is what Paul wanted to avoid in the collection for the Jerusalem saints. God isn't interested in compulsion; instead, He *loves a cheerful giver*.

For the cheerful giver, which comes first, the gift or the cheer? Explain. How is giving a source of cheer? How does a cheerful heart move a person to meet the needs of others?

VERSES 8-11

Sharing in the support of the poor means sharing in the blessings the Lord returns for that effort. If the Corinthians gave to the needy, God would make sure they were taken care of, because He *is able to make every grace overflow*. They need not worry; the Lord would supply everything they needed to *excel in every good work*. After receiving financial support from the Philippians, Paul told them, "God will supply all your needs according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:19). The promise of God is that the "one who gives to the poor will not be in need" (Prov. 28:27).

To support his claim that God's people are meant to bless others through liberal giving, Paul cited Psalm 112:9. This psalm extols



the traits of the godly person whom the psalmist identified as “the person who fears the LORD,” and “the righteous one” (Ps. 112:1,6). The apostle quoted lines that describe the righteous person’s history of generosity. He also included the next line from the psalm about God’s eternal favor extending to such a person: “his righteousness endures forever” (Ps. 112:9). God will never forget His people’s good works, including their generosity.

BIBLE SKILL: *Connect Old Testament teaching to New Testament significance.*

Read Psalm 112 and take note of the traits of the righteous person that the psalmist described. Then read 2 Corinthians 9 and observe how Paul applied the words of the psalm to Christians. How do the words of the psalm support what Paul wrote concerning generous giving?

Other benefits are found in generosity. Paul told the Corinthians to expect God to **increase the harvest of their righteousness**. Sacrificial giving yields a liberal harvest of righteousness indeed. Paul argued previously, “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ: Though he was rich, for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich” (2 Cor. 8:9). When we place others’ needs before our own comfort and gain, we demonstrate the same kind of humble, sacrificial love of our Savior.

When we place others’ needs before our own comfort and gain, we demonstrate the same kind of humble, sacrificial love of our Savior.

Finally, Paul stated that the Corinthians would **be enriched in every way** for their generosity. The benefits to be found through generosity are important, but not nearly as important as the validation of one’s relationship with the Lord, proven to be genuine because of compassionate, cheerful giving (see 1 John 3:17).

What is the relationship between trust in God and one's wiliness to give to meet the needs of others? How does a person's understanding of God impact his or her willingness to meet the needs of others?

ADORATION GAINED (2 COR. 9:12-15)

¹² For the ministry of this service is not only supplying the needs of the saints but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. ¹³ Because of the proof provided by this ministry, they will glorify God for your obedient confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone. ¹⁴ And as they pray on your behalf, they will have deep affection for you because of the surpassing grace of God in you. ¹⁵ Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

VERSES 12-13

Ultimately, giving to others is intended to bring glory to God. Although the ministry of this service would supply the needs of the saints in Jerusalem, there was a greater outcome. Those who eventually received the generous gift would be ***overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God***. Their gratitude would extend beyond the Corinthians to God, the Provider and Sustainer of all. The generosity of the Corinthians would produce thanksgiving to God (v. 11).

Paul was confident that the saints in Jerusalem would ***glorify God*** for the Corinthians' ***generosity in sharing with them***. Perhaps one reason Paul expected the saints in Jerusalem to glorify God for the Corinthians' gift was because he himself responded that way to the Philippians' generosity to him (see Phil. 4:20).

How can giving be an act of worship? How can giving be a means of honoring God? How can the person receiving a gift honor God?

The Jerusalem believers would also glorify the Lord on account of the Corinthians' ***obedient confession of the gospel of Christ***.



The gift and support from the Corinthian believers offered evidence of their love for the saints in Jerusalem. John asked, “If anyone has this world’s goods and sees a fellow believer in need but withholds compassion from him—how does God’s love reside in him?” He then exhorted believers to “not love in word or speech, but in action and truth” (1 John 3:17-18). Those in Jerusalem would rejoice in the truth that the Corinthians walked in obedience to the gospel, showing concern for them by helping in time of need.

All Christian giving is carried out in light of God’s gift to us—an incredible, priceless, generous gift.

VERSES 14-15

Paul noted that the surpassing grace of God at work in the Corinthians would also be a source of gratitude in the hearts of the Jerusalem saints. As they received the demonstrable love of the Corinthians, they would grow in *deep affection* for the Corinthians.

As Paul concluded this section of his letter, he could not stop himself from glorifying God as he reflected on the gospel and its fruit among believers: ***Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!*** Words are inadequate to explain the gift God has given us in His Son, Jesus Christ. Even so, God receives glory when His Son is worshiped. He deserves all we can ascribe to Him for His sacrifice on our behalf.

Consequently, all Christian giving is carried out in light of God’s gift to us—an incredible, priceless, generous gift. God loved the world and gave us His Son (John 3:16). He “did not even spare his own Son but offered him up for us all” (Rom. 8:32). Indeed, it is through His Son that we are reconciled to God (see 2 Cor. 5:18). If God has demonstrated such profound generosity toward us, giving us an indescribable gift (even though we don’t deserve it!), how can we not also give cheerfully and generously to others, especially those who belong to the household of faith (see Gal. 6:10)?

In what ways does God’s generosity in the gift of His Son challenge believers to meet the needs of others?

IN MY CONTEXT

- Believers are accountable to provide for the needs of others.
- Believers demonstrate trust in God’s provisions for them by giving to meet the needs of others.
- Believers’ gifts can be a means of honoring God for both the giver and the receiver.

As a group, discuss appropriate ways of challenging each other to meet the needs of others in the community and to meet the needs of the church. What adjustments need to be made within the group based on this discussion?

Ask God to show you a need that you are to meet. Ask Him for the courage and faith to address that need. Record your actions here.

List attitudes about giving you discovered in this study. Evaluate how well you exhibit the attitudes you identified. Ask God to strengthen these attitudes in your life, committing to take action as He directs.

Prayer Needs





FINDING STRENGTH

Believers can trust in God's strength when confronted with their weaknesses.

2 CORINTHIANS 12:7b-10; 13:2-8

Many people have a weakness or ongoing difficulty they consider an impediment or liability. They may pray for the removal of this perceived liability or seek other ways to overcome it. This week's study reminds us that God can use our weaknesses to anchor our faith, strengthen our witness, and magnify His grace and power.

What are some personal weaknesses or ongoing afflictions you find it difficult to live with? What are some possible ways God might use those weaknesses for His purposes and His glory?

UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT

2 CORINTHIANS 10:1–13:13

We have the apostle Paul to thank for the phrase, “thorn in the flesh,” which has been widely used—and widely misused. Some people have used the term to refer to a chronic physical ailment. Sometimes the term is applied to a difficult person. Others think of the thorn in terms of sins of the heart, such as lust or greed.

Paul did not specify what his thorn in the flesh was. The important matter is to recognize that God’s strength is available to us when we confront any weaknesses. In this week’s Scripture passages, Paul shared insights learned through his own struggles, giving his final challenge to the Corinthians to examine their lives, weaknesses and all, for evidence of a living faith.

Since the opening chapter of 2 Corinthians, Paul has bounced back and forth between the desire to commend himself again to the Corinthians (4:2; 6:4-10) and denying the need to commend himself based on his proven track record (3:1-3; 10:12-18). He concluded his letter by taking on the negative influence of the false apostles that had crept into the congregation.

Those false apostles had caused damage to Paul’s reputation by casting doubt on his apostleship. Apparently, their claims must have amounted to something like, “he’s not spiritual enough,” or “there must be sin in his life,” or “God is punishing and judging him as a fraud.” They pointed to all the suffering, persecutions, problems, and affliction Paul had faced. Their insinuation was that if he was really a spokesperson for Christ he’d be protected from such suffering.

Paul rejected the need to compare himself to them (10:12). He certainly didn’t think he was inferior to them in any way (12:11). Nevertheless, he sized up his résumé against theirs and magnified the grace and power of God manifested in his weakness (11:16–12:10). Suffering did not disqualify Paul but rather validated his credibility as a servant of Christ (12:19), established the foundation for offering sympathetic comfort (1:3-11), and provided an opportunity to glorify God (12:7-10).

The false apostles were preaching a false gospel. Paul was upset that the Corinthians readily gave them audience and put up with their teaching (11:3-4). In the end, when Paul visited them a third time (12:14; 13:1), he wanted to find them doing and believing what



was right. If he found them otherwise, he would not be lenient but would deal harshly with them again that they might be built up into maturity (13:2-10).

Read 2 Corinthians 12:7b-10; 13:2-8 in your Bible. Notice the different ways Paul used the word “weak” or a variation of it in these verses. Highlight instances where being weak is a good thing.

EXPLORE THE TEXT

PAUL’S WEAKNESS (2 COR. 12:7b-10)

⁷ Therefore, so that I would not exalt myself, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, a messenger of Satan to torment me so that I would not exalt myself. ⁸ Concerning this, I pleaded with the Lord three times that it would leave me. ⁹ But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is perfected in weakness.” Therefore, I will most gladly boast all the more about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may reside in me. ¹⁰ So I take pleasure in weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and in difficulties, for the sake of Christ. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

VERSES 7b-8

In defending his credentials as an apostle, Paul insisted it was necessary to boast, but that he would boast about his weaknesses (2 Cor. 11:30). This led him to recall an experience when he was “caught up to the third heaven” and received “visions and revelations of the Lord” (12:1-2). Because of those extraordinary revelations, *a thorn in the flesh was given* to Paul so that he *would not exalt* himself. Lurking pride needs to be kept in check, so the Lord provided a specific measure in Paul’s life to corral self-exaltation.

Paul did not identify the thorn in the flesh. We are left to speculate. Bible scholars offer various ideas collected in three major categories: psychological or spiritual anxiety, opposition to his ministry, or some kind of physical condition of difficulty. Likely, it

was something in the third category—a physical issue that created difficulties in his ministry of the gospel (see Gal. 4:13-15). It is likely the Corinthians were familiar with the nature of Paul’s thorn.

Paul referred to the thorn as *a messenger of Satan to torment* him. He wasn’t saying that the issue originated with Satan, since it was given to Paul to crush self-exaltation (which the devil would support). Instead, the thorn was simultaneously given by God but used by Satan; a gift from one used as a tool by the other.

Paul’s thorn drove him to plead with the Lord *three times* that it would leave. But the Lord chose to keep it in Paul’s life to provide a deeper spiritual application and purpose.

Paul’s thorn in the flesh was a gift of God to magnify the grace of God.

VERSES 9-10

Paul’s thorn in the flesh was a gift of God to magnify the grace of God. Instead of taking it away, the Lord allowed it to continue to teach Paul two important spiritual truths. First, God’s *grace is sufficient*. His grace is enough for anything and everything we encounter in this life.

Second, God’s *power is perfected in weakness*. Paul’s first letter instructed the Corinthians that “God has chosen the weak things in the world to shame the strong ... so that no one may boast in his presence” (1 Cor. 1:27-29). Paul knew this firsthand. He had come to the Corinthians in weakness, preaching Christ alone and demonstrating the Spirit’s power, so that their faith would be based on God’s power rather than Paul’s eloquence or wisdom (1 Cor. 2:1-4).

Paul continued: *I will most gladly boast all the more about my weaknesses*. Whereas he once pleaded with Christ to take them away, now he viewed them as a badge of honor. Why? So that Christ’s power would reside in him. Boasting was necessary to correct the false allegations and theology of the false apostles, but Paul boasted not in himself; instead, his boasting was in his weakness so that Christ was honored in it all.

Astoundingly, Paul said he not only boasted in weakness, but actually took *pleasure in weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and in difficulties*. He did so *for the sake of Christ*. His conclusion was, *when I am weak, then I am strong* in the strength Christ provides.



How does God use weaknesses and thorns to bring about His purposes and to shape believers' lives? How do weaknesses cause believers to grow in their trust of God?

BIBLE SKILL: Memorize a verse and apply it to a real life situation.

Memorize 2 Corinthians 12:9 in your preferred Bible translation. Then write the verse in your own words. Finally, write a couple of sentences here or in a journal, stating how the verse can help you today make a tough decision or face a difficult situation.

CHRIST'S STRENGTH (2 COR. 13:2-4)

² I gave a warning when I was present the second time, and now I give a warning while I am absent to those who sinned before and to all the rest: If I come again, I will not be lenient, ³ since you seek proof of Christ speaking in me. He is not weak in dealing with you, but powerful among you. ⁴ For he was crucified in weakness, but he lives by the power of God. For we also are weak in him, but in dealing with you we will live with him by God's power.

VERSE 2

Paul was concerned that things would not be as he expected on his next trip to Corinth. He was concerned that he might have to “grieve for many who sinned before and have not repented of the moral impurity, sexual immorality, and sensuality they practiced” (2 Cor. 12:21). He had already given *a warning* when he was with them, and now gave *a warning while* he was *absent*.

Some may think Paul was bullying them with his authority, but this was not the case. He was trying to build them up (2 Cor. 10:8-9). If he needed to deal harshly with them on account of their sins,

it would be in keeping with his authority as an apostle. Some in the Corinthian church thought Paul was weak in person (2 Cor. 10:10). If things did not change, Paul did not plan to be lenient this time toward those who had not followed through with his prior warnings.

What role should the church and church leaders play in holding believers accountable for spiritual growth? What is the responsibility of the individual when challenged to grow spiritually?

VERSES 3-4

The Corinthians wanted ***proof of Christ speaking*** in and through Paul. Paul was insistent that he was a genuine messenger of the Lord. In the actions that he would undertake in disciplining them, they would see the proof they were looking for.

Paul said, Jesus was ***not weak in dealing with you, but powerful among you***. How so? Through Paul's gospel ministry and authority. That's why Paul's warnings seem so punitive in these verses. The Corinthians wanted proof that Paul (the weak one) spoke for Christ? Paul was ready to show them! When they received punishment at Paul's hand, perhaps by being handed "over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh" (1 Cor. 5:5), they would in fact be undergoing the Lord's discipline.

Jesus was ***crucified in weakness***, which is why Paul boasted in the cross. In humbling Himself by taking on humanity, Jesus submitted to the most horrible of deaths. Yet no one took Jesus' life from Him, He laid it down by His own choice. Jesus was obedient to death. He made himself poor that believers might be rich in Him (2 Cor. 8:9). But that's not the end of the story. Jesus now and forever ***lives by the power of God***, which is why the resurrection is central to the Christian faith and proclamation. Jesus' resurrection leads to powerful results in the lives of His people.

So Paul declared to the Corinthians that he was on Christ's side after all: ***in dealing with you we will live with him***. God's discipline—seen here through Paul's correction of the Corinthians—demonstrated God's power and love for his people, clarifying their relationship to Himself, and calling them to greater holiness as a people who bear His name and represent His gospel.



How is discipline an act of love? If God failed to discipline His followers, would He be viewed as weak or strong? Explain.

KEY DOCTRINE: *Salvation*

Sanctification is the experience, beginning in regeneration, by which the believer is set apart to God's purposes, and is enabled to progress toward moral and spiritual maturity through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit dwelling in him.

OUR CHOICE (2 COR. 13:5-8)

⁵ Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith. Examine yourselves. Or do you yourselves not recognize that Jesus Christ is in you? — unless you fail the test. ⁶ And I hope you will recognize that we ourselves do not fail the test. ⁷ But we pray to God that you do nothing wrong — not that we may appear to pass the test, but that you may do what is right, even though we may appear to fail. ⁸ For we can't do anything against the truth, but only for the truth.

VERSES 5-6

The Corinthians faced a choice. Would they heed Paul's warning and follow through on their repentance? Paul exhorted them to **test** themselves to see whether they were **in the faith**. If they had trusted Christ, it would be evident in their lives. It would be evident also in their obedience to God's messenger seeking to bring them to maturity in the gospel.

Hopefully, after examining themselves spiritually, they would recognize that Christ was in them. Unless, of course, they failed the test. The Corinthians wanted proof about Paul, and now he turned their demand back on them to supply proof of their own spiritual status. **Examine yourselves**, Paul said. He trusted that their response would be affirmative as those who were new creations in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17).

How might a person test his or her faith? Why might it be important for them to do so?

Paul was confident that he passed the test and hoped the Corinthians would recognize that he indeed did pass the test. He wanted them to perceive the truth that Christ was in Paul, regardless of what the false apostles said to the contrary. If Paul failed the test, then everything he had written to them was invalid, or at least, deceptive. But he passed, as one who had Christ in him. He told the Galatians, “I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2:20).

VERSES 7-8

Paul prayed to God that they make the right choice—that they ***do nothing wrong*** and ***do what is right***. It’s not about whether Paul appeared to pass the test or whether he appeared to fail. What was important was whether or not the Corinthians themselves demonstrated Christ in them, proving that they passed the test. The Corinthians’ passing the test did reflect on Paul’s ministry among them, however. Their authenticity in the faith was one of the strongest commendations of Paul’s apostolic fruitfulness (2 Cor. 3:1-3).

As God’s messenger and ambassador for Christ, Paul sought only the truth. He could not do anything against the truth of Jesus Christ and His gospel. Paul declared earlier, “the truth of Christ is in me” (2 Cor. 11:10), and his ministry among them was “an open display of the truth” (2 Cor. 4:2). The bottom line was this: Paul and his ministry among the Corinthians existed only for the truth. Perhaps the only appropriate response from the Corinthians was whether they would pursue and choose the same.

What is the difference between approaching others to convince them that you are right and approaching others so they can be right? How is the way in which a person approaches another person a test of faith and maturity for the approaching person?



IN MY CONTEXT

- Believers can find comfort and security in the grace God provides through His Son.
- Believers need to be aware that the power of the gospel is seen in God’s discipline of His people.
- All people must carefully examine their lives, looking for evidence of their salvation.

Share with the group ways God is using a “thorn” to shape and mold you for His honor. Record insights gained from others as they share. How can you learn from them?

What things is God using to shape you into a maturing follower of His? In what areas does He seem to be shaping you the most? Thank Him for working in your life, and commit afresh to allowing Him to shape you.

Examine your spiritual life looking for areas where you may have grown cold, or where obedience is a low priority. What actions do you need to take in light of your evaluation?

Prayer Needs

PAUL'S PLEA FOR UNITY

By Michael W. Olewski



»» “I wish we could have church like they did in the first century.” Some might make this statement because of problems in their own church, thinking no problems existed in the first-century church. Problems, though, did exist. A recurring issue was disunity.

Jesus had emphasized the need for unity. He prayed that all believers would experience the oneness with one another that He experienced with the Father—and they with Him (John 17). His hope was the world would see that He had

come from the Father and that His followers were in Him.

Unity was a priority for the early church. The new Christians were unified; they would fellowship and worship together and share their possessions (Acts 4:32). Before long, though, a problem arose. Ananias and Sapphira sold a piece of property and pledged the full amount to the common fund. Unfortunately, they withheld some of the income and lied about it. This was the first break in the church’s unity (5:1-11).



PAUL'S INSTRUCTIONS

Years later, Paul in many of his letters had to deal with church unity because internal and external forces were poised to undermine it. He, therefore, devoted much effort to maintaining unity within the fellowship. His letters were meant in part to heal potential rifts that threatened the young church.

Some scholars viewed Paul as regularly encountering the problem caused by proponents of the Law. Jewish legalists could not accept Paul's teaching that Gentile believers could be saved without following the Law.

Galatians is a perfect example of Paul having to deal with the division the Judaizers created. They taught that to be a Christian, one had to follow Jewish Law. This led Paul to propose a Spirit-centered solution. He reminded them that Christ had freed them from the Law (Gal. 5:1); he then made four related statements about the believer's Spirit-controlled life. He called them to "walk by the Spirit," be "led by the Spirit," "live by the Spirit," and "follow the Spirit" (vv. 16,18,25). Paul emphasized that if believers continued to walk by the Spirit, the Judaizers would not sway them.

In First Corinthians, Paul addressed several situations that threatened church unity. The apostle established the need for unity as a primary purpose for writing, and he made a plea for oneness (see 1 Cor. 1:10). Paul was not trying to impose uniformity; he was concerned, though, that differences might lead to a division that would weaken the church and its mission.

Paul also dealt with developing factions related to those following either Paul, Apollos, Cephas (Peter), or even Christ Himself. Paul did not want these factions to create division, so he presented rhetorical questions to show the Corinthians that their quarreling was foolish. Paul posed the question, "Is Christ divided?" (v. 13). The answer was obvious and restated the need for church unity.

The apostle later compared the human body's unity with that of the church (12:12-30). Paul was responding to a dispute over spiritual gifts, a dispute that threatened to divide. Some Corinthian believers felt superior to their brethren who had gifts the former group considered inferior. Paul explained that all spiritual gifts were necessary for a church to function properly. He challenged his readers: "And I will show you

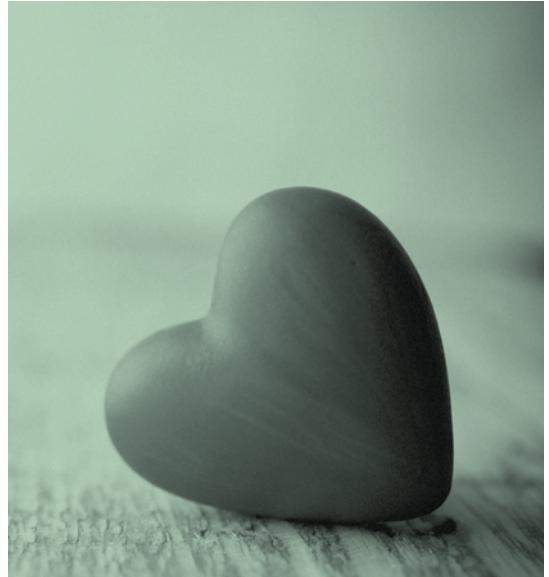
an even better way” (v. 31). This led into chapter 13, where Paul established love as the means of maintaining church unity.

In Ephesians, Paul again had to deal with unity. Some see the problems between Jewish and Gentile Christians as the letter’s central theme. In chapter two, the apostle stated that Christ “made both groups one and tore down the dividing wall of hostility” (Eph. 2:14b). He further explained that Christ had overcome any spiritual division between the Jew and the Gentile and described the two as “fellow citizens with the saints, and members of God’s household” (v. 19).

In chapter four, the apostle compared the church to the human body, with Christ as the head (4:15). According to Paul, when Christians practice the virtues of humility, gentleness, patience, and have love for one another, they show and maintain the unity of the Spirit (vv. 2-3).

IMPLICATIONS

Paul gave the churches clear directions concerning unity. He reminded the Galatians they were to be Spirit led. He admonished the Corinthians to love one another. He emphasized to the Ephesians that Christian love was essential



for maintaining unity. Similarly, Paul encouraged Christians at Philippi to be like-minded, to love one another, to put other’s interests ahead of their own, and to have the same attitude or same way of thinking as Christ (Phil. 2:1-5).

Although Paul gave these instructions about unity to address a problem that plagued the early church, his teachings still apply. If believers today follow the clear teachings of the Scriptures, the church will experience the unity the Lord both desires and expects.

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Paul's Second Missionary Journey



Paul imprisoned

Lute joins Paul

Paul receives vision that encourages him to travel to Macedonia

Paul brought on charges before Gallio

Paul asks Timothy to join him in his work

Paul returned from Jerusalem to plan his next venture

Jerusalem Conference, A.D. 49, (Acts 15:1-30; Gal 2:1-21)

"Paul's Second Missionary Journey" is adapted from Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded, page 1230 © 2015, B&H Publishing Group. Used by permission.

1,2 Corinthians

Disunity threatened to tear the church apart. That was just the tip of the iceberg. A church member was engaging in immoral practices—the kind of immorality that was not even tolerated among the unbelievers—while the church tolerated it. Things were taking place during worship that were destructive and harmful. There was confusion about spiritual gifts, with members claiming their gifts were proof of spiritual superiority. Welcome to the church at Corinth. If you're the apostle Paul, what do you say to such a church? Like a father, you sternly correct them. But first you remind them of who they are in Christ, and who Christ is. You call them back to the gospel. Therein lies the answer to the moral, relational, and theological problems that plagued the Corinthian church—or any church.



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